Antiquity 2023 Vol. 97 (394): 795–809
https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.98

Research Article

The future of archaeology is (still) community collaboration

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In this contribution to our periodic 'Archaeological Futures' series, Lindsay M. Montgomery and Tiffany C. Fryer reflect on the reshaping of archaeological praxis in the Americas through recent developments in collaborative community-engaged research. Over the past 20 years, new theoretical and methodological approaches informed by decolonisation and Black feminism have shifted power dynamics within the discipline. The authors review this growing body of research, highlighting trends in collaborative archaeological research and discussing some of the ongoing challenges and tensions. They argue that this collaborative paradigm marks a new future for archaeology in the Americas, which will increasingly centre on topics of importance to Black and Indigenous scholars and descendant communities.

Introduction

In 2021, the descendants of enslaved Africans who had worked on the Montpelier estate owned by the fourth US president James Madison in Virginia, organised themselves into the Montpelier Descendant Community (MDC). The subsequent allocation of several seats on the Montpelier Foundation Board (which oversees the finances and operation of the historic site) to MDC members marked an unprecedented increase in the power of Black descendants on matters of heritage management at the estate. In April 2022, however, simmering tensions between the MDC and the Board came to a head over which entities should be able to install new representatives to the Board. In response to complaints from some Black descendants, who argued that the MDC should not be the sole voice in matters of site management and heritage representation, the 16-member Board unilaterally asserted its exclusive right to nominate members by expanding the pool of possible representatives to include individuals who identified as descendants but were not members of the MDC. While the Board argued that this policy was consistent with the foundation's mission to achieve parity between descendants and trustees, for the MDC this shift represented a regressive move intended to give the majority-white Board complete control over managing the historic plantation (Levenson 2022; Lukpat 2022).

This power-sharing debate garnered national attention in the USA after four senior archaeologists who supported the MDC were fired from Montpelier for alleged policy violations. In response, the Society for American Archaeology (SAA 2022) and the Society for Historical Archaeology (Schablitsky 2022) both issued public statements voicing support

Received: 22 October 2022; Revised: 15 March 2023; Accepted: 1 May 2023

for the MDC and reinforcing calls for collaborative heritage management practices in redressing Montpelier's traumatic history of enslavement and legacy of oppression. By May 2022, facing sustained public criticism for undermining what had been lauded as a watershed partnership, the Board conceded, and 11 new members recommended by the MDC were appointed.

When viewed through the lens of Chip Colwell's (2016: 17, fig. 1) five-part 'collaborative continuum'—which positions colonial control at one end and community control at the other—the actions of the Montpelier Foundation Board can be interpreted in two different ways. From the critical perspective of power-sharing, the Board's actions represent a move towards the far extreme of 'colonial control'. Marshalling a liberal rhetoric of inclusivity, the Board effectively undermined the MDC's power to participate in heritage management decisions, while recentring itself as the primary arbiter of how the site should be managed and who qualified as a legitimate community representative (Schneider & Brown 2022). Alternatively, the Board's appeal to achieve consensus from the greatest number of stakeholders might be interpreted as a step on the continuum towards increased participation. Whether viewed as a regressive or progressive move, the Montpelier controversy highlights many of the challenges that surround collaboration in heritage contexts where diasporic and multifaceted descendant communities are historically marginalised and politically decentralised.

This case also points to a new position for archaeologists in debates over representation, interpretation and heritage management. Although archaeologists were entangled in the struggle between the MDC and the Montpelier Foundation Board, they were not the primary stakeholders in that debate nor were they the most powerful players. Instead, archaeologists acted as intermediaries and allies. Such a position runs counter to the current Society for American Archaeology (SAA) Ethical Principles which affirm the special status and responsibility of archaeologists as managers or stewards of the material record (see ethics section on SAA website). Rather than reinforcing this exclusive power, the Montpelier case gestures towards a new position for archaeologists along the collaborative continuum as 'accomplices' (Flewellen *et al.* 2021).

Building on the complex relationships and rhetoric at play in the Montpelier controversy, this article offers an overview of current and emerging trends in collaborative research in the Americas. Based on this discussion, we identify the key challenges and tensions that exist around defining 'the community' and the precarity of power-sharing agreements in heritage management. The article specifically nods to collaborations with, by and for Black and Indigenous communities throughout the Americas. We argue that despite occasional regressive slippages, the growing momentum around collaborative and community-engaged research signals that, for Black and Indigenous scholars and communities, the future of archaeology is still very much collaborative and community-centric.

The collaborative paradigm

The publication in 2008 of Chip Colwell and T.J. Ferguson's edited volume *Collaboration in archaeological practice* and Stephen Silliman's *Collaborating at the trowel's edge* ushered in a new era of archaeological research grounded in ethical and engaged partnerships with descendant communities (see Meloche *et al.* 2020: 5). The development of this collaborative

https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.98 Published online by Cambridge University Press

research paradigm coincided with the growth of Indigenous Archaeology—a specific subset of collaborative archaeologies—to which the wider paradigm is greatly indebted (Watkins 2000; Zimmerman 2008; Nicholas *et al.* 2011). Indigenous Archaeology explicitly incorporates into archaeological theory and practice "Indigenous values, knowledge, practices, ethics, and sensibilities" (Nicholas 2008: 1666; e.g. Silliman 2008; Nicholas *et al.* 2011; Atalay 2012; Atalay *et al.* 2014; Watkins 2014). As early as 1989, Aymara historian Carlos Mamani also articulated a vision for Indigenous Archaeology in South America, emphasising not only the deeper integration of Indigenous knowledge and values but a commitment to making space for Indigenous peoples to practise archaeology on their own terms (Ayala 2020: 30). Over the past 20 years, Indigenous Archaeology has gained global traction, taking on a wide range of forms including archaeological projects on ancestral Indigenous lands, theoretical interventions centring Indigenous worldviews, the development of Tribal Historic Preservation Offices and tribal museums, and capacity building among Indigenous communities (Watkins 2014; Schmidt & Pikirayi 2016; Supernant 2020; Acabado & Martin 2022).

Disciplinary engagements with collaborative methodologies have accelerated over the past decade. This trend is reflected in the steady increase in the numbers of research papers referencing these topics presented at the annual meetings of the SAA and American Anthropological Association (AAA; Figure 1). Over the course of 10 years, the percentage of presentations at the SAA annual meeting referencing collaboration increased from roughly 3 per cent in 2012 to over 7 per cent in 2021. Over this same time span, there was a similar, albeit unsteady, increase in the percentage of collaborative and community-engaged research papers presented by participants at the AAA annual meeting (roughly two per cent in 2012 to nearly five per cent in 2021).

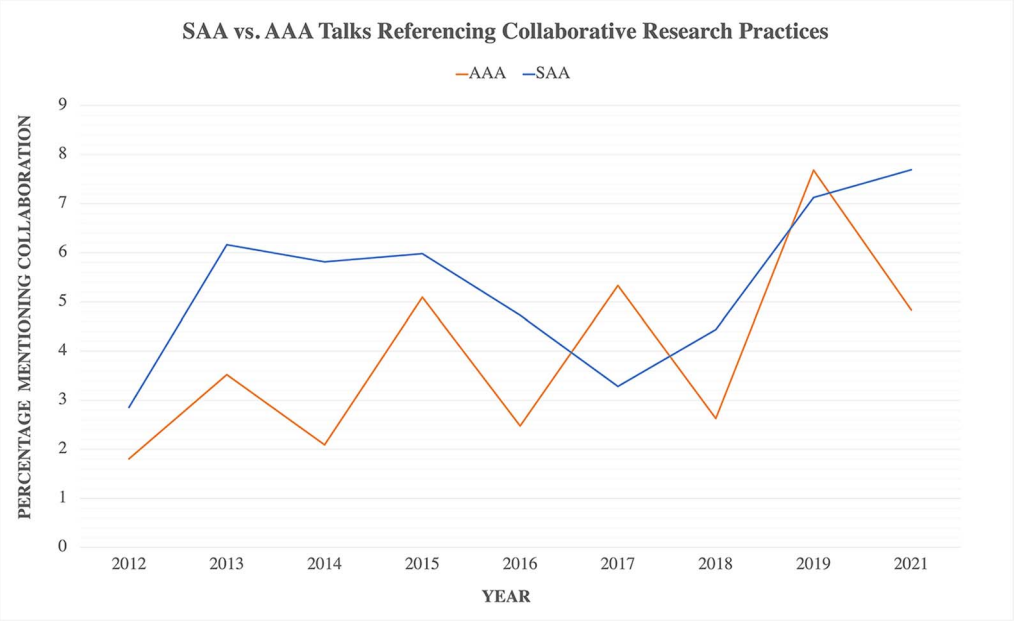

Figure 1. A comparative assessment of the percentage of conference talks referencing collaborative research practices, 2012–21 (figure by the authors).

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We differentiate this growth in the collaborative paradigm from what some might term the 'public archaeology' paradigm, which emerged in the 1980s in response to calls for improved heritage-based education. While the collaborative paradigm centres on building sustainable and reciprocal power-sharing partnerships with local and descendant communities, public archaeology is a much broader concept that includes archaeological projects funded by the public, orientated around science education, or that incorporate non-specialists with no specific ties to the research (Richardson & Almansa-Sánchez 2015). Patricia McAnany and Sarah Rowe (2015: 504) note that the call for improved public relations—though ethically commendable—was not "driven by a desire to enfranchise community members as participants in the research process". Rather, it was "a way to foment greater appreciation for archaeology as a discipline and to secure the role of archaeologists as primary stewards of the archaeological record". Similarly, Shannon Dawdy (2009: 137–8) has critiqued these types of projects as "public relations" archaeology, arguing that they do not redistribute power but rather attempt to preserve the power of archaeologists as stewards by bolstering public support for status-quo archaeology.

Research and community engagement at the African Burial Ground in New York offers one early example of the collaborative approach in action. Lead archaeologist Michael Blakey has referred to their work as a "clientage model" (Blakey 2020: 191). This model positions archaeologists as in the service of specific communities—in this case, New York's Black community—while also recognising that the efficacy of the service provided may lay in the expertise and professional capacities of archaeologists and other researchers on-site.

More recently, collaborative work with Indigenous and descendant communities has been framed using Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) models. Sonya Atalay (2012: 4) defines CBPR as an approach to research that fosters equal partnerships between researchers and community members by combining or "braiding" knowledge from different traditions and perspectives in the conceptualisation, development, execution and dissemination of archaeological projects. The CBPR approach differs from earlier theorisations of collaboration in its insistence on the shared stewardship of heritage resources and the incorporation of Indigenous and descendant communities in all phases of archaeological research. Clientage models and CBPR approaches each represent a significant shift along the collaborative continuum towards full community control of archaeological research and cultural heritage management. While CBPR positions archaeologists and communities as equal partners, in many ways the clientage framework represents a more radical reformulation of power by defining archaeologists as the 'employees' of specific communities.

Trends in collaborative research

While archaeology "is undergoing a fundamental sea change" (Wylie 2014: 69), in some ways our review ultimately indicates that this paradigm remains a small, albeit vocal, subset of the field. Within the still-emerging paradigm of collaborative research, we note three trends in the scope of research with Indigenous and descendant communities: diversification in who is conducting collaborative research; the normalisation of CBPR research designs; and a greater engagement with critical theory.

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Diversification

A growing number of archaeologists who identify with Indigenous, Black and otherwise 'othered' groups are entering the fields of archaeology and heritage management. Rather than indicating a major transformation in disciplinary culture, the increasing visibility of non-white archaeologists largely reflects grassroots efforts by professional associations, such as the Society for Black Archaeology and the Indigenous Archaeology Collective, to recruit and mentor racially marginalised populations. In the Americas, we have particularly seen notable growth in the numbers of archaeologists of African American and Afro-Caribbean descent engaged in collaborative research projects with Black communities. As William White has noted in a recent editorial, "I am an African American archaeologist who never saw anyone but white people doing archaeology until 2011, after doing archaeology for almost a decade" (White & Draycott 2020). By destigmatising community-based work—especially work with one's home community (Morris 2014)—some archaeologists are now positioned to offer a service to groups that have previously been excluded from cultural heritage management discussions.

The small but growing number of Black archaeologists in the field has changed not only who is involved in archaeology but also how collaborative research is conducted with African Diaspora communities (Flewellen *et al.* 2021, 2022; Reid 2022; White 2022). For instance, this new generation of researchers have renewed pressing questions about the ethical treatment of African American human remains (Dunnavant *et al.* 2021), while bringing attention to systemic forms of anti-Blackness within the discipline (Franklin *et al.* 2020). These conversations are part of a more structural approach to disciplinary transformation; an approach that fundamentally repositions descendant communities as rights-holders rather than simply stakeholders in relation to the archaeological record.

Indigenous peoples have successfully used this rights-based discourse to lobby for major shifts in power-sharing (McAnany & Rowe 2015: 4). State-directed heritage laws such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the Karanga Aotearoa Repatriation Programme in New Zealand have been used by Indigenous communities to secure a seat at the proverbial table in matters of archaeological research and cultural heritage management (e.g. Darling *et al.* 2015; see also Smith & Wobst 2004 on the parallel development in Australia). Scholars working within the framework of Indigenous Archaeology are pushing the discipline forward by asking, "How can archaeologists reshape who controls, has access to, and benefits from the products of their research in ways that strengthen Indigenous sovereignty?" (Laluk *et al.* 2022: 660). Similar calls for accountability to Indigenous sovereignty within archaeological and heritage management circles have been framed using human rights legislation such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). As several archaeologists have pointed out, the implementation of UNDRIP requires a profound reorientation of who defines the benefits of archaeology (i.e. Indigenous peoples) and the locus of decision making (i.e. Indigenous Nations; McAnany *et al.* 2022: 17). We believe that this shift towards heritage rights represents an important discursive move that can be used to build solidarity between descendant communities and to strengthen their political position at the national and international levels.

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Normalisation and global influence

The regional distribution of conference papers at the SAA and AAA meetings that discuss collaboration and community engagement shows that a significant component of this research is focused on North America (Figure 2). Community collaborative research is, however, also growing in other areas of the Americas. In their path-charting collection, *Indigenous peoples and archaeology in Latin America*, Cristóbal Gnecco and Patricia Ayala (2011) note that, although the language of collaboration and participation has begun to infiltrate Latin American archaeologies, there is reason for scepticism about progress to date, if optimism for the future. They remind us that neither collaboration nor participation have real meaning if context is ignored. That context is summarised by Maya K'iche' sociologist Avexnim Cojtí Ren, who lamented over a decade ago: "the reconstruction of our history by archaeology must benefit the interests and needs of living Maya, yet we are still excluded from archaeological research management and from the interpretation of our own past" (Ren 2006: 14) because the "Maya past is considered a common good to be shared with the international community, rather than a cultural right for Maya to decide how our past will be shared with other people" (Ren 2006: 13).

Nonetheless, there have been archaeologists from Latin America, working in Latin America, who have steadfastly applied the principles of community-based research in their work (e.g. Hernández Álvarez & Martín Medina 2016; Balanzátegui Moreno 2018; Ichikawa 2018; Migeon 2019; Diserens Morgan & Leventhal 2020; Harrison-Buck & Clarke-Vivier 2020; Fryer & Diserens Morgan 2021; McAnany *et al.* 2021; Hartemann 2022; Weaver *et al.* 2022). One particularly strong example is the El Proyecto Santa María de la Antigua del Darién project which began in 2013 at the behest of the Colombian Ministry of Culture, the National University of Colombia, and the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History. Despite being housed under these regulatory institutions, this project was conceived as a community-based endeavour—a major break from conventional archaeological practice in Colombia (Sarcina 2021). The historical narrative around Santa Maria has typically focused on the site's status as the first Spanish settlement on mainland America, often glossing over the violent impacts of colonisation on local Indigenous peoples and on enslaved Africans brought to the colony. Conducting community-based archaeology that intentionally involves Embera and Guna (Indigenous Colombians) as well as Santa Maria's African descendant community has reoriented the nation's archaeological practice more explicitly around social justice.

The Santa María de la Antigua del Darién project's working model was determined by the community and has led to field-school training that offers opportunities to community members who may not previously have been able to access more formal education (e.g. Silliman 2008; Cipolla & Quinn 2016; Seyler 2017; Gonzalez & Edwards 2020). A major result of the project has been the creation of a community-based museum, La Casa Patrimonial, guided by the Darien Cultural Committee (DCC). Like the Montpelier Descendant Community discussed previously, the DCC was composed of local representatives tasked with managing the site and creating intercultural spaces for dialogue. The formation of this committee was important because of the ongoing political unrest that has characterised the region for decades (for a similarly difficult context, see Horning 2019). The wider project demonstrates that building archaeological research agendas alongside community collaborators not

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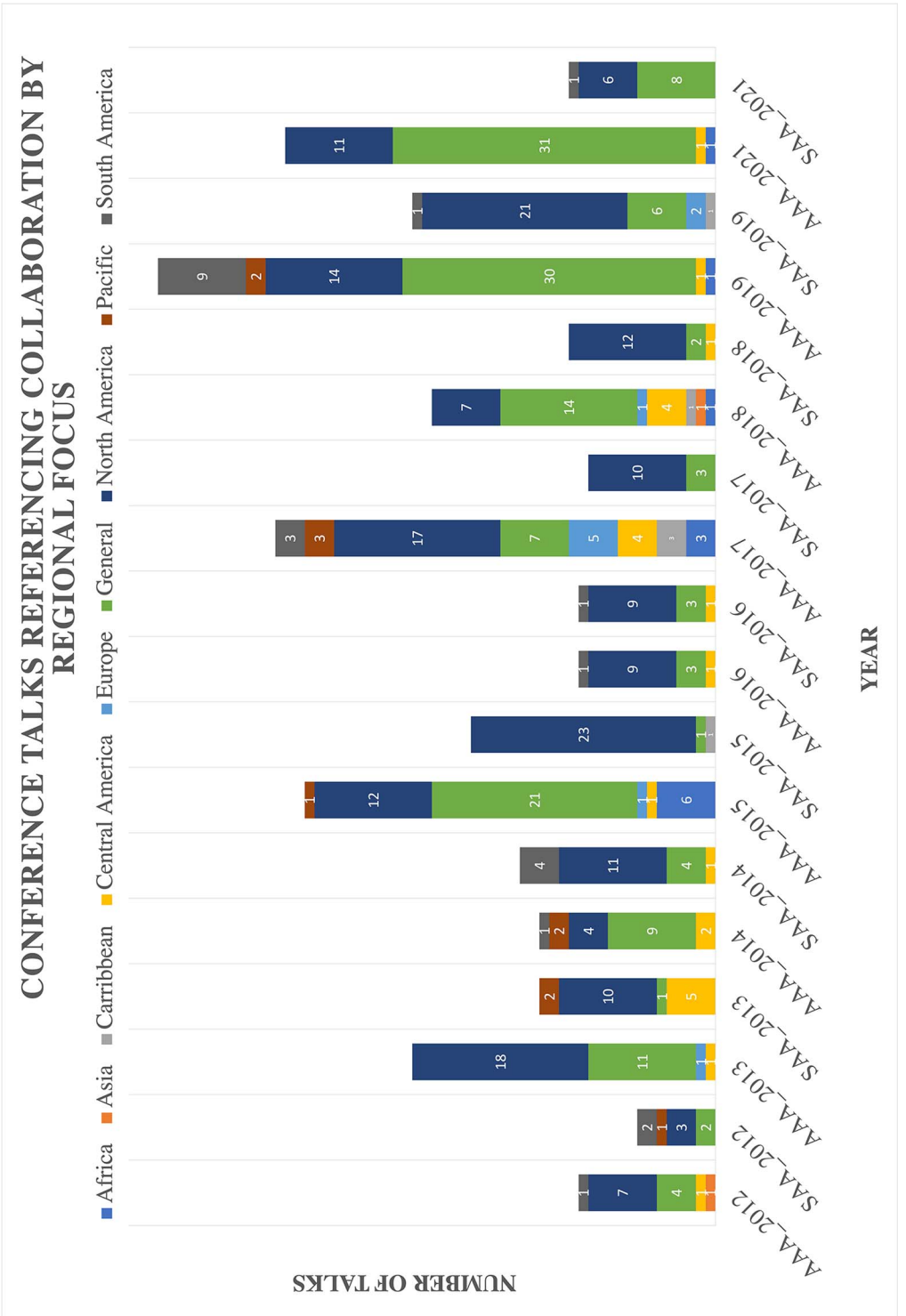

Figure 2. Comparison of conference talks referencing collaboration by regional focus between 2012 and 2021 (figure by the authors).

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only can chart generative research directions but also (where circumstances demand) can help repair community relations and advance new, more equitable historical narratives.

Critical theories

In addition to expanding in geographical scope, the collaborative paradigm is becoming more epistemologically pluralistic. While critical approaches such as Marxism, feminism and post-colonialism have influenced the development of collaborative and engaged archaeological scholarship, this new generation of research is explicitly informed by the concept of decolonisation. Within archaeology, decolonisation has involved critiquing practices that have regularly been used to dispossess and erase historically marginalised voices, increasing disciplinary transparency, and decentring archaeologists as the sole stakeholders in the management and interpretation of the material past (Atalay 2016: 82). A growing number of scholars are also using non-Western and non-patriarchal perspectives as interpretative frameworks to address scientific colonialism—Western hegemony over the production and dissemination of knowledge. This facet of collaborative research has emerged in dialogue with the 'ontological turn', which has drawn scholars' attention to divergent understandings of being (Alberti *et al.* 2011; Alberti 2016; Harris & Cipolla 2017). To date, much of this work has been conducted by scholars operating within Indigenous Archaeology, who have advocated for the integration of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies into interpretative archaeological practice (Todd 2016; Cipolla *et al.* 2019; Laluk 2020; Acebo 2021; Montgomery 2021; Two Bears 2021).

Black feminist theorising is another dimension of these efforts to decolonise archaeology. Unlike mainstream feminism, which has been critiqued for recentring Whiteness and heteronormativity, Black feminism has been used by archaeologists to examine the intersections between race, gender and class in the past, as well as in contemporary power relations within the discipline (Palacios 2020; King 2021). In a special issue of the *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*, Tiffany C. Fryer and Teresa P. Raczek (2020), lay out an agenda for an engaged archaeological heritage practice rooted in the feminist principles of intersectionality and intersubjectivity. Contributors to that special issue demonstrate how race-radical approaches to heritage enable harm reduction in collaborative heritage work (e.g. Lupu 2020; Rizvi 2020; Surface-Evans & Jones 2020) and foster shared understandings between archaeologists and communities with incommensurate worldviews (e.g. Arthur 2020; Raczek & Sugandhi 2020; Sloan 2020). Similarly, in a journal special issue on community archaeology in the African Diaspora, Jeffrey Burnett (2022) discusses how he synthesised Black feminist frameworks and CBPR approaches to foster radical solidarity with the community of Oak Bluffs in Massachusetts. We see this growing engagement with feminism, particularly forms of race-radical feminism, as an essential and defining feature of a new era of collaborative research orientated around achieving social justice for Indigenous and descendant communities.

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Troubling collaborative research: concluding thoughts

V. Camille Westmont and Elizabeth Clay (2022: 206) have argued that:

> while CBPR is an important step in working toward equality with stakeholder and descendant communities, the power inequalities inherent within archaeology as practiced in the Western world will never be solved solely by collaboration. Equality does not inherently mobilise self-determination, self-representation, or sovereignty.

Westmont and Clay's critique draws attention to some of the complexities which surround collaboration with descendant communities—complexities that the Montpelier controversy brought to the fore. The rationale provided by the Montpelier Board reflects challenges around defining descendant communities, the role of archaeologists and heritage management organisations in mediating between descendant voices, and ongoing power imbalances between descendants and archaeologists.

Defining 'community' within the collaborative paradigm presents a continuing philosophical problem in archaeology (Agbe-Davies 2010, 2011; Crooke 2010; Martindale & Nicholas 2014; Supernant & Warrick 2014). These intellectual struggles are reflected in practice by the Montpelier Board's attempts to redefine the boundaries of descendant representation and the MDC's resistance to these efforts. Like other heterogeneous communities, descendants of formerly enslaved Africans at Montpelier have various relationships to and opinions about the site, the history of slavery, and the representation of 'dark heritage'—heritage produced in times of conflict, death, suffering and trauma (Thomas *et al.* 2019; Westmont 2022).

Related to these representational issues is the question of what role, if any, archaeologists and heritage professionals should play in defining and mediating between different descendant voices. When working with descendant communities, archaeologists are asked to make decisions about which communities to collaborate with (Supernant & Warrick 2014). To date, many archaeologists have approached this issue through the principle of multivocality, welcoming and incorporating numerous stakeholder perspectives and values to expand understandings of the past, present and future (Atalay *et al.* 2014: 11–12). While the concept of multivocality has broadened who archaeologists are in dialogue with this approach has also been critiqued for failing to reform structural power dynamics in the field (a key goal of decolonisation). From this vantage point, multivocality represents a problematic "move to innocence" that reconciles settler guilt around past injustices while maintaining current systems of power that recentre Whiteness (Tuck & Yang 2012: 3).

As Fryer and Raczek (2020) have argued, while multivocality is an admirable principle it may also allow us as practitioners to be too agnostic (*sensu* Brumann 2014) about the groups we decide to collaborate with and on what terms. Sometimes, we would argue, what is at stake in a collaborative endeavour has everything to do with who our collaborators are and are not. There are often legitimate reasons, such as a history of injustice, to prioritise the interests and voices of some stakeholders over others. The senior archaeologists at Montpelier who put their jobs on the line—and ultimately sacrificed them—were committed to this principle.

While there are clear historical and cultural differences between Black and Indigenous communities, the issues concerning identity and representation that arose around the MDC are mirrored in conversations around heritage, representation and Indigenous identity

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(e.g. Sobo *et al.* 2021). Much like the MDC, Indigenous communities are not homogeneous entities. In addition to internal diversity, Indigenous communities hold varied forms of political status which have meaningful impacts on heritage management and collaboration. In the USA alone, there are 574 federally recognised Tribal Nations that hold a political status as 'domestic dependent nations'. As federally recognised tribes, these Indigenous communities possess certain rights, federal benefits, services and protections that extend to the archaeological record (for more on sovereignty and recognition in the North American context, see Barker 2005). There are many more Indigenous peoples in the USA, however, who are recognised only at the state level, and others who lack any legally defined status. Forms of representational boundary maintenance, whether self-imposed by descendant communities, such as the MDC or legally constructed as in the case of federal and state recognition, inevitably end up excluding some descendants from issues of heritage management. In building collaborative projects, we argue that archaeologists must educate themselves about these different statuses and their political implications for conducting collaborative research. While Native Nations and settler colonial governments have created a legal (albeit flawed) framework for defining Indigenous communities in the USA and Canada, for Latin America and the Caribbean the heuristic lines between local, descendant and Indigenous communities are less clear. As Chickasaw anthropologist Shannon Speed (2017: 784) tells us, "colonialism in much of Latin America has in fact been characterized by both land dispossession and labor extraction [key mechanisms of settler colonialism], to which Indigenous peoples were simultaneously subjected". This often results in the racialisation and proletarianisation of Indigenous peoples into a subnational class rather than an autonomous or sovereign entity, creating a context wherein identifying direct descendants with whom to partner may feel nearly impossible. The state often exploits this impossibility by nationalising all forms of heritage that cannot be claimed by a specific family or recognised community lineage.

We believe that the deep entanglement between colonialism, dispossession and Indigenous recognition in Latin America requires a model of research that transcends settler colonial legal systems. Archaeologists working in the region should not use non-recognition as an excuse to bypass the need to seek substantive collaborations with those communities. Instead, we promote a flexible construction of community that allows archaeologists to prioritise collaborating with those communities who face unjust power imbalances—regardless of their capacity to prove or perform a specific indigeneity or locality (e.g. see Matthews 2022). It is simply insufficient to throw up our hands and seek the bare minimum (e.g. state-issued permits or approval from a small contingent of nondescript 'locals') because identifying the community is too difficult. Failing to do so perpetuates an extractive mindset that is antithetical to the ethos of the collaborative paradigm.

Finally, the Montpelier scenario reveals the precarious power of descendant communities and the continued need to push against dominant heritage regimes that place control of archaeological resources in the hands of predominantly white institutions and experts. We are reminded here too that archaeologists may find themselves contributing to partnerships where they are not the arbiters and where they will have to make a choice about where on the collaborative continuum they want to be: leaning toward the colonial or advocating for the community. Although the Montpelier Board aspires to achieve parity in terms of descendant representation among its membership (Montpelier 2021), this controversy reveals a slippage between the ideals of representativeness and equality and the realities of implementing structural changes that serve the

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goals of social justice (La Salle & Hutchings 2016: 171). As the collaborative paradigm continues to expand, we hope to see more archaeologists transparently grappling with the complexities of real power sharing and investing substantial efforts in capacity building and empowerment within Black, Indigenous, and othered descendant communities.

In the end, we chose to title our article, 'The future of archaeology is (still) community collaboration' because the potential of community collaboration has yet to be fully realised. Despite intrepid individuals having conducted various forms of collaborative work for some decades, only now are we seeing our professional organisations take action, for example, urging tenure and promotion committees to recognise the arduous labour of seeing through the work involved in these kinds of collaborations (ACC 2023). Unfortunately, we still hear well-meaning colleagues confuse consultation or conversation for collaboration. While we celebrate the growth in collaborative community-based research in archaeology, we ultimately agree with Westmont and Clay's argument that collaboration is not sufficient in and of itself to reform the power imbalances within the discipline. Furthermore, we echo their call for continued self-reflection on how collaborative research may inadvertently perpetuate systemic inequities in heritage management (Westmont & Clay 2022: 205–6). Until we surmount the challenges and disincentives to implementing community-centred collaborations it will be difficult to disentangle our own failures from structural incapacitation.

Acknowledgements

This article is inspired and informed by conversations the authors have had with a growing number of Black and Indigenous scholars in the field of archaeology.

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