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Thematic Analysis of Indigenous Perspectives on Archaeology and Cultural Resource Management Industries

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Abstract

This article explores Indigenous perspectives on archaeology in Canada and the United States and the role of archaeologists in engaging with Indigenous communities. As part of our study, we interviewed Indigenous community members about their experiences in archaeology and their thoughts on the discipline. We analyzed each interview thematically to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset and to develop common themes in the interview transcripts. Based on the results of our analysis, we identified six themes in the data: (1) Euro-colonialism damaged and interrupted Indigenous history, and archaeology offers Indigenous community members an opportunity to reconnect with their past; (2) archaeological practices restrict access of Indigenous community members to archaeological information and archaeological materials; (3) cultural resource management (CRM) is outpacing the capacity of Indigenous communities to engage meaningfully with archaeologists; (4) the codification of archaeology through standards, guidelines, and technical report writing limits the goals of the discipline; (5) archaeological methods are inconsistent and based on individual, or company-wide, funding and decision-making; and (6) archaeological software offers a new opportunity for Indigenous communities and archaeologists to collaborate on projects.

Resumen

Este artículo explora las perspectivas indígenas sobre la arqueología en Canadá y Estados Unidos, así como el papel de los arqueólogos en la interacción con las comunidades indígenas. Como parte de nuestro estudio, realizamos entrevistas con miembros de comunidades indígenas acerca de sus experiencias y percepciones en relación con la arqueología. Mediante un análisis temático, cada entrevista fue examinada para identificar patrones de significado en el conjunto de datos y desarrollar temas comunes en las transcripciones de las entrevistas. A partir de los resultados de nuestro análisis, identificamos seis temas principales en los datos: (1) El eurocolonialismo causó daño e interrupciones en la historia indígena, siendo la arqueología una vía para que los miembros de la comunidad indígena se reconecten con su pasado; (2) Las prácticas arqueológicas limitan el acceso de los miembros de la comunidad indígena a información y materiales arqueológicos; (3) La Gestión de Recursos Culturales (CRM por sus siglas en inglés) supera la capacidad de las comunidades indígenas para interactuar significativamente con los arqueólogos; (4) La codificación de la arqueología a través de estándares, pautas y redacción técnica de informes impone limitaciones en los objetivos de la disciplina; (5) Los métodos arqueológicos son inconsistentes y a menudo influenciados por la financiación y toma de decisiones a nivel individual o empresarial; y (6) los softwares arqueológicos presentan una oportunidad novedosa para la colaboración entre comunidades indígenas y arqueólogos en iniciativas de proyectos.

Keywords: Indigenous perspectives; archaeology; decolonization; Eurocentrism; thematic analysis; qualitative analysis

Palabras clave: perspectivas Indígenas; arqueología; descolonización; Eurocentrismo; Análisis temático; analisis cualitativo

Scholars have long recognized the theoretical and methodological problems with Eurocentrism/colonialism in archaeology, the “ownership” of archaeological materials and information, and the monopolization of interpretations of the past by Western institutions and archaeologists (see Gupta et al. 2023; Laluk et al. 2022; Schneider and Hayes 2020). Historians argue that traditional academic scholarship, which experts in Western university-based science historically dominate, marginalizes Indigenous voices (see Mihesuah and Wilson 2004). Archaeologists and Indigenous peoples are now collaborating on community-led approaches to empower descendant communities and encourage a retaking of history and heritage from colonial powers, whose narratives continue to pervade the policies of academic and governmental authorities (see Acabado and Martin [2020] for a community-led study). Collaboration has encouraged archaeologists to seek ways to integrate Indigenous knowledge into archaeological practice, especially to provide new perspectives and overcome the colonial history of the discipline (Cipolla et al. 2019; Marek-Martinez 2021). This project furthers these goals by providing an Indigenous-focused perspective on archaeology in academia and cultural resource management (CRM) industries.

We interviewed Indigenous community members in Canada and the United States to understand their perspectives and foster an Indigenous-led agenda on archaeology. Through a process of recording, transcribing, and evaluating the responses of Indigenous communities, this study assesses the strengths/weaknesses of archaeologists (in academic and commercially based industries) in engaging with Indigenous communities, addressing Indigenous concerns, and incorporating Indigenous voices into archaeological practice (see McLellan and Woolsey [2023] for the preliminary report).

Social sciences use thematic analysis—a qualitative method that codifies interview transcripts into patterns of meaning—to identify salient topics, or themes, in the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2022; Terry et al. 2017). Based on a thematic analysis of 16 interviews from members of 10 Indigenous communities, this study identified six themes: (1) European powers in the colonial period interrupted the ancestral ways of knowing and living in Indigenous communities, and archaeology can reconnect their peoples to the past; (2) Indigenous communities lack control over archaeological materials and information, and they question the traditional role of archaeologists as stewards of the past; (3) the rapid growth of the CRM industry is outpacing the capacity of Indigenous communities to engage meaningfully with archaeologists and evaluate technical reports; (4) standards, guidelines, and technical report writing are bureaucratic, prescribed, and codified, and they shape and limit the goals of the discipline; (5) archaeological methods are inconsistent and change company to company, with some using more intensive methods and technologies in the field; and (6) Indigenous community members are optimistic about the impact of new software in the industry and its potential to share archaeological information.

Sociopolitical and Archaeological Context of the Study

There are differences between high-level, federal, and international messages about Indigenous rights to archaeological materials and the experiences of Indigenous community members working in archaeology in Canada and the United States. Toward the end of the twentieth century, critiques about the treatment of Indigenous peoples, who felt increasingly marginalized in colonial societies, led to the creation of a United Nation’s (UN) working group on discrimination of Indigenous peoples (see Martinez Cobo 1986). After several decades of debate on the right to self-determination and the control over natural resources on traditional lands, the UN released the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP; ratified by 143 out of 147 countries). The declaration was clear in its position toward archaeology:

Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present, and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature [United Nations General Assembly 2007].

Canada is one of the four countries that voted against the declaration, along with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Canada recognized UNDRIP as “aspirational” but affirmed that it was not a legally binding instrument (see Nicol 2017:800–803). The government listed intellectual property, military, and the “rights and obligations of Indigenous peoples, Member states, and third parties” as major concerns of the country (Nicol 2017:800). Canada maintained that its legal framework—the Indian Act (see Woolsey [2013] for a critique of the Act)—already addressed the protection of Indigenous rights and Canada’s role in consulting and accommodating Indigenous communities (see Coates and Favel 2016). Chief Phil Fontane of the Sagkeeng First Nation called the vote a “stain on Canada’s reputation” and viewed it as a betrayal of the country’s legacy as a protector of human rights (Lackenbauer and Cooper 2007:113). In 2016, Canada endorsed the declaration because of Indigenous pressure and mounting criticism from the international community, with Minister for Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada Carolyn Bennett saying, “We intend nothing less than to adopt and implement the declaration in accordance with the Canadian Constitution” (Exner-Pirot 2018:176).

In the United States, policymakers denied the flawed document because it did not represent a consensus declaration and lacked transparency (Frankel et al. 2022:8–9). Even with the endorsement of President Barack Obama, who announced an administrative shift in 2010, Favel and Coates (2016:19) argued that the decision came with doubts and caveats—or as one spokesperson said, a voice that reflected the United States’ “own domestic and constitutional interests.” Many scholars have observed that UNDRIP is not a legally binding document and that it only serves as a moral compass in the United States (Crepelle 2019:22; Favel and Coates 2016). As a result, its effects on relations with Indigenous people in the United States has seemed negligible to many. Frankel and colleagues (2022:1) argue that the country “perpetuates power and ownership” onto Indigenous communities through insincere empathy and ignoring the needs of the people. Crepelle (2019:20) highlights issues with federal Indian law—or “the law of national power and rights developed in the context of Native Nations and Native peoples” (Blackhawk 2019:1795)—which Indigenous people view as primitive or “anchored in the past.” Federal Indian law is a collection of binding decisions made by the United States regarding the legal and political status of Indigenous peoples. There have been constitutional improvements in the official policy toward Indigenous self-determination, but as Laluk and colleagues (2022:662) argue, Western foundations and the colonial state still limit Indigenous sovereignty. Their main issue in archaeology is the accumulation of information/objects by non-Indigenous researchers/museums and cultural resource management companies (Laluk et al. 2022:661).

In Canada, the Trudeau government enacted the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to address the historic legacy of the residential school system (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC] 2015a). Widely instituted by Sir John A. MacDonald in 1883 to assimilate Indigenous people into Euro-Christian society, residential schools were “a coercive policy of land acquisition and directed cultural change” (Miller 2018:399) that deeply impacted Indigenous people across Canada by perpetuating physical, psychological, and sexual abuse on its residents for more than a century (Knockwood 2015). The TRC commission, which concluded in 2015, called for the reform of many Canadian institutions—such as child welfare, education, language and culture, health, and justice—to “advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” (TRC 2015b). For archaeology, the TRC reemphasized the articles under UNDRIP, including Indigenous peoples’ right to “maintain, protect, and develop” (TRC 2015a:246) “historical sites [and] artefacts” (UN General Assembly 2007). According to the commission, the state should return—or “provide redress through effective mechanisms which may include restitution”—any property obtained without consent (TRC 2015a:246). Under the TRC, Indigenous peoples have the right to their cultural sites, ceremonial objects, and the repatriation of human remains (TRC 2015a:247). For historical documents and archives, which are like technical reports produced by CRM industries, oral history must be on “equal footing” with written history (TRC 2015a:247). The TRC also recommends that cultural institutions and Indigenous communities draft, endorse, and implement ethical guidelines for the interpretation of artifacts. The recommendations of the TRC have had a sweeping impact on archaeology in Canada and

the museums and institutions that support it. That said, there are still many issues with engagement and cultural ownership in archaeology and CRM on provincial and municipal levels.

As mentioned, federal and international messages about Indigenous rights to archaeological materials are different from the experiences of Indigenous peoples on provincial/state levels. For example, as early as the 1990s, provincial legislation in Canada underrepresented First Nations in the resource management process, such as the Mi'kmaq, in Nova Scotia, Canada, whom the government failed to consult in the extraction of cultural materials (Berneshawi 1997). The province/state (in Canada and the United States) retains the right to issue permits for archaeological sites and because of this, archaeologists serve the state by managing cultural resources and—as Ferris (2003:156) acknowledges—by balancing protection with resource extraction and land development.

Provincial and state governments own natural and cultural resources, which both prevents Indigenous communities from sharing jurisdiction over archaeological materials and privileges archaeologists, which governments regulate through education, licensing, and accreditation. Archaeologists in CRM harvest cultural resources on behalf of the state/province, create gray literature based on the results of the harvesting activities (often using company boilerplate to summarize extensive periods of Indigenous history), and submit the results to government agencies and provincial and state authorities, who then restrict access to these reports. The Anishinabek Nation (with the support of Archaeological Research Associates Ltd.) argues that structural/regulatory processes that govern community and CRM consultant interactions give the province/state exclusive rights to the archaeological and historic past, the right to determine who can explore the past, the right to determine how archaeologists explore the past, the right to determine what finds have archaeological value, the right to determine curation methods, and the right to determine when archaeologists consult Indigenous communities (Racher et al. 2022). As we will see in the following sections, these processes create frustration among Indigenous communities, especially when provincial authorities issue permits that alter or destroy their cultural heritage without their consultation.

Goals of the Study, Composition of the Participants, and the Interview Process

Indigenous perspectives on archaeology are important for understanding how archaeological methods and practice can respect and engage with Indigenous cultures. Participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) they are of Indigenous descent, and (2) they currently work or previously worked in archaeology or they have some practical knowledge of archaeological practices. We contacted First Nations organizations, communities, and scholars directly, through emails to various communities and institutions throughout Canada and the United States, and indirectly, through snowball sampling (by asking participants to recommend other potential subjects). Our study includes perspectives—albeit some indirectly from meetings, informal conversations, and email responses—from Indigenous community members, archaeologists, and CRM practitioners across Canada and the United States. We contacted archaeological associations (such as the British Columbia Association of Professional Archaeologists), museums (such as the Port Moody Heritage Society / Port Moody Museum and Archives), and Indigenous communities with archaeological monitoring programs (such as Little Shuswap Lake Indian Band and Hiawatha First Nation). We also solicited broader archaeological communities and universities by asking for participants on social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram).

We asked participants to explain the goals of the discipline, its importance generally and to Indigenous people specifically, challenges around working with archaeologists, issues with artifacts and accessibility, and cultural ownership. The study involved 16 community members, from 10 communities across four provinces in Canada and one state in the United States. Two of the respondents asked to remain anonymous. In many cases, we held preliminary meetings with Indigenous communities (such as the Nation Huronne-Wendat) but did not interview specific community members because of issues related to the capacity and free time of the community. It is likely that capacity was an issue in participation because we conducted the study in the summer/fall (during the peak months of archaeological investigations). That said, scholars show that our study sample includes a robust selection of participants to identify themes in a relatively homogenous dataset (i.e.,

Table 1. List of Participants (Excluding Two Anonymous Sources).

Name	Indigenous Affiliation	Geographic Location
Lisa Francis Beaver	Acadia First Nation	Nova Scotia, Canada
Katsisahente Cross-Delisle	Mohawk Council of Kahnawake	Quebec, Canada
Christine Zachary Deom	Mohawk Council of Kahnawake	Quebec, Canada
Jordan Jamieson	Mississaugas of the Credit	Ontario, Canada
Jubal Jamieson	Haudenosaunee Development Institute	Ontario, Canada
Adam Laforme	Mississaugas of the Credit	Ontario, Canada
Jamie Laforme	Mississaugas of the Credit	Ontario, Canada
Cedar Meuse-Waterman	Bear River First Nation	Nova Scotia, Canada
Kamden Nicholas	Pictou Landing First Nation	Nova Scotia, Canada
Gaetan Nolet	Mohawk Council of Kahnawake	Quebec, Canada
Drew Perley	Tobique First Nation	New Brunswick, Canada
Jeff Purdy	Acadia First Nation	Nova Scotia, Canada
Richard Zane Smith	Wyandot Nation of Kansas	Kansas, United States
William Lucas	Six Nations of the Grand River	Ontario, Canada

Indigenous perspectives on archaeology in Canada and the United States) and that theoretical saturation (the point at which the analyst no longer identifies new themes) can occur after only six interviews (Braun and Clarke 2013; Francis et al. 2010; Fugard and Potts 2015; Guest et al. 2006). Although we set out to interview as many participants as possible, including Indigenous community members from northern Canada and the western/southwestern United States, it is unlikely that increasing the number of participants would have impacted the development of themes (especially considering existing studies on Indigenous communities in these areas, such as Hodgetts [2012] and Van Dyke [2020]). Table 1 lists the name, Indigenous affiliation, and geographic location of each participant.

Each community member participated in a semistructured interview—either in person or online via video conferencing—that consisted of between 10 and 15 questions (see Table 2 for the primary interview questions). The University of New Brunswick Research Ethics Board approved the study design and interview questions (REB# 2022-136). Interview questions focused on four general areas: (1) the importance and goals of archaeology, (2) the accessibility of archaeological results and information, (3) the methods used by archaeologists, and (4) the impact of new technology and software on the discipline. At times, questions deviated from the script to elaborate on specific points or to provide clarity to previous statements.

Qualitative Data, Coding, and Theme Development

This article uses thematic analysis—a common qualitative method in psychology (see Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012, 2019, 2022; Terry et al. 2017)—to understand and categorize the responses of each participant. Scholars designed the method to empirically draw out common themes or narratives from a set of participant responses and to develop recommendations based on the emergent themes. We opted to use this method because it is an effective way of synthesizing information while still allowing the original voices to “speak” on their own behalf. We transcribed the interviews into text, coded the text with labels or short phrases, and then compared the texts to see if themes “emerged” from the codes. Braun and Clarke’s (2012:68–69) article on thematic analysis and the six-phase approach to codification has heavily influenced our study. The six-phase approach consists of (1) immersion of the researcher in the data (i.e., transcripts/audio recordings), (2) generation of initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review and revision of potential themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) production of the report. We added an additional stage to this study: (a) asking community members

Table 2. List of Major Interview Questions.

Can archaeology benefit Indigenous people?
Do you think archaeologists understand the goals of their research?
Have you experienced any challenges in your engagement with archaeologists?
Do you think archaeologists do their best to share the results of their surveys and excavations with Indigenous communities?
Do you think archaeologists use the best and most up-to-date techniques and technologies in the field?
If a tool existed for digitally recording data, what features would you like to see in the application?

to give feedback on the emergent themes and this articles’s first draft and (b) incorporating them into the second draft. Interviewers made notes on initial observations and gathered information during the interviews related to the research questions. After the interviews, we generated the initial codes, and we reviewed and revised them to capture both semantic and latent data (see Braun and Clarke 2012).

As Braun and Clarke (2012:61) note, codes can be either descriptive or interpretative, with the ideal being a mixture of both. Braun and Clarke (2012:58–59) argue that there are two processes to data coding and analysis: (1) bottom-up, inductive approaches that allow the codes to emerge from the data, and (2) top-down, deductive approaches that use codes that the researcher develops—or preconceives—which act as “a lens through which to interpret data” (Braun and Clarke 2022:8). Most scholars agree that thematic analysis inherently involves a degree of influence from the analyst (see Gough and Madill 2012; Mauthner and Doucet 2003). To avoid an overly descriptive system of codes or an overly interpretive (and possibly biased) system of codes, we used a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. We coded the transcripts into six general topics (i.e., importance, comprehension, challenges, accessibility, methods, and software). Early data familiarization and data collection aided in the creation of the topics. We broke down the six general topics into three subcategories; for example, we subdivided importance into (a) reason for importance, (b) impact on an individual or community, and (c) reason for unimportance (Figure 1). This deductive form of dividing the data helped to conceptualize the major themes of the study. There is overlap in the categories, and the analyst can code the transcript into one or many of the general topics. We also coded the content based on the semantic data to reduce the subjectivity of the top-down, deductive approach and to think critically about the early conceptualization of the topics (see Figure 2 for an example of a coded transcript). After we analyzed each transcript, we grouped together codes with the same deductive categories, with overlapping inductive codes identifying possible themes in the dataset. Based on an analysis of groups of deductive categories, this study identified six overarching themes, each of which we will describe, interpret, and discuss in the following section.

Thematic Analysis and Discussion

Physical Artifacts and Linking Indigenous People with the Past: “It Gives You a Connection”

Archaeologists argue that the incorporation of Indigenous peoples in archaeological practice—or the transformation of people from objects of study to participants of study (Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2012:274)—has changed the theoretical trajectory of the discipline (see Cipolla et al. 2019). Indigenous perspectives have impacted the methods of the discipline (see Gonzalez and Edwards 2020) and popularized the use of technology, such as ground-penetrating radar, which archaeologists use to identify potential unmarked residential school burials in Canada (see Montgomery and Supernant 2022; Simons et al. 2021; Whiting 2023). Scholars have written less about the transformative effect archaeology has on Indigenous community members who practice in academic and CRM industries (see Watkins [2005] for a similar approach, or Cole and Harris [2022] for Indigenous perspectives on UNDRIP). According to several community members, archaeology helped to restore their connection to the past and rediscover their history.

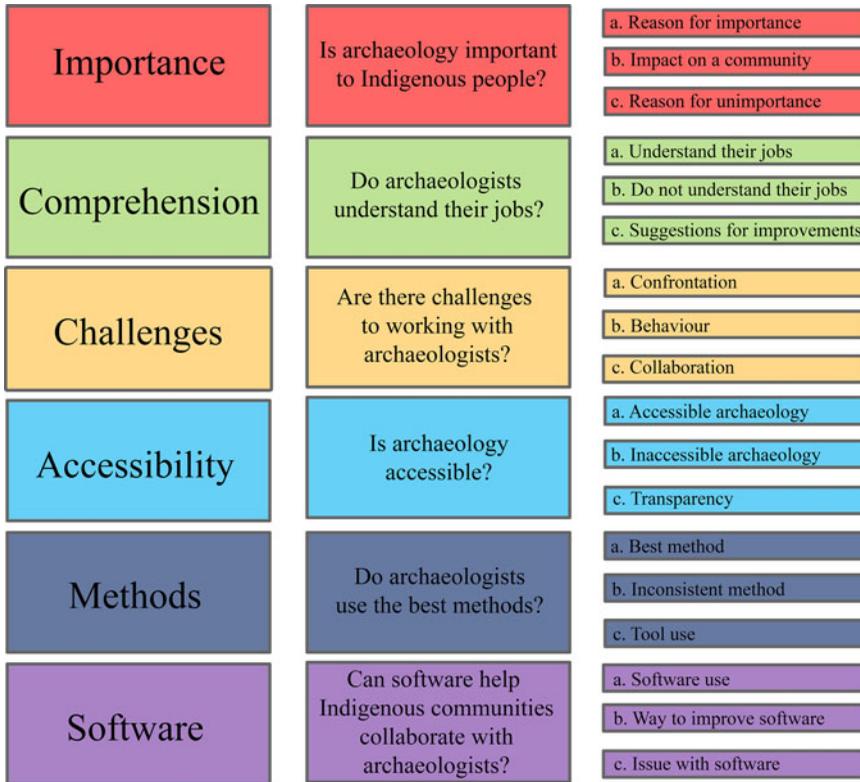


Figure 1. General topics, research questions, and deductive codes (left to right).

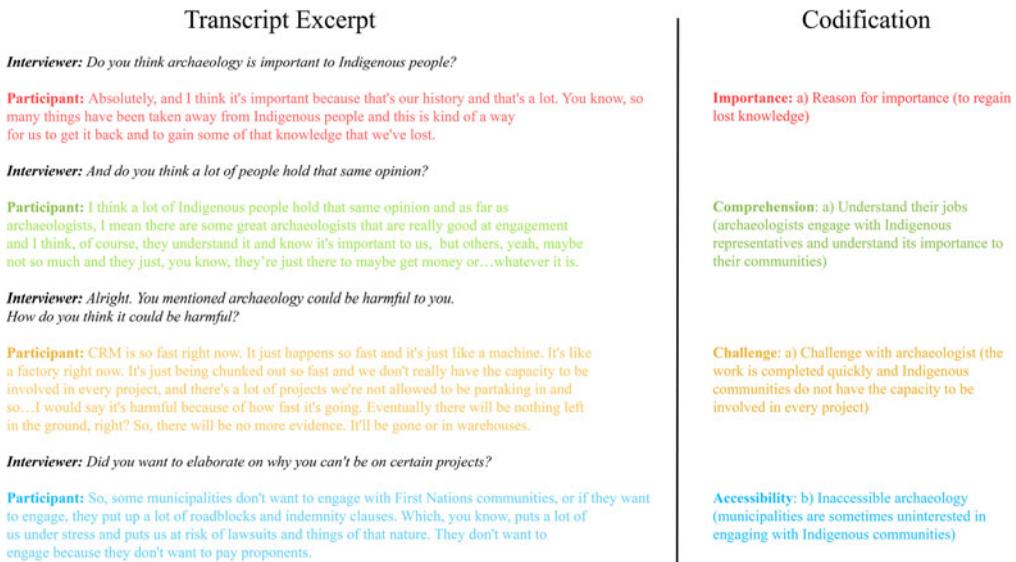


Figure 2. Example of a coded transcript.

Adam Laforme, a supervisor of archaeological operations at Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN), shared his experiences in archaeology.

Interviewer: Do you think archaeology is important to Indigenous people?

Adam: Absolutely, and it's important because it's our history. So many things have been taken away from Indigenous people and this is a way for us to get it back and gain some of the knowledge that we've lost.

In other archaeological contexts, “colonial land alienation” is a term used to describe the removal of local descendants from their cultural landscape (by populating it with nondescendant communities; see Pikirayi 2016:120). The alienation process creates communities that lack cultural or ancestral ties to the physical landscape and its oral history. Archaeology allows Indigenous and descendant communities to reclaim lost ancestral land (Pikirayi 2016).

Kamden Nicholas, who works as a curatorial associate at the Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Centre, offered her thoughts on the importance of archaeology:

Kamden: It's a direct connection to the past. It has so many benefits to the community. It is personal. It provides a sense of belonging and a sense of being at the same time and place as your ancestors.

Some respondents talked about their physical connection with the archaeological materials, including the experience of holding artifacts in their hands. Jeff Purdy, a councillor of the Acadia First Nation Band Council, shared his perspective on the importance of material culture:

Jeff: It's not an artifact. It's not a rock. It's a cultural and spiritual connection with our Elders and community members.

Lisa Francis Beaver, a human resource manager at Acadia First Nation Band Council in Nova Scotia, Canada, elaborated on archaeology's power to connect people to the land:

Lisa: Archaeology gives us a tie to the past and who we were: our ancestors, their travel patterns, and their lives. It gives us a connection. As Mi'kmaq, our grounding is very much to Earth: to its lands, waters, and resources. Archaeology provides this connection and tells a story.

These responses reaffirm the conclusions of other archaeologists in community-led research: archaeology helps Indigenous communities heal historic traumas and reconnect with their past, or the “sacred places; ancestral sites, homelands, and waterways; and the traditional knowledge associated with such places” (see Atalay 2020:38).

Archaeologists as Stewards of the Material Record: “The Currency Is Heritage and Whose Heritage Is It? It's Indigenous Peoples”

In common with scholars who argue that archaeologists create injustices through their ownership and control of intellectual property (see Laluk et al. 2022:661), many of the participants mentioned their concern—and frustration—with both their access to archaeological information and their control over archaeological materials. The traditional stance in archaeology is that archaeologists are stewards of the archaeological record. One of the nine principles of archaeological ethics of the Society for American Archaeology is stewardship, or the responsibility of archaeologists to act as “both caretakers of and advocates for the archaeological record for the benefit of all people” (Society for American Archaeology 2023). Archaeologists often view stewardship as an ethical right—or obligation—to manage, preserve, and conserve the archaeological record (see Hollowell and McGill 2014). This paradigm has shifted, with professional societies emphasizing collaborations with Indigenous peoples (see Canadian Archaeological Association 2023), but there are still issues with the ownership of information/materials and decision-making in archaeology. Indigenous community members argue that

archaeologists manage culture-heritage that does not belong to them, and that their role as stewards can act to block Indigenous people's connection to their history.

Jamie Laforme, a field-level representative (FLR) with MCFN, described his ambivalence toward archaeologists and their unwillingness to share findings:

Interviewer: Do you think archaeologists do the best in their ability to share information?

Jamie: For the most part, I think archaeologists are guarded with their information. Sometimes it's understandable because they don't want people looting a site. I can understand that. But when we want to learn more about a site and archaeologists are standoffish, it becomes a block to our history.

Interviewer: Can you think of why archaeologists might be guarded about data?

Jamie: I can't think of any, really. It doesn't make sense to guard that information. It doesn't belong to them.

Jamie echoed this sentiment when asked about the impact of new technology.

Interviewer: Do you think a tool [to share information] would help archaeologists and Indigenous communities collaborate on projects?

Jamie: I think it could. Because then everybody would have the same information, instead of one person holding the cards and saying, "Here's what you need to know, and all you need to know."

One of the participants, who asked to be anonymous, commented on the patronizing behavior of some archaeologists in their role as stewards of the past.

Interviewer: Have you had challenges with archaeologists?

Anonymous: Archaeology is about us. It is about our ancestors. It can be dehumanizing when archaeologists forget that archaeology is about us and our ancestors. I have witnessed archaeologists telling my elders how to hold an artifact, or to be careful when handling an artifact. I don't know if it's intentional, but it can be hurtful. Other archaeologists have told me to "zip it" because I don't have academic letters to my name.

Many of the participants shared similar feelings: archaeologists act as if their education and position entitle them to archaeological materials. Supernant and Warrick (2014:581) suggest that this sense of authority stems from archaeologists' "paternalistic attitude towards the past." William Lucas, an FLR with Six Nations of the Grand River, made the following comment:

William: It's still part of this Euro-Canadian-centric paternalism that says, "Oh, we have to take care of this for them because they can't do it, right?" . . . And that's not the case. We want to.

Katsisahente Cross-Delisle, an archaeologist with the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake, also commented on the collection and storage of artifacts, which is one of archaeologists' key responsibilities as stewards of the past.

Katsisahente: And then there's also the issues of how the human remains and how the artifacts are treated once they're collected. They're just put in boxes, and they're put on shelves, and they're forgotten. And so, when I try to bring this up at museums, and question, "Why do you do this?" I suggest that they should send the artifacts back to the community, especially if they're not using or researching them. But a lot of the times they'll say "Oh, it's because of the bureaucracy of the museum. We can't just do that" or "If we give the community all these artifacts, we have to give all the communities their artifacts and then we'll have nothing in the museum." Or they always say, "Oh well, you don't have a museum in your community, so we're going to take care of them until

you do.” But these are just excuses to control our culture-heritage and continue the colonial structure of archaeology.

The ownership of the past has remained a contentious issue in Canada and the United States, but Indigenous communities are making strides in reclaiming the artifacts of their peoples. Archaeologists returned a stone knife, which they found in Parliament Hill, Ottawa, dated from 2,500 to 4,000 years ago, to the stewardship of the Algonquin First Nation (Woolf 2021).

The Speed and Quality of Archaeology and Indigenous Communities: “So Everything from Then Till Now Is Just Being Erased Systematically”

Prior to the development of legislation to protect culture-heritage, archaeologists conducted excavations as part of university-led projects and field schools funded by governmental and/or private granting agencies. University-based research restricted the scope, intensity, and widespread application of archaeology in Canada and the United States. Shifts in the discipline in the 1980s (i.e., legislation that required archaeological investigations prior to land alterations) led to the growth of commercial archaeology, or CRM, which changed archaeology from an academic pursuit to a business activity (Dans and Gonzalez 2021; see Messenger and Smith 2010). Over the last several decades, the growth of the CRM sector in Canada and the United States has rapidly increased the number of sites that archaeologists survey and excavate each year. In Ontario, the Ministry of Citizenship and Multiculturalism released a report that shows a steady increase in the number of Project Information Forms and the number of reports filed each year—a statistical reflection of the rising intensity of archaeology in the province over the last 10 years (Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport [MTCS] 2022). An archaeological contractor in the western United States estimated that she had surveyed more than 176,000 acres over the course of her career and created a paper trail of reports that stretched 3.5 km (2.2 mi.; Roberts 2017).

Many of the community members commented on the speed, intensity, and sustainability of CRM industries. Adam offered his opinion on the harmful process of commercial archaeology:

Interviewer: And you mentioned archaeology is harmful. How is it harmful?

Adam: CRM is so fast right now. It’s so fast, and it’s like a machine. It’s like a factory. We don’t have the capacity to be involved in every project, and there are a lot of projects we can’t be a part of. CRM is a problem because of its intensity. There will be nothing left in the end, right? There won’t be any evidence of us. It will be destroyed . . . or in warehouses.

The commercial sector of archaeology and the production of archaeological impact assessments is susceptible to the boom-and-bust cycle because of its connection to the construction industry (Aitchison 2009; Gnecco and Dias 2015). In Spain, commercial archaeology collapsed in the wake of the global financial crisis in 2008, with more than 70% of archaeological companies closing by 2017 (Dans and Gonzalez 2021). In Ontario, Canada, where Adam supervises archaeological sites, the business is booming because of federal and provincial pressure to develop new residential developments—the “More Homes Built Faster” Act aims to build 1.5 million homes in Ontario over the next 10 years. Pressure from governments and private construction companies—the clients of archaeological companies—creates an environment of expedition, where archaeologists must try to balance the retention of archaeological data with the timely completion of projects. Kamden explained how the pressure of keeping up with CRM projects impacts the engagement process with Indigenous communities:

Kamden: It’s been my experience that [Indigenous engagement] is going to slow down work. Especially when most of the archaeology I’ve been involved in has been proponent driven. When the proponent knows that they will have to involve Indigenous peoples, there’s this stigma that Indigenous people want to fight against non-Indigenous people, which isn’t always the case. But I think there’s this fear that finding Indigenous objects is going to have projects halted and so proponents would rather not find them or deal with the community.

Added to issues with the speed of archaeology and a reluctance to engage with Indigenous communities, the CRM industry is facing a labor shortage, even though the number of individuals graduating with degrees is much higher than the replacement rate (the number of employees lost through retirement, career changes, etc.; see Altschul and Klein [2022] for a breakdown of the CRM job market in the United States, and see Jalbert [2019] for Canada).

Adam commented on the impact of low staff retention on archaeology in the field:

Adam: It's every year, you know. It's a new batch of people. I've been on sites where I've asked a [field technician], "Do you know what you are looking for? Have they explained to you what to do?" And they say, "No." So, it's a pattern. Every year it seems like we're more heavily involved in training."

Governments have used certification, registration, and licensing, to try to maintain archaeological standards in the field (for an example, see MTCS 2011), but most of these do not apply to entry-level positions, which usually make up most of the field staff. William commented on the quality of archaeology in CRM:

William: I struggle with the question, Is this good archaeology? Do [field technicians] think that they're doing good archaeology? There's such a lack of archaeologists that hired laborers are sometimes used in the field. You can train them, but they enter the job force with inadequate training.

Some scholars argue that university programs should reorient their content to focus on CRM instead of traditional academic subjects, such as anthropology and history, but they are also worried that pressure from labor shortages might lead to a less rigorous and accelerated education (Altschul and Klein 2022:365). These types of certificate programs already exist (see the Archaeological Field Assistant program at Camosun College). Camosun College offers an accelerated program (84 hours) that places emphasis on specific CRM skills (even though the college cautions that the certificate program should complement other credentials and does not ensure employment).

The Codification of Archaeology and Technical Report Writing: "I Don't Know Exactly What the Goals Are . . ."

In most nonacademic contexts (i.e., commercial or CRM industries), governmental, administrative, and bureaucratic systems prescribe and codify archaeology in a document—sometimes referred to as "standards and guidelines"—that outlines the best practice in the discipline (for an example, see New York Archaeological Council 1994). In many cases, archaeologists and Indigenous community members view the standards and guidelines as a "baseline" in the industry, or a minimum level of requirements for the completion of an archaeological project (as defined by long-standing, rarely amended documents; see MTCS [2011] for an example). Jordan Jamieson, a lead FLR at MCFN, questioned whether upholding the standards and guidelines is best practice.

Interviewer: When they hit the ground, when they're excavating, do you get an idea that [archaeologists] know what they're doing and that they are aware of what they're trying to do?

Jordan: I think a lot of the goals or reasoning to why they're doing what they're doing is based on upholding the standards and guidelines. So . . . that becomes their North Star, as opposed to wanting to understand a past culture.

In Ontario, the Ministry of Citizenship and Multiculturalism and the Standards and Guidelines for Consultant Archaeologists (MTCS 2011) governs archaeology (except Parks Canada). Indigenous communities have challenged the Standards and Guidelines, with some drafting their own version of the document to request more rigorous archaeological investigations (see Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation [MCFN] 2018). For engaging with Indigenous communities, the government of Ontario (MTCS 2011:40) requires an archaeological project to engage with Indigenous communities "at the

end of Stage 2,” or “in Stage 3,” after archaeologists have identified a site and collected and processed a sample of artifacts for analysis. In contrast, MCFN (2018:13) maintains that engagement is necessary at all stages and should include consultant archaeologists, as well as approval authorities, proponents, and other decision-makers. The MCFN’s Standards and Guidelines for Archaeology (2018) are more in line with the TRC, which emphasizes the rights of Indigenous people with respect to archaeological sites. The ministry does not currently endorse the document, and CRM practitioners have generally ignored its guidelines in the province. Jordan explained the impact of government standards on Indigenous engagement:

Jordan: On the commercial side, you have the same effect where [archaeologists] are being forced by the government to [create] checkboxes that say they’ve consulted with Indigenous communities. But when they say they must consult with communities, they don’t tell you how to do it. They leave it up to a proponent and/or internally, in an archaeological company. So, they can do minimal work, and that’s where a lot of the negative side of [Indigenous engagement] comes from.

One participant, who preferred to remain anonymous, commented on differences in archaeological standards and guidelines, which vary from province to province and from state to state:

Interviewer: Did you notice a lot of variability in how the archaeology was approached?

Anonymous: Certainly. I would say that some archaeological teams very much stick to whatever the provincial guidelines are, which in the province of Nova Scotia is not much in comparison to what I looked at, say, for Ontario. They have much more stringent guidelines than what we do here.

Because of issues with the guidelines in Nova Scotia, some Indigenous communities have called for changes.

Interviewer: Have you tried to get the government to raise their standards?

Jeff: Yeah, but it’s a slow negotiation. Right? Sometimes it’s senior management, or someone who has been doing something a certain way for so long. That’s what’s drilled into their head, and that’s what they know. This is what we’re going to do. We know this works. We don’t need to change it. This works for them, but it doesn’t work for Indigenous communities. Right? Because it’s our culture. Our heritage, not theirs.

Inconsistency in the Use of Archaeological Methods: “It’s Done to the Best of Our Abilities with the Tools We Have at Hand”

Like the inconsistencies in state- and province-wide legislation of archaeology, archaeological methods vary based on the governmental jurisdiction, the skill of the practitioners, their resources, and the company. New approaches are available in archaeology through advances in remote sensing (see Wadsworth et al. 2021), technological integration (e.g., drones) with artificial intelligence for artifact identification, and refined macro- and microanalysis of archaeological materials, but there are irregularities in their use across the discipline.

William offered his thoughts on inconsistencies in archaeological methods:

Interviewer: Do you think that archaeologists use the best and most up-to-date techniques and technologies to record in the field?

William: I would say that it differs on a company-to-company basis.

When asked about the ways archaeology can be harmful to Indigenous communities, William elaborated on archaeological methods in CRM:

William: There’s a need to expedite, and there’s not a need to study. That puts archaeology in a state of crisis, right? . . . Where we need to get this out of the ground right now because in two

months the bulldozers are coming and/or a lawsuit. There's always a time constraint you are under and, in that way, I don't think that archaeological sites are given the appropriate attention to detail. And so, for us, it's just something we have to checkmark. We must check the box to make sure it's done, and then we can move on with development.

Lisa mentioned another issue with archaeological methods that is related to the standardization of archaeological practice: the “cutoff” point, or the maximum limit at which an excavation must be stopped. In many contexts, archaeologists define the extent, or boundaries, of an excavation by artifact counts (e.g., 10 artifacts per 1 × 1 m excavation unit). Archaeologists identify the size of sites by artifact types and densities, but some of the respondents criticized the methods of archaeologists as being arbitrary or—as other authors have argued—biased by social and environmental factors (see Douglass et al. 2023:30; Leckman and Heilen 2023:12–13).

Lisa: OK, so we found this site. Let's have a conversation. Can we avoid it? If we must mitigate it, “Well, what's the count?” Archaeologists define units in terms of [artifacts]: “What's the count?” Well, to the Mi'kmaq, those [artifacts] were a result of stone toolmaking. They're still part of our ancestors, so trying to negotiate counts is very challenging for communities because those items, and those [artifacts], are still part of our history. So, trying to sit there and negotiate a count that's acceptable that you leave behind after you go ahead and say, “OK, it's a 15-count for [artifacts]. Once that's mitigated to that point, we can move on.” Even if the site is mitigated, there are still artifacts in the ground, so you're going to bulldoze through an archaeological site for development. I found these conversations very challenging because now you're just talking about numbers. You're not talking about the history of a people.

Field-Level Data Capture and Collaborating with Indigenous Communities: “If Things Are Going to Move at a Fast Pace, We Need Tools That Also Move at a Fast Pace”

Commercial archaeology companies, Indigenous communities, universities, and independent businesses are developing new software to capture field-level data. Archaeologists and Indigenous communities are using a combination of software to collect, manage, and assess a range of disparate types of data. Software and new data-capture applications have changed the nature of community participation and engagement, and they may offer new opportunities for Indigenous communities to access archaeological information. Fieldworkers usually record data in a form template, which is either paper or electronic and redirected to office staff, who sort, organize, and file the templates into a database. Some of the participants in this study mentioned other third-party solutions, such as Trailmark Systems, which offers services in Indigenous land-use planning, custom software and GIS web development, and custom mobile apps. Some Indigenous communities are using a mobile application called GeoKeeper, by Kwusen Research & Media, which aims to support community-based monitoring programs by providing data collection via handheld devices. Because of the data-sharing potential of mobile applications, we asked respondents about the impact of new technologies in the field. Most of the community members mentioned the importance of data sharing, real-time updates on the progress of archaeological sites, and other technologies—such as 3D rendering of artifacts—as well as integrating Indigenous languages.

Cedar Meuse-Waterman, from the Bear River First Nation, asked for future software solutions to incorporate traditional Indigenous languages and provide translations for common archaeological terms.

Cedar: Each word is like a door. When you open it, there's a whole new world of meaning. It's as if you are seeing things for the first time. And it is the same in archaeology. It's the first time that you're seeing an artifact that's been, you know, hidden for so long.

Other community members were optimistic about the use of new software in archaeology, especially as a way of sharing data and adding to their capacity to engage with archaeological projects.

Interviewer: Do you think your job is slowed down by the transfer of information between the field and office?

Adam: It would be nice if we had a program that the consultant or the proponent logged on and put the information in, and then we could just have access to it, instead of, you know, the consultants and proponents dumping all this information on us.

Richard Zane Smith, from the Wyandot First Nation in Kansas, also mentioned the desire for a centralized database that would be accessible:

Richard: Whenever a ruin, or an ancient place, is excavated, it is like opening a book. There is a lot of information. So, if you can create a software, or a source that Indigenous communities can access to see site locations and collections, that would help us collaborate more openly with archaeologists.

Archaeologists and Indigenous communities are still developing and incorporating technological solutions into common practices, but it is possible that mobile applications will help to break down long-held issues with data sharing and data ownership.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the thematic analysis of the interviews, our study has identified six major themes. Archaeology is important to the culture-history of Indigenous peoples and helps to reconnect descendant communities to their history, which Euro-colonialism and other Western institutions (i.e., provincial ownership of culture heritage) interrupted. Archaeologists should continue to engage with Indigenous communities and offer more opportunities for participation, especially in laboratory and analysis contexts. The traditional role of archaeologists as stewards of the past is antiquated. Archaeologists are increasingly adopting a role as arbitrators between the state, archaeology, and Indigenous communities, and they should push for legislative changes to better define and formalize their position in relation to Indigenous engagement.

Commercial archaeology, or CRM, is dependent on market forces/budgets and political objectives, and practitioners should not compromise the integrity of the discipline because of client-based pressure. Indigenous community members are an ally in this endeavor given that they often push for more rigorous archaeological methods (i.e., instead of fulfilling a checklist of static procedures). Government-proscribed standards and guidelines limit the potential of the discipline and move away from knowledge-based interpretations of the past. Provincial governments and archaeologists should consult with Indigenous communities to reassess and rewrite archaeological standards and guidelines. Another option is to move toward a system more akin to academia, in which archaeologists submit proposals to governmental authorities, with research questions, goals, and a discussion of the culture-historic significance of the investigation. Archaeological methods are different across provinces and states in North America, with differing degrees of intensity and technological sophistication, which affects the quality and thoroughness of archaeological surveys and excavations. Indigenous communities are unhappy with these inconsistencies and insist that archaeologists should try to ensure the quality of archaeological work on their culture-heritage.

Software and apps offer a new opportunity for collaborations between Western and Indigenous communities, which may break down some of the historic barriers between data sharing and Indigenous ownership. Archaeologists and Indigenous communities should collaboratively design and implement these technologies so that they do not reify, or concretize, the inherent problems that already exist between them.

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