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# Indigenous Collaborative, Consultative, and Community-Engaged Archaeology in the American Southeast

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**Abstract**
In October 2022 at the annual board meeting of the Southeastern Archaeological Conference (SEAC), a new image policy for the journal *Southeastern Archaeology* was adopted that prohibited publication of photographs of funerary objects/belongings. In the discourse surrounding these new policies, a range of misunderstandings and mischaracterizations regarding consultative, collaborative, and community-based Indigenous archaeology were highlighted. Through a range of examples and personal experiences, this paper explores some of the realities of collaborative archaeological practice in the Indigenous American Southeast and aims to contextualize and mediate some recurring misunderstandings. Of particular importance and focus is the unique concept and definition of "the community" as it relates to collaborative practice across Indigenous North America. Importantly, I emphasize that southeastern archaeology and southeastern archaeologists are doing transformative work that puts us in a position to be leaders in the ongoing structural changes to our discipline.

**Resumen**
En octubre de 2022, en la reunión anual de la junta directiva de la Conferencia Arqueológica del Sureste (SEAC), se adoptó una nueva política de imagen para la revista *Southeastern Archaeology* que prohibía la publicación de fotografías de objetos/pertenencias funerarias. En el discurso en torno a estas nuevas políticas, se destacó una serie de malentendidos y caracterizaciones erróneas con respecto a la arqueología indígena consultiva, colaborativa y comunitaria. A través de una variedad de ejemplos y experiencias personales, este artículo explora algunas de las realidades de la práctica arqueológica colaborativa en el sudeste indígena de Estados Unidos y tiene como objetivo contextualizar y mediar algunos malentendidos recurrentes. De particular importancia y enfoque es el concepto y la definición únicos de "la comunidad" en lo que respecta a la práctica colaborativa en toda América del Norte indígena. Es importante destacar que la arqueología del sudeste y los arqueólogos del sudeste están haciendo un trabajo transformador que nos coloca en posición de ser líderes en los cambios estructurales en curso en nuestra disciplina.

**Keywords:** archaeological practice; collaborative archaeology; Indigenous; method and theory; North America; southeastern United States

**Palabras clave:** práctica arqueológica; arqueología colaborativa; Indígena; método y teoría; América del norte; sureste de Estados Unidos

In October 2022 at the annual board meeting of the Southeastern Archaeological Conference (SEAC), a new image policy for the journal *Southeastern Archaeology* was adopted that prohibited publication of "photographs of funerary objects/belongings" (*Southeastern Archaeology* Journal Image Policy 2023:8; see also Hollenbach et al. 2023). The policy went on to outline that while photographs would no longer be included, "in lieu of photographs, authors may choose to include line drawings or other representations of funerary objects/belongings" and that "any such representations to be published . . . must be submitted

with written evidence that the authors consulted with Native Nations having ancestral ties to the archaeological region in question, or with evidence of the authors' good faith effort to initiate such consultative discussions" (*Southeastern Archaeology* Journal Image Policy 2023:8).

In March 2023, four months after the new policy was announced at the annual SEAC in November 2022, a petition was submitted to the Executive Committee to hold a referendum, or full-membership vote, to either accept or repeal the new policy (Signatories of the Petition 2023:9). The argument by the petitioners was that the Executive Committee "had an obligation to act in accordance with the wishes of the membership" and that passing a policy that would "have a major impact on the practice of archaeology in our region by inhibiting the publication of important ongoing and future research" without a full-membership vote lacked the character of "good governance" and was decidedly nontransparent (Signatories of the Petition 2023:9). While the text of the petition focuses on transparency in organizational governance, a series of essays published by some of the petitioners in a special issue of the SEAC newsletter, *Horizon & Tradition*, focused on such themes as academic freedom and the suppression of archaeological research (e.g., Smith et al. 2023; Steponaitis 2023).

The debates that ensued within and beyond SEAC membership provide an opportunity to evaluate and take stock of the past, present, and future state of Indigenous collaborative, consultative, and community-engaged archaeology in the American Southeast. Indeed, many of the arguments, assumptions, and warnings put forth by those opposed to the new policy and its requirements to consult offer an avenue to explore some of the misunderstandings and realities of working and collaborating with representatives of Tribal Nations. As 44% of the 632 voters voted to rescind the image policies, it seems a significant proportion of SEAC's membership, as well as practicing archaeologists beyond the Southeast, share many of the sentiments outlined in the petitioners' essays and, as such, likely also share some of the misunderstandings about consultative and collaborative archaeological practice with Indigenous descendant communities.

In this article I aim to leverage a discussion about archaeological practice in the American Southeast as a case study to explore broader discourse, perceptions, misunderstandings, and realities of collaborative archaeological practice. The practice of archaeology in this region of North America, specifically in regard to regional disciplinary histories of Indigenous collaborative work, is unique compared to other regions where this work and ethos has been adopted or accepted more rapidly. Indeed, two key differences compared to regions like the Southwest, Northwest, or Northeast are that (1) Indigenous peoples and communities have been disproportionately (and further) removed from their ancestral lands in the southeastern United States to places like Oklahoma, where their visibility and perceived presence to archaeologists is limited; and thus (2) because of this general absence of publically visible politics and any substantive discourse surrounding Indigenous issues across all facets of life and governance, archaeologists of the Southeast (often citizens and residents of these regions as well) are not as familiar (or acclimatized) to processes of proper communication, consultation, or mediation. The primary results of these two factors are that the concept of "the descendant community" is often misunderstood or misrepresented and that the practices of engaging "the descendant community" are highly variable. As such, an important part of the discussion to follow focuses on defining what constitutes "the community" in Indigenous collaborative archaeology across the Unites States and on highlighting some of the realities of working with these communities in most regions across Indigenous North America.

One of the outcomes of these challenges has been the slow adoption by southeastern archaeologists of these practices and thus the underrepresentation of southeastern archaeology in critical advances to our discipline. Across two recent special journal issues on the topic of collaboration and community-based work (Bollwerk et al. 2015; Herr et al. 2023), three high-profile edited volumes on the theme of Indigenous collaborative archaeology (Bruchac et al. 2010; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; Silliman 2008), and a comprehensive review article published in one of the flagship journals of Americanist anthropology (Colwell 2016), not a single case study or example from the archaeology of the Indigenous Southeast has been included. Despite this absence, and contrary to suggestions that southeastern archaeology is a place of "old school hold-outs," as might be deduced from a few, loud voices, I hope to emphasize that southeastern archaeology and southeastern archaeologists are doing

transformative work that puts us in a position to be leaders in the ongoing structural changes to our discipline.

In this article, I offer as case studies my experiences consulting with Indigenous descendant communities in the American Southeast. Most of this experience comes from direct interaction with representatives of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, specifically those in the Historic and Cultural Preservation Department. It is almost certain that my experiences will not reflect others'. Nor will my evaluations of consultative and collaborative archaeology in the American Southeast match everyone's evaluation of these complex engagements. That said, I believe that my experiences can be a productive lens through which to illuminate some realities about this kind of archaeological practice.

My goal is to build on prior work theorizing consultative, collaborative, or community-based archaeology (e.g., Atalay 2012; Bruchac et al. 2010; Colwell 2016; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; Gonzalez and Edwards 2020; Gonzalez et al. 2018; Nicholas et al. 2011; Silliman 2008; Silliman and Ferguson 2010) that suggests critical change to the structure of our practice. I realize that a significant proportion of SEAC members may share the reservations of the petitioners. My goal is to introduce archaeologists who may remain wary to relevant perspectives and recent literature on these practices and to address, as simply as possible, some continued misunderstandings. In addition, I highlight some of the excellent work being done in the Southeast and insert our region into broader continental and global conversations about collaborative archaeology, its practice, its challenges, and its successes.

Three recent bodies of work implicitly and explicitly inform my understanding of working with communities. I use these to frame some of the realities of working with Indigenous communities in the Southeast. These include conceptualizing archaeology as "co-creation" (Bollwerk et al. 2015), archaeology as "service" (Herr et al. 2023), and approaches that fall under the broad umbrella of "archaeologies of the heart" (Supernant et al. 2020). Inspired by these collections, I present a broad, somewhat simplified summary of what community-based work in the Southeast might look like at a number of places along the spectrum of these kinds of practices. I then offer a definition and exploration of what we actually mean by "the community" in reference to Indigenous descendant communities in the Southeast. Finally, I outline some realities of conducting archaeology with Tribal Nations in the Southeast and use these examples to address some of the most cited reservations among southeastern (and indeed North American) archaeologists.

As pointed out by Herr and colleagues (2023:2), citing a conversation with Kristina Douglass, "Archaeology as service is really the complete antithesis to archaeology as antiquarianism." Many of the misunderstandings outlined here continue to fall back on epistemological structures that in many ways share the values and principles, or at least were born of the values and principles, of antiquarianism. In this way, challenging these long-held assumptions often necessitates that we reimagine and redefine what archaeology is. This is because truly collaborative and community-based work cannot happen within the outdated constraints of a colonialist archaeology and its particular conceptions of how we are to understand and define value, relevance, and knowledge in regard to the archaeological record and our engagement with it. In this way, many of the misunderstandings considered here come from a place of engaging with these concepts in a very particular, Western-colonial inspired way. Without an ontological or epistemological shift, misplaced notions of value, relevance, and knowledge will continue to disenfranchise descendant communities. This isn't about updating archaeology, it is about redesigning archaeology and advancing structural, disciplinary change (sensu Franklin et al. 2020). In this article I simply offer how many of the structural changes outlined by others serve to challenge some of the most recurring fears about working with Indigenous communities in the American Southeast. While structural change may sound daunting, one of the major themes of this article that I hope to highlight is that the work toward these goals can be both small and large, and that the primary tools required include both humility and empathy, as many others have similarly suggested.

It is important to note that broader, global structural change, not just in our discipline but across society, serves as the context for shifting practice. We all understand that what was acceptable, and indeed innovative, practice in collaborative work four, three, or even just two decades ago has evolved. As the structure and context and relational foundations of our world and our discipline evolve, so too do our

practices. This article is not meant to make the argument that no archaeologists have undertaken meaningful collaborative and community-engaged work before now. In fact, the opposite is true! Within the structures of practices that existed, southeastern archaeologists have routinely worked alongside Tribal community members. As I hope to outline here, however, as our structures of practice have changed, we must now *continue* to innovate in our approaches to community-engaged archaeology. While throughout this article I cite very specific misunderstandings, the goal is not to disparage the histories of work by previous generations of archaeologists. Rather, it is to highlight the root of current misunderstandings, which is primarily a mismatch between the contemporary evolution of our discipline and disciplinary goals on the one hand, and our slow-to-change approaches and understandings of acceptable collaborative practices on the other. In what follows, I highlight how we might work together to build on and expand the innovative practices developed over the last few decades and to realign our structural practices with the new realities of archaeological research.

## Consultation, Collaboration, and Community-Engaged Archaeology

To address some common reservations and challenges about working with Indigenous communities, I want to draw attention to bodies of work that outline archaeology as co-creation, archaeology as service, and archaeologies of the heart. Each of these represent frameworks that allow us to define the broad contours of community-engaged archaeologies. While some of this work is certainly about deep collaboration, the principles laid out by each can be implemented in both small and large ways. I draw on themes highlighted by all three of these loosely related perspectives as I contextualize current practices in the American Southeast.

Throughout this article I write of consultation, collaboration, and community-engaged practices. Much has been written about collaboration as "dynamic and fluid" and how it is neither a single set of practices nor something that can be easily categorized into clean boxes of practice (Colwell 2016:116). Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson (2008:10–14) have referenced a spectrum of practice, placing resistance on one end, collaboration on the other, and participation in the middle. This spectrum has been revised in a number of ways to better reflect different forms of practice, some suggesting that the ends of the spectrum be labeled with colonial control on one end and community control on the other (Colwell 2016:116). This kind of spectrum of practice is meant as a framework for better understanding the coloniality of projects, the directionality of knowledge production and sharing, and the alignment of values across communities and researchers.

In this article, I use consultation, collaboration, and community-engaged as simplified terms that map onto different degrees or qualities of engagement with Indigenous communities in the context of an archaeological project, with consultation at the less involved end of the spectrum and community-engaged (or driven) at the higher end of involvement or engagement. Importantly, I don't seek to define the value of any of these practices, nor do I see one side of the spectrum as more or less valuable or more or less important or impactful than the other side. Where a particular practice lies on this spectrum from more to less engaged I believe is completely project dependent, community dependent, and must be contextualized and driven by the particular characteristics of the project. In all cases, however, whether consultation, collaboration, or community-engaged, the goal is to minimize the extractive nature of archaeology, evaluate and mitigate risk, and establish practice that is not unidirectional toward the archaeologist. The frameworks below outline some of the recent thinking on these "spectra."

### *Archaeology as Co-creation*

The idea of co-creation in archaeology, especially as presented across a number of contributions to a special issue of *Advances in Archaeological Practice*, edited by Bollwerk and colleagues (2015), is derived from both "co-," referencing the sharing of power, and "-creation," referring to products that could not have come to be without the specific collaborative relationship and sharing of power. Bollwerk and colleagues (2015) place co-creation at the far end of a spectrum, as a deeply collaborative practice, set apart from different kinds of engagement defined by "contribution" (e.g., providing predetermined opportunities to participate) and "collaboration" (e.g., rightsholders being invited to serve as active partners,

though power of decision-making remains limited). Co-creation is defined by cooperation from the onset of a project, with all parts of the project defined by reciprocal relationships within which power is distributed and multiple perspectives on knowledge and value are integrated. When it comes to co-creation, as Bollwerk and colleagues (2015) point out, we are compelled to explicitly consider in our research design: Who will be involved? What is the purpose? Where does the work occur? How much involvement is optimum? For how long? How will the work be incentivized?

Importantly, throughout this process, we are reminded that this kind of work is directed toward helping people make decisions, and that the work isn't necessarily about knowledge itself but about the engagement with those who are trying to make decisions, in this case Tribal representatives trying to make decisions about their particular cultural heritage resources (Chambers 2004). The co-creative processes additionally allow us to realize that (1) archaeologists have to accept that our concepts of value may not align with the concepts of value as defined by descendant communities (Bollwerk et al. 2015) and that (2) central to creating value in this process is "dialogue, access, transparency, and understanding of risk-benefits" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004).

### *Archaeology as Service*

Archaeology as service, as outlined by Herr and colleagues (2023) and the articles in their special issue of *Advances in Archaeological Practice*, is considered to be an "active, and humbling, form of care," a main goal of which is to "facilitate healing, restoration, and reconstruction for communities in need" (d'Alpoim Guedes et al. 2021; Herr et al. 2023; Schaepe et al. 2017). Herr and colleagues (2023) remind us that archaeology is conducted on the histories of peoples who are often marginalized, especially by the inequities of economic expansions, extractive industries, and political subjugation. With this understanding, it becomes critical, as the authors point out, to (1) seek to pause this exploitation and to (2) ask how what we do might instead contribute to the well-being of people and the environment. All of this is to say that conceptualizing archaeology as service means that one of our key goals is to seek relevance in our work to marginalized communities. What does our work *do* for these communities?

Herr and colleagues (2023) introduce their special issue by summarizing four major themes of archaeology as service: collaborative work, structural change, relationship- building and trust, and momentum. When projects are fully collaborative, as explored by Bollwerk and colleagues (2015), in the process of co-creation, the authority to direct research is shared and expanded. The important part is that this power is shared between people, and knowledge is gained in diverse ways, not just academically. Collaboration within the framework of archaeology as service is unique in that its explicit aim is to engender structural and institutional change in archaeology. How can we leverage our time, our relationships, our affiliations, et cetera, to enact change that might trickle through existing structures? In this sense, investments in collaboration, in relationships and trust -building, are investments in enduring structural change, even if that change proliferates simply from person to person, extending the potential for archaeology beyond its traditional values. Critically, Herr and colleagues (2023) point out that this takes time, and that there are instances when we certainly cannot do much. To this challenge they pose the question: "If we cannot do a lot, can we at least do a little more?"

### *Archaeologies of the Heart*

The final set of perspectives I want to draw attention to are those filed under the umbrella of "archaeologies of the heart" (Supernant et al. 2020). In their impactful edited volume, *Archaeologies of the Heart*, Supernant, Baxter, Lyons, and Atalay bring together a collection of essays and reflections that bear directly not only on our practices and engagements with communities and others but *also* on our encounters with the archaeological record itself. The collection outlines what the editors deem "heart-centered" approaches to building, maintaining, and nourishing these diverse kinds of relationships. The framework offered serves as a valuable guiding ethos of archaeological practice, and one that is foundational for the co-creation and service practices described above. Importantly, the editors and authors of contributed essays note that heart-centered sensibilities and practices are decidedly *not* antithetical to

archaeological research, even *scientific* (!) archaeological research. Throughout these chapters, empathy is referenced 23 times; respect, 37 times; humility, 48 times; care, 107 times; and love, 129 times. It is critical that structural changes to our practices and to our discipline begin with a critical evaluation of and change to our own personal relationships to our practice, to archaeology, and to the communities with whom we need to be engaging. If scientific research is always contextualized by the political, emotional, and societal zeitgeist, why can't that context of practice and production be defined by empathy and humility—two characteristics that serve as the core of community-engaged work.

### *An Oversimplified Model of Collaborative Work and Barriers to Practice in the Southeast*

The perspectives outlined above all work to give us the broad, material contours and shape of community-engaged work. No matter how big or how small, whether simple consultation or full-fledged co-creation, there are a standard set of "parts" that make up these processes. These parts include the domain of research interests, the domain of community interests, and risk. Our position along the collaborative spectrum is defined by how we choose to address the overlap between these domains. The particular contexts, cases, and resources (both the researcher's and the community's) guide how this process may unfold. As Herr and colleagues (2023) point out, if we are cognizant of rightsholders, then we should be able to understand that these communities have risk, investment, and claim in the work being done (Agbe-Davis 2010). And, in this regard, this process should be about (1) what value our work might have to communities, (2) what harm our work may cause to communities, (3) and the community-engaged work necessary to realize these benefits and mitigate perceived risk.

As mentioned, we can think about community-engaged work in three components. The first is the domain of researcher interests. These come primarily from disciplinary contexts and a wider body of anthropological frames within which an archaeologist is embedded. The second domain is community interests. These come from historical contexts and the contemporary political landscape within which communities are embedded. And then there is the domain of risk, as defined by the community. What work might cause harm, broadly defined? This could be physical harm, economic harm, perpetuation of stereotypes or incorrect narratives, or, critically, a threat to sovereignty. Often, we as archaeologists see this area in particular as representing "no-go" or "off-limits" research. In reality, a community-engaged perspective suggests that these are areas where potential risk mitigation is especially critical. And indeed, sometimes not doing this work is the best way to mediate risk and reduce harm. Put another way, we often need to reconceptualize our approaches to certain topics or materials as a *strategy* to reduce harm and risk.

This is the aspect of community-engaged archaeology that consumes the majority of discourse in the Southeast. Most conversations surrounding community-engaged work, consultation, or collaboration with descendant communities, especially Indigenous communities, is concerned with what can and cannot be researched. But this kind of thinking continues to place the archaeologist and their research interests as central, whereas community-engaged thinking should shift the ontology of research away from such a researcher or archaeologist-centric endeavor to one that embraces a noncentralized production of knowledge, with knowledge coproduction as one of the hallmarks of community-engaged work.

## Some Realities of Working with Tribally Affiliated Partners in the American Southeast

### *Defining "The Community"*

If the community is the entity with whom we collaborate, it is important to define exactly what, or rather who "the community" is in the Indigenous American Southeast. In the absence of advisors or courses or existing collaborations that specifically provide background and training in this kind of relationship-building, it is common for an ambiguous definition and understanding of "the community" to be adopted by archaeologists. In fact, I'm not sure I myself could have defined "the community" or the process of working with "the community" while I was a graduate student not long ago.

An important concept that needs to be understood if we are to understand the concept of "the community" is *sovereignty*. From the standpoint of international relations and law, sovereignty is generally used in reference to a nation's government (Cobb 2005:117). More specifically, sovereignty is essentially standard shorthand for an autonomous state and refers to the state's freedom from external control or to a state's relative independence from and among other states (Forbes 1998). While this is the most commonly understood notion of sovereignty, this definition does not fully represent how the term is used by Indigenous groups and Tribal Nations to describe their autonomy. As Cobb (2005:118) poses, the idea of sovereignty possesses some "ineffable qualities" beyond being concerned merely with legality. Indeed, sovereignty also references or implies "dignity and respectability beyond its literal meaning" (Wilkinson 1987:55). As Clara Sue Kidwell (Choctaw) and Alan Velie point out, sovereignty is deeply embedded in culture and cultural integrity (Kidwell and Velie 2005:75).

Vine Deloria (1996:123) writes similarly that "sovereignty . . . can be said to consist more of continued cultural integrity than of political powers and to the degree that a nation loses its sense of cultural identity, to that degree it suffers a loss of sovereignty." Part of sovereignty, then, is Tribal control, or self-determination, of the social institutions and practices that contribute to and maintain cultural continuity. While legal standards are often cited as justification for archaeologists to conduct certain research or look at certain objects, when it comes to the exercise of sovereignty, we must look beyond legal definitions if we are to understand what it means for Tribal Nations, and the representatives of Tribal Nations, to work toward the ultimate goal of sovereignty.

The reality is that "the communities" referenced in "Indigenous descendant communities" of the American Southeast are sovereign nations, most being federally recognized Tribal Nations. "The community" isn't an interest group, a village, some congregation of Indigenous peoples, nor simply an Indigenous friend. What must further be understood is that not every Indigenous person, or even every citizen of a Tribal Nation, does or can serve as an official representative voice for their nation. For example, representatives with whom we might engage may include Tribal Historical Preservation Officers or staff, cultural or natural resource office staff, council members, et cetera. There is a critical difference between the heterogenous views, perspectives, and experiences of a citizenry on the one hand, and the official views, positions, and missions of a sovereign government on the other. In this regard, when we put on our "community-engaged" archaeology hats in the American Southeast, one of the roles we are adopting is that of a diplomat (Victor Thompson, personal communication 2023).

This reality is likely one of the most misunderstood. An example comes from one petitioner's essay, who notes that

> we worked on . . . problems together with Tribal friends; Muscogee, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw. These were neither members of the political class, nor were they cultural resource functionaries. They were traditionalists, elders, medicine-persons, and storytellers, male and female. . . . During those days and years of productive discussions, not a word was spoken about any discomfort from looking at pictures [Knight 2023:16].

The reality is that, today, we need to engage with the Tribal members who are official representatives of sovereign nations authorized to forward the goals and promote the positions of a sovereign government. To deny this is to deny a Tribal Nation's right to self-determination and to undermine the nation's exercise of its own sovereignty. Importantly, in most cases in the American Southeast these are sovereign nations and peoples who were forcibly removed from their lands and relocated by the US federal government. Once this is realized, it brings much-needed clarity to the contexts and content of our interactions.

### *The Character of Indigenous Inclusion and Collaboration*

Consultation, collaboration, and community-based work are sometimes misunderstood or misconceptualized as procedural steps that are meant simply to bring Tribal Nations into the existing fold of archaeological research. This perspective accepts that communities are to be engaged with only in a manner that does not disrupt traditional archaeological practice and Western epistemological structures. This is one of the overarching frameworks across the petitioner's essays where it is stated that "we welcome more contributions from Native American scholars to the journal—but as additions to

the discussions and debates about the past rather than exclusions of legitimate research" (Smith et al. 2023:22).

As reviewed above, community-based archaeology is a methodological and theoretical approach that centers the coproduction of scholarship and leverages that scholarship toward a plurality of ends. Such approaches represent a shift in praxis that relocates the position of the researcher and their relationship to the subject and to stakeholders or rightsholders. Community-based work will, and often does, disrupt traditional (i.e., Western-colonial) perspectives, narratives, and disciplinary practice. As such, the real barriers to collaboration in these cases is not necessarily the unwillingness of community partners to adhere to accepted standards, but the resistance by us, archaeologists, to disciplinary and epistemological change.

The reality is that inclusive, accessible, and community-engaged work brings diverse voices into research but also helps us to change institutional structure and the status quo. Inclusion, collaboration, or consultation are not simply hoops that must be jumped through to continue to practice archaeology the way it has been practiced for decades. They are not check-boxes that must be checked simply to undertake research. Community-based archaeology is a methodological and theoretical tool for knowledge coproduction that necessitates an openness to transformation, institutional reorganization, and flexibility of traditional models of archaeological practice. Collaboration, consultation, and community-based work cannot be conditional. When participation is constrained by conditions defined exclusively by Western concepts, practice is neither collaborative nor consultative. I am careful here to say "exclusively," because certainly community-engaged practices *can* take place within, and contribute to, Western forms of knowledge production. But when these contributions happen at the exclusion of other forms of knowledge production or perceived value, the work no longer carries the character of being community-engaged.

### *The Motivations of Tribal Nations*

If we want to move to community-engaged work that is more than checking boxes, to break down traditional models, barriers, and practice, then the perception of consultation as "figuring out what Tribal Nations will and will not allow" becomes moot. The process of collaboration is not about seeking permission but about distributing power across stakeholders and rightsholders. And, while part of this represents effective risk mediation, another part of this is about conducting more meaningful archaeological research, where value is codefined by archaeologist and Indigenous community, or even solely by the community. This point, about the differences in how research is valued and what kinds of information/research are important, can certainly be difficult to understand, especially for those of us trained in and accepting of a Western model of science as truth-finding, in which we, the researchers, define what is or is not important, groundbreaking, or critical.

I often encounter a perception that Tribal Nations want to stifle or completely stop archaeological research (or at least certain kinds of research) and that the value to Tribal Nations of archaeologically produced knowledge should be defined by the archaeologist. This misunderstanding is illustrated in the claim that "if that [image] policy had been in place then, my research would never have happened. And it saddens me to think about how many future breakthroughs in knowledge, ones that could make a real difference to Native communities, will never happen unless the current policy is changed" (Steponaitis 2023:15). In reality, community-based or collaborative research isn't about what can and cannot be studied. It is about considering and addressing any risk that a study may present to the Tribal Nation or in some cases to Indigenous ancestors. In this context, the value of knowledge produced is also codetermined within a community-engaged framework.

The misunderstanding here is the motivation of Tribal Nations, which is not to stifle archaeological research but to help to express the value of archaeological work to the community and to define the risks involved. The motivation for supporting the image policy derives from (1) a mission to advance and exercise sovereignty over cultural heritage and history and (2) to mediate the harm caused by viewing funerary objects. In this case, there was a fine balance struck that continued to allow line drawings of funerary objects/belongings. Tribal representatives and the Executive Committee worked together

explicitly to arrive at a solution that would not stifle or impede research but that would contribute to the self-determination of Tribal Nations and to heightening the level of involvement in Tribal representatives in making decisions about data.

Indeed, a key motivation nationally and globally for these kinds of policies and the call for community-driven/engaged work comes back to issues of sovereignty. As Carroll and colleagues (2019) note, data is truly becoming the new global currency and plays a crucial role in decision-making and wielding power. To these ends, a huge corpus of literature on Indigenous data sovereignty and governance has emerged that outlines the links between Indigenous communities, sovereignty, and control over data (in all disciplines). Indeed, many of the proposed frameworks for considering this nexus recognize the "crucial role of data in advancing innovation, governance, and self-determination among Indigenous Peoples" (Carroll 2020).

### *On Academic Freedom*

Community-based archaeology, collaborative research, and even simply consultation is meant to more evenly distribute power across stakeholders for the purpose of knowledge coproduction and mediation of risk. This is often misinterpreted as a motivation for communities to take complete control of archaeological projects and as a threat to "academic freedom" (e.g., Steponaitis 2023:12).

It is true that a key part of community-based archaeology is the distribution of power. You do give up unimpeded control over your research. But I would argue that the kinds of academic freedom often cited to be lost don't exist in any discipline. In no discipline does a researcher have complete, unencumbered freedom to research whatever they want. The idea that we have a right to all knowledge is misplaced. The misconception that Tribal Nations want to take away control from archaeologists can only come from a place that considers that control to be our personal right to wield. It is commonly decried that with increasing collaboration and consultation, important work will not be able to be completed as Tribal Nations impose boundaries as risk mediation. But this only remains an issue if the archaeologist is defining what is and is not valuable or important. The restriction of "important" work only becomes an issue if the archaeologist refuses to empathize with and accept that there are a plurality of value systems and ontologies for defining what is important and for defining what may cause harm.

To illustrate some realities of academic freedom and control, I have permission from my collaborators to share with you some of what this looks like in practice. Specifically, I include some comments made on manuscript drafts by RaeLynn Butler and LeeAnn Wendt (Butler 2020) of the Muscogee Nation Historical and Cultural Preservation Department. One of these manuscripts was about the persistence of Indigenous mound-building practices after initial contact with Europeans and included interpretations of the use of the tops of platform mounds and spaces (Holland-Lulewicz et al. 2020). At one point, I make a comment about the "meticulously clean floors" of a mound-top structure. Butler's comment reads: "This is something I would also associate with a sacred fire, similar to current practices." At another point, I reference 18 separate re-buildings of a structure. Butler's comment reads, "The structure was rebuilt at least 18 times in how many years? Would you say it looked like yearly rebuilds/burnings" (Butler 2020)?

These comments, as I hope you can see, are coming from a place of knowledge coproduction and interest, steering value and importance in particular directions, toward particular parts of the research. It is not about policing my writing or the narrative. It is about bringing to bear the goals and positions of the institutions she represents on archaeological research about her ancestors, ancestors of the Muscogee Nation. At another point, I reference that communities may have consciously rejected European materials at contact. Butler points out that even today there is heterogeneity across communities regarding what is and is not allowed in ceremonial spaces, with some ceremonial grounds not even allowing power tools, cell phones, or watches. Finally, I reference ethnohistoric accounts of mound-building into the eighteenth century. Butler points out that there are practices today at ceremonial grounds that are analogous to the kinds of mound-building we have evidence for in the past. Not only does Butler present new information for enhancing the archaeological narrative I've constructed, but her comments also

allow me to avoid the narrative that this practice is one of the past by demonstrating a direct genealogy with mound-building practices into the present. This is a great example of how simple consultations can serve to mitigate potential risk, in this case disassociating an important practice from modern peoples and traditions.

In the above case, this was a very simple form of consultation. I ran the analyses, interpreted the data, and constructed the narrative before consulting with Butler's office about results. A short proposal and consultation form were indeed submitted for permissions to proceed with the project, but no substantive engagement occurred until after I had produced a document. In another case (Thompson et al. 2022), we began discussions much earlier. We (the archaeologists) had again submitted a short proposal and consultation form through the UGA (University of Georgia) Laboratory of Archaeology to gain permission and to solicit feedback from Tribal Nations. After data were gathered, we met as a team with Butler and her office to discuss how we should go about interpreting results. This article was about early evidence for council houses, and thus for collective and communal decision-making. We explicitly discussed the use of the term "democratic" to describe the form of governance that was emerging. We discussed the pros and cons, what the use of the term "democracy" might suggest and whether or not it was appropriate. In this case, it was decided that it would be useful for highlighting Indigenous, specifically Muskogean, forms of collective governance to broader, global conversations on the histories of democracy.

Finally, in one more example, I began a project to track the spread of peaches through the American Southeast (2024). I knew specifically that Butler's background, as well as the background of others in her office, were in plant biology and paleoethnobotany. Further, I knew that peaches remained an important part of Muscogee traditions today, and that such a paper could be important for highlighting the key role that Muscogee communities played in the spread and adoption of peaches. In this case, Butler provided both personal and broader cultural context and connections. Noting that she herself is from Peach Ground Tribal Town (Pvkan Tvlvhassee; "pvkan" translating to "peach"), and that "this namesake is an example of Mvskoke people adopting and adoring peaches" (Butler 2020). She went on to comment that "to me, my town was named peach ground because we grew and lived among the peach trees, i.e. peach trees are abundant at 'peach ground'" (Butler 2020).

Consultation, collaboration, and community-engagement aren't just about seeking permission and improving our academic archaeologies or exercising our academic freedoms. These practices are about making connections with individuals and about understanding the contours of the missions, goals, and interests of Tribal descendant communities. It is about understanding how an Indigenous descendant community might define the value of certain kinds of archaeological knowledge and how other forms of archaeological knowledge may cause harm. The purpose of these examples are to highlight how (1) community engagement can be small, and how it can take different forms, and how (2) the content of these engagements can be a place for exchanging concepts of value, for sharing stories and experiences, and for coproducing something that could not have been produced without these relationships. Nobody's freedoms were threatened, and we undertook important work together. Person by person and project by project, new structure for practice is created.

### *The Variable Costs of Consultation and Collaboration*

One last reality I want to discuss is that community-based research is cumulative and begins with the smallest of gestures. Community-based and collaborative projects do not have to be huge, labor-intensive undertakings, though of course some are.

I want to speak specifically to the students reading this (or to advisors, or to those who have been intimidated by the process of consultation/collaboration, or who think it is too late in their careers to begin to foster meaningful relationships with Indigenous descendant communities). As looming and daunting as they seem, at the end of the day a dissertation is not as large in scope as one might think. You take classes for two years, you write a research proposal, then sometime between years three and five you conduct research, and you spend the rest of your time writing it up. All and all, a dissertation project is essentially a two- or three-year project. Because of this, I have often heard students or advisors

propose that the costs of community-engaged work are too high to be incorporated into dissertation research.

I would argue, however, that community-engaged work is scalable. We do what we can with what we have. True, it takes time to build relationships and to earn trust. But a dissertation or master's thesis represents the beginning of your career, not the peak. These projects are places to begin building foundational relationships, even through small gestures: sending an email introducing yourself; sharing copies of your research proposal for comments, questions, concerns, or suggestions; inviting Tribal representatives to visit a project or a public defense (many of which can be virtual now!). These are all small, achievable, meaningful gestures. There are always manageable ways to begin to engage in this kind of practice without imposing a burden on either yourself or your potential Indigenous collaborators.

## Discussion

We in the southeastern archaeology community have a long way to go. My own experiences with community-engaged work only scratch the surface of engaged practice. Indeed, the examples I provided above from my own experiences mostly fall on the part of the community-engaged spectrum of consultation and low-level coproduction. Across the Southeast, there are few fully realized programs of Indigenous collaborative and coproduced archaeology, though the inklings of these practices are certainly beginning to emerge more frequently and in greater numbers. Below I highlight just a few of these efforts, ranging from personal consultation to institutionally guided, structural change.

I still want to stress that the "consultation" end of the spectrum can be highly impactful and a worthy goal of collaboration. Wright and colleagues (2024) provide a great example of how consultation can create the underlying framework for a research project. Focusing on a geochemical study of eighteenth-century Choctaw ceramics, Wright and colleagues (2024:2) note that preliminary results from the eventually published study were initially presented to Choctaw representatives and that interpretations shared by these community members provided the guiding framework for how data would be used and interpreted. That is, the community defined the importance and value of the study, identified the results that would be most meaningful, and thus guided the shape and contours of the discussion that the authors ended up offering in the final published paper. Wright and colleagues' work demonstrates that what may be often cited as "control" is in reality useful guidance for ethical and meaningful archaeological narrative building.

An example of more coproduced, collaborative, and community-engaged work is the project Coastal Indigenous Fisheries Assessment (CIFA) Using Archaeological and Ecological Perspectives, led by Jayur Mehta at Florida State University. Alongside the Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana, Mehta, with other archaeologists and ecologists, aims to study the long-term health and ecology of fisheries and water bodies in west-central Louisiana. The outcomes of this project aim to address fisheries habitat restoration utilizing archaeological data to build a long-term dataset on human use of fisheries and past environmental change. Importantly, the work, funded by the United States Geological Survey National Climate Adaptation Science Center, specifically takes as its focus species of cultural and historical importance as defined by the community, the Chitimacha Tribe, and seeks to use results from these investigations to inform future policy decisions and bolster the resilience of traditional fishing practices in these regions. Beyond this specific project, Mehta's collaborative work has also prioritized alternative forms of communication, especially those aimed at broader interdisciplinary but also public audiences. These efforts can be seen through two documentaries that Mehta helped to produce (Adams Bay Project, https://adamsbayproject.org/; Matthews 2019). While beyond much of the discussion offered throughout this article, collaborative work often necessitates products beyond academic articles and reports, and considerations of the mode and media of communication are key components that may be valued differently by different rightsholders and communities.

Beyond research, we might highlight the UGA Laboratory of Archaeology's work to develop a co-creative and community-based philosophy to guide curation practices (Roberts Thompson et al. 2023). They are completely rethinking the laboratory's role under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and in broader curatorial issues including caring for archaeological

collections and facilitating archaeological research. In this context, they aimed to build a "descendant community-informed institutional integrity (DCIII)" level of engagement with consultative and community-engaged efforts across each and every area of collections management and research.

In terms of the integration of these collaborative principles in education and curriculum, this same leadership at the UGA Laboratory of Archaeology in 2022 also initiated, alongside the Muscogee Nation Cultural and Historical Preservation Department, the Enfulletv-Mocvse in Archaeology Field School (or "New Ways" in Archaeology Field School). This field school was a completely collaborative effort with the Muscogee Nation to conduct archaeological research on Ancestral Muskogean homelands in Georgia and, more specifically, on land owned by the Muscogee Nation. In the summer of 2023, students enrolled in the field school traveled to Okmulgee, Oklahoma, after the conclusion of fieldwork to further strengthen engagements with the Muscogee Nation (UGA Office of Global Engagement; https://anthropology.uga.edu/enfulletv-mocvse-archaeology-field-school-muskogean-summer-2025).

At a more institutional level, the Cherokee Studies program at Western Carolina University represents an integrated, community-engaged, and co-produced institution that facilitates both co-creative relationships and scholarship as service, including archaeology. While the Cherokee Studies program represents an interdisciplinary program for both undergraduates and graduate students, it represents the tip of the iceberg so to speak of community-engaged efforts by WCU. More broadly, WCU is home to the Cherokee Center, which serves as the headquarters "for all outreach and involvement in the Cherokee community." It is highlighted that beyond a hub for research, the center "provides many services to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians students and the surrounding region" and that these services include "the application process, transcript requests, scholarships, internship placement, high school recruitment, and much more" (WCU Community & Alumni Engagement 2024).

These examples, ranging from consultation to fully community-engaged, and from traditional research to education and institutional structure, illustrate the diverse research and service domains within which community-engaged practices can be and should be deployed. Consultative, collaborative, and community-based work with Indigenous descendant communities has the potential to provide the framework for us to reimagine the practice of archaeology not just in the American Southeast but nationally.

## Conclusion

Through consideration of case studies, examples, and bodies of literature devoted to theorizing and advancing collaborative practice, I have tried to address a number of conspicuous misunderstandings among North American archaeologists. These misunderstandings can be grouped, broadly, into (1) definitions of the "the community," (2) the character of Indigenous inclusion and collaboration, (3) the motivations of Tribal Nations, (4) concepts of academic freedom, and (5) the variable costs of consultation and collaboration. Some key takeaways might be summarized as follows:

1. Southeast are sovereign nations. Not all Tribal members are authorized to serve as representatives on behalf of a Tribal Nation (the community), nor do all Tribal members' positions represent the official positions of the Tribal Nation.
2. Community-engaged work, wherever it may fall on a number of spectra, are packages of methodological, conceptual, and practical tools that center the coproduction of scholarship and leverage that scholarship toward a plurality of ends. Such perspectives represent a shift in praxis that relocates the position of the researcher and their relationship to descendant Indigenous communities.
3. Community-engaged work or collaborative research is not simply about determining what can and cannot be studied, nor does it simply define the process of getting "permission." It is in part about mediating risk that research may present to Tribal Nations (the communities), or to members, descendants, or ancestors of the community. Sometimes not pursuing a particular line of research is indeed a strategy for mediating risk.
4. Community-based archaeology, collaborative research, and even simple consultation is meant to more evenly distribute power (or translocate power to Indigenous communities) for the purpose

of knowledge coproduction and mediation of risk. An important, key feature of this work is its contributions to Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

5. Community-based research is cumulative and begins with even the smallest of gestures.

I have two concluding remarks. The first is that it is never too late to reach out to communities. Disciplines change. Disciplinary practice shifts. As discourses rage on across the world and throughout archaeology, there will be those who lament that the "ethical goalposts are always changing." While they may consider this to be a challenge or detriment to archaeological practice, I would argue that it means we always have opportunities to remake ourselves and our practice and to do better, even if incrementally. The only real challenges are personal.

It is these personal challenges that bring me to my final remark. At the end of the day, a productive, community-engaged archaeology requires only two things: humility and empathy. Humility, being a modest view of one's own importance, and empathy as the capacity to share the feelings of another. So, for those of you who have read this far, I will leave you with this challenge: *to go forth with humility and to be a force of empathy*. It is one thing to practice humility and empathy, but I would challenge us to be vehemently, overtly humble and empathetic; not only to passively conduct our work within this ethos but to explicitly champion the centrality of these characteristics within our practice. With these two tools I have no doubt that we can reimagine the contours of archaeology together, in the present and for the future.

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