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Author
Dalla Costa, Emma

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The History of Early Indigenous Community Archaeology

*Emma Dalla Costa*¹

Introduction

Modern histories of Indigenous community archaeology show how this practice took off in the United States after the 1990s and after the passage of some legislative measures, including the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.² Looking at the early development of Indigenous community archaeology, when the vast majority of the discipline still was a colonialist practice, is telling about the archaeologists' willingness to involve Indigenous communities in their research and the Indigenous people's interest in investigating their own past through Western scientific methods. This paper examines a previously overlooked pattern in the early history of Indigenous community archaeology: that many early examples of collaboration between Indigenous communities and archaeologists in North America—particularly from the 1960s to the 1990s—occurred within Indigenous reservation territories. Rather than being accidental, this geographic pattern reflects the legal, political, and cultural agency exercised by Indigenous communities within these sovereign spaces. The structural frameworks of reservation governance, alongside Indigenous insistence on control over their lands and histories, created conditions that both enabled and required archaeologists to engage collaboratively. This paper argues that these early, place-based interactions played a foundational role in reshaping archaeology, prompting archaeologists to acknowledge Indigenous knowledge systems and laying the groundwork for broader transformations in archaeological ethics and practice.

The fact that early archaeology projects involving some type of collaboration with Indigenous people occurred predominantly on reservations may indicate that the legal and administrative frameworks of reservation systems created pressure to involve Indigenous participation. These initially pragmatic partnerships appear to have fostered increased recognition of Indigenous people and their knowledge systems among archaeologists, allowing the discipline to shift from one of colonial extraction to one that increasingly values Indigenous perspectives in scientific practice. This could prove that the reservation system, despite its colonial origins, paradoxically created conditions that helped initiate archaeology's transformation toward more inclusive and ethical methodologies. Kretzler and Gonzalez more recently supported this argument by suggesting that Indigenous reservations are

¹ Emma Dalla Costa is a senior at Cornell University studying Anthropology and Government. She is drawn to anthropology for its ability to connect people and perspectives, and she is especially inspired by Indigenous worldviews that emphasize community, reciprocity, and relationships with the land.

² Gabriel Moshenska, *Key Concepts in Public Archaeology*, (UCL Press, 2017), p. 5 and Christine Westmond and Anna Antelids, "The Place to Be: Community Archaeology as a Tool for Cultural Integration," *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage* (2018), p. 3.

key sites for understanding settler colonialism and eventually advocate for community-based collaborative research with Indigenous people within reservation territories—which they call “reservations archaeology”—to achieve full decolonization.³

This paper focuses specifically on Indigenous community archaeology, a form of archaeology that is conducted *by, for, and with* Indigenous communities.⁴ While community archaeology can more broadly refer to collaborative archaeological practices involving any community, Indigenous community archaeology refers to work that prioritizes Indigenous agency, authority, and knowledge throughout the research process.⁵ The role of Indigenous reservations in the development of Indigenous community archaeology will be analyzed by examining both the role of Indigenous agency in shaping this discipline and the ethically driven change instigated by archaeologists and the social movements of the 1960s. For this purpose, three early examples of Indigenous community archaeology will be analyzed in relation to their proximity to reservations. These will include the Ozette site in Washington State, where tribal youth were included as active participants of the archaeological crew in 1971; the excavations conducted by the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in collaboration with the Seneca Nation at the Vanatta site in 1972; and the active participation of the Navajo people in archaeology which started as early as 1896 and led to the creation of the Navajo Cultural Resources Management Program in 1977. Additionally, attention will be paid to the importance of ethics in archaeological research, also fostered by the 1960s social movements, particularly through a review of the work of the archaeologist Janet Spector.

Modern Community Archaeology

Indigenous people have inhabited North America for at least 15,000 to 20,000 years, while European colonizers have been able to call America their home for just a little more than 500 years. Yet, when thinking of America, the common conception views Indigenous People as alien when, in fact, they have been the aboriginal inhabitants since the beginning of humanity. This tendency is the result of the colonizing mentality that arrived in America with the first European colonizers who brought with them a sense of superiority that the modern world is still imbued with.⁶ In truth, prior to European

³ Ina Kretzler and Sara Gonzalez, “Unsettling the Archaeology Reservations,” in *Routledge Handbook of the Archaeology of Indigenous-Colonial Interaction in the Americas*, (Routledge, 2021), p. 449.

⁴ George Nicholas, ed., *Being and Becoming Indigenous Archaeologists* (Left Coast Press, 2010), Stephen Silliman, ed., *Collaborating at the Trowel’s Edge: Teaching and Learning in Indigenous Archaeology*, (University of Arizona Press, 2008).

⁵ For an example of a broader understanding of community archaeology see Lindsay Montgomery and Travis Fryer, “The Future of Archaeology Is (Still) Community Collaboration” (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

⁶ Sonya Atalay, “Indigenous Archaeology as Decolonizing Practice,” *American Indian Quarterly* 30:3-4 (2006) pp. 79-80.

contact, North America was a completely Indigenous territory, while today, the amount of Indigenous land has been reduced to two percent through processes of land theft, removal, and colonization. Fifty-six million acres of land are currently held in trust by the United States for various Native American tribes and individuals, U.S. Department of the Interior.⁷ This means the federal government holds legal title to the land, while the beneficial interest remains with the individual or tribe. Additionally, Indigenous reservations are primarily administered by the federally recognized tribes themselves and are exempt from state jurisdiction.⁸ Luckily, today, a raised awareness about the injustices and abuses suffered by Indigenous People is more widespread, and many disciplines, including archaeology, are committed to remedying the errors of the past.

An example of this commitment in the archaeological field is the development and affirmation of community archaeology. The concept of Indigenous community archaeology refers to a collaboration between Indigenous People and archaeologists to conduct archaeological work in accordance with the Tribe's preferences and research design.⁹ This practice emerged during the 1960s, and before delving into its origins in relation to Indigenous reservations, it is worth observing what it has become today. Significant progress has been made since the 1960s toward achieving decolonization not only of archaeology but of society as a whole. Indigenous community archaeology evolved to promote reconciliation—the process of building and maintaining respectful relationships with Indigenous people after the mistreatment they underwent, specifically due to colonialism.¹⁰ This ongoing process of healing aims to acknowledge past injustices and redirect the future toward recognizing the value of Indigenous Knowledge. In the United States, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), passed in 1990, marked a key step toward decolonization by legally requiring the return of ancestral remains and cultural items to descendant tribes. While it does not explicitly aim to recognize Indigenous traditions symbolically, its enforcement demonstrates respect for tribal sovereignty and cultural continuity, making it a crucial part of the broader movement toward ethical and collaborative archaeology. NAGPRA implemented the necessity of returning or repatriating Native American “cultural items”—and, most importantly, the human remains of Indigenous ancestors—to descendant populations of culturally affiliated tribes and made

⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior – Natural Resources Revenue Data, “Native American Ownership and Governance of Natural Resources” (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2024) p. 1.

⁸ U.S. Department of the Interior – Natural Resources Revenue Data, “Native American Ownership and Governance of Natural Resources,” p. 1.

⁹ Brian Angelbeck and Colin Grier, “From Paradigms to Practices: Pursuing Horizontal and Long-Term Relationships with Indigenous Peoples for Archaeological Heritage Management,” *Canadian Journal of Archaeology / Journal Canadien d'Archéologie* 38:2 (2014): p. 3.

¹⁰ Lindsay Montgomery and Kisha Supernant, “Archaeology in 2021: Repatriation, Reclamation, and Reckoning with Historical Trauma,” *American Anthropologist* 124 (2022): p. 801.

trafficking Native American human remains and cultural items obtained in violation of the Act a criminal offense.¹¹

While NAGPRA was a landmark law designed to return both cultural objects and the remains of Indigenous ancestors to descendant communities, it is important to remember that its history is fraught with resistance. Recent scholarship has revealed that many archaeologists and institutions publicly supported collaboration while privately opposing or delaying NAGPRA's implementation, with thousands of Native ancestors' remains still held in collections decades after the law's passage.¹² Still, NAGPRA was a first step showing how legislative measures can create the structural conditions necessary for more ethical archaeological practices by fostering reconciliation through concrete measures, such as repatriation, which make archaeology more ethical and sustainable. After this law was passed, Indigenous community archaeology became more widespread, and its defining principles—such as collaboration, accountability, and Indigenous leadership—became more clearly articulated.

Some specific strategies have been shown to foster a meaningful direct involvement of Indigenous peoples in fieldwork and have become widely applied in Indigenous community archaeology. In particular, two proved to be very effective: practicing “horizontalism” and establishing long-term relationships. Both these approaches are built on the conception that archeologists should not work in isolation. *Horizontalism* refers to relationships of cooperation, negotiation, alliance, and collaboration between the two parties involved, in this case, the archaeologists and the Indigenous communities.¹³ Each one of them is recognized as equal despite bringing different and distinct skills and knowledge. In the application of horizontalism, it is very important to establish a non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian relationship to be able to take advantage of each party's capabilities in the best and most productive way possible. Recognizing the value of Indigenous Knowledge is particularly important in the practice of horizontalism. No party should overpower the other, and mutual authority recognition is vital to achieving effective horizontal relations.¹⁴ This type of collaborative effort applied in archaeology is surely a great step towards decolonization and the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' values.

Another strategy, which intertwines with horizontalism, consists of creating long-term relationships between the two parties. While horizontalism aims to prescribe the nature of the relationship that should exist between archaeologists and Indigenous People, a long-term focus ensures its durability over time. Archaeology often takes place rapidly under the pressure of timelines for completing fieldwork and generating reports, which completely hinders the possibility of creating a

¹¹ Julia Ulmer, “Introducing Respect in NAGPRA Repatriation Efforts” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2022) p. 7.

¹² Paul Spickard and Kelly Lovely, “Respecting the Ancestors: On Repatriating American Indian Remains,” *California History* 100:4 (2023).

¹³ Marina Sitrin, *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina* (AK Press, 2006) p. 6.

¹⁴ Angelbeck and Grier, “From Paradigms to Practices,” p. 7.

bond with the people involved in the research. If there is a lack of horizontal relationships, it is almost impossible to conduct research with a decolonized approach because the perspective of the observed population would be missing.¹⁵ However, in order to ensure the effectiveness of horizontalism, it is fundamental to establish long-term relationships. Repeated and extended involvement with communities leads to better partnerships built upon knowledge and shared experiences. The combination of these two strategies is the perfect example of how Indigenous Knowledge can be effectively incorporated into a decolonized approach to archaeology. Nevertheless, these strategies took time to develop, and the route to decolonized archaeology began around the 1960s.

The Relationship Between Indigenous People of North America and Archaeology

Over time, some archaeologists went from being agents of colonialism and “grave robbers” to allies of Native tribes working with them or even for them. However, this evolution of archaeology was not easy or linear. George Nicholas and his colleagues offer a prominent example of the complicated history of Indigenous-archaeology relations. Today, the terms *archaeologist* and *Indigenous* are no longer mutually exclusive because of decades of complex dynamics and political engagement.¹⁶ Indigenous people still have varying opinions about archaeology. Some have embraced it as a tool that can be applied in ways that are suitable for understanding and valuing their culture, while others do not see it as a meaningful method to connect with the past because professional archaeology sometimes continues to create an artificial barrier that has frequently been used to distance communities and people from their history and legacy.¹⁷ Colonialism and White exploration and settlement strongly impacted the historical relationship between Native Americans and archaeology. In particular, Indigenous peoples were perceived as scientific specimens for a very long time. Archaeologists treated them as mere research subjects up to the 1960s when social movements brought attention to the need for greater rights for Native Americans. The American Indian Movement and the Red Power movement started voicing issues important to Native Americans, such as critiques of archaeological studies, which frequently involved disrespectful actions towards Indigenous people and their ancestors.¹⁸ Vine Deloria Jr. also powerfully challenged the authority of anthropologists and archaeologists, accusing them of speaking for Native peoples without accountability and perpetuating colonial attitudes under the guise of academic inquiry.¹⁹

Raised awareness of these topics led to the above-mentioned early examples of collaboration between Indigenous people and archaeologists. It is particularly interesting to notice how these case studies all occurred within Indigenous territories because tribal governments and communities actively

¹⁵ Angelbeck and Grier, “From Paradigms to Practices,” p. 7.

¹⁶ George Nicholas, Dorothy Lippert, and Stephen Loring, “Indigenous North Americans and Archaeology,” in *Handbook of North American Indians* (Smithsonian Institution, 2022) p. 57.

¹⁷ Nicholas, Lippert, and Loring, “Indigenous North Americans and Archaeology,” p. 57.

¹⁸ Nicholas, Lippert, and Loring, “Indigenous North Americans and Archaeology,” p. 59.

¹⁹ Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (Macmillan, 1969).

invited archaeologists onto their lands to pursue goals aligned with their own cultural, historical, and political interests. This pattern demonstrates that Indigenous nations were not passive participants but pioneers in shaping Indigenous community archaeology, using the framework of reservation sovereignty to assert control over how their pasts were studied and represented.

The United States government currently recognizes 326 Indigenous Reservations, adding up to approximately fifty-six million acres. Some are the remains of a tribe's original land base, while others were created by the federal government to forcibly relocate Indigenous people during colonialism.²⁰ The fact that these territories add up to only two percent of the lands that were originally Indigenous mirrors the evident history of colonialism that has characterized the country.

Ozette Case Study

The Ozette archaeological site is a significant early example of community archaeology in North America. In 1971, the Makah Tribal Council initiated a unique partnership by hiring University of Washington archaeologists to excavate an ancient village within their reservation in Washington State. Because the project was located within reservation lands, the Makah Tribe had significant control over the excavation process and its results, making this proactive participation a relevant improvement from what used to be conventional archaeological techniques.²¹

These excavations uncovered the archaeological remains of several ancient family homes of the Makah Nation after they were partially exposed by erosion.²² Five hundred years prior, a massive springtime mudslide swept down a hill and buried an old Makah village under tons of clay. In 1966, the archaeologist Richard Daugherty, from Washington State University, observed the presence of unusually well-preserved organic remains at the Ozette site.²³ In 1970, extensive house timbers and other organic artifacts were exposed by natural conditions, prompting the Makah Tribal Council to contact Daugherty and ask him "to return to Ozette and evaluate the situation."²⁴ This was the beginning of a collaboration that officially took off in 1971, which included several Makah youths joining the University of Washington archaeologists in the excavation.

Makah people on the excavation team provided non-Native archaeologists with unique insider takes on the site during a very emotional excavation process that uncovered their ancestors' culture. They shared Indigenous stories and showed the non-Native crew where to dig for specific artifacts. Together, they witnessed the unearthing of harpoons that had not been seen for hundreds of years,

²⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior – Indian Affairs, "What Is a Federal Indian Reservation?" (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2017) p. 1.

²¹ Nicholas, Lippert, and Loring, "Indigenous North Americans and Archaeology," p. 14.

²² Robert Cutler (writer) and Karen Thomas (director), *A Gift from the Past* (Media Resource Associates, 1994) p. 429.

²³ Ruth Kirk with Richard Daugherty, *Exploring Washington Archaeology* (University of Washington Press, 1978) pp. 92-93.

²⁴ Kirk and Daugherty, *Exploring Washington Archaeology*, p. 113.

establishing a remarkably productive cross-cultural collaboration. The Makah crew brought a sense of historical continuity to the excavation, which eventually led to the creation of the Makah Cultural and Research Centre, a Native American community museum.²⁵ This center was planned and developed in collaboration with the Makah tribe, and this is clearly reflected in the curation techniques. Artifacts were grouped into houses according to the excavation records, clearly mirroring Makah's ideas of property and ownership, and the Makah language was used to name every object, fostering Indigenous language preservation.²⁶ Since the Ozette site was affected by a devastating mudslide, artifacts were kept surprisingly well-preserved by this unique natural occurrence. Wooden objects that would normally have been lost to decomposition were preserved thanks to these circumstances, offering incredible insights into Makah material culture. While this preservation is often celebrated for its archaeological significance, it is important to note that excavations of ancestral sites such as Ozette often expose more than just tools or household items - they reveal the realities of human existence, everyday life, memory, and the lasting imprint of those who came before. This unique preservation was remarkable as it validated oral Makah tales of the "great slide," proving the historical validity of Indigenous knowledge and establishing a crucial link between traditional and scientific modes of knowledge.²⁷

The Ozette excavation's approach to community involvement was unusual for its time. This site was excavated in collaboration with the Native people of the area, still residing there, and also resulted in the founding of a tribal museum that fostered Indigenous research methods and forwarded Native Americans' self-determination objectives.²⁸ This early case of Indigenous community archaeology showed how archaeologists and Indigenous tribes could have more equal partnerships if archaeology was conducted under tribal control, and demonstrated how Indigenous communities could participate in and shape archaeological research while maintaining their cultural perspectives and priorities in the early 1970s. Interestingly, this happened within an Indigenous reservation territory. Makah tribal leaders were physically living on the same reservation where the excavation took place. It makes sense to assume that this is what allowed them to oversee the archaeological procedure and ensure the truly collaborative nature of the project. This is especially interesting in light of the fact that this is not a unique example.

Vanatta Case Study

²⁵ Janine Bowechop and Patricia Erickson, "Forging Indigenous Methodologies on Cape Flattery: The Makah Museum as a Center for Collaborative Research," *American Indian Quarterly* 29:1-2 (2005): p. 256.

²⁶ Bowechop and Erickson, "Forging Indigenous Methodologies on Cape Flattery," p. 256 and Cutler and Thomas, *A Gift from the Past*.

²⁷ Nicholas, Lippert, and Loring, "Indigenous North Americans and Archaeology," p. 70.

²⁸ Bowechop and Erickson, "Forging Indigenous Methodologies on Cape Flattery," p. 256.

An article published in 1980 describes the excavations conducted during the summer and fall of 1972 by the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in collaboration with the Seneca Nation. The Vanatta site is located along the Allegheny River on the Allegheny Indian Reservation in New York State.²⁹ The site was inhabited from approximately 1790 to 1850, according to historical documents and archaeological findings.³⁰ The main feature uncovered at this site was an eighteen-foot-long Seneca cabin with a porch identified through post molds and the pattern of artifacts' distribution, as no physical remnants of the cabin were discovered. On the east end of the south wall and on the west side of the north wall, the cabin seems to have two entrances.³¹ Archaeologists found a wide variety of artifacts, including ceramics, metal items, buttons, gunflints, pipes, and animal bones. Due to easier access to manufactured items from Quaker colonies founded after 1798, the artifact assemblage demonstrated a shift from brass and tinned sheet metal containers to historic pottery around 1800 (1980:39).³² According to an analysis of faunal artifacts, white-tailed deer was the most commonly hunted animal. Additionally, there were also traces of domesticated animals like hogs and cattle, which is consistent with historical sources that suggest the Seneca were rearing livestock by 1801.³³

Prior to beginning the excavation, during the Fall of 1971, archaeologists obtained a permit from the Council of the Seneca Nation to conduct their research.³⁴ Moreover, the discussion of this excavation project mentions that the Seneca people themselves directly worked at the site and “administered” the excavation.³⁵ For this reason, the Vanatta site project could be considered an early example of community archaeology, possibly the first one of an Iroquoian site involving the Seneca people themselves. This example, however, is more controversial than the Ozette site as it is presented from a 1980s perspective. The input of the Seneca people actually had in the excavation is unclear and, even though their participation is mentioned in the acknowledgments section of the paper, the actual role they had remains obscure. They are described as principal “excavators” and “administrators” without expanding on what this entailed or how decisions were made. This sort of practice, which was very common until quite recently, makes it more difficult to tease out the history of early Indigenous involvement in archaeological projects.³⁶ Due to this fact, this article surely reflects the colonialist approach of last century's archaeology, but still shows some evidence of an initial change. Despite this being a problematic example of community archaeology by today's standards, it is still interesting to observe its geographical location. As mentioned in the article itself, the excavation took place in the

²⁹ Stephen Lantz, “Seneca Cabin Site: Historic Component of the Vanatta Site,” *Pennsylvania Archeologist* (1980): p. 10.

³⁰ Lantz, “Seneca Cabin Site,” p. 39.

³¹ Lantz, “Seneca Cabin Site,” p. 21.

³² Lantz, “Seneca Cabin Site,” p. 39.

³³ Lantz, “Seneca Cabin Site,” p. 35.

³⁴ Lantz, “Seneca Cabin Site,” p. 18.

³⁵ Lantz, “Seneca Cabin Site,” p. 39.

³⁶ Kurt Jordan, *Lecture - Archeology of Colonialism and Cultural Entanglement* (Cornell University, 2024)

Allegany Indian Reservation administered and inhabited by the Seneca people. As a consequence, they had to grant permission to the archaeologists for the excavation of the Vanatta site and they were additionally able to participate in the research as “excavators” and “administrators.” Although the exact extent of the Seneca Nation’s role in the Vanatta site excavation remains unclear, their decision to grant permission for the project and participate as excavators and administrators reflects an early assertion of sovereignty and intent to shape how their heritage was studied. As such, this case represents a nascent form of Indigenous community archaeology, and its location within reservation lands underscores how tribal governance and territorial control created conditions for Indigenous-directed archaeological collaboration.

The Navajo Cultural Resources Management Program

The Navajo people are probably the most publicly well-known Native American population in the United States. For years, anthropologists have conducted ethnography to understand these people, and archaeologists have always shown a deep interest in this area.³⁷ The Navajo relationship with archaeology supposedly started in 1896 when Richard Wetherill began excavating at Chaco Canyon on Navajo territory. However, very little about this collaboration is clear. The exact role that the Navajo people played in it remains unknown due to the fact that in the nineteenth century, archaeology was still an unequivocally colonized practice. This was, however, the first clearly documented Navajo involvement in the field, and it was just the beginning of a clearer long-lasting relationship between the Native people and archaeologists. In 1956, the establishment of the Navajo Nation Tribal Museum marked the official beginning of tribal involvement in archaeological and historical research programs. Since their early involvement, the Navajo have been committed to claiming tribal control over cultural resources within the overall management of environmental issues.³⁸

This ultimately led to one of the greatest cultural management programs founded in 1977: The Navajo Cultural Resources Management Program (NNCRMP), established with the purpose of managing and protecting Navajo historical material and properties. The NNCRMP was founded to conduct the archaeological inventory work of the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project, which eventually provided agricultural land for the Navajo Agricultural Products Industry.³⁹ This led to the excavation of hundreds of archaeological sites on the Navajo Nation territory that entailed progressively more and more collaboration with Navajo Indigenous people. A fundamental initiative of the NNCRMP was providing professional archaeological training for Navajo people who learned skills in cultural resource

³⁷ Joe Watkins, *Indigenous Archaeology: American Indian Values and Scientific Practice* (AltaMira Press, 2000) p. 93.

³⁸ Watkins, *Indigenous Archaeology*, p. 100.

³⁹ Navajo Nation Archaeology Department, “Navajo Nation Archaeology Department,” in *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, ed. Claire Smith (Springer, 2014) p. 5163.

management, archaeological inventory field methods, testing and excavation of historic and prehistoric sites, and laboratory techniques.⁴⁰

In 1979, David E. Doyel became Director of the NNCRMP, and the program started to be more directly involved in Navajo governmental affairs. The focus of NNCRMP shifted to historic preservation compliance on behalf of the tribe, which, in accordance with the Archaeological Resources Protection Act passed in 1979, demanded tribal consent for federal permits on Indian lands.⁴¹ In 1982, Anthony L. Klesert became the director of the program. His contribution to Navajo Nation archaeology was fundamental. His research was focused on reconciliation between archaeologists and Navajo Native Americans as he was a strong advocate for collaboration to attain mutual goals through reciprocal education, interaction, and research.⁴² In particular, he observed how Native Americans did not consider archaeology to be of any benefit, due to its disregard for their culture and traditions which were always considered mere objects of study. For this reason, he decided to implement in the NNCRMP services related to cultural resource management, including: supplying technical assistance to tribal agencies concerning the legal and professional requirements for excavations; carrying out required archaeological and ethnographic surveys and excavations in advance of development projects; identifying, documenting, and protecting Navajo and other Native American sacred places and gravesites; assisting other agencies, such as the Tribal Rangers, in enforcing tribal and federal antiquities laws; and providing technical review and input on proposed tribal and federal statutes and regulations dealing with historic preservation.⁴³ Klesert spent his career demonstrating how much archaeologists and Native Americans have to gain from cooperative interaction, and he was aware that the Navajo Nation's legal and cultural framework was a great place to initially prompt impactful changes in the practice of archaeology towards a more collaborative, rather than colonized, practice.

The Navajo Nation reservation spans across northeastern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, and southeastern Utah, and it is the largest federally recognized Indian reservation in the United States. However, the Navajo Nation's strong involvement in archaeological research reflects not just geographical circumstance, but a deliberate assertion of self-determination and cultural sovereignty. The Navajo reservation provided the legal and territorial infrastructure to support the Navajo's participation in archaeological research, but it was their proactive efforts to preserve and manage their own cultural heritage that led to the establishment of tribal cultural resource management programs. These efforts testify to a sustained commitment to asserting control over how Navajo history is studied, interpreted, and protected. As Klesert himself recognized, it makes sense to conclude that the reservation's scale and legal status played a significant role in creating the institutional foundation

⁴⁰ Navajo Nation Archaeology Department, "Navajo Nation Archaeology Department," p. 5164.

⁴¹ Navajo Nation Archaeology Department, "Navajo Nation Archaeology Department," p. 5164.

⁴² Allen Klesert, "A View from Navajoland on the Reconciliation of Anthropologists and Native Americans" (Society for Applied Anthropology, 1992) p. 17.

⁴³ Klesert, "A View from Navajoland," p. 18.

necessary for the Navajo to exercise meaningful control over archaeological research and cultural heritage management within their own lands.

Beyond Geography: Ethical Awakening

The American archaeologist Janet Spector, in *What This Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village* (1993), offers an alternative example of change and improvement in the ethics of archaeological research. By telling the story of her understanding of archaeology, she proves that change also emerged during the 1960s, when she began her research as a university student, because of the work and efforts of archaeologists who valued ethics and empathy over objectivity.

Spector grew up in a neighborhood of Madison, Wisconsin, deeply rooted in Native American culture. In her book, she traces the roots of her interest in archaeology, explaining her connection to this discipline that has fascinated her since she was a child. She criticizes the objective, object-oriented, and objectifying application of archaeology, which she argues should be about people and life. What has always fascinated her is discovering what life was like in the past, including the life of those Native Americans whose language was used to name all the streets of her neighborhood. For this reason, during her excavations of Native American sites in Wisconsin, she was able to connect to the past and its people, overcoming the empathetic barrier that objects and tools create with their materiality. As early as the 1960s, she started developing the enlightening observation that neither archaeology professors nor authors tended to promote getting closer to Native Americans by studying their contemporary Indian languages, religion, or philosophies. They all believed that too much time had passed and too much history separated people from their past. However, Native Americans never claimed to be disconnected from their ancestors. Believing that Indian culture was destroyed by European contact is the result of the colonizing mentality that empathy allowed her to overcome.⁴⁴

The second chapter of her book tells the story of an awl she found during her excavation at the Little Rapids site and its former owner, a Dakota girl who lost it 150 years ago. Materially speaking, awls were tools usually used by women to work animal hides. This awl has a tip of iron derived from the Euro-American trade, and the antler handle shows patterns of engraved lines and dots, some of which are filled with red pigment made from sumac berries.⁴⁵ From the observation of this object and her knowledge of the past history of the area, she creates a fictional but historically representative tale about the girl who owned this awl, her family, her village, and her life. This does not mean that archaeology consists of picking up an isolated artifact and telling an authentic story about the past, but it shows how behind the objects archaeology uncovers there is the life of real people. With this story,

⁴⁴ Janet Spector, *What This Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1993) pp. 2-3.

⁴⁵ Spector, *What This Awl Means*, p. 25.

Spector demonstrates that archaeology can be an empathetic way to discover essences, images, and feelings of the past, not a merely detached, distanced, and objective discipline.

This approach is more understandable today, but it was not common while Spector was researching and writing. Her book provides evidence of an ethical awakening that happened beyond reservation boundaries. Growing up seeing and getting to know Native American culture allowed Spector to develop a sensitivity that made her adopt an approach that was not influenced by the colonial mentality that had shaped archaeology for centuries. She knows and explains that Native American sites are not “prehistoric” but, as much as artifacts, carry with them cultural values that are still alive among Native communities. Spector engages with the past in a way that uniquely lays the foundations for engaged archaeology and encourages the participation that will eventually lead to modern community archaeology. Specifically, her approach to community archaeology grew out of her feminist convictions that archaeological practices and interpretations needed to be more meaningful in human terms. This is reflected in her view of the Indigenous past as human history, not the history of objects. She did all of this because of her personal values, her lived experiences, and the influence of the social movements that developed simultaneously with her academic career. This supports the argument that reservations created the framework necessary to foster a real understanding of Indigenous perspectives, but the individual and social ethical awakening that started in the 1960s also played a role in changing archaeology for the better.

Analysis of the Case Studies and Conclusion

After observing these early examples of Indigenous community archeology, an interesting trend about the placement and evolution of these early collaborations (1960s–1990s) emerges. The collaborative efforts taken into consideration were conducted inside the bounds of reservations. This geographic pattern may suggest that Indigenous reservations offered special circumstances that led to the development of more cooperative archaeological relationships. It is commonly thought that archaeological practices started to change during the 1960s due to raising social awareness and decolonizing efforts. However, this paper suggests that the presence of Indigenous people on reservation grounds and their legal structure influenced archeology as well. The analyzed case studies show how Indigenous people had the chance to directly impact and willingly participate in research when it took place on reservations. This dynamic is seen at the Ozette site, where the Makah Tribe employed archaeologists from the University of Washington. It seems that when archeologists started excavations on territories inhabited and administered by Native tribes, they were more prone to involve the tribes in the excavations as it started happening in the Navajo Nation as early as the end of the nineteenth century. This makes sense if we consider that Indigenous reservations are administered by the Native tribes themselves and archeologists had to obtain permission from Indigenous people of the land to conduct the excavation, as it appears to have happened at the Vanatta site where archeologists had to obtain expressed consent from the Seneca Nation Council before doing any work. These case studies demonstrate that while the legal structure of reservations provided the administrative

framework for collaboration, it was the proactive leadership of Indigenous nations that drove early archaeological projects. By asserting sovereignty over their lands and heritage, Tribes actively shaped how archaeology was conducted, initiating shifts toward more ethical and inclusive practices.

These early reservation-based projects also had important long-term implications on the evolution of archaeological practice. The Makah Cultural and Research Centre is one example of the programs that resulted in the creation of long-lasting tribal cultural organizations. These organizations began to create innovative curation and interpretation strategies that represented Indigenous viewpoints and knowledge, such as classifying artifacts based on traditional household relationships and integrating Indigenous languages into cataloging practices. These findings prove that projects based on reservations not only have an impact on the shaping of community archaeology but also foster long-lasting changes in the handling and interpretation of archaeological resources.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider that multiple other factors influenced and allowed the development of Indigenous community archaeology. The impact of larger social movements, such as the civil rights movement, surely shifted theoretical frameworks in anthropology, impacting the personal ethics of individual archaeologists and contributing to the transformation of archaeological practice during this time. It must be recognized that the personal dedication of archaeologists to foster participation and their willingness to listen, for the first time, to Indigenous voices was fundamental to starting this historic decolonization of archaeology. This is proved to be true by Janet Spector, whose work values Native Americans' past, culture, and life, overcoming the objective and objectifying approach of archaeology.

However, the evidence discussed in this paper still indicates that the pattern of early collaborative archaeology originating on reservation grounds cannot be explained by the ethical awakening that started in the 1970s alone. The development of Indigenous community archaeology was not the product of the ethical values of a few enlightened archaeologists only, but it was a process of decolonization in which Indigenous people played a fundamental and active role. This understanding simultaneously challenges oversimplified accounts of professional growth and claims for the credit of the development of Indigenous community archaeology, which are, in some ways, a form of colonialism in themselves. This draws attention to the disregarded contribution of Indigenous populations to the development of contemporary archaeological techniques, adding to the decolonized perspective that archaeology should be approached from nowadays. This knowledge broadens our understanding of the decolonization process of archaeology by emphasizing the role that Indigenous agency and territorial sovereignty—rather than merely professional reform—played in changing archaeological methods. It is thus fair to conclude that, ironically, the reservation system, despite its colonial roots, offered the institutional structure that initiated archaeology's shift towards more ethical and inclusive methods.