PRIVILEGING INDIGENOUS PLACE AND SUBVERTING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

Terry Beaulieu
Assistant Professor
St. Francis Xavier University
tbeaulieu@stfx.ca

Abstract

The almost total absence of Indigenous voices in debates surrounding the theoretical legitimacy of the concept of the archaeological site has, for decades, enabled its deployment as a colonialist tool that facilitates the erasing of Indigenous place. Despite surprisingly little agreement about the validity of the concept within archaeology—including critiques that it hampers rather than helps archaeological analyses—the concept remains an enduring disciplinary feature. By intentionally privileging Indigenous place, though, the concept of the archaeological site can be subverted in a way that counters colonialist narratives that obscure Indigenous histories while simultaneously enhancing archaeological analyses.

Résumé

La quasi-absence de voix autochtones dans les débats portant sur la légitimité théorique du concept de « site archéologique » a, depuis des décennies, permis son déploiement comme outil colonial facilitant l'effacement des lieux autochtones. Malgré l'étonnant manque de consensus quant à la validité de ce concept au sein de la discipline, y compris des critiques soutenant qu'il entrave plutôt qu'il ne favorise les analyses archéologiques, il demeure un élément durable de la pratique archéologique. Toutefois, en privilégiant intentionnellement les lieux autochtones, il devient possible de subvertir le concept de site archéologique de manière à contrer les récits coloniaux qui obscurcissent les histoires autochtones tout en renforçant simultanément les analyses archéologiques.

Introduction

Ranging from large and complex arrangements of megalithic monuments and buildings to comparatively small and simple scatterings of handfuls of lithic flakes and bone, for well over a century the archaeological site has been one of the most enduring and iconic elements within the discipline of archaeology (McCoy, 2020). It has been described as the de facto base unit of archaeology (Dunnell, 1992; Dunnell & Dancey, 1983), with Willey and Phillips (1958, p. 18) characterizing it as "the smallest unit of space dealt with by the archaeologist." Given the pervasive nature of the concept within the discipline, it would not seem unreasonable to expect there would be a generally agreed upon definition of just what an archaeological site is. The reality, though, is that there really is no clear and accepted definition of the concept. In fact, the notion of the archaeological site has sometimes even been ontologically contentious. Despite the resulting occasional disciplinary debates, the idea remains one of the most ubiquitous concepts in archaeology.

This paper briefly examines the history of the concept of the site within the discipline of

archaeology and identifies the logical incongruities often created when it is unquestioningly accepted as legitimate. Archaeology's failure to engage with Indigenous voices regarding the concept of the archaeological site, along with the discipline's strict adherence to certain Western concepts and processes, are explored as examples of longstanding, and deep-rooted, disciplinary colonial bias. While a case study is presented that illustrates the archaeological advantage that can be gained by eschewing the concept of the archaeological site, it also illustrates the discipline's Western rigidity that continues to perpetuate the colonialist erasure of Indigenous places.

The Archaeological Site as a Theoretical Construct

Initially, the archaeological meaning of the term "site" was employed in a generic sense to refer to the site of something or the location where something occurred (Dunnell, 1992; Dunnell & Dancey, 1983). Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, increasing numbers of archaeologists—particularly in North America—began promoting what they described as a more "scientific" approach to the discipline. Referred to initially as "New Archaeology" (Caldwell, 1959), proponents of the approach, which later became known as processual archaeology, argued that human behaviour was driven primarily by ecological factors (Trigger, 2006). It was in this climate that the concept of the archaeological site began to take on a meaning of its own, becoming "a single unit of settlement" that is "fairly continuously covered by remains of occupation" (Willey & Phillips, 1958, p. 18), "a spatial cluster of cultural features or items, or both" (Binford, 1964, p. 431), "any place, large or small, where there are to be found traces of ancient occupation" (Hole & Heizer, 1973, pp. 86–87), or "the activity loci of cultural systems" that are "components of larger and more inclusive settlement systems" (Judge et al., 1975, p. 83).

A little more than a decade after the initial rise in popularity of processual archaeology, a number of archaeologists—particularly in Great Britain—began rejecting the idea that social behaviours were "passively shaped by external (ecological) forces," and instead adopted postmodern characterizations of knowledge as inherently subjective in nature (Trigger, 2006, p. 446). Their approach became known as post-processual archaeology, and debates between the two camps raged for many years thereafter. It was in that climate that some archaeologists began questioning the need to formally define the archaeological site at all. D. H. Thomas (1975), for instance, questioned the universal applicability of the idea, suggesting that in certain situations a "nonsite" sampling strategy would better suit archaeological investigations. Foley (1981, p. 157) later mirrored that suggestion when he noted that "archaeological material is spatially continuous, and that the site may not form the most suitable framework for analysis." He proposed the adoption of an "off-site" archaeological approach. Likewise, Ebert (1992) eschewed the focus on site-level investigations and argued instead for a "distributional" approach focusing on the artifact as the base unit of investigation. Despite some archaeologists raising questions about the site concept, though, most archaeology in North America remained focused on site-level analyses. So much so that by the close of the 20th century—upwards of two decades after the ideas were first proposed—proponents of "nonsite," "off-site," or "distributional" archaeology were still arguing for the wider adoption of those approaches (e.g., Bintliff, 2000; Erdogu, 2003).

Part of the reason for the continued focus on the archaeological site was that, even though some archaeologists had questioned the value of site-level archaeological analyses, most "nonsite" or "off-site" proponents still accepted the ontological validity of the archaeological site. For example, despite his argument for the adoption of "nonsite" approaches, Thomas (1975, p. 62) nonetheless accepted as "unassailable" the claim that an archaeological site consisted of a locus of

cultural material. Similarly, when Holdaway et al. (1998, p. 1) argued "that the conventional concept of a site is unproductive," it was not because they questioned the reality of the existence of the archaeological site, but rather that "without rockshelters, the boundaries of a site are much harder to determine" (Holdaway et al., 1998, p. 2). Even Dunnell and Dancey (1983, p. 272), who forcefully argued the archaeological record consisted of a "more or less continuous distribution of artifacts over the land surface"—thus meaning that site-level archaeological analyses were necessarily biased—accepted the reality of the archaeological site when it was "defined by density characteristics."

For the majority of archaeologists, then, the site remained a theoretically valid construct. Most saw archaeological sites as bounded spatial expanses having identifiable edges (Carman, 1999; Dunnell & Dancey, 1983). That those edges were notoriously difficult to determine— something that had been acknowledged as far back as Willey and Phillips' (1958, p. 18) concession that they were "often impossible to fix"—was generally attributed not to the dubious ontological nature of the site concept, but rather to depositional and post-depositional forces that acted to obscure site characteristics (e.g. Dunnell, 1992; Foley, 1981; Schiffer, 1983). Archaeological sites were thus generally accepted to be empirical units of significance that theoretically could be discovered, mapped, and effectively analyzed by diligent archaeologists (Dunnell, 1992).

That is not to say that all archaeologists accepted the site as theoretically meaningful. Indeed, several archaeologists questioned the tangibility, or at least the practicality, of the site concept. Initially, most critiques were grounded in a processualist paradigm. For example, Foley's argument "that the site may not form the most suitable framework for analysis" was rooted in concerns about site formation processes, post-depositional disturbance, and artifact visibility (Foley, 1981, p. 157). Similar processualist concerns were raised by Dunnell and Dancey (1983) when they argued that embracing site-centred approaches to archaeology ignored the true nature of depositional processes, which necessarily resulted in biased understandings of the material past. Theirs was an argument similar to that later made by Dibble et al. (2017) in their examination of stone artifact assemblages. It was not that these researchers believed that the archaeological site was an invalid concept; rather, it was that they thought it was just too difficult an entity to unequivocally identify to be useful.

Periodic focus on, and critique of, the archaeological site concept continued with the rise of post-processual approaches to archaeology. Not all of those critiques were new, however, as some post-processual assessments mirrored earlier processual concerns. Both paradigms, for example, had critics who argued the archaeological site was necessarily an artificial modern construction of the archaeologist and was therefore not a meaningful analytical unit of past activity. Goodyear et al. (1979, p. 39), for instance, suggested the archaeological site was "merely a synthetic construct created by the archaeologist." Darvill (1992, p. 168) pointed out that site boundaries were generally "arbitrarily located." Dunnell (1992, p. 33) recognized archaeological sites as "modern, contemporary phenomena," a sentiment later echoed by Carman (1999), and recently concurred with by McCoy (2020, p. 18), who also added they were "not past frames of reference."

Archaeologists engaging with post-processual approaches, though, pushed harder against the ontological validity of the site concept. Carman (1999, p. 27), for instance, observed that the archaeological focus on sites resulted in researchers having "a static vision of [past] people in fixed locations" rather than of dynamic groups moving through space and time. McCoy (2020, p. 18), meanwhile, highlighted the seemingly obvious—but often ignored—point that "formal definitions of sites must rely on subjective criteria." It was also noted that archaeological sites are often found due to contemporary legislative requirements placed on resource development activities (Gupta et

al., 2020, p. 41) that view and interact with the physical environment much differently than did past peoples.

One way to more clearly illustrate the ontological tenuousness of the archaeological site concept is to employ an approach that emphasizes the importance of the critical concepts of space and place (Beaulieu, 2018). When space is defined as location, it represents the areas where objects are located (Agnew, 2005). It is fixed, is independent of the character of the objects it may contain, and is independent of human activity (Agnew, 2005; Curry, 1998). This contrasts with the concept of place, which depends entirely on human activity. Place is a mental construction comprised of lived experiences (Agnew, 2005; Tilley, 1994). It is subjective, exists in a constant state of flux, and varies in significance across both space and time (Agnew, 2005; J. Thomas, 2001). The importance of these concepts comes into sharper focus when exploring how the contemporary representation of the archaeological record— as defined by archaeological sites—is created. As noted above, archaeological sites are often found as a direct consequence of contemporary legislative requirements placed upon resource development activities. Those resource development activities, and the legislative hurdles they must navigate, however, view and interact with the physical environment much differently than did past peoples. It is nonetheless the modern resource development perspective that dictates where in space most archaeological materials are recorded. The archaeological sites identified and defined as part of the resource development process, then, are necessarily modern constructs that form an archaeological record whose distribution across space is more reflective of the goals, perceptions, and desires of modern resource development activities than it is the goals, perceptions, and desires of past peoples. The archaeological record as we know it, then, must also be a necessarily modern construct that represents current resource extraction activities at least as much—and perhaps even more— than the interests of the past peoples it is purported to represent. When recognizing the often-pivotal role modern resource extraction activities have on the creation of the archaeological record, then, it should be clear that the modern places embodied by the spaces revealed by those activities (i.e., archaeological sites) are a sub-optimal source on which to base detailed models of past human perception and behaviour.

Despite a decades-long history of archaeologists questioning both the ontological and epistemological validity of the archaeological site, though, the concept has remained foundational within the discipline (McCoy, 2020). The seeming inability to jettison the concept—despite its obvious shortcomings (regardless of theoretical position)—has resulted in many archaeologists expressing clearly incongruous positions. On the one hand, they will argue for the constructed modern nature of the archaeological site, but then, on the other, will proceed with archaeological assessments that explicitly—or at least implicitly—include site-level analyses that intrinsically imbue archaeological meaning and validity to a concept whose very legitimacy they previously questioned (Dunnell, 1992). Dunnell's (1992, p. 26) decades-old observation seems as relevant today as it was when he initially made it—despite statements to the contrary, most archaeologists continue to treat sites as "things that can be observed rather than units that are constructed."

The Archaeological Site and the Absence of Indigenous Voices

What is conspicuously absent from discussions interrogating the concept of the archaeological site is any exploration—or even recognition—of Indigenous views or perspectives. Such indifference to Indigenous perspectives is not unique only to examinations of the archaeological site concept. While increasing efforts have recently been made to engage with

Indigenous voices in archaeology (particularly since the turn of the 21st century), historically the discipline has been repeatedly accused of failing to meaningfully engage with Indigenous peoples and their perspectives (e.g., Deloria, 1992; Hammil & Cruz, 1989; Yellowhorn, 1996). That failure is a longstanding issue having roots stretching back to the nationalist and imperialist origins of the discipline (Supernant, 2020; Trigger, 2006), and it has facilitated archaeology's use as a colonialist tool to separate and erase Indigenous people from their own history (Kelvin & Hodgetts, 2020). From the beginning, archaeology has required a lost past that could be recovered and deciphered only by a cadre of professionals having an expertise acquired exclusively through Western methods, from Western institutions, espousing Western perspectives that were ultimately designed for Western consumption (Atalay, 2006; Schneider & Hayes, 2020). One clear consequence of those colonialist practices is that Indigenous individuals, and by extension their perspectives, have traditionally been underrepresented in the ranks of archaeology, both academically and professionally (Supernant, 2018, 2020). As a result, the "experts" archaeology has traditionally turned to when describing Indigenous cultures—both past and present—have generally existed outside the cultures they are presumed to be experts on (Atalay, 2006; Kelvin & Hodgetts, 2020; Supernant, 2020).

One of the justifications of such an approach has been the suggestion that these cultures no longer exist, that they have disappeared or become extinct, and therefore can only be examined and deciphered by outside "experts" (Schneider & Hayes, 2020; Supernant, 2018). But even when the descendants of the archaeological cultures under examination live nearby, archaeology still often deliberately constructs their past as lost, and therefore in need of recovery by outside "experts" (Schneider & Hayes, 2020). When the existence of descendants of those archaeological cultures, and the knowledges and understandings they hold about their ancestral past, cannot be ignored, archaeology frequently resorts to interpreting them in ways designed to devalue those knowledges, thereby reinforcing the constructed narrative of a lost past. This is often accomplished by portraying Indigenous groups as "vanished," "primitive," or "simple," while characterizing their perspectives as obstructionist and defiant (Schneider & Hayes, 2020; Watkins, 2011). Western science and archaeology, meanwhile, are portrayed as objective and analytical, and thus more intellectually sophisticated, thereby further freezing Indigenous cultures in the past (Kelvin & Hodgetts, 2020; Palmer, 2012).

This should not be taken to infer that archaeology alone has been responsible for ignoring Indigenous voices and perceptions of the past. Historically, settler communities have attempted to control the past with little concern for Indigenous perspectives (Nicholas et al., 2010; Williamson, 2018). Archaeology, though, has generally been a willing accomplice. In Canada over 90% of archaeological work is conducted by archaeologists employed by commercial firms conducting impact assessments ahead of large-scale development projects (Gupta et al., 2020; Williamson, 2018). The rules governing those impact assessments have developed in environments focused primarily on addressing settler community concerns of efficiency, satisfying market forces, and archaeological interpretive convention (Nicholas et al., 2010; Williamson, 2018). In this way, settler communities have imposed their world views and perspectives onto the past and helped define what does, and does not, constitute an archaeological site (Nicholas et al., 2010). They also claim ownership of the Indigenous material culture recovered from archaeological investigations driven by those resource development concerns, and accept the archaeological data derived from those materials as the authoritative sources of information and knowledge about Indigenous pasts (Gupta et al., 2020). By asserting control over the archaeological record, then, archaeology not only helps facilitate the state's claim to ownership of the Indigenous past (Gupta et al., 2020) it also helps

"reproduce and uphold racist colonial narratives of Indigenous people" (Kelvin & Hodgetts, 2020, p. 6).

As early as the 1990s—despite their relatively low numbers—Indigenous archaeologists were pushing back against the discipline's colonial practices and demanding change (Yellowhorn, 1996) so that by the dawn of the 21st century, archaeology could no longer claim ignorance of these problematic issues (Supernant, 2018). Despite the apparent recognition of the legitimacy of the concerns raised by growing numbers of Indigenous archaeologists, though, relatively few non-Indigenous archaeologists initially seemed inclined to prioritize addressing the problem.

There were, however, signs of significant changes—the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act came into force in the United States in 1990, and in 1997 the Canadian Archaeological Association (1997) adopted a Statement of Principles for Ethical Conduct Pertaining to Aboriginal Peoples. While shifts such as those did lead to practices such as archaeological consultation with Indigenous sources becoming increasingly preferred—particularly in the Cultural Resource Management field—daunting issues remained.

There was, for instance, an apparent obliviousness to the significant differences between consulting with Indigenous informants and actually collaborating with Indigenous partners (Atalay, 2006). In many instances, where Indigenous consultation was required (most prevalently in Cultural Resource Management situations), the aim of archaeologists initially appeared to be more about ticking the consultation check box than actually engaging in meaningful collaboration with Indigenous partners. While the intent and goals of evolving legislation and consultation policies may not have been to further entrench the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge, in practice those policies often did little more than promote a "check box consultation" that enabled archaeologists to fulfill their legal requirement of "consulting" with Indigenous peoples without actually requiring them to meaningfully engage with the knowledge holders with whom they were supposedly intended to be collaborating. It was a situation exacerbated by the relative paucity of Indigenous archaeologists. There are still far fewer Indigenous archaeologists than there are non-Indigenous archaeologists, the result of a vast array of systemic colonial barriers (Supernant, 2018, 2020). Given archaeology's consistent devaluing of Indigenous people and their perspectives, it is unsurprising that Indigenous voices were effectively absent from archaeological discussions about theoretical issues such as the validity of the concept of the archaeological site. It was not that those voices did not exist; rather, it was that, in most instances, they were intentionally ignored, marginalized, and silenced.

As just noted, archaeology can often be criticized for imposing a settler world view, ignoring and erasing Indigenous voices, and for painting with too broad a brush that results in accepting homogenizing pan-Indigenous perspectives. Caution, however, should be exercised to avoid engaging in similarly broad strokes that adopt the same essentializing practices that ignore cases countering the dominant narrative.

There are, for example, archaeological approaches in North America that both recognize and embody Indigenous perceptions. Fowles (2010), for instance, has pointed out that over the past four decades archaeology in the American Southwest has increasingly embraced the value of Indigenous viewpoints. Several factors in the region, they note, have combined to foster an archaeology that regards Indigenous knowledge not simply as something to be interpreted through a Western intellectual lens, but rather as an "intellectual epistemology in its own right" (Fowles, 2010, p. 454) In other words, Indigenous knowledge regarding archaeological questions in the American Southwest have come to be accepted as "viable historical data" (Fowles, 2010, p. 464), meaning "'theory' is not the unique contribution of Western intellectuals" (Fowles, 2010, p. 454). While

there are other instances and regions—such as the Northwest Coast (see, for example, Kristensen & Davis, 2015; Mohs, 1994)—where Indigenous knowledges have challenged standard colonial interpretations. Such examples, unfortunately, remain exceptions to the rule.

The Archaeological Site as a Colonizing Tool

If archaeology, as a discipline, had prioritized conferring in meaningful ways with Indigenous voices regarding the site concept, it would likely have been confronted with more questions about the appropriateness of the idea. At the very least, there would have been significant pushback about the implied value of non-Indigenous-created boundaries surrounding Indigenous spaces. The nature of the archaeological site—whether defined by presumed activity areas or simply by higher artifact concentrations—necessarily creates bounded areas delineated by identifiable and discernable borders. The creation and location of those borders is not trivial since they attribute archaeological and cultural significance and value to the areas they contain. From a Western perspective, however, they also imply an emptiness—and thus an inferiority of archaeological and cultural significance—to those areas lying beyond and between those borders. The implication is clear: the spaces beyond archaeological site boundaries, and thus the places that reside within the areas beyond archaeological site boundaries, are necessarily inferior to the places whose physical imprints are contained inside accepted site boundaries—as defined by Western-trained archaeological "experts." If the spaces housing Indigenous places lying outside accepted archaeological site boundaries were significant or important, archaeology would ensure a Western "expert" would have constructed around them identifiable boundaries; that is, they would have created archaeological sites. Since they have not, the spaces—whether identified as significant or not by Indigenous people themselves—are deemed empty and therefore archaeologically inferior (even insignificant) by the Western "experts" granted the power and authority to make such proclamations by the Western institutions of which they are a part. It matters not whether that insignificance is accepted—or contested—by Indigenous people; the categorization is not for them. Remember, the identification and significance of archaeological "sites" is constructed by Western "experts" employing Western methods, *for Western audiences* (Atalay, 2006; Schneider & Hayes, 2020). An Indigenous perspective would more likely characterize the spaces between identified archaeological sites not as empty and insignificant but rather as important relational places, in much the same way Indigenous peoples in Tasmania view the night sky. While stars are recognized as discrete constellations, the space between those constellations is also important: "nothing is black or empty space" (Tynan, 2021, p. 601). One of the issues that arises with archaeological sites in the North American context is that Western "experts" wield the social and political power to impose—on both non-Indigenous *and* Indigenous audiences—how those locations (spaces between defined archaeological sites) are to be perceived and valued. The categorization practice (i.e., the creation of archaeological sites), then, necessarily both initiates and perpetuates the colonial erasure of Indigenous spaces and places lying beyond archaeological site boundaries.

Even the way archaeological sites are defined and understood privileges colonial Western perspectives over Indigenous world views. Land in a colonial perspective "exists for the primary benefit of humans" (Tynan, 2021, p. 602). It is something to be segmented and bordered (Watts, 2013). It is the location of resources that exist for the benefit of humans who have the right to extract them for monetary gain (Tynan, 2021), and access to which they have the right to control (Watts, 2013). This contrasts with Indigenous perspectives that do not separate the world into the same human/land dichotomy, but instead recognize the world as a web of relationships that exist between humans and non-humans (Campbell, 2007; Watts, 2013, 2023; Wildcat & Voth, 2023). In this

Indigenous perspective, humans, animals, plants, and the earth on and in which they live have reciprocal responsibilities to one another (Campbell, 2007; Watts, 2023), meaning that, as humans, "we are extensions of the very land we walk upon" (Watts, 2013, p. 23). Often referred to as "relationality" (e.g., Tynan, 2021; Wildcat & Voth, 2023) this Indigenous perspective is premised on the idea that everything exists in a complex relationship that humans have a duty to honour and respect (Campbell, 2007). The Western perspective, then—that archaeological sites (regardless of how they are defined) are the locations of cultural resources needing to be managed—runs counter to the Indigenous perspective that recognizes them as spaces of relationships needing to be acknowledged and cared for.

The notion of the site boundary is also a problematic colonial imposition on the Indigenous experience. That should not be taken to mean that Indigenous boundaries do not exist. The view that Indigenous peoples did not produce their own maps, and thus do not have boundaries, has been shown to be an inaccurate romanticization founded on racist stereotyping (Lucchesi, 2018; Sletto, 2009b). As Wildcat and Voth (2023, p. 478) note when discussing Indigenous relationality, embracing an Indigenous world view "does not mean boundaries should fade into the background." There can, however, be significant differences in how maps and boundaries are perceived and understood. Western perceptions of map boundaries, for instance, are of fixed polygons and lines that partition Cartesian space into distinct geographic areas of exclusivity (Sletto, 2009a; Thom, 2009). In the Western perception, once drawn on a map, a boundary acquires a physicality that makes it real (Eades, 2015) and in so doing divides space into exclusive inside and outside regions (Nadasdy, 2012). Indigenous perceptions of boundaries, however, are often significantly different. Boundaries in the Indigenous context are often conceived not as fixed geographical divisions dividing space but rather as contextual and relational zones contingent on shifting social relations acting in concert with an animate physical environment (Sletto, 2009a; Thom, 2014). Indigenous boundaries can thus be fluid entities with the ability to shift, depending upon circumstances, to allow spaces to be shared "without evaporating the ways different nations assert nationhood and territoriality" (Wildcat & Voth, 2023, p. 479). This fluidity means Indigenous boundaries and borders often overlap with one another in the Western spatial realm (Nadasdy, 2012; Thom, 2009, 2014).

Archaeological site boundaries, by contrast, are fixed and rigid divisions firmly ensconced within a Western worldview that does not embrace such Indigenous perspectives. They are decidedly inflexible and generally cannot overlap with one another. In its *Archaeological Site Reporting Guide*, for instance, the settler government agency that administers archaeology in the Province of Alberta (Archaeological Survey, Alberta) unequivocally states that "overlapping site boundaries will not be accepted" (Alberta Culture, 2023, p. 3). Western perceptions of boundaries clearly divide space, not place, while Indigenous perceptions of boundaries often identify places as they relate to space. How these differences manifest themselves in archaeological interpretations can be shown in the following example.

The Archaeological Site: Eschewing the Norm

Over the course of two field seasons, research assistants and I conducted in the neighbourhood of 400 km of archaeological pedestrian survey throughout a study area that was adjacent to the valley edges of both sides of some 43.5 km of the Red Deer River in southern Alberta (Beaulieu, 2018). Close to 1,000 archaeological surface features were located, identified, and recorded as part of that process (see Figure 1). The recorded features were later organized into 124 archaeological sites in accordance with—and sometimes directed by—Archaeological Survey, Alberta, personnel and

guidelines (Alberta Culture, 2023) (see Figure 2). At first glance, the archaeological features and archaeological site maps do not appear appreciably different. There look to be significant numbers of archaeological features and sites spread along the valley edges of both sides of the river throughout the study area. That similarity of appearance, however, is misleading. It is a function of the scale at which the data is represented, a fact that can be easily illustrated by a simple data consolidation process. Independently compiling the two sets of data into ¼ mile x ¼ mile squares—known as Legal Subdivisions (LSDs)—clearly begins to reveal shortcomings with the archaeological site concept. As can be seen in Figure 3, there are few areas along either side of the river where there are significantly higher numbers of sites per LSD than in other areas. In fact, the general impression is that archaeological sites are—with few exceptions—relatively evenly distributed along the margins of both sides of the river valley throughout the study area. Compiling the feature data into similar LSD counts, however, provides a very different picture. Examining Figure 4 reveals that, while the presence of archaeological features along the valley edges is—with few exceptions—relatively constant, there are several distinct regions within the study area having LSDs containing much higher numbers of archaeological features than occur in other regions. A relatively large section of the southern end of the study area, for instance, is clearly a region containing significantly more archaeological features per LSD than nearby regions. There is another similar, though somewhat smaller, region towards the centre of the study area, as well as one or two other such regions—depending on how they are subjectively viewed—located near the northern end of the study area. Examining the distribution of archaeological features without the imposition of the archaeological site obscuring the picture reveals several regions in which there are distinct feature clusters—a fact that is masked when examining the study area through the colonially imposed lens of the archaeological site.

This subjective assessment—that archaeological sites are relatively evenly distributed throughout the study area even when the archaeological features that comprise them exhibit discrete spatial clustering—is further supported when the distinctly Western analytical process of point pattern analysis is applied. "Nearest Neighbour" analysis of the archaeological site distribution data resulted in a z-score of 34.62, indicating a dispersed, or uniform, distribution (i.e., archaeological sites are spread evenly across the study area without there being areas having higher or lower incidences of archaeological sites). Contrastingly, a similar analysis of the feature data resulted in a z-score of -10.55, indicating a clustered distribution (i.e., features are *not* evenly distributed across the study area but rather are organized into distinct groupings, or clusters, of features). Both scores have a p-value of 0.000, indicating there is a less than 1% chance that the observed patterns (dispersed and clustered) are the result of random chance. The distributional discrepancy apparent between the site and feature data—evident in both subjective visual analysis and empirical statistical measurement—is a clear indication that the archaeological site has a distorting impact on the representation of the archaeological record.

That distortion can be even more clearly illustrated when the density of materials found throughout the study area is examined without the imposition of artificial geographic divisions (i.e., LSDs). Figure 5 is a map showing the density of archaeological surface features found across the study area when determining density by counting the number of features lying within a 1 km radius of every square metre of the study area. The density data was organized into quartiles to provide a clearer picture of regions containing high, moderately high, moderately low, and low densities of archaeological features. As can be seen, there are four distinct regions within the study area containing high densities of archaeological features when compared to neighbouring regions. Unsurprisingly, a similar process employing the site-level data results in a much different picture (see Figure 6). As with feature density, site density was determined by counting the number of sites

(as indicated by site-centre locations) lying within a 1 km radius of each square metre of the study area. Like the feature-density data, the resulting site-density data was then organized into quartiles to reveal high, moderately high, moderately low, and low densities of archaeological sites. The resulting picture proves to be very different from the picture produced by the examination of the feature data. In contrast to the four distinct and easily identifiable areas of high feature density revealed in Figure 5, Figure 6 shows more than three times as many areas of high site density. Furthermore, the 14+ areas of high site density are not separated into unambiguous and easily identifiable zones, as is the case for the feature data. Many of the areas of high site density evident in Figure 6 are relatively small and not easily distinguishable from other nearby areas of high site density. It is a result not unexpected, given that point pattern analysis indicated a dispersed distribution of archaeological sites throughout the study area. Much of the ambiguity evident in the site-level data can be directly attributed to the subjective and constructed nature of the archaeological site concept, relying as it does on modern colonialist sensibilities.

The Archaeological Site Subverted

When defining the concepts of space and place in the manner referenced above (see Beaulieu, 2018, for an in-depth explanation), areas of high feature density, such as those evident in Figure 5, can be interpreted as the physical manifestations of place-making activities of past people (Beaulieu, 2018, 2022). Past people's perceptions of their world, while different from modern perceptions, even when situated in the same spaces, resulted in unique place-making activities that often left physical imprints in the environment that remain visible today. While it may be true that the material culture elements the archaeologist observes today exist in the same space they did when they were in use by the past people who created them, they do not—and cannot—exist in the same place. When modern archaeologists recognize those environmental imprints for what they are— physical manifestations of past perceptions of place—they can begin examining them with an eye to gaining a greater understanding of that world. That can only happen, however, when archaeologists understand that the importance of the physical imprints they see in the environment today lies not in their physical expressions as modern archaeological sites, but rather in their manifestations of past place-making activities. No matter how exhaustive an archaeologist's work might be in detailing the spatial expanse of material culture remains in their quest to create the most detailed of archaeological site maps, it must be emphasized that the archaeological site can never be more than a uniquely modern construction based on distinctly Western sensibilities. Creating a model of the past employing such constructs is thus a necessarily colonialist endeavour that imposes a contemporary Western perception of place onto Indigenous space, and in so doing effectively erases Indigenous place.

Deploying the concepts of space and place in the manner described above (see Beaulieu, 2018) enabled the privileging of certain Indigenous perspectives—in this case, the physical locations of important places created by past Indigenous peoples—over modern colonialist representations of the past as characterized by the modern and subjectively constructed archaeological site. When taking such an approach, the concept of the modern archaeological site was jettisoned in order to explore the significance of past place-making activities. When employing that methodology, one intentionally designed to privilege Indigenous place over colonizing spaces, it was possible to reveal the physical location of another significant place for past people—a crossing that traversed the Red Deer River near the mouth of Bull Pound Creek—that had been effectively erased by over a century of colonial mapping practices in the region (Beaulieu, 2018, 2022). Recognizing the inherent colonialist nature of the archaeological site and eschewing it in favour of the Indigenous

place-making activities represented by the physical imprints of those place-making activities (i.e., the cobble features left behind) was a crucial step in revealing the river crossing. Reliance on analyses of site-focused archaeological data, similar to that detailed in Figure 6, would likely not have resulted in the river crossing being revealed.

The above example should make it evident that archaeology cannot claim to be merely a passive actor in the erasure of Indigenous places such as the river crossing just mentioned. Without attempting to deliberately privilege Indigenous perspectives, in part by denying the legitimacy of the archaeological site, it is improbable that the space of that significant Indigenous place would have been revealed. But even after the spatial location of that significant Indigenous place had been identified, archaeology continues to attempt to diminish its significance. There are no obvious physical manifestations of that river crossing evident in the modern environment. That lack of materiality thus precludes the location from being recognized as an archaeological site (Alberta Culture, 2023). Because of the rigid adherence to inflexible Western definitions, the location of the river crossing thus remains locked in space beyond and between archaeological sites presently recognized by Western authorities. Consequently, it is, as noted previously, implicitly characterized by the colonial establishment as archaeologically and culturally inferior to nearby areas that are bounded by archaeological site borders. This, despite the distinct possibility that it may have been the spatial location of a much more significant Indigenous place than the archaeological sites identified by Western "experts" and recognized by the colonialist archaeological establishment. So, while archaeology may not have had a direct hand in the initial erasure of the river crossing as a significant Indigenous place, it is certainly guilty of perpetuating that colonial erasure through its insistence on the legitimacy and significance of the archaeological site in both concept and practice.

Conclusion

Processual theorists have characterized the archaeological site as an inappropriate tool for conducting analyses because of ambiguities surrounding its physical character. Post-processual proponents have characterized the archaeological site as inappropriate for archaeological analyses because of the questionable ontological validity of the concept. From an Indigenous perspective, the archaeological site is a colonialist tool that arbitrarily imposes Western concepts of space onto the environment. In so doing, it obscures the importance of place, and thereby diminishes, and eventually erases, Indigenous place. Regardless of theoretical perspective, the archaeological site is a difficult concept to ontologically defend. Despite that difficulty, though, it continues to be an intrinsic aspect of the discipline, so much so that more archaeological sites are recorded now than ever before (McCoy, 2020). Even after decades of critique of the concept, the archaeological site appears as firmly entrenched within archaeological methodologies as it ever has been, with virtually no recognition of—or even any serious attempt to explore—its colonialist overtones.

That, however, does not have to be the case. The archaeological site need be no more intrinsic to the discipline than does a fedora, a pistol, or a bullwhip. The colonizing implications of the archaeological site concept have been illustrated above, but so too has a method of addressing that problematic issue. Tackling colonial bias in archaeology does not require ignoring and throwing out Western techniques and perspectives. Rather, it requires a recognition that there is value in both Western *and* Indigenous knowledges, and can begin, as was done here, with something as simple as intentionally privileging Indigenous perceptions of place. Indeed, while the above example deliberately eschewed the colonial Western concept of the archaeological site in favour of

Indigenous place, it nonetheless relied on Western-derived processes such as Global Positioning Systems and Geographic Information Systems modelling in a manner that echoed the Two-Eyed seeing approach promoted by Murdena and Albert Marshall (Bartlett et al., 2012), and the concept of Braided Knowledge suggested by Sonya Atalay, over a decade ago (Atalay, 2012).

Since at least the mid-1990s, there has been a growing number of Indigenous archaeologists and others who have recognized the inherent Western biases within archaeology and have called for the discipline to more effectively address them (Supernant, 2020). Whether referred to under the label of postcolonial critique, Indigenous activism, or encompassed under some other rubric, the first quarter of the 21st century has witnessed a continuing increase in the number of Indigenous voices demanding that researchers begin earnestly addressing the clearly inherent colonial practices within their disciplines (Shaw et al., 2006). With archaeology's growing acceptance of the need to meaningfully engage with Indigenous perspectives has come the development of new approaches to undertaking archaeological research, and an increasing number of scholars who are promoting Indigenous archaeology as a means to address the concerns that have long been raised about the colonial structures inherent in Western archaeology (e.g., Atalay, 2006; Watkins, 2011; Supernant 2018; Schneider & Hayes, 2020). This is but the latest volley in that exchange. If archaeologists truly are serious about decolonizing their discipline, there must be an acceptance that some taken-for-granted archaeological concepts—even foundational ones—will need to be rethought. The archaeological site may just be one of those concepts. Subverting the long-cherished—but often criticized—archaeological site concept is a move that would indicate archaeology is willing to do more than just talk about decolonization. An unwillingness to show that level of engagement in this type of radical reformulation of the discipline, however, may indicate that Watkins (2011, p. 60) was right when he wrote that "archaeology runs the risk of continuing to be a sterile act" that is ultimately doomed to be nothing more than "a handmaiden of colonialism."

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