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# Community Engagement and Decolonization within Anthropology and Academia

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**She/Her/Ella**

***I graduated from CSUDH in spring 2022 with a B.A. in Anthropology and concentration in biological anthropology. My interests include Maya archaeology, Salvadoran culture, Forensic anthropology, and Community engagement. I had previously written a paper about Indigeneity in El Salvador, in which I drew on ethnographies as my sources. This led me to enroll in an Intro to Nawat course taught by Nahua Elders. I realized that some of the terms and information that I had used in my paper were outdated or incomplete. It made me realize that there are many sources that we use for scholarly research that could be updated. I decided to do more research on terminology used in scholarly books and connected it with community engagement. It showed how Anthropology isn't yet as decolonized as it should be as a discipline and how it affects our resources and the communities we work in.***

## **Introduction**

There have been several movements focused on decolonizing anthropology since the 1960s (Pels 2021). Although the goal of decolonizing anthropology is not new, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done to decolonize anthropology as a discipline. There are many aspects of how anthropology is taught in academia and how fieldwork is conducted that still need to be changed. It is important to prepare students, starting from the beginning in introductory classes by educating them on community engagement and respectfulness towards other cultures. Anthropology has claimed to be a subject that is inclusive and open to other cultures. However, there remain issues of equal access to research, higher education, and job opportunities for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) individuals, as social sciences remain predominantly white in academia and field research (Pels 2021). The impacts of earlier anthropologists who largely conducted their research under and in service to a framework of colonialism, are still seen today and the movement to decolonize and restructure

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anthropology still has a lot of work to do. For instance, there is a lot of published work that includes problematic terms that came from colonization and need to be updated to suit the information we have learned over the years and that fit today's climate. There is still work that needs to be done in the field to ensure community engagement is put into practice.

As well as preventing a fascination with another culture or community from overpowering one's respect for these communities, which is why it is so important to address these issues from earliest introductory courses. There also needs to be more equal access for BIPOC individuals to contribute to the future of the discipline. A diverse field can bring a variety of ideas and experiences into the discussion that can better benefit communities and research. The new generation of anthropologists has the opportunity to continue and push the work of decolonization and finally put it into practice.

When it comes to decolonizing anthropology, there are many factors to consider and there is no one answer to resolve the issue of an unequal and colonized discipline. Education, community engagement, equal access, and updating earlier work are just a few aspects to consider when pushing this movement. As Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith (2010) state, community engagement is not the "cure-all" to resolve issues of inequality. School curriculum should include work on community engagement, and the importance of access to archaeological

information in non-academic communities (especially the communities with which the anthropologists work), and how earlier work of anthropologists needs to be revised. It is important for students to learn this information at the beginning of their anthropological education so they can be aware of this issue and bring this knowledge with them once they move further on in the field.

Being an anthropologist comes with responsibility including correcting and changing previous work that is problematic. The main focus of this paper is to show how current class materials still include information that needs to be updated. As well as pointing out problematic words and statements made in a popular introductory anthropology book about the precolonial Maya civilization, *The Maya* by Michael D. Coe and Stephen D. Houston. It is crucial to edit previous work to add inclusive and decolonized information because the students who use this material would otherwise continue to spread outdated knowledge and misinformation. Also, having inclusive and decolonized texts can create a safer and more welcoming space for students who identify as BIPOC. This paper will also discuss different forms of inclusive practices such as community engagement to utilize in the field. In addition, I will show the importance of descendent and community involvement in anthropology and how it impacts these communities as well as archaeological research.

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## Community-based archaeology

Community-based archaeology involves collaboration with the descendent and local communities within which anthropologists work (Atalay 2012). In *Community-based archaeology* (2012), Sonya Atalay points out the importance of “problematizing the future” in archaeology. This means to think hard about community involvement and engagement in archaeological places and landscapes that results in long-term sustainability. There are three important aspects to consider when problematizing archaeology’s future, 1) the issue of relevance, 2) the question of audience, and 3) concerns about benefits. First, research needs to be relevant to the modern world and with this, the world can be open to archaeologists (Atalay 2012).

Second, the audiences in archaeology are usually academic individuals. More archaeologists are now engaging with communities in the archaeological process, and this expands the audience to these community members. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a way to expand the connections and create potential engagements with Indigenous groups, public audiences, and local communities. CBPR benefits both partners by creating an opportunity for communities to learn the information that is being gathered and for archaeologists to receive diverse knowledge from different traditions and experiences. For CBPR to work, everyone involved needs to

have equitable partnerships and projects must be community-driven (Atalay 2012).

Involving community members in projects empowers the community and ensures that they know and learn what is happening with projects that involve them and their ancestry.

And third, many communities have been excluded when it comes to archaeological excavations within their own territories and ancestral lands. They also do not have access to the archaeological information that has been uncovered and researched on their ancestral land (Atalay 2012). These community members and descendants should be part of the decision-making when it comes to archaeological fieldwork. It is also important to have equal access to projects for BIPOC anthropologists as many times projects are led by anthropologists who do not have a connection or history with the community that is related to the research. It is important to have a diverse field because BIPOC individuals have their own knowledge and experiences that they can bring to projects, especially projects where they have a connection. Community archaeology is being practiced more today than it has in the past. Creating new methods of archaeology and community engagement is one of the practices that we need to implement in fieldwork to create inclusive and accessible research. It benefits communities by creating a safe space for them to participate in research and have a say in projects. It also helps research by including different viewpoints and information

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that would have been missed if community members and BIPOC individuals were not involved.

### **Terminology**

New academic practices should include reviewing, editing, and updating older textbooks that are still used in classes. Here I will reference a textbook that was taught in a class that I took during undergraduate education that I noticed had some information that needed to be critiqued and updated. *The Maya* by Michael D. Coe and Stephen was the main text used in my Ancient Americas class and it includes a lot of information that is hurtful to Indigenous people. It includes terms that have a colonial history that should no longer be used. Other information in this book is important and depicts the most accurate information that was available at the time that it was published.

Some terms that are found in this text are “exotic”, “discovery”, and “backward”. When using the word “discovery” to refer to artifacts and earlier cultures, it implies that this entity did not exist beforehand. It should go without saying that we all know that artifacts and early sites existed for the people of that time. It is better to use different words such as “unearthed” or “uncovered” instead because it implies that this entity has existed before but has been brought to our attention during our time. These entities that are unearthed are not something “new” or “exotic” for us to discover. Using harmful words like these romanticize and exoticize

early civilizations. This leads Indigenous descendants of these civilizations to experience racism and colonial tourism. These artifacts and sites are only new to us, the outsiders of this community. There are descendants still living today who have known about these objects and sites or should have known about them if it weren't for colonization.

There are also some terms in the book that even the authors admit are not used correctly. One example is “Tik'al” the name of a very important Classic Maya site. In the majority of the book, the site name is spelled “Tikal” despite the authors' recognition at the beginning that it is not the proper spelling of the name. The authors state that since this is a well-known spelling of this word by students, tourists, and literature, it would be confusing to use the logically correct spelling “Tik'al” (Coe and Houston 2015). The issue with this is that it is continuing incorrect information about the spelling and ignoring what was used by early civilizations. It is also important to note that the name Tik'al was given to the site recently based on the reservoirs that were still filling with water and the name roughly means “at the watering hole”. If no one starts to use the correct spellings and information, then it will never change, and people will continue to learn the incorrect spelling of this word. Another word that is “Cenote”. The Yucatek Mayan term is “tz'onot”. Although the book uses the word “cenote”, the authors state that “cenote” is a word that was used by

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Spaniards that came from the Yukatek Mayan term “tz’onot” (Coe and Houston 2015). It is well done that the authors noted this because it is important for readers to be aware of the history of this word.

Another potentially problematic word is “Pipil”, a term used to identify Indigenous peoples of El Salvador and other areas on the Pacific Coast and Guatemala. The term “Pipil” is a word that comes from Tlaxcallans, an Indigenous group from Central Mexico who spoke Nahuatl and helped the Spaniards conquer Maya areas. In a Nawat language course from Asociación Nacional Indígena Salvadoreña taught by Nahua elders (names undisclosed for privacy reasons), they teach students the history of the word and state that they identify as Nahua or Nawat, not “Pipil”. The word “Pipil” means “child” in Nawat. Calling an entire group of people “Pipil” is inappropriate. The word for child is used in the language to refer to someone who is a child. However, it is not what the entire community uses to identify themselves because it would be calling non-children “child” as well. It is important to use terms that people use to self-identify and it is important to research and question the history of a word if you are unsure of where it came from, especially if it comes from areas that experienced colonization. If one refers to themselves as “Pipil”, it is also important to not question their identity even if others from the same cultural community do not identify with this word. However, it is still important

to know this information and if referring to a group of people with different terms for their identity it should be stated so in the text.

Another term that is similar is “Eskimo” which is also in this text. The term “Inuit” is the term that Indigenous people of the Northern polar circle identify with today (Sinchi Foundation 2020). Although there are still some people who self-identify as “Eskimo”, there has been a big movement to educate people on the history of the word which is a word that was given to them by European settlers. In the Algonquin language, which is a language spoken by Indigenous people of Quebec and Ontario, Canada, “Eskimo” translates to “eaters of raw meat.” Identifying a group by a single trait does not give recognition to other parts of their rich culture such as throat singing, mask dancing, and creation stories (Sinchi Foundation 2020). The word “Eskimo” is a general term used to describe a large group of people from different regions in the Northern Circumpolar areas where some do not identify with this word. Although this can be tricky since some people still identify with this, it is important to know this information and use the word that the people or person with whom you are referring or in contact identifies. This is an important part of decolonizing anthropology and not only should this be taught in anthropology courses, but people outside of academia should know this information as well. Due to colonization, there are a lot of terms that are used today that refer to Indigenous people that

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they do not use to identify themselves .

The word Indigenous is also not capitalized in the text. According to the University of British Columbia's Indigenous foundation (2009), Indigenous with a capitalized "I" is referred to in the United Nations as peoples of long settlement and who have a connection to specific land that has been impacted by industrial economies, displacement, and settlement of their traditional territories by others. This definition acknowledges the modern European colonial era where people were suppressed for political, economic, and social exploitation and sovereignty (Weeber 2020). Using the lowercase "i" in "Indigenous" can refer to anyone who was born and grew up in the place they currently live (Weeber 2020). Capitalizing the "I" is used to identify a group of political and historical communities (Weeber 2020). The capital "I" makes a clear distinction that who you are speaking of is an "Indigenous person" with historical ties to a land.

Another thing to note from the text is that the authors make assumptions about certain artifacts while admitting that they are unsure of their true meaning. Female fired clay figurines were made in the Preclassic villages of Mexico and the Maya area (Coe and Houston 2015). The authors state that no one is sure of the meaning of these figurines but go on to state that it is thought that they may have something to do with fertility similar to female figurines from the Neolithic and

Bronze Age Europe (Coe and Houston 2015). The issue with this is that no one knows the true meaning behind these figurines. If no one is sure, it should be common practice to not guess what it means without any evidence. The idea that female figurines are connected to fertility is questionable because this idea stems from Old World civilizations that were thought to reflect matriarchal societies which focused on fertility and the Mother Goddess (Marcus 2019). In her article Studying Figurines (2019) Joyce Marcus states that there have been many overviews that have pointed out that scholars were over-emphasizing women even though men and animals were seen in the collections in which they were researching.

Another interesting note about the book is that although the Maya civilization did not "collapse", this term is used throughout the book with minimal explanation or qualification. The author states in Chapter 10 that the Maya are resilient and still alive today (Coe and Houston 2015). The result is that there are many reasons for the Maya to have left sites, but those reasons did not erase the Maya. They endured and transitioned to adapt to their changing environment. There is also the word "abandonment" that is used to describe the dispersion of this community. When using these words, it has a sense of failure behind it instead of resiliency (McAnany 2014).

Also, towards the end of the book, the authors talk a bit about post-conquest life for

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the Maya. There is a quick statement about how this was a time when enslaved African people were brought against their will into Guatemala, Campeche, and later in time the area that is now called Belize (Coe and Houston 2015). When the Spaniards came between 1500 and 1750, about 716,000 Africans were brought during that time which was more than the number of Spaniards that came, which was 678,000 (Nájera and Luis, 2017). However, there is no further information about the enslaved African populations brought to the Maya area in the book. There have been several types of relations between Maya and enslaved African people in the Post-conquest Era. An example of Maya and African people relations is the Maya resistance to Spanish colonization in 1531. Sugar plantation owner, Francisco de Montejo, had requested slaves from Spanish colonial authorities to his plantation but because of the Maya resistance this request was postponed. This conflict illustrates the history of war and slavery that brought the Maya and African people together (Nájera and Luis, 2017). There are many Afro-Indigenous people today and it is important to acknowledge them. Afro-Indigenous people are overlooked and deserve to be represented. Many people do not realize how slavery affected early Indigenous cultures and communities in the Americas. Therefore, if one is speaking about the Maya or any other group that had contact with enslaved African people, it should be widespread practice to

acknowledge the history and impact that African slavery had on this civilization.

### **Conclusion**

There is a lot more information and parts of the text that need to be evaluated. What I have pointed out here is just a few examples from the book that needed to be critiqued. A new edition of the book is set to be published in 2023 and I will look forward to seeing if any of the terminology and approaches are updated. Community engagement, changes of school curriculum, and equal access is also only part of what can be done to decolonize anthropology. The information that I have provided is to help readers think deeply about what information they are being taught and if you are the educator, what information are you telling your students. It is imperative to think about better ways to practice archaeology that involve diverse and community-based practices. There won't be a change in anthropology and academia without people acknowledging that there needs to be a change. Anthropology needs to be more inclusive and have people in the field that represent the diversity of humanity. A more diverse and inclusive field will result in better research and representation for communities and students.

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