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## Book Review: Atalay: Community Members, Not Scientists, Give Best Advice

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# Atalay: Community Members, Not Scientists, Give Best Advice

Reviewed by Laura Reimer

*Sonya Atalay, Community-Based Archaeology: Research with, by, and for Indigenous and Local Communities.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012, 312 pages. ISBN: 9780520273368

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In a refreshing approach and practical guide to innovative research methods, Dr. Sonya Atalay demonstrates the richness of community-engaged research for research, for scientists, and for communities. In *Community-Based Archaeology*, Atalay persuades readers that through active engagement in the research practice, community members – and not scientists – provide the most effective research guidance. Such practice overturns assumptions about the necessity of detached research and ultimately promotes better research and community well-being by embracing local people, traditions, and knowledge. Atalay’s enthusiasm for inclusive knowledge production provides readers and researchers with a book that is tightly focused on the meaning and applications of community-based participatory research (CBPR) while promoting decolonizing “research with, by, and for indigenous communities” (subtitle).

This review begins with a presentation of Atalay’s professional interests. Then it will provide a brief presentation of the central arguments of the book, followed by evidence supporting her assertions. Next the review will explore the organization and structure of the book in the context of its major themes, followed by a short evaluation and critique. Finally the review will situate Atalay’s book within the literature, followed by a short conclusion.

Dr. Atalay is an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts with research interests and a growing experiential base in the area of engaged (public) anthropology. She was educated at the University of Michigan and the University of California-Berkeley. Atalay has been awarded significant research funds and positions in support of the development of community-based research, which is outlined extensively in this book. Atalay’s current research is conducted in full partnership with indigenous and local communities, and her university classes are practical opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students to gain hands-on experience in how to partner with

communities to identify research needs. Atalay crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries to incorporate aspects of cultural anthropology, archaeology, heritage studies, and indigenous studies, a perspective reflected and supported in the book. Atalay’s writing, teaching, and community-based research reflect her conviction that research is best when ordinary people are engaged in the work of studying, protecting, and teaching about their own cultural heritage, and that these benefits extend positively beyond the limited timelines and parameters of traditional archaeological research.

The central argument of *Community-Based Archaeology* is that local people engaged in research about their histories and culture produce, ethical, relevant, and sustainable research. Furthermore, for indigenous populations and especially for archaeological research among indigenous populations, the work is particularly meaningful because the community members determine the research agenda. This is an interesting assertion and, according to the book, works well. There are five case studies within the book that demonstrate how CBPR is enacted throughout each stage of the research process. While each chapter provides theoretical frameworks, the chapters focus on practical examples from Atalay’s own research regarding how to build inclusive relationships, how to collaborate with members of the community, and how to share research results with that community.

The first chapter merges indigenous principles with community-engagement principles to argue convincingly that the time has come for a sustainable archaeology through community-based research. The following chapters explore the origins of community-based research, the guiding principles of CBPR, and then how community research partners are connected. These lead logically to the fourth chapter, and the rest of the book, which is a presentation of the practical aspects of research, identifying research questions, developing a research design, gathering data, and sharing results. Atalay is mindful of the lasting effects of research,

and encourages her readers, especially academic researchers, to do the same.

The case studies help readers understand how Atalay's thesis can work in multiple settings. Each case study is presented to demonstrate that CBPR is more than theory: It is a tested practice. The book also provides a solid "how-to" manual for researchers looking to conduct meaningful research, particularly with indigenous people. What is perhaps most compelling is Atalay's consistent assertion that commitment to the principles of community-based research will develop a long-lasting and productive research relationship with a community.

The book is presented in a readable format in eight chapters. Each chapter is appropriately titled to make engagement with the book simpler for readers. For those seeking the more practical aspects of CBPR, chapter titles like "Identifying Research Questions" and "Gathering Data and Sharing Results" make navigating the book quite straightforward. The index is particularly helpful as the book is a dense 312 pages. The central focus of the book is clearly supported by the principles of community-based participatory research. There are five interrelated and overlapping principles for archaeological CBPR presented in the book that have emerged out of Atalay's own experiences planning and conducting five CBPR projects: 1) a community-based partnership process; 2) an aspiration to be participatory in all aspects; 3) the building of community capacity; 4) a spirit of reciprocity; and 5) reorganized contributions of multiple knowledge systems. Atalay is clear that although these five principles interrelate and overlap, each plays a critical and identifiable role in making the CBPR project successful.

The book brings the research process to life, which is particularly compelling in a "how to" manual for archaeology. The book stresses that community members, not scientists, are in charge of their cultural heritage and it is the strength of community, not merely artifacts, that embody and translate culture across time. Atalay's thesis is well-placed and supported, proving that archaeological research can be relevant, exciting, community-based, and decolonized.

This is an important book that joins the expanding literature challenging the traditional confines of academic research to acknowledge indigenous research principles. Atalay's theme, also proclaimed by indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhawai-Smith with "Decolonizing Methodologies" (1996), Shawn Wilson with *Research is Ceremony*

(2008), and Kathleen Absolon with *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know* (2011), is captured in her subtitle: "Research with, by, and for Indigenous and local communities." Readers are not just exposed to Atalay's thesis; she supports her work in each chapter with theory, research, and practical application. The book joins the emerging body of literature that connects North American indigenous research principles with academic research toward a "trail that leads to a future of lasting peace" (p. ix). Atalay states clearly that "the next generation of archaeologists will be quite different from those of past decades, and as a result, archaeology students must master new types of skills and training" (p. 1). The book is persuasive in its comprehensive assertion that engaged, ethical, and sustainable research is best when it collaborates with descendant and local communities to build an exciting future of possibilities and relevance for archaeology. However, in the sometimes rigid world of academia, and in particular the tightly competitive parameters of funding, it may be a long while before community-based archaeology is fully embraced. In the meantime, the book should appeal to scholars truly interested in expanding their views and their practices of research. One assumes that with the depth of engagement that undergirds CBPR, Atalay considers the price tag of this kind of research secondary to its meaningfulness. The monetary and personnel cost of relevant research continues to be a challenge for universities, but this dimension of CBPR is not addressed in the book.

One completes the book with a thorough exposure to the multiple facets, actual practices, and the potential of community-based research for archaeology, and for other disciplines that may not have traditionally embraced such principles. The field of systematic inquiry is in a time of significant change and Atalay's book is unique in the way it brings emancipation from colonizing methods to archaeological research, standing among other pioneers in academic research that provide empirical evidence for indigenous and community-engaged research.

In conclusion, the book is an excellent resource for those seeking tools and a philosophical framework for an exciting and plausible research vehicle that is emerging in indigenous research paradigms in particular. Without doubt, Atalay's book is essential reading for those who seek excellence in research and who seek to construct meaningful, inclusive, and community-based and community engaged research. This book should prove useful for both qualitative and quantitative

research courses and their instructors, especially for those committed to research that makes a difference within and with the larger community.

### **References**

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