MICHAELA SHIFLEY: I ended up I ended up here as a kind of a scared young graduate student not really knowing what to expect and one of the first classes I took was historical archaeology, the graduate seminar with Kelly, and she, you know, being Kelly was really vibrant and lively and really passionate and that's what really drew me further into this field and also to her.

MARTY LOPEZ: Well, she's been one of the biggest advocates for natives and indigenous people being involved in anthropological projects. And, that's one of the things that drew me to her. And I think that if there's some kind of study being done with indigenous people, that indigenous people should be involved.

NIKKI MANNING: She ingrains in us this, this attitude of we're not just doing this for the people in the halls of academia. It means nothing, unless there's a real purpose for it.

ASHBY KINCH: You just heard the voices of Michaela Shifley, Marty Lopez, and Nikki Manning, talking about their adviser, Dr. Kelly Dixon. She’s been a professor of anthropology at UM since 2003 and she’s our guest on this episode of “Confluence: where great ideas flow together,” a podcast of the Graduate School of the University of Montana. On “Confluence,” we explore the scenic side streams that flow into the river of knowledge of our mountain campus. I’m your host, Ashby Kinch, associate dean of the graduate school and I’m delighted to be guiding your sonic float today.

KINCH: For each episode, we select a short passage of literature for our guests to read, and we’ve asked Kelly to read Langston Hughes’ “I’ve known rivers,” his lush encomium to the awe-inspiring rivers around which the great civilizations of the past have sprung up, especially those that the connect the Africa-American experience of the Mississippi to an historical legacy that flows through Africa, including the Congo, the Nile, and north into the cradle of civilization, the Euphrates. Here’s Kelly reading in Langston Hughes’s voice.

KELLY DIXON: I've known rivers. I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood inhuman veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. I've known rivers ancient dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

KINCH: As an anthropologist with a specialty in historical archaeology, Kelly studies people and their objects, through which she reconstructs the lifeways and experiences that mark a culture’s distinct practices. Her innovative work on the Donner party, on African-American saloons in the West, and more recently, on the work of Chinese migrant laborers on the railroad, have contributed to a re-evaluation of the history of the colonization and conquest of Western North America. I’ve known Kelly for many years, and every conversation is a wild ride: she bursts forth with kinetic energy a deeply engaged thinker, but she also has a “deep soul like a river.”

KINCH: In this conversation, we discuss how she connected with the field of archeology, including how that Langston Hughes poem bridges some of her research interests, as well as her personal stake in graduate student development. She is committed to being an ethical practitioner of archaeology, a field with an ugly history of colonialism to undo, particularly in relationship to the regional archaeology that impacts the sovereign tribes of Montana. Kelly is a strong advocate for her Native students, who train with her so that they can bring their skills back to their tribes, but also so that they can add their voice to the discussion in the profession about the importance of cultural recovery. But, she challenges all of her students the same way she challenges herself. To reflect deeply on how their work is relevant to issues facing our world today.

KINCH: We hope you enjoy our discussion with Kelly Dixon. Welcome to Confluence. Enjoy the float.

DIXON: A lot of people when they find out you are an archeologist, which usually happens when you're sitting on an airplane and they get all excited and they ask you what you do, what's your favorite find, how did you get into it. Um, eighty five percent of strangers I run into say they wished they had been an archaeologist, but they didn't think they could make a living at it. I usually have to start out by saying I didn't always think I would be an archaeologist I didn't ever think of it as a potential career. And when I was an undergraduate studying journalism I took time and took a loan out and sold one of my horses. And paid enough money so that I could afford to do a study abroad. And I wanted to be a war correspondent and I traveled to the Near East during the first Persian Gulf crisis.

KINCH: Wow.

DIXON: While I was over there being a journalist I realized that it would be a really good idea to be an anthropologist if you were going to go to one of these foreign lands and try to tell complex stories in this case about time immemorial conflicts. And so, I decided when I got back to the states that it would be a good idea to double major in journalism and anthropology, which I did. But while I was in the Near East one of the trips I took was to Egypt and I was along the Nile. Um, and I realized how it was Ancient Egypt and all that we associate the world's great archeological discoveries from the past few centuries with. That, that is all a gift of the river.

KINCH: Yeah.

DIXON: The Nile has natural flood cycles without which there wouldn't have been predictability and crops and surplus and haves and have nots and people suddenly becoming powerful enough to have great monuments built for them that are still standing today and of course how could I have not gone to that region and come back more curious in ancient history and cultural heritage and archaeology. So, that’s what happened.

DIXON: Uh, long story short I ended up in the west here and, um, I initially worked in the Great Basin and in mining boom towns in the Great Basin. I worked on my Ph.D. at the University of Nevada-Reno and ended up conducting dissertation research on a rare African-American archaeological site from a mining boomtown. It was a saloon, became the source of a dissertation and a book, but it reminded me of, wherever you practice archaeology. It can be a way to democratize history especially if your subject in this case African-Americans in this mining boomtown. Um, It is a way to help tell their daily lives and stories especially if the other records that we have of them are not written by them. We don't have their perspectives. If anything in this case what was written was not only written by African-Americans but it was written in a racist fashion and so by conducting archaeology at a place that we knew African-Americans gathered and there was an African-American property owner that we actually had physical evidence of the day-to-day life of being African-American in a mining boom town in the West. So, I certainly came to not only appreciate all the stories that have yet to be told in this region, but I also came to appreciate the power of archaeology to help tell those stories. And I'm not discounting history. We can't do one without the other especially when you study the recent past. Historic newspapers and census records and photos and maps. Those help us out even more. But imagine multiple lines of evidence now coming together to help democratize history. So.

KINCH: I like that phrase democratize history because it captures that. So, there's two dimensions that one's chronological that you get back to a certain point and there is no historical written record.

DIXON: Right.

KINCH: And now archaeology is having to write that history before the documentary history and that kind of maybe is a good segue to the Maitland quote, the famous Maitland quote the kind of lies at the core of some of the current theoretical debates. You know, that I've flown out of it which is this idea that anthropology must become history or will become nothing.

DIXON: Not only do we have to become history or become nothing, but we also have to make sure that the anthropological and archaeological research that we carry out has relevance to people living today. I'd like to think that archaeology in the 21st century is not the archaeology of the late 19th century when people were travelling to ancient Egypt and coming back to their homelands with artifacts from someone else's homeland and stuffing them in museums. Today, we are not those pith helmet wearing colonial archaeologists. Instead, we are aware that not only do we have to conduct archaeology that's relevant to people living today but we work with descendant communities what do they think. Do they care. We might have a whole series of important research questions and hypotheses to be tested that are important to scholarly intellectual conversation. But, how often do we ask the people who have true familial connections with the sites or the artifacts what they think. Many of them aren't going to read the peer reviewed journals where a lot of our work is published. And, and so how to make that relevant to people living today is a question I pose to the students that I work with in undergraduate and graduate classes. You know, I'm sure many people have heard the question, “So what?” That's great. “So what?” Well yes, we're used to answering that question in terms of the intellectual impacts, but I think we are also beholden to asking that question and answering it well in terms of societal impacts.

KINCH:I do want to make sure we get a little segment in here on the current work on Chinese in the West.

DIXON:Sure, sure.

KINCH:That you’re also working on. What attracts me to your work is the ways in which you find these stories that integrate figures that have otherwise been marginalized.

DIXON: Right.

KINCH: And this is another one where you’re excavating a history that needs more attention.

DIXON:Totally. Before I started working on my Ph.D. in the Great Basin, I was so fortunate to have gotten a job on the Tahoe National Forest. Um, Eastern Sierra Nevada. Lake Tahoe, gorgeous area. We had a large project that came about as the result of devastating forest fires. What a shock. And forest fires ripped through a part of the Tahoe National Forest and as a result they had to hire teams of different “ologists”, because we all had to go in whether we were a hydrologist or a botanist or an archaeologist or a wildlife biologist all these environmental laws kicked in for all of us to go out and analyze the land and basically determine whether or not we could release an area that had been impacted by fire for logging so they could at least get some of the burned trees out of there before they started falling. And as part of that project, I was introduced to Chinese sites and they were everywhere. I was forced to crash course in them. I had to buy a book on the archaeology of the overseas Chinese published in 1993 and I carried that in my backpack and, um, eventually I learned how easy it can be to identify a Chinese work camp. And this part of the world includes the site where the ill-fated Donner Party had to spend the horrific winter of 1846-47. It includes the overland immigrant trail that later became a superhighway once gold was found in 1849. The California Gold Rush. And so you had these layers of people and activities on the landscape and it was my job to go out there through the clouds of ash in this landscape that looked like it had been hit by a bomb and identify everything. And as a result of that I not only had to become an expert in all the different cultures and people who passed through there, but the bulk of those sites were Chinese.

DIXON:And then I came here to Missoula, and heard, indeed, that there were many Chinese sites in the region and I was very lucky when I first got here I didn't have any trouble finding research sites. I had Forest Service and BLM and now lately Park Service colleagues in the region saying, “Oh you're here.” We'd like, we heard there was this Chinese site up near Plains, Montana. Nobody's ever checked it out. And so, I started working on things here and I had the honor to work with a Ph.D. student named Chris Merritt who now works for the Utah State Historic Preservation Office. He took on, for his doctoral dissertation, took on a project that tried to summarize everything he could find out about the Chinese in Montana. And take that past template of research here. We know that they were here, but nobody's ever done a systematic study on Montana. So, his dissertation is not only archeological it's historical. But, we also got a heritage stewardship enhancement grant from the Forest Service to go through and fact check and ground truth sites on Forest Service land that were allegedly Chinese, but maybe weren't. And so, he's at since turned his dissertation into a book, which is really cool. But, if you now consider this context, I'm finally going to get back to the point.

DIXON: Leland Stanford, who founded Stanford University, made the bulk of his fortune off railroads and the blood, sweat, and tears of thousands of Chinese railroad workers. 2019 will mark the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the 1869 connection of the central and Union Pacific railroads at Promontory Point, Utah. So, Stanford would like to do something to honor the Chinese railroad workers who, who, who helped make all of that happen. What Stanford is doing is they've created this project called the Chinese railroad workers in North America project and they wanted to see if they could find descendants of those tens of thousands, well thousands of Chinese railroad workers to see if there are oral histories, to see if there are journals diaries, something that could help relay what it was like to be a Chinese laborer in daily life.

DIXON:So again, not even trying I get a call. If you come to Stanford and be part of this group. We're trying to put together a story and that turned into a delegation that traveled to China that I was honored to be part of. And now, this work that we're conducting in our backyard here in Montana now has relevance not only to the scholars at Stanford, but broader relevance to people throughout the world.

KINCH: When, you know, when we open up those channels all of a sudden breakthroughs get made and then the other part of it is just the powerful international the global village thing that's happening in scholarship, but in culture as well, and.

DIXON:I'm glad you brought that up, because there is a publication coming out and it is an interdisciplinary fantasy that has become reality. And, the historians and the East Asian experts and the archaeologists have all gotten together and Stanford University Press, in 2019 to honor the anniversary of, is putting out this publication that includes a whole interdisciplinary take on the Chinese railroad workers history in North America. And, I have to say it was really nice at those gatherings of all the different scholars to have people appreciate archaeology. Whether they, I don't know if they felt forced into appreciating archaeology, but they had given it such a good try and all the other realms that they suddenly realized that the archaeology puts you in the closest possible tangible contact you can with the people from the past.

KINCH: Yeah.

DIXON: And so, I was quite honored to even be part of that and to have that level of appreciation for what we do. But then of course we turned around and had our appreciation right back. And there's a lot of people who talk the talk of interdisciplinary work and it is often really a challenge to carry out. But, oh my gosh, if you can make it all work then.

KINCH: It’s remarkable.

DIXON: It is remarkable. And how to have that now inserted into our graduate education here.

KINCH: Well so, let's do a pivot to graduate education, because I know I mean that's why you're here in fact, because I know you to be so passionate about graduate students you know your support and mentoring of them is so important too. I mean on a practical level just the work you do but it's more than that for you. It's an ethical drive. And so, tell me a little bit about I mean first you know how they fit into your research on a practical level, but then also you know what does this mean to you professionally and what's important about the work you do with graduate students.

DIXON: In the past few years as the cadre of graduate students that I've been working with has grown. I almost feel like I'm living a whole new form of research vicariously through them.

KINCH: Through them.

DIXON: Yes. And they are.

KINCH: You become like a project manager.

DIXON: I feel like I'm more of a facilitator.

KINCH: Yeah.

DIXON: And in many cases we, you know, I, we work so closely we start to finish each other's sentences. And you know have our own support networks you know support networks and therapeutic discussions and work through a research problem on multiple levels because every student is different. Everybody's coming here with different goals and objectives and different skill sets. And so, I feel like I can't just use one template to mentor with all of them. Everybody really has their own tailored plan.

KINCH: Yeah.

DIXON: And in some cases they overlap, but what that's done is if I, if I'm doing my job, I feel like my job is to help them find out what their skills and abilities are, and their contributions. And, I'm there to not only help facilitate and guide that, but they should be empowered to do it all on their own by the time they leave here. What's ended up happening in the recent past is a few people who've come here for their masters don't want to leave and they finish and now they're working on their Ph.D.’s.

KINCH: Yeah.

DIXON: And I'm advising a few people now who have done that, um, and we definitely get to know each other very well because we're working 7 years together. Yeah, yeah. And I will often try to encourage people to go elsewhere and work with different faculty get a different outlook you know where, that's always a good thing. But, a lot of people don't want to leave.

KINCH: Yeah.

DIXON: And our Ph.D. program in cultural heritage was created with the idea that we should be serving the people in Montana. Um, they may need to keep their fulltime jobs, but they want to get their Ph.D. and how can we allow that to happen in a convenient way, whether they’re a tribal historic preservation officer, whether they work for a state agency, or whether they work for the feds.

KINCH: Yeah. And there's a natural fit in the case of your program in the west. Obviously, in Montana with the Native American community. I know your department has a dedicated Native American TA. Talk to me a little bit about the Native American students that you have mentored through the years and you know what that experience has been for you professionally.

DIXON: It has. Inspired me to. Make sure that every one of their projects is going to in some way be able to help them help their tribe. And, in fact, it comes up in our seminars and in our discussions. That's all great, but what how does that help Native people today. We aren't just coming in and taking information and trying to get published on it and holding artifacts that maybe belong to another sovereign nation against their will. That is not what we're doing. Instead, we're trying to help students be able to go back with skills to work to protect cultural heritage. And in this day and age with the advanced level of extractive industries that we are witnessing impacting the landscape in this region alone. We need all the people we can with the knowledge and skills to explain why the laws are in place, why it just isn't that easy to put the pipeline right here and why the five alternate routes are very important. But, those might impact another descendant committee, community's ancient homeland. And you know there's a student in our program who's also working as a tribal historic preservation officer. There are other students in the program who are working for a tribal Historic Preservation Office and taking on students that may have to do with something that happened decades ago that, that was a cultural manager's decision from another agency and the project is over but the people who are descendants are still impacted by that and they're going through correspondence and looking at the history and how can we mend a relationship maybe that was broken between different agencies because of a late 20th century way of doing business.

KINCH: What do you think the biggest challenges and opportunities are for a graduate student in archaeology today?

DIXON: Without doubt, the biggest challenge at the moment, is the potential for policies and laws that were put in place to protect cultural resources and natural resources, if they get lessened…

KINCH: Mm. So, this is sort of where the demands of business regulation and development clash right up against the cultural heritage, preservation.

DIXON: Right, with laws. Laws. Um, and, I would like to believe an archaeologist or an anthropologist or a historian, anybody going into one of these stakeholder meetings to speak on behalf of, uh, a tribe, or an agency. “This is why you have to go around. This is a very important site. We can’t give you details. You’re just going to have to trust us. Don’t touch it.” Um, uh, if, if the people sitting at the head of that table are just there to listen and nod and say, “Thank you, we’ll take that into consideration.” They check the box that they had a stakeholder meeting, but then they go on with their original plan. I feel like the challenge today is to help equip people with the ability to diplomatically combat that awful situation, um, and do it in a way that they don’t upset the other party. You know, on the one hand I want to empower people to go out and fight for what they believe in.

KINCH: Yeah.

DIXON: But, they have to do that in a way that's diplomatic and that they're gonna come away with citizens who appreciate it and those citizens in turn will tell someone and tell someone and raise their children to be respectful. Well maybe we should, maybe we should make sure there wasn't a cemetery here before we break ground. We’ve heard stories in the past that there are human remains unearthed here. Wouldn't it be nice if that's how people thought, first.

KINCH: These are going to be quick hitters. Favorite winter activity?

DIXON: Snowboarding.

KINCH: What's on your iPod?

DIXON: I love Thievery Corporation. Um, I, I love Bob Marley.

KINCH: Morning or night person?

DIXON: I burn the candle at both ends.

KINCH: Bitterroots, Pintlers, or Missions?

DIXON: Missions.

KINCH: This has been awesome. Thank you so much for sharing your time.

DIXON: Yeah.

KINCH: Thank you.

DIXON: Thank you.

KINCH: We hope you enjoyed your time floating on the river of knowledge with us. If you enjoyed this episode, give us a like on SoundCloud and stop by the University of Montana Grad School website at [www.umt.edu/grad](http://www.umt.edu/grad) for more episodes and videos highlighting our amazing graduate students.