Archaeology as Necessarily Political

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Mucha gente pequeña, en lugares pequeños, haciendo cosas pequeñas, puede cambiar el mundo.

Eduardo Galeano

In October 2020, as part of a panel on Black History and Archaeology in British schools organised by the Department of Archaeology at Cambridge, a sixth-form student from Greater London, when asked about their perception of archaeology as a discipline, replied with the following: 'Posh, classy, not very diverse.'

Posh. Classy. Not *very* diverse.

Let that sink in.

Archaeology is indeed one of the whitest disciplines. In the report *American Archaeologist* carried out by the Society for American Archaeology (SAA), 89% of respondents identified themselves as having European ancestry, i.e. being white (Zeder 1997: 13). More recently, the 2020 *Profiling the Profession* report states that 97% of archaeologists in the UK are white (Aitchison et al. 2021). There are no official data for the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA), but I surmise a similar percentage of white people. There are only few initiatives whose work has been crucial to truly diversify ethnicity within the discipline, namely the Society of Black Archaeologists (SBA) and the Indigenous Archaeologist Collective (IAC) in the US and the European Society of Black and Allies Archaeologies (ESBAA).

Regarding socioeconomic background, the 2020 *Profiling the Profession* report calculates that 62% of UK archaeologists come from well-off families, with parents holding managerial and professional occupations. It is difficult to know whether this would apply to other European countries because educational systems differ between them, but the UK evidence is telling. Regarding gender, in the US the number of female students was slightly higher than male learners in archaeology, as in the SAA 1997 report. Yet, double as many men as women worked as archaeologists (in companies or in academia) (Zeder 1997: 9). In the UK, archaeology currently employs 47% women and 53% men, according to *Profiling the Profession*. This does not mean, however, that working conditions are equal: 88% of women experienced sexual harassment versus 12% men, according to the same report. In fact, as a recent survey confirms, "women encounter unfavourable wage gaps, more inequitable hiring practices, publishing and citation biases, discrimination due to pregnancy and childrearing, and are often constrained by gendered divisions of labour both inside and outside academia, as well as experience higher rates of bullying, harassment, and assault" (Brami et al. 2022: 13; see also Coto Sarmiento et al. 2020; Heath-Stout 2020; Voss 2021a, 2021b).

Archaeology, as Alex Fitzpatrick blatantly puts it, "is perhaps one of the more egregious examples of an academic discipline whose origins and foundations are almost entirely based on weaponising science for the purposes of

subjugation" (2021: 29). Indeed, archaeological (and anthropological) narratives and fieldwork practices have supported, legitimised, and sustained colonial, racist, classist, and misogynistic discourses, policies, and institutions since the 19th century. This had, and continues to have, very real consequences for Indigenous, non-white people, and non-hetero-white-cis males around the globe.

Now, do we need an activist archaeology?

In what follows, I gather and urge us to take a few actions that will help us move towards what I understand as an archaeology of social justice or an activist archaeology. At the heart of these suggestions lies willingness and commitment to build a more just, diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible archaeology with all and for all.

1. Positionality and acknowledging of our bio- and geo-political location. Concealing the standpoint of the author hides epistemic privilege and violence as well as power asymmetries. This is something that feminist, decolonial, post-structuralist, and Indigenous scholars have been advocating for a while (hooks 1984; Rivera Cusicanqui 1987, 2010; Haraway 1988; Smith 1999; Lander 2000; Mignolo 2002; Wylie 2003; Harding 2004; Grosfoguel 2006; Sundberg 2014; Fryer 2020), but there is still much work to do in archaeology in this regard.

2. Reckoning with whiteness and racism is urgent. It is not enough to tick the box of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) trainings. We need to confront the roots, historiography, mainstream and subjugated knowledges, and practices of our discipline (Mullings 2005; Hutchings and La Salle 2014; Blakey 2020; Franklin et al. 2020; Flewellen et al. 2021; Reilly 2022).

3. Decolonising the archaeology curriculum. This implies reflecting on the way we teach archaeology (periodisation, geographies covered, topics, themes, methods) and reformulating our syllabus and praxis. The websites of the Society of Black Archaeologists and Queer Archaeology, among many others, have very useful resources in that regard (see also Smith 1999; Watkins 2000; Silliman 2008; Hutchings and La Salle 2014; Cobb and Croucher 2020; Supernant et al. 2020). Specific examples include, but are not limited to, the following:

- *honestly* looking for non-white scholarship as part of our syllabi, i.e. not tokenising Black, Indigenous, and People Of Colour (BIPOC) scholars, but engaging seriously with their scholarship;
- actively avoiding a mostly white-male reference list in our syllabus;
- rethinking labels such as "prehistory" and "protohistory" that still assume writing as the precondition for "History"; perhaps even abandoning them altogether. The term "prehistory", in particular, is a clear reminiscence of colonialism that, in many places, erases all (Indigenous) history existing before the brutal invasion by Europeans. As Miguel Aguilar Díaz insists, "our history is not "pre" anything!" (2010: 21).

4. Diversifying staff members. This starts with arranging hiring panels that are deliberately diverse in terms of race, ethnic, and socioeconomic background, gender, sexuality, disability, and age, and actively avoiding almost exclusively white male panels. If our department/school/institute does not have such a diversity of scholars to set up a hiring panel, we can always invite (and compensate) scholars from other universities or institutions (either in person or online) to the panel to ensure heterogeneity.

5. Citational practices are important. Citations are a "reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies," and "*screening techniques*: how certain bodies take up spaces by screening out the existence of others" (Ahmed 2013). This is especially the case of Indigenous people, whose knowledge has been extracted, filtered, co-opted, and depoliticised by white bodies, who, in the process, have gained considerable symbolic capital (Smith 1999; Rivera Cusicanqui 2010, 2016; Simpson and Klein 2013; Ndlovu 2014; Todd 2016; Mendoza 2018). As Max Liboiron points out, "Citing the knowledges of Black, Indigenous, poc, women, lgbtqai+, two-spirit, and young thinkers is one small part of an anticolonial methodology that refuses to reproduce the myth that knowledge, and particularly science, is the domain of pale, male, and stale gatekeepers" (Liboiron 2021: viii). Undercitation goes against academic integrity and honesty, it consciously ignores, disregards, and screens out non-white male bodies, and has very real consequences in terms of hiring, promotion, success in funding and publishing for those uncited scholars (12 Women Scholars 2021; see also "Cite Black Women").

6. Fleshing out the material culture of subalterns and of marginal lives forgotten and/or ignored in written records, including disabled people, prostitutes, Indigenous communities, slaves, asylum seekers, immigrants, convicts, lgbtqai+, women, poor and homeless people, discriminated religious and ethnic communities, colonised people, and victims of fascism and dictatorships (Scott 1994; Casella 2001; Given 2004; Singleton 2009; Wilcox 2009; Funari et al. 2009; Delgado Hervás 2010; Dezhamkhooy and Papoli-Yazdi 2010, 2020; Spencer-Wood 2010; Myers and Moshenska 2011; Weismantel 2013; Marshall 2014; Funari and Orser, Jr. 2015; Ogundiran and Ige 2015; Pollock and Bernbeck 2016; Hamilakis 2016; Bates et al. 2016; Battle-Baptiste 2016; Kiddey 2017; Byrnes and Muller 2017; Tejerizo-García et al. 2017; Zuchtriegel 2018; Chalfin 2019; Hansson et al. 2019; Rosignoli et al. 2020; López Mazz et al. 2020; González-Ruibal 2021; Marín-Aguilera 2021). Intersectionality, as Latinx and Black Feminist thought have demonstrated, is key for mapping precarious lives (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Collins 1986; Anzaldúa 1987; Crenshaw 1989; Lorde 2007 [1984]; Collins 2009).

7. Critically examining the focus of traditionally androcentric research areas and shifting them towards other silenced topics, e.g., from the male-warrior Viking stereotype to personhood, sexuality, and the domestic among the Vikings (Eriksen 2019; Moen and Walsh 2021); from the androcentric military/defensive aspects of medieval castles to gendered narratives (Dempsey 2019); instead of focusing on change in the archaeological record, bringing to the forefront continuity and the importance of care and everyday maintenance activities (Montón Subías and Sánchez Romero 2008; Montón Subías and Hernando 2018: 461–464).

8. Working *with* and *for* local communities (Indigenous, descendants, and otherwise), not only collaborating with them (Swidler et al. 1997; Watkins 2000; Singleton and Orser, Jr. 2003; Smith and Wobst 2005; Ayala Rocabado 2008; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; Gnecco and Ayala 2011; Paillalef Carinao 2011; Atalay et al. 2016; Ayán Vila and Gago García-Brabo 2018; Cipolla et al. 2019; López Mazz et al. 2020; Supernant et al. 2020). It might be good to learn from other academe beyond the West. Since the 1970s, university extension programmes at the Universidad de La República in Uruguay, for instance, "aim at building a collaboration between academics and other agentive communities, *on an equal footing*, discussing and combining their respective knowledge to the service of socially valuable objectives, giving priority to the problems of the most oppressed groups" (Grabino and Santos 2017, emphasis added). These collaborative schemes follow a bottom-up approach – from the community to the university. They have an integrative approach – community knowledge(s), academic knowledge, interdisciplinarity – and, most importantly, they aim at enacting social change.

9. Challenging problematic practices and contents, and holding people in our communities and outside them accountable. This also includes allowing space for amending wrongdoings, learning, apologising, healing, and repairing. Confronting whiteness, racism, androcentrism, ableism, and socioeconomic, sexual and gender discrimination are processes of learning (and unlearning privileges), and we will all commit mistakes. Therefore, it is also important to recognise when someone is apologising and changing.

We could practice one or (hopefully) more of these suggested paths. There are many other actions that one can take to work towards social justice as an activist archaeologist. Reciprocity and cross-learning are crucial steps, as it is the decolonisation, as a process, of archaeology in particular and of Western knowledge in general. Greater diversity, equality, and inclusivity enriches perspectives, narratives, pedagogies, methodologies, experiences, and praxis. An activist archaeology thus does not have a political dimension, paraphrasing José Luis Rebellato (2009 [1988]: 64); it is necessarily political.

Acknowledgements

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