

In Defense of Incremental Change

Erhan Tamur

Zitiervorschlag

Erhan Tamur. 2023. In Defense of Incremental Change. Forum Kritische Archäologie 12, Theme Issue: Archaeology as Empowerment: For Whom and How? Comments on Scholarly Activism: 66–68.

URL <https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de>
DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-40268>
ISSN 2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des Autors, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

In Defense of Incremental Change

Erhan Tamur

erhan.tamur@metmuseum.org

We seem to live in an age of euphemism. A recent article in *The Guardian* titled “Iraqi discoveries help shed light on British Museum treasures” explains the lack of provenience of some antiquities as “owing to the *circumstances* of their discovery and retrieval during the *buccaneering* period of early archaeology.”¹ Neither the word “circumstances” nor “buccaneering” do justice to the colonial legacy of the discipline and the complex and asymmetrical power relationships that led to the exhibition of such “discoveries” in Britain. Even in the well-documented case of the Benin Bronzes, a journalist for the *New York Times* prefers to put the word “looting” in quotation marks in the article’s title and speaks of the “so-called looted works of art” in the text, despite the fact that the curator who is interviewed in the same article refers to the same sculptures as “indisputably looted.”²

One also finds parallels to this troubling rhetoric in academic works, such as when James Cuno asserts that antiquities have “no obvious relation” to source countries “other than the *accident of geography: they happen to have been found* within its modern borders” (Cuno 2008: 146; my emphasis). Or take Kwame Anthony Appiah’s idea of “cosmopolitanism” (Appiah 2006),³ according to which artworks *belong to us all* regardless of our cultural, social, and economic backgrounds and hence can remain exactly where they are. Critical historical processes are thereby reduced to “accidents of geography,” while deeply exclusionary politics are presented as “cosmopolitanism.” This is nothing but the “mental and moral offense of euphemism” (Hitchens 2002: 273).

I approach activist archaeology from the context of decolonization, and it is imperative that decolonization does not turn into another euphemism or into a metaphor for other forms of justice-seeking. Within the context of the United States, “decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (Tuck and Yang 2012: 31; cf. Garba and Sorentino 2020). Within the context of my recent work, which focuses on the particularities of European colonial archaeology in Ottoman and post-Ottoman Iraq, decolonization requires the restitution and repatriation of looted and illegally exported objects. As such, efforts towards decolonization should render the constitutive colonial structures and their legacies transparent and decentralize and diversify both those structures as well as the narratives that they continue to produce. Whether these objectives are meaningful at all in a discipline that is inherently a product of colonialism and racism is still under debate.⁴

My contention is that those objectives are indeed meaningful. In fact, I find them compatible with the individual and collective efforts that are currently taking place in the streets, on university campuses, and inside museums and research institutions. For instance, the pioneering 2015 protest movement leading to the removal of the statue of the British colonialist and diamond merchant Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town is important, even if another Rhodes statue at the University of Oxford remains on display, with the recent addition of an explanatory

1 “Iraqi discoveries help shed light on British Museum treasures,” *The Guardian*, 29 January 2020 (my emphasis). The use of the word “treasures” necessitates a separate discussion.

2 “A Long Way Home for ‘Looted’ Art is Getting Shorter,” *The New York Times*, 27 April 2022.

3 “There Is No National Home for Art,” *The New York Times*, 22 January 2015. See also Appiah’s lecture titled “Art and Identity” given at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on October 30, 2016, the recording of which is available online.

4 There have been two major questionnaires published in the last two years, asking the opinions of a diverse group of scholars, activists, and artists on what decolonization means. See Copeland et al. 2020; Grant and Price 2020. See also the related questionnaire, Baker and Joselit 2022.

plaque.⁵ The same goes for the persistent and eventually successful calls for the resignation of Warren B. Kandors, the vice chairman of the Whitney Museum of American Art, even if he is reported not to have divested from tear gas manufacturing.⁶ The recent appointment of Patricia Marroquin Norby as the first full-time Indigenous curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, or the ongoing calls for changing departmental names from “Near East” to “Western Asia” in various museums and universities,⁷ are extremely meaningful, even if ideas of institutional inclusivity and diversity are often utilized as an “easy way out.” I am therefore not in favor of underestimating or dismissing these moments as examples of “incremental” progress, even if the funding structures and the inextricable ties of our institutions to the national and global capitalism currently remain intact.

In other words, there is much that *can* be done in the here and now using the very positions of power that we occupy. The scholarly tendency to focus exclusively on the enormous difficulties facing a decolonial project, often combined with fatalistic despair about its impossibility, has increasingly downplayed the power a university professor, a museum curator, a field archaeologist, or a heritage specialist wields. There *are* things we can do, some of which go beyond epistemological musings and can have tremendous impact on peoples’ lives. To me, foregrounding underrepresented, neglected, or ignored sources, languages, population groups, and regions is essential. In tandem, we must question and dispense with disciplinary practices that have promoted themselves as natural and universal, and integrate into our work different temporalities, ontologies, and epistemologies. These objectives require us:

- To forgo beginning every single survey of Mesopotamian archaeology with the travels of Benjamin of Tudela but to make an effort to study millennia-long histories of local engagement with ancient sites and monuments.
- To start exploring the histories of Mesopotamian archaeology from the vantage points of Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, and Shatra.
- To learn the modern languages of the region and to push universities, research institutions, and museums to make modern language instruction an integral part of their professional training as well as an employment prerequisite.
- To study and actively cite the works of scholars and students writing in non-European languages.
- To study past and present *non-academic* forms of knowledge keeping, especially in non-European languages.
- To dispense with the notion of “discovery” as an explanatory model in academic writings and museum didactics, and to argue against anti-restitution pundits who continue to claim that local populations were entirely detached from the ancient pasts of their lands until the arrival of the European traveler, diplomat, or archaeologist.
- To stop referring to the members of local populations as “informants,” “natives,” or “escorts,” or taking them as interruptive nuisances to the “discovery” at hand, but to name them individually (if that is not jeopardizing their safety) and to acknowledge that if there is any “interruption,” it is the one that is caused by launching massive archaeological campaigns.
- To regard community outreach (both during fieldwork and “off-season”) not as an additive free-time activity but as a foundational research methodology, and to study examples such as Halet Çambel’s work at Karatepe which touched the lives of so many people that her name resonates in the region even today.
- To develop research objectives and create funding mechanisms that prioritize the safety and well-being of local scholars and students, the protection of sites, and the publication of excavation results over moving from one country to another to initiate new excavations.
- To include Arabic, Farsi, Turkish, and Kurdish names in both academic publications and public-facing museum didactics, with full use of diacritical marks.

5 “Cecil Rhodes statue will not be removed by Oxford College,” *BBC News*, 20 May 2021; “Cecil Rhodes statue: Explanatory plaque placed at Oxford college,” *BBC News*, 12 October 2021.

6 “Ousted Whitney Museum Board Member Still Selling Tear Gas Despite Divestment Claim,” *The Intercept*, 5 June 2022.

7 For example, see the recent change at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York (Tamur 2020).

- To create space to discuss the most “radical” opinions at the very center of colonial institutions, and to demonstrate in practice why museums cannot (and should not) be “neutral.”
- To use the platforms and resources of colonial institutions to shape public discourse and to change public opinions on both individual and mass scale.

Finally, to be cognizant that the past is always entangled with the present, and that a critical, multi-temporal investigation should not merely be a “celebration” of the lives of artworks but one that foregrounds questions of power, colonial violence, and dispossession.

References

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Baker, George and David Joselit. 2022. A Questionnaire on Global Methods. *October* 180: 3–80. DOI: 10.1162/octo_a_00453.
- Copeland, Huey, Hal Foster, David Joselit, and Pamela M. Lee. 2020. A Questionnaire on Decolonization. *October* 174: 3–125. DOI: 10.1162/octo_a_00410.
- Cuno, James. 2008. *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Garba, Tapji and Sara-Maria Sorentino. 2020. Slavery is a Metaphor. *Antipode* 52(3): 764–82.
- Grant, Catherine and Dorothy Price, eds. 2020. Decolonizing Art History. *Art History* 43: 8–66. DOI: 10.1111/1467-8365.12490.
- Hitchens, Christopher. 2002. *Unacknowledged Legislation*. London: Verso.
- Tamur, Erhan. 2020. From “Near East” to “Western Asia”: A Brief History of Archaeology and Colonialism. *The Morgan Library & Museum*. <https://www.themorgan.org/blog/near-east-western-asia-brief-history-archaeology-and-colonialism> (last viewed 2.3.2023).
- Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. Decolonization is not a Metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1(1): 1–40.