

## Purification in Practice & Dialogue

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## Purification in Practice & Dialogue

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YH: ...*Purification was sanitation exercise as well as an epistemic, aesthetic, and ideological exercise.*  
(Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 93)

### Archaeology & Purification

Across contexts as disparate as the United States, Australia, China, Japan, India, Russia, Spain and Europe more broadly, concepts of national identity are deeply intertwined with racial “purity” (Segal 1991; Weiner 1995; Dikötter 1997; Ang and Stratton 1998; Collins 1998; Tolz 2007; Goode 2009; Ghoshal 2021). Scientific rhetoric and technologies, from phrenology to genetics, have often been co-opted into shoring up myths about homogeneity and purity, and archaeology is no exception (Díaz-Andreu 1995; Epperson 1997; Arnold 2006; Challis 2013; Hakenbeck 2019; Pai 2020). What Rafi Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis add to this discussion with their book *Archaeology, Nation, and Race* (2022) is a deep consideration of the myriad ways in which the metaphor of purification shows up throughout archaeological practice. Their discussion invites a consideration of what it is about archaeology in particular that lends it to arguments about the salience of nationalist racial categories and homogeneity.

One of the clearest examples of how archaeological practice pursues purity is a temporal sort of purification – the division and classification of layers and structures according to their time period. In trying to tell a story of a site through time, archaeology necessitates determining what deposits and stones belong to *what* time, exactly. Layers are assigned to ages or phases, and as Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis point out, decisions around heritage management often pursue the presentation of a clean, uniform period of time. At the Athenian Acropolis, this has meant erasing traces of pre- or post-classical occupation (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 95). Between the 19<sup>th</sup> century demolition of the medieval Propylaea and the 2021 pouring of concrete over much of the surface, there has been a refusal of multitemporal mixture and instead, an embrace of an idealized “masterpiece representing one point in time” (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 97). Greenberg points to a related historical project in Israel, where “the very first archaeologists would have been saying that they’ve got to get beneath the layers of Ottoman filth,” and where the British mandate government determined that any artifacts or monuments dated later than AD 1700 would not be considered antiquities (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 79). This designation established a pure binary of before and after – worth researching and protecting versus easily discarded as refuse.

Archaeological methods more broadly carry through principles of purification. Stratigraphic excavation, identifying and removing “clean” layers, and avoiding “contamination” by later periods or animal burrows, are essential to the scientific process of excavation but are also means by which archaeologists confer purification – however imperfect – upon the archaeological record. Greenberg makes this point in *Archaeology, Nation, and Race*, adding that even the act of delineating the boundaries of a site and laying a Cartesian grid “is all about reducing the chaos of the archaeological site into an order that we can control” (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 77). Hamilakis furthermore discusses the photographic conventions of Félix Bonfils, who intentionally took photographs of

Classical Greek monuments during times with minimal human presence (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 19), calling to mind the traditional archaeological practice of taking photographs of stratigraphic layers, features, and sites with all tools removed, footprints brushed, and even shadows of human bodies out of frame (Fotiadis 2013; McFadyen and Hicks 2020). Documentation and photography are additional archaeological methods that concretely impose ideals of purity.

In *Archaeology, Nation, and Race*, Greenberg appeals to Bruno Latour for a theoretical understanding of archaeology's relationship with purification. Archaeology has been entwined with the same project of modernity that Latour describes, looking for dichotomies – in particular of nature and culture – rather than acknowledging and interrogating the messy hybrids that actually shape the conditions of life, according to Latour (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 76). By this explanation, the material ways that archaeological methods tie into the pursuit of purification are no accident. Instead, this linkage is a reflection of the underlying logic underpinning archaeological knowledge production.

Archaeology is additionally bound to principles of purity in its relationship with hygiene and “sanitation discourse.” From the earliest days of archaeology in Greece, the presence of animals, and more to the point – animal waste – was framed as a toxic intrusion that needed to be cleared. This concern reached a practical expression in the Athenian Agora project of the 1930's, which was as much about aesthetics and epistemology as it was about sanitation, clearing the site of dirt, contamination and disease (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 93). In recent years, archaeologists and heritage practitioners have continued to express grievances with the presence of birds, dogs, insects and animal dung at monumental sites such as the Acropolis. In Israel, ancient water reservoirs function as a locus for anxieties about tainted water. Through these periods and contexts, archaeology has served as a reliable mode of the requisite clearing and cleaning.

With all of these attachments and affordances in mind, archaeology's connections to racial purification hardly seem random. Archaeology isn't just any science; it is a science dedicated to sorting, categorizing, and cleansing. Its theoretical underpinnings and its suite of methodologies lend themselves to this project, and the logic not only molds typologies and time periods but contemporary communities as well. If animal waste is polluting, it is a short leap to labelling people (and their waste) as polluting as well. If later periods are denoted as intrusive or contaminating, certainly the same can be said of people living on archaeological sites today, the latest period of all. Greenberg and Hamilakis (2022: 76) offer the specific example of Silwan, where city authorities justify the removal of makeshift houses in al-Bustan neighborhood on the premise that they are built upon the biblical Kings' Gardens. I am reminded too of Petra, Jordan, where in 1985, Bedouin communities were removed from living in the caves and tombs and relocated to a village outside of the park. The rhetoric for doing so was the same principle of archaeological purity – that having these contemporary residents inhabiting the stones would be anachronistic to visitors and would defile the stones (Bille 2012). The pursuit of purity and sanitation that suffuses archaeological theory and methods thus carries through to the decision-making around management of archaeological sites and the spaces around them.

### **Why Is This, When Archaeology Is So Messy?**

As much as archaeology is bound to concerns about hygiene and cleanliness, archaeology itself is anything but clean. Field archaeology, in particular, is dirt under our fingernails, the mix of sweat and dust caking our eyelids, the clothes that never quite return to their original color, no matter how many washes. Digging in the dirt means encountering insects and spiders, worms that wriggle and roots that ooze. Research team members numbering in the dozens or hundreds share toilets and showers where they wash unshaven faces and unpeel greasy hair from tangled ponytails or braids. Archaeological excavation entails intimacy with sand and soil, with stickiness and stink. Breathing, beading, bathing, bleeding bodies brushing up against each other necessarily means that these bodies break down, get sick. Contrary to “sanitation discourse,” viruses and bacteria invade our excavations. Indeed, illness and disease have directly shaped the development of the discipline for centuries. At Khorsabad, for instance, in 1843 Paul Émile Botta fell ill with malaria. Khorsabad at the time was also called “Khastabad” – translatable as “a place where illness dwells.” As a result, he decided to build a dig house and plan the excavation

schedule around the weather and mosquito cycles in the area (Genç 2019). The house, however, aroused tensions with village residents, causing many stoppages and changes to the excavation plan.

Bruce Kuklick's (1996) *Puritans of Babylon*, which tells the story of American expeditions to Nippur at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is as much a medical history as it is a history of archaeology. At the time of these expeditions, cholera, typhus, malaria, and ague were sweeping the region. The American researchers documented their bouts with these illnesses, as well as with locusts and cutaneous leishmaniasis, a scarring dermatological lesion caused by sandfly bites (Kuklick 1996: 47). Team member after team member needed to return home because they became ill (Kuklick 1996: 50). In 1894, Joseph Meyer – who had been responsible for overseeing and documenting the excavations – became so sick he could no longer fulfill those duties (and later died). Kuklick links this explicitly to the archaeological record produced by this excavation, discussing the poor quality of the reports and the photographs produced by Meyer's substitute (Kuklick 1996: 71).

Illness has been as constitutive of the nature and practice of archaeology as has hygiene and health. Sickness and disease have determined not only who participated in expeditions and who didn't, but furthermore the rate and pace of excavation, the seasonality of excavation, relations with local residents, and the content of the documentary record. All of this has fundamentally shaped what we have found, what we have written, and what we know about the past.

The professed alliance between archaeology and hygiene in examples like the Athenian Agora project is accordingly an uneasy one. Field archaeology necessitates compromises in cleanliness, confronting bodies with pathogens and pests. This is something I imagine most excavators would agree with – many even proudly! Still, many of the same people who cherish the memory of their dirtiest dig might also remain committed to principles of purification in archaeological methodology. Yes, we as excavators may still be shaking sand from our socks months after the field season has ended. But our stratigraphic control couldn't be faulted. We excavated pits and fills with precision. We photographed and recorded each layer removed, and drew nicely-labeled elevations. Certainly, people make occasional mistakes, but in general our methodology remains sound and *clean*.

Perhaps, though, there is something to be gained from continuing to pick apart the tight bind of archaeology with purification by challenging this inherent ideal. Does archaeological knowledge production always benefit from a commitment to purification? What about archaeological photography? Oftentimes, the most helpful photographs are the uncleaned, unplanned photographs, the candid photos of work in progress or even a funny moment. In the background of the photo, there is a particular artifact *in situ* or the last remnants of a particular soil deposit, verifying whether it was cut, or cut by, or abutting another. It is not simply that there are some aspects of archaeological practice that we must compromise and allow to be a little dirty, sometimes. Rather, I argue that there are many aspects of archaeological practice that are best served by embracing mess, chaos and impurity.

For one thing, a pursuit of purification is ultimately a pursuit of something that never existed in the first place. Archaeological sites have always been in flux – from construction and use to abandonment and decomposition. And, as Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2019) demonstrates in her book *Waste Siege*, trash and mess are especially good at evading control. Waste grows and seeps and besieges us in ungovernable ways. Landfills leak and contaminate and pollute, watersheds mix and systems of reuse and disposal are unpredictable. This unpredictability and leakage was true for the people we study through archaeology and for the places we delineate as archaeological sites in order to study them. And if all of the power and resources of the modern state are not enough to keep pathogens and garbage in line, surely even our most precise archaeological methods will fall short as well.

A methodological and interpretative commitment to purity is furthermore a denial of the power of the palimpsest. Archaeologists like Geoff Bailey (2007) and Gavin Lucas (2010) have used the metaphor of the palimpsest to talk about archaeological landscapes and to introduce nuanced approaches to thinking about temporality in archaeology. One exception to archaeology's methodological adherence to purity over palimpsest is the pedestrian survey. In pedestrian survey, the palimpsest becomes the mode of inquiry – thinking of all the people who have occupied a particular place over time and seeing evidence of them all at once. It is ironic, perhaps, that Greenberg and Hamilakis see the themes of purity so vividly in Greece and Israel – two areas where pedestrian survey has been so essential and so widely practiced. Something happens between pedestrian survey and excavation or

heritage development – an about-face, away from the palimpsest as a guiding metaphor and instead an objective to clinically sort and streamline the archaeological landscape.

While such temporal purification can be aesthetically pleasing and instructive in some ways, it can also represent an epistemic *loss*. For example, Eric Gable and Richard Handler (1996) have pointed out the ways that Colonial Williamsburg is not a fully accurate portrayal of what life in 18<sup>th</sup> century Chesapeake would have been like, but is rather a reflection of 1930s ideas about what life in 18<sup>th</sup> century Chesapeake would have been like. The paint colors would not have existed in the 1770s and the gardens are not quite right. Many of the furnishings are ahistorical. Gable and Handler discuss this, though, as a negotiation – that yes, there is overall a desire to correct misrepresentations and to portray as accurate a picture of colonial America as possible. But at this point, Rockefeller’s image of Colonial Williamsburg is nearly 100 years old itself. Is there not some value, from a historiographic perspective, in preserving a 1930s idea of the 1770s? Ultimately, embracing this messy historiography was one way that Colonial Williamsburg responded to what Gable and Handler termed the “too-clean critique” (1996: 570) – the argument that the park was too clean to be an accurate representation of history. Viewed in this way, temporal purification represents a loss.

In reality, archaeology and purification are uncomfortable bedfellows. Archaeology itself is hardly hygienic, and neither its methods nor its analytical approaches are (always) best served through clean classification and separation. Loosening and teasing apart the supposed cohesion of archaeology and purification perhaps lays the groundwork for disconnecting archaeology from the rhetoric of racial and national purity, which archaeology is so often stolen to serve. Turning to public policy rather than archaeology for a moment, intentional integration remains one of the most effective strategies for actually dismantling the systems of stratification that protect and preserve myths of an eternal uniformity, myths about who belongs. When people of different racial and class backgrounds share the same local infrastructure (same trash pickups, same bus lines, same sewer and water systems), when their children attend school together, material inequality and xenophobia appear to decrease (Massey and Denton 1988; Orfield 2005; Vaughan 2007; Mishra and Mohanty 2017; Ayscue and Frankenberg 2022). Perhaps a parallel effort on the part of archaeology – to reject purification and instead seek out the entangled, the commingled, the mixed-up – would lead to a more complex and nuanced science. Perhaps an archaeology disentangled from principles of sorting, hygiene, and cleanliness would be an archaeology less useful to myths of national and racial supremacy. How can we build that kind of archaeology?

### Let’s Write More Impurely

In addition to writing *about* what archaeology stands to gain from embracing its messiness, the dialogic format of *Archaeology, Nation, and Race* illustrates the affordances of writing in ways that mimic the mess and nonlinear experience of archaeology. The book is written as a longform conversation between Greenberg and Hamilakis. Standard archaeological writing – particularly monographs – proceeds generally from literature review to conclusions, or, in the case of site reporting, from site overview to methods to results. Normally, headings and paragraph breaks help the reader to navigate the text. But *Archaeology, Nation, and Race* has little of this. There are chapters, but the authors speak at length about some topics and only briefly about others. They do not signal in advance where the discussion will wind up. They repeatedly open a topic, then state that they want to return to it later. And there is plenty of room for tangential asides, even minor ones, that might otherwise seem distracting (if there was an organization to distract *from*). Who would expect, for instance, a book about archaeology’s role in nationalism to reference the 1898 invention of cosmetic surgery (to correct the “Jewish nose”), as Greenberg mentions briefly on page 113? Such a digression, however, would seem entirely natural in a casual academic conversation. This is how we talk; this is how we think. But it is not, very often, how we write.

Greenberg and Hamilakis’s text is, of course, not the only example of this. Others have experimented with dialogue as a novel form of writing that would more accurately capture the ways that archaeologists form ideas and create new knowledge (e.g. Bapty 1990; Tringham 1991; Bender 1998; Praetzelis and Praetzelis 1998; Hodder 2006). Such experimentation, though, peaked in the 1990s and remains relatively uncommon. Part of the project of disentangling archaeology from principles of purification – from theory to practice – will necessitate more impure, disorderly, unpredictable forms of writing that more closely resemble what archaeology is and what it feels

like. What will it mean to write in unsanitized, untidy ways? How can we write in ways that disrupt the idea that archaeological work is solitary, pre-planned, and linear? How can we write to convey that archaeology does not actually allow an easy, clean recognition of discrete populations in the past – and therefore has nothing to do with arguments for displacement and segregation of communities in the present? I have argued in the past not only for dialogues, but furthermore for fictive writing on the basis of the freedom to “mess” with traditional structures and orders of archaeological writing (Mickel 2012). But if we are to extricate archaeology from purity politics, we will need to continue to seek out more ways of writing that represent the ruptures of our work, the unanswered questions, the creeping and seeping and leakage, the fact that even when we close out a project, our ideas about the past are anything but neat and compl

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