

## Activating Archaeology: Commentary on the Theme Issue “Archaeology as Empowerment: For Whom and How?”

**Sven Ouzman**

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## Activating Archaeology: Commentary on the Theme Issue “Archaeology as Empowerment: For Whom and How?”

**Sven Ouzman**

Archaeology, and the Centre for Rock Art Research + Management, School of Social Sciences, University of Western Australia & Rock Art Research Institute, School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies, Origins Centre, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, sven.ouzman@uwa.edu.au, ORCID: 0000-0002-9379-2996

We live in a paradoxical world in which humanity has accumulated more wealth than ever before – but we have distributed it less equitably than ever before (e.g., Christiansen and Jensen 2019). This is not a new insight. Most archaeologists, at least since the Processual – Post-Processual debates, acknowledge that they work within inequality. As Gabriel Moshenska (p. 49),<sup>1</sup> quoting Collingwood puts it: “I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting against these things in the dark. Henceforth I shall fight in the daylight.” This quote nicely encapsulates the intent of this important *Archaeology as Empowerment* theme issue that marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Forum Kritische Archäologie*. Archaeology is well-positioned to recognise the materiality of inequality in the past – and also in the present and potentially the future through a lens of climate change, war, poverty, and by utilising broad-scale social and technological innovations from the past (e.g., Boivin and Crowther 2021). We are perhaps the only field of enquiry to study human history in all of its facets (because we ‘steal’ or creatively repurpose so many insights and technologies from others, which can have its issues). But, as Nicolas Zorzin (p. 74) points out, our intervention can range from being a ‘prefix archaeology’ add-on to a ‘scientific’ project to a whole-hearted reorienting of archaeological work to empower people other than ourselves. However, there is a paucity of guidance on the ‘middle range’ and day-to-day actions we can take – and this theme issue offers 19 authored pieces with diverse themes, case studies, actions, and geographies tied to ‘activist’ archaeologies, including:

Land ownership, murder, violence, dispossession, forcible removal (Acuto), personal and group safety, exiles (Dezhamkhooy), making unofficial histories known (Cruz), climate change and natural disasters, massacres, distinguishing ‘participatory’ from ‘activist’ work, fair wages, official and subaltern heritage (multiple contributors), bad teaching (Davidovic-Walter), state control, dam projects, being morally unqualified, saying ‘no’ to projects as protest, exporting pollution (Dezhamkhooy), museums as sites of protest, grief and healing (excluding acceptance) (Durgun), anarchism, teaching as reproducing hierarchies, feminism, precarity of employment (Hahn, Koch and R. Müller), revolution’s materiality, heritage, tourism and GDP (Mickel), redeploying existing archaeological techniques (Jungfleisch and Reali), whiteness, profiling, female participation, sexual harassment, positionality, citation as exclusionary/hegemonic practice, nine-point plan of action, (Marín-Aguilera), identity, tourism, crime, fieldwork decisions and monies (Mickel), countering populism, calling out falsehoods (Moshenska), normalising activism, research based on social rather than scientific need (U. Müller), Indigenous re-centring, ethics, law (Porr and Piezonka), healing, kindness, heart-centredness, radical care, (Rizvi), museums, 12 possible remedial actions (Tamura),

<sup>1</sup> All references in a name/page format refer to the set of comments in *Forum Kritische Archäologie*, “Archaeology as Empowerment”, 2023.



for human rights and cultural heritage protection should conflict break out. However, most of us lack training for such eventualities, and we need to build these competencies from an undergraduate level; also to deal with issues like climate change, harassment, political interference, and the like. Even in regions at peace, inequality exists, and from almost any moral or ethical stance, it is untenable for archaeologists and allied workers, who typically consume public money and resources, not to be ‘activists’. But before understanding ‘how’ to do this, we must consider what ‘activism’ is.

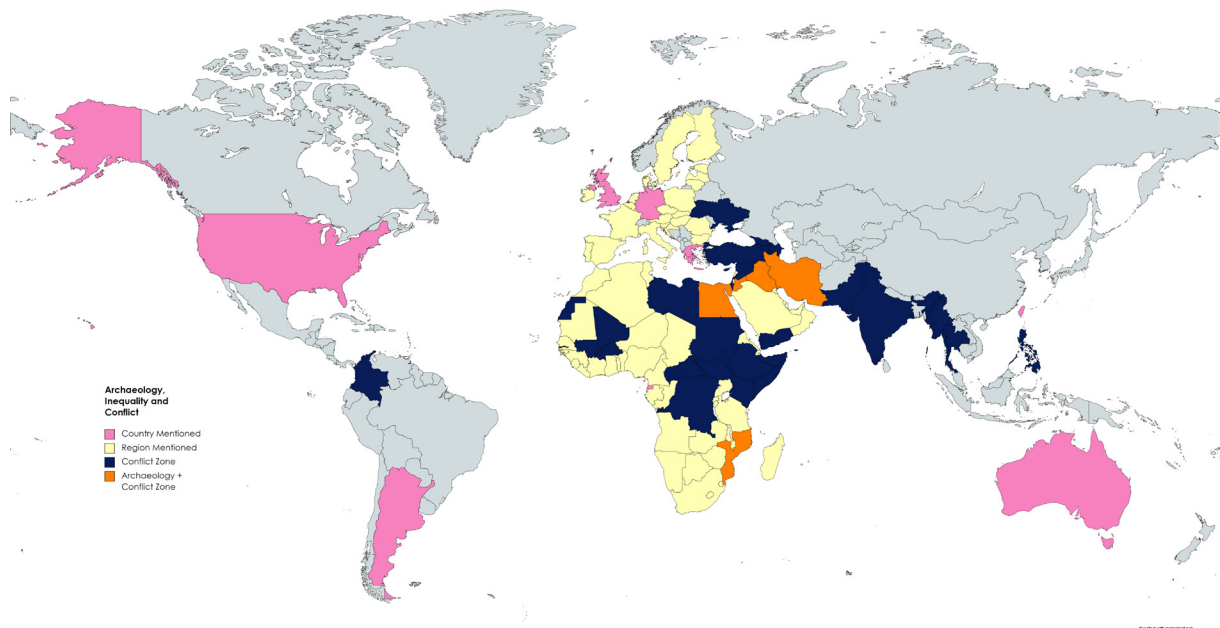


Fig. 2. Countries in which authors live and/or work and current conflict zones. Pink = specific country mentioned. Yellow = general region mentioned. Blue = conflict zones as determined by the Geneva Academy. Orange = overlap between archaeological work area and conflict zone.

### Activism and Activating Archaeology

This volume has many strengths but one gap is, in everyone’s eagerness to be ‘activists,’ we may not fully understand what ‘activism’<sup>3</sup> is, or how doing so can make us susceptible to manipulation and inadvertently cause harm, as Geesche Wilts articulates (pp. 69–73). The FKA Collective (pp. 81–85) provides an invaluable grounding that builds on earlier insights like those contained in Jay Stottman’s edited volume (2010) and Larry Zimmerman’s work (2014). These works have provided a sounder grounding for my practice (thank you), which was previously more or less made up as I went along. Now, I calibrate work against Bill Moyer’s (1987) formulation of four types of activists: citizen, rebel, change agent, and reformer. This theme issue aids self and disciplinary reflection both on why we want to ‘activate’ and from whence we are coming ideologically, geo-politically, and historically. Radically, we need to consider whether archaeology is, in fact, compatible with activism. As Tonia Davidovic-Walter observes: “Archäologie und Heritage scheint zwar eine Affinität zu konservativen Narrativen zu haben, etwa in ihrer Verwendbarkeit zur Behauptung einer historischen Kontinuität von nationalen Strukturen, Herkunft oder Abstammung oder in der Nutzung zur Verhinderung des Ausbaus erneuerbarer Energien”<sup>4</sup> (pp. 14–15); to which Erhan Tamur adds: “Efforts towards decolonization should render the constitutive colonial structures transparent

3 Similarly the word ‘empowerment’ can mask iniquitous power relations, create the impression that archaeologists have the power to empower, and assumes that those we seek to empower want us to do so.

4 “Archaeology and heritage seem to have an affinity for conservative narratives, for example in their use to assert a historical continuity of national structures, origins, or descent or in their use to prevent the expansion of renewable energies” (author’s translation).

and decentralize and diversify both those structures as well as the narratives that they produce. Whether these objectives are meaningful in a discipline that is inherently a product of colonialism and racism is still under debate” (p. 66). In parallel, several contributors draw from Anibal Quijano’s forward-looking understanding of ‘coloniality’ to demonstrate that issues with “a colonial origin and character can be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix they were established” (Quijano 2000: 533). This spotlights our default positionality as ‘outsiders’ especially in community and Indigenous work. Indeed, the word ‘Indigenous’ remains productively problematic as we seek to ally our ‘scientific’ expertise to service social and environmental needs (Supernant et al. 2020). I share an unease with the view that archaeology can be decolonised. However, if this is possible, do we not need to augment this deficit model of somehow removing something (coloniality) by replacing it with something (like cosmopolitanism)? ‘Activating’ our different archaeologies – always balancing the scientific with our social license to operate – seems unarguable – but how do we do this?

### Plans of (In)action

The stakes of activating<sup>5</sup> archaeology – and archaeologists – vary enormously. One litmus test is whether you or those you work with can suffer harm as a result of your work. We risk our physical, mental and cultural safety in the field – and can suffer reputational loss and diminution at our place of employment and surrounding society. For example, in 2009 the World Archaeological Congress held its Inter-Congress on “Structural Violence in Ramallah.” I spoke on comparing South Africa’s Apartheid state’s use and abuse of archaeology with that of the Israeli state. Both states were founded in 1948, and I found this a serendipitous convergence intellectually for two problematic and militarised regimes that both used extreme manipulations of archaeology and the past to legitimate their rule. Israel was also a leading sanctions-buster to Apartheid South Africa, especially with regard to exchanging military technology and armaments. I did also intend to provoke but was unprepared for the extraordinary difficulty both in attending this conference and the subsequent and enduring sanctions. The latter involved visa delays and misdirections, multiple failed attempts to enter Ramallah over two days, interference from the Israeli Antiquities Authority and their Head (who was also a general in the Israeli Defence Force) in the content of my paper (they declined to attend the conference to witness the content firsthand), complaints to my employer, and being declared *persona non grata* (Hole 2010). There is a very real risk to enthusiastic but inexperienced students and colleagues wanting to do good but, in doing so, suffering harm and disillusionment. Should we then consider establishing guidelines for what constitutes activist work and how it is best practised? Or is this, as anarchist-aligned Marieluise Hahn, Anna Koch and Raphaele Müller imply, subjugating ourselves to a controlling structure? The most radical action is to do away with archaeology altogether (cf. Hutchings and La Salle 2021). Or to keep it but not always activate it. As Maryam Dezhamkhooy points out, sometimes the best action is not to do any archaeology because it can endanger people’s lives and living, or because it is an unwanted distraction from more pressing issues: “As an independent group in Iranian archaeology, saying no has been sometimes our most effective resistance. It does not necessarily mean passivity and inactivity but rather responsibility about the outcomes of decisions” (p. 17). Doing ‘nothing’ or working slowly can also have the benefits of contributing to degrowth (e.g., Zorzini 2021) and of using the laborious and time-consuming techniques of archaeology as a form of therapy (e.g., Schaepe et al 2017). Inaction and action can thus exist in contrapuntal relation and there are actions worth exploring. Appetite for this approach is shown among three contributors – Beatriz Marín-Aguilera, Erhan Tamur, and the FKA Editorial Collective – who offer guidelines, which I summarise and supplement in Tab. 1.

5 I use ‘activating’ rather than ‘engaging’, which can imply an external action rather than something that springs from within archaeology and archaeologists.

Action	Resources
<b>General Principles</b>	
Be clear to ourselves and partners what ‘archaeology’ is and what it can and cannot do.	Zorzin, this volume
Acknowledge our bio-geographical and other positionalities.	FKA Editorial Collective, this volume
Acknowledge past wrongdoing, challenge problematic practices, and foster learning, apologising, care, healing, and repairing.	Marín-Aguilera & Rizvi, this volume
Diversify the archaeology workforce, especially allowing younger, diverse, and Indigenous participants, and let them shape 21 <sup>st</sup> century practice.	Zorzin, this volume
Co-design and deliver projects with clear roles, values, and outcomes, articulating broader project impacts on climate change, sustainability, identity, etc.	Acuto, this volume
Archaeology is primary evidence of past and present lives, so we can work in any temporality but should focus on the marginal and subaltern.	Acuto & FKA Editorial Collective, this volume
Use multiple voices/perspectives, including radical and non-academic forms of knowledge and knowledge-keeping.	Supernant et al. 2020
Ability to process contradictions from partners who are opposed to values such as democracy, BIPOC and LGBTQI+ identities, or concepts such as evolution.	Dezhamkhooy, this volume
Foster long-term engagements with project partners and socialise students and colleagues into a participatory mode of work.	Cruz, this volume
Understand the history and impacts of words, ideas, technologies (archaeology uses a lot of military-derived technologies such as mapping, GPS, dating, etc).	Jungfleisch and Reali, this volume
<b>Safety</b>	
Ensure the cultural, mental, physical, reputational safety of partners, employers, funders, and ourselves.	Dezhamkhooy, this volume
<b>Funding</b>	
Due diligence checks on employer and funder reputations, agendas, expectations and claims to our work, with equitable legal, ethical, and ICIP conditions.	Porr and Piezonka, Wilts, this volume
Encourage a minimum quantum of project funding/skills/in-kind to go to partners and local economies to prioritise the well-being of local scholars and students, the protection of sites, and the dissemination and application of results.	Tamur, this volume
Account for the carbon footprint of all of our work (fieldwork, lab analysis, conference travel). Build in budget offsets to at least attain carbon neutrality.	Throsby 2019
Create micro-funding of and teaching opportunities for students and early career colleagues.	Black Trowel Collective n.d.
<b>Fieldwork and Conferences</b>	
Cater for all physical and mental abilities, ensure adequate accommodation, sanitation, privacy, and meals.	Phillips et al. 2012
Hold conferences at/near fieldwork locations and/or in locations where our help/presence can be of benefit. Consider a local and distant fieldwork model.	Editorial 2022
Mandatory outreach during fieldwork and encourage local, paid participation in work. Train students and colleagues in science communication.	Tamur, this volume
<b>Teaching, Training and Engagement</b>	
Encourage and reward both <b>critical AND orthodox</b> thinking, foster two-way learning and the expression of multiple perspectives and alternative ontologies.	Durgun and Wilts, this volume
Learn project partner’s languages and encourage employers to make language instruction part of professional training and an employment prerequisite.	Tamur, this volume
Utilise immediate, tangible recognition of learning and prior learning through instruments like skills passports.	ANCATL et al. 2021
Let younger colleagues teach what they want, how they want, and ensure recognition of this work.	Davidovic-Walter, Hahn et al., this volume

<b>Research and Dissemination</b>	
Reconfigure ‘authorship’ not just to include junior and other colleagues, but also project partners, collectives, and more-than-human participants.	Ouzman 2023
Always ensure open access to at least a version of research, unless it is harmful to any participants.	Eve and Gray 2020
Use language carefully and avoid problematic words like ‘prehistory’ / ‘mankind’, and dispense with notions of ‘discovery’, ‘informants,’ and the like.	Tamur, this volume
Work against chronocentrism and promotion of ‘deep time/oldest’ narratives by also encouraging ‘shallow’ time narratives to communicate the full sweep of human history.	Bernbeck and Van Dyke 2015
Avoid citing cliques and seek out work of local scholars and scholars who publish in other languages.	Marín-Aguilera, Tamur, this volume
Acquire science communication skills to deal with diverse stakeholders, opponents, and pseudo-science mendacity.	Moshenska, this volume
Reconfigure ‘establishment’ authority spaces such as museums to present, for example, co-curated displays, which then have reception studies, and are integrated into school syllabi, government policy, tourism, and the like. Use these as truly public spaces for debate and action.	Durgun, this volume
Use media and social media in collaboration with partners (or not, if they so decide), and check that media platforms do not subsequently own your work.	U. Müller, this volume

Tab. 1. Provisional guidelines for activist archaeologies.

A concerted but not necessarily coordinated set of such actions challenges us to apply our core competencies in new ways, rejuvenating – even decolonising – the field. For example, Dong-Yo Shih’s practitioner-citizen work on materialising underground and socially invisible e-waste in Taiwan using archaeological and sociological methods helped galvanise larger societal and government action (Zorzin p. 75). We should also reflect on past practice and how we could have done better, as Johannes Jungfleisch and Chiara Reali did by positing an imagined set of actions during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution where “archaeologists could have helped with the systematic geo-referenced photogrammetric documentation of street art and its integration into a diachronic open map of protest” and “archaeological documentation of weapon fragments could have been the starting point for tracing the trajectories of weapon exports to Egypt” (p. 32). For myself I have found what I initially considered a project ‘by-product’ rather than core activity now exist in contrapuntal relation to each other. These activities include: two-way learning and accreditation with a ‘Skills Passport’ (ANCATL et al. 2021), getting Indigenous people and partners out on Country (which is regarded as a living and reciprocal partner in human life), thereby improving mental and physical health; using fire as a pro-active and collaborative tool to manage heritage in bushfire-prone areas;<sup>6</sup> and conducting local fieldwork to minimise carbon footprints and engage an urban populace. What becomes tricky, without falling victim to Strathernian ‘audit cultures’, is how to measure whether such actions have meaningful ‘impacts’ for us, the people we work with and for – and to convince employers that this is part of the ‘core business’ of an archaeologist.

### Home Truths

Returning to the introductory point of inequality existing everywhere, even in wealthy countries (indeed, especially in wealthy countries), I end this commentary from my location on unceded Noongar/Nyungar land in colonial Australia, where the recent referendum to recognise constitutionally Aboriginal Australians and their ‘voice’ was rejected by 60.1% of 15.68 million mostly non-Indigenous voters (AEC 2023). What frustrates many ‘yes’ voters were the ‘relative truths’ and outright falsehoods disseminated (Australia has no law requiring truth in electioneer-

6 For example, simply knowing where archaeological and heritage sites are – as identified by Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants – enables fire planning to avoid these areas or conduct on-ground hand burns by Rangers. The very activity of cultural burning maintains Country and people’s relationship with it and has done so for a long time (cf. Pascoe 2014 and commentaries to this productively provocative book) to the degree that there is no ‘wilderness’ separate from humans (cf. Fletcher et al. 2021).

ing). As June Oscar, proud Bunuba woman and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission, succinctly puts it:

“The referendum and the merciless politics around it have underscored a harsh reality: it is increasingly challenging, if not impossible, to engage in reasonable and safe public discussions in today’s political and media climate [especially with] ... those in the political sphere who wish to pathologize our cultures, to dismiss the harms that colonisation has wrought, and to deny us the realisation of our rights as Indigenous peoples.” (Oscar 2023)

This referendum comes on the back of the 2020 destruction of the Juukan Gorge cultural landscape by Rio Tinto aided by a complicit State government’s ‘*Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972*.’ This Act was replaced in 2023 by the ‘*Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2022*’ – which lasted for two months before it was repealed after pressure brought to bear by a concerted and partisan media scaremongering campaign, fuelled by sectional interests and a weak State government. This continues Quijano’s ‘durable colonialism’ by manipulating democratic processes that are underpinned by an extractive capitalist economy to perpetuate long-term silencing and refusal of recognition.

So, does it then matter if we tell our ‘truth’ or do activist work? Of course it does, but we should probably acquire better skills to tell it. It is more than useful to conduct this truth-telling after upskilling in what are often called ‘science communication’ programmes. Here, you typically first acknowledge your ‘opponent’; hear them out, posit your view, invite response, and then decide whether to continue the conversation or to stop because the conditions of possibility for accepting all or part of the others’ viewpoint do not exist and that to continue conversing would legitimise their position (e.g., Kappel and Holmen 2019). We can work both within and beyond ‘the system’. For the former, taking inspiration from W. E. B. Du Bois’ tactic of ‘using master’s tools to dismantle master’s house’ we can: “use the platforms and resources of colonial institutions to shape public discourse and to change public opinions on both individual and mass scale” (Tamura, p. 68). In this spirit, colleagues use the growing recognition that heritage is an inalienable human right (e.g. Donders 2020) and quantify in monetary terms what the impact of heritage destruction and denial through war and climate change is to human health, by using what the insurance industry calls ‘non-market values’ (e.g., Throsby 2019; see Manero et al. 2022 for specifically Indigenous values valuation).

But the urgent and existential threats that are climate change and war mean that we also have to work outside of even our own norms by, for example, being undemocratic in not engaging with obdurate opponents. Just as no-one over 40 should be in politics, as everyone should have to live with the consequences of their decisions, so we need to create secure positions of responsibility for young and diverse archaeologists to empower them to shape a 21<sup>st</sup> century archaeology that is scientifically excellent, socially responsive – and urgent. Here curator Maria Isabel Garcia’s formulation of ‘ragency’ as “the anger and agency we carry within ourselves and bring with us to the museum. There are many issues to be angry about in our world and in museums” (cf. Durgun, pp. 22–23). Using rage as a means of dialogue adds passion and consequentiality to show the publics we serve that there are short and long-term consequences of our work. (but see Rizvi, this volume for another view). And, of course, while telling our truths we do need to call out falsehoods as a matter of principle. As Félix Acuto articulates: “A good science, one which produces strong theoretically and methodologically informed arguments and solid evidence, serves to categorically rebut the discourses of the powerful, driven by their political and economic interests.” (p. 5) while not hiding “under the cloak of conspicuously political, radical, and critical archaeology ... with limited pragmatic results” (Cruz, p. 6). Pseudoarchaeologies – often state-sponsored – are on the rise, and we need to counter their mendacities and their consequences (Moshenska, p. 50).

### Concluding Commentary

To conclude commentary on this timely theme issue – thematically summarised by Johannes Müller’s pithy advice to “think long term, act short term” (p. 80) – I offer some forward-facing thoughts that take seriously our understanding of temporality and change. Humanity is in the unique position of being both self-aware and heading toward extinction. If evolution is valid, we will either all die out completely or evolve into one or more other organisms. We are in a unique position both to negotiate our demise and to hand over to our biological successors, which should include more-than-human entities. This may sound odd, but when the ‘Anthropocene’ was mooted, it elicited a far left-wing suggestion for a coalition of humans and more-than-humans to save the planet



from ourselves – an approach that resonates with many youth (Spannring and Hawke 2022). It is noteworthy that Indigenous First Law, which was not extinguished by colonial invasion and subsequent European-derived legal systems, is typically not given parity to ‘western’ invader’s law, thereby gagging the more-than-human rather than letting it/them speak (but see Martuwarra River of Life et al. 2021). We already do some of this by acknowledging the agency if not the sentience of artefacts and landscapes. Likewise, classic anthropological host-guest obligations can be extended to all the actors in the world around and within us. Finally, and responding to this issue’s sub-title *for whom and how?* – this issue provides multiple ‘how’ case studies – but each practitioner will have to craft their own bespoke set of ‘how-to’ deal with their specific circumstances. More broadly, activating our diverse archaeologies will both give names and dimensions to inequality, which can then inform and focus what equalising actions we can take.

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