

You Will Never Be Indiana Jones: How Toxic Masculinity Spurs Sexism and Ableism in Archaeology

Ask any Euro-American archaeologist why they entered the profession and many of them will cite Indiana Jones, the whip-wielding protagonist of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and the resulting film franchise starring Harrison Ford. These films represent a very romanticised view of archaeology – one in which artefacts are in constant need of rescue by Western adventurer/academics for display in *their* museums and institutions. “It belongs in a museum!” was less of a rallying cry for the protection of heritage, and more of an excuse that allowed colonialist forces to claim cultural objects as their own.

There’s much to unpack regarding the legacy of Indiana Jones and others within the archaeological adventure genre, and how they perpetuate colonialist and Orientalist thought (Hall, 2004; Blouin, 2017; Gross, 2018). But one aspect that is often given less attention to is the impact that pop culture has had on the toxic masculinisation of archaeology, and how it connects to sexism and ableism within the discipline.

Indiana Jones is an abled man, a literal white saviour who charges into tombs with guns blazing. No boulders, poison darts, Nazis, or the enticements of women can stop Dr. Jones from retrieving whatever the archaeological MacGuffin of the film is – and this is something that many archaeologists seem to have internalised and applied to their attitude towards excavation and fieldwork.

Fieldwork is often seen as the “heart” of archaeology – and understandably so, as much of our data collection is done amidst the ruins and remains of excavation sites. The significance of fieldwork has arguably increased with the influence of depictions of archaeology (regardless of realism) in popular culture. Unfortunately, this has led to an increase in both sexism and ableism within the field. Fieldwork is often seen as the more “masculine” aspect of archaeology, the epitome of a “science of doing”, with other forms of archaeological analysis seen as more passive and “feminine”.

As such, archaeologists – particularly male archaeologists early in their careers – arrive at the field with something to prove. With excavation sometimes demanding feats of strength and endurance, it is very easy to see how fieldwork becomes a test of one’s supposed masculinity, regardless of any health and safety risks. Those who cannot perform the desired amount of masculinity *and* ability are often looked down upon as being obstacles in the way of archaeological progress. Thus, fieldwork becomes a form of gatekeeping – if you cannot do X, Y, and Z, then you are *not* an archaeologist.

The toxic masculinisation of the discipline is something I’ve witnessed myself, particularly the effects it has on someone who struggles with mental illness such as myself (Fitzpatrick, 2018, 2019). As a Chinese-American woman working in British archaeology, I already felt as though I had something to prove, even more so as

excavation season began in 2018. Unfortunately, this determination was cut short after injuring myself on-site. Although it was not a life-threatening injury, I was adamantly against returning to site under the circumstances. With the support and encouragement of my supervisors, I spent the remaining three weeks doing analysis work from our accommodations. But it was hard to shake thoughts of Imposter Syndrome, and soon I felt depressed and ashamed of my inability to be a “real” archaeologist, that I did not have the strength and temperament to remain in the discipline that I’ve given years of my life to. At my lowest point, I started using the Twitter hashtag *#DiggingWhileDepressed* to vent about my frustrations and anxieties, hoping that my struggles would resonate with others online.

The response to the hashtag was surprising – many archaeologists came forward with stories of dealing with mental illness and the ways in which our own discipline was failing us. But more voluminous were the private messages I received, not just of support but also of people quietly revealing their own fears and struggles within archaeology. The sizable response felt disproportionate to what I had understood previously about disabled archaeologists; in fact, a survey undertaken in 2013 had found less than 2% of professional archaeologists in the UK are disabled (Rocks-Macqueen, 2014a). But many disabled people do not disclose their disabilities to employers, in fear of losing work (Rocks-Macqueen, 2014b) – this is understandable in a discipline like archaeology, which puts so much emphasis on “doing”.

Fortunately, there is hope for a more inclusive future. Projects such as the Inclusive, Accessible, Archaeology (IAA) Project have developed toolkits towards cultivating a better practice of accommodating and incorporating disabled archaeologists (Phillips and Gilchrist, 2012). In the last decade, disabled archaeologists in the UK such as the late Theresa O’Mahoney have made great strides in providing support and resources for others with the Enabled Archaeology Foundation (O’Mahoney, 2015).

But we must *remain* hypervigilant of persistent strains of toxic masculinity that still permeate archaeological fieldwork culture. The romantic conceptualisation of the lone adventurer archaeologist must be left in the past and replaced with a more inclusive future that *enables* everyone to be an archaeologist. We will never be Indiana Jones, and we shouldn’t *want* to be.

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