

To Be the Curator, and Not the Curated

Even as a child, I loved museums. Science museums, history museums – I could spend hours losing myself in intricately designed and curated exhibits that would transport me to another place or another time. One of my favourite parts of the common museum in the United States were the “World History” or “World Cultures” section, the area in which all of the non-Western, non-European artefacts were kept. Here, sometimes tucked away in a corner, I would find the Chinese Cultural displays, places in which I could actually see items that resonated with my familial culture that often felt so different from my white friends and *their* families.

In high school, my biology class went on a field trip to the recently opened *Bodies Exhibit* in New York City. At the time, I was incredibly drawn to biological sciences, although I still had a soft spot for history as well (little did I know that bioarchaeological studies were a thing!). I was proud of how little revulsion I had over the idea of seeing real bodies on display, that I was so scientific in my curiosity. That was, until I finally saw the bodies...and that they looked like *me*. Eventually, our class would learn that the human remains were all Chinese, which unfortunately made *me* the butt of many racist jokes for the rest of the day. But more importantly, that specific experience – of seeing myself in the dissected, preserved bodies in a way that my (white) classmates could not – has always stuck with me.

Today, I’m an archaeologist and PhD candidate in the United Kingdom. I wish I could say that things have gotten better, that I feel more comfortable in my own discipline and have a cohort of diverse peers surrounding me...but that’s not true. The field of British archaeology is predominately white, perhaps most obviously whenever I attend a conference and struggle to find another archaeologist of colour. Whether intentionally or not, I am always “Othered” – it’s easy to feel as though there’s an asterisk next to my name, that I’m not just an archaeologist but a *Asian American* archaeologist. Sometimes people will bring up my background and ask, in what they think is a “complimentary” way, “How does *someone like you* end up in British archaeology?” As though I somehow stumbled my way into this space, this *white* space, by accident!

During these past few years living and working as an academic and archaeologist here in the UK, I’ve reflected a lot on these tough experiences. I’ve written about them, I’ve vented about my frustrations on Twitter, and, luckily, this has led to making connections with other BIPOC scientists with similar struggles. Eventually, through Black and Indigenous colleagues that I’ve connected with online, I learned about the decolonisation movement within academia and have become committed to approaching archaeology with this in mind.

The roots of archaeology as a scientific discipline are colonial ones. Regardless of how much I love being an archaeologist and doing my research, I cannot obscure my discipline’s violent past (and, in some cases, violent present as well). Across the

world, Western/European museums hoard artefacts and ancestors from colonised regions, and although repatriation of these stolen objects and remains have become slightly more commonplace today, there are still many cases in which museums refuse to comply.

To decolonise archaeology is to centre the voices of the Indigenous peoples, the colonised peoples in our research. When we decolonise archaeology, we uproot it from the grasp of colonialism and replant it in fertile grounds that are *not* tainted by a Western/European bias. And it has to be more than just empty words too – Frantz Fanon (1963), Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), all of their work emphasised the fact that decolonisation *must* be a transformative, even destructive act. One of the most freeing things I've realised as I've grown as an academic is that archaeology, as a discipline, *can* be radically changed into something so much better. And that, ultimately, I can't wait for someone else to make change...along with like-minded peers, we can take an active role in starting this change.

As of the writing of this article, I'm just about to start my final year of my PhD. My thesis is partially written, and I'm starting to think about my future. Not necessarily just about my academic future...to be honest, sometimes I find it hard to even concentrate on my PhD research these days, when the world is in an upheaval. At my most pessimistic, I often wonder...what good is my PhD if it can't feed the hungry, or house the homeless, or stop climate change? But, I think that by committing to a decolonised archaeological practice, I am part of a larger movement that is working to end the marginalisation and dehumanisation of others. We are creating change in the archaeological world...for too long we have been curated by others, objectified in studies and not given the chance to be the expert. Now, we get an active hand in interpreting our collective past, and becoming our own curator.

References

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