

## Accountability in Action: How Can Archaeology Make Amends?

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Archaeology has roots in racism and colonial violence, both of which, regardless of intent, are inherent in the methods and theories used in archaeological research today. As such, many—particularly archaeologists of colour and archaeologists from marginalised backgrounds—have spent their careers thinking about ways in which we can divest from harmful practice and ultimately ‘decolonise’ the discipline itself (e.g. Odewale *et al.* 2018). This scrutiny and critical re-evaluation appear to have increased in 2020, notably in the wake of the current global pandemic and the spread of the Black Lives Matter movement (Franklin *et al.* 2020). But what is the next step forward? How do we move beyond recognition of harm and towards meaningful repair? It is time for archaeology to become actively accountable.

The concept of accountability in archaeology is not new and has previously been used as a means of interrogating the role of whiteness and colonialism in interpretation of the past (Gorsline 2015). There has also been movement towards ensuring accountability within archaeological practice, including increased engagement and closer collaboration with colonised communities (Acabado and Martin 2020; Schmidt 2016), as well as the instalment of (arguably imperfect) legislation such as 1990’s NAGPRA: the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (Nash and Colwell-Chanthapohn 2010). To echo, however, what many have said more recently (e.g. Schneider and Hayes 2020), archaeologists have a moral imperative to take further steps to change our discipline’s practices.

Taking inspiration from the transformative justice movement in the United States, I propose that establishing a more involved accountability process within archaeology is necessary for the discipline to ensure a more ethical practice. This work would focus on two specific iterations of accountability. The first would ensure ‘community accountability’ (The Audre Lorde Project 2010), which emphasises the need for archaeologists to do the work of strengthening relationships between themselves and historically colonised communities through addressing the specific conditions that allowed harm to occur. The second iteration would then promote ‘active accountability’ (Moore and Russell 2011: 31), in which archaeologists are challenged to become proactive in maintaining these community connections in order to avoid future harm.

This focus on *community* ultimately provides archaeologists with an integration point for accountability practices: community-based archaeology already promises alternative approaches to the research process and could readily adapt to concepts of accountability. For example, an approach such as community-based participatory research allows for the ‘braiding of knowledge’ (Atalay 2012: 27), which enables community knowledge to be just as valued as academic knowledge. Power is arguably much more balanced between the community and outside archaeologists in this situation.

This redistribution of power is already practised within many archaeological projects that occur on Indigenous land, often through increased legal sovereignty by settler governments. For example, the passage of the 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights Act in Australia gave Indigenous elders the ability to restrict certain places from settler researchers as necessitated by their cultural practices. In addition, access may often be granted only with the supervision of an Indigenous custodian (Smith *et al.* 2019). This redistribution of the power of access is a step in the right direction towards a more accountable relationship between Indigenous peoples and settler researchers, but I would argue that an accountable archaeology can move further. As archaeologists, we should concede our power *and* overall leadership to Indigenous and historically looted communities in a consistent manner throughout the archaeological process, providing these communities with major decision-making powers at all times.

To imagine what this process could look like, we can turn to the ways in which underlying power dynamics are engaged with within grassroots movements on occupied Indigenous territories in North America. One such example is the basic principle of ‘taking leadership’ (Walia 2012: 241), in which non-Indigenous allies defer to Indigenous leadership on the frontlines. As Walia warns, however, this deferral is not an excuse for non-action; instead, it is a call to remain responsive to the needs and experiences of Indigenous people. Following the example of taking leadership, archaeologists *must* decentre themselves and their work, and instead place community needs first and foremost. As Smith *et al.* (2019: 536) conclude, there must be a ‘shift from working *with* Indigenous peoples to working *for* Indigenous peoples’. Archaeologists can provide the practical tools necessary for communities to rediscover their histories, but on the communities’ own terms and in their own voice.

To reiterate, an accountable archaeology *must* be community-led, not just community-based. More specifically, it should be led by the impacted community (e.g., local, cultural, and familial communities associated with the focus of the research). To start, they must be given the initial power to grant access to their lands. The community then informs the archaeological process throughout: by modifying aspects of the excavation and post-excavation process, possessing editorial power over reports and publications, or enjoying the ability to request repatriation of artefacts and remains. By prioritising the needs of the community and giving them the agency to say ‘no’ at any time, archaeologists can redistribute control.

Accountability, both community-led and active, is not meant to erase harm, but instead support the process of healing (Bonsu 2018). Similarly, an accountable approach to archaeology will not undo the violence and marginalisation that the discipline has inflicted as a tool of colonial enterprise. But it will move archaeology from ‘feeling sorry’ to actually ‘doing sorry’ (Shara 2020: 227), enabling tangible action to be taken towards repair and a commitment to real change. Change should be spurred on by responsibility, rather than guilt (Walia 2012). Archaeology needs to move beyond surface-level acknowledgements of harm, and instead become actively accountable.

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## The Social Justice of Recognition: Confronting Histories of Injustice in Egyptian Archaeology through Egypt’s Dispersed Heritage

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### DISTRESSING THE ‘DECOLONIAL TURN’

The rhetoric of decolonisation has swept Western museums. While this moment is overdue but welcome, for Indigenous archaeologists it can be distressing. Not only can it be patronising to see colonial nations centring themselves in this work, it can also be distressing to see how issues of colonial violence and exploitation against people are diluted into debates over objects. Unless social justice for colonised peoples is at the core of decolonisation, the ‘decolonial turn’ risks becoming a conscience-clearing exercise for the benefit of Western museums and academic careers.

How ancient Egypt is presented and perceived in the West is a case in point. Despite the notion of ancient Egypt being a colonial product and construct, museum displays on the topic remain largely overlooked within decolonisation discourses (Abd el Gawad and Stevenson 2021), and views based on a disconnection between ancient and contemporary Egyptians remain prevalent. Such opinions are not passive legacies which can be undone by returning objects, making institutional statements, or constructing ‘post’-colonial theories. They have a direct impact on Egyptians today. Within Egypt, claims that ancient Egypt is an ‘orphaned culture’ (Swain 2007: 293) contribute to the ongoing destruction of non-pharaonic layers of Egypt’s history, disenfranchisement, and even displacement of Egyptians from their heritage and, sometimes, their homes. In a global context, erasure of Egyptians from fetishised displays of ancient Egypt reinforces stereotypes, social injustices, and discrimination against contemporary groups.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is clear in public online comments to Ahmed, S. 2019. The Lure of Ancient Egypt Is a Way To Revitalise Faded Industrial Towns. *The Guardian*. 21 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/21/lure-ancient-egypt-revitalise-industrial-towns-mummies#comments> [Last accessed 20 January 2021].