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By Alex Fitzpatrick

So... is Archaeology Decolonised Yet?

Decolonisation, like it or not, has become a bit of a buzzword. Perhaps that is a cynical reading of the rallying cry against entrenched colonialism and whiteness in academia, but I wonder: once British universities, such as the University of Leicester, begin using decolonisation as an excuse to make nearly 200 staff members redundant, did we lose the plot at some point? Of course, this is not to say that there is no need for the decolonisation movement. In fact, I would argue that truly decolonial approaches and transformations that do not legitimise the institution are needed particularly in this moment as shallow and performative gestures towards diversity and equity are being sold as “ground-breaking” and “decolonising actions” by the same institutions and organizations complicit in the continued oppression of the most marginalized, even if not so overtly.

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Alex Fitzpatrick is a completing PhD researcher at the University of Bradford. Although her current research is focused on Later Prehistoric zooarchaeology in Britain as part of the Covesea Caves Project, she is also interested in decolonial approaches to archaeology and has discussed the subject in various media outlets and conferences across the United Kingdom.

Archaeology is perhaps one of the more egregious examples of an academic discipline whose origins and foundations are almost entirely based on weaponizing science for the purposes of subjugation. The origins of archaeology as a discipline can be traced to colonial endeavours and the pursuit of instilling and maintaining racist hierarchies and colonialist attitudes have become entrenched in the very disciplinary foundations of archaeology. Fortunately, the past decades have seen a movement towards rectifying these past injustices to “decolonise” the discipline, with particular emphasis on increasing diversity and equity within the field. However, as archaeologists, are we doing enough? This article will critically analyse the current state of decolonisation in archaeology and offer readings of the interventions by Black and Indigenous archaeologists to more recent work spurred on by the Black Lives Matter uprisings and protests in the summer of

2020. Furthermore, discussing the use of personal experience, Leigh and Brown (2020: 165) write that “the emphasis on the self is not a narcissistic or self-indulgent fixation: it is a lens through which the social is explored in order to provide better understanding of cultural phenomena.” As someone who has been chasing after a decolonised archaeology since I was first introduced to Fanon, Césaire, and Said, I will be interspersing this discussion with my own self-reflections. I hope that this contextualizes the larger movements towards decolonisation from the perspective of the “new generation” of archaeologists and academics, and perhaps provides insight into the future of decolonisation within archaeology.

The Current State of a Decolonised Archaeology

It would be easy to assume that decolonisation, as it is understood in the public consciousness, is a relatively recent phenomenon; at some point during the late 2010’s, the term seems to have been conflated (and perhaps watered down) with neoliberal ideals of diversity and inclusivity, particularly among academics in higher education and social media influencers (Iyer 2020, Shringapure 2020). In fact, and as I demonstrate, the demand for a decolonised archaeology is as old as the discipline itself. Although it may not have been as formally articulated as such, it would be disrespectful to claim that historically looted communities have only just become aware of the harm that archaeologists have done for centuries. To riff off of Fanon’s (1963) definition of decolonisation as an inherently violent process, every moment that colonized peoples have fought back against colonists who were intent on looting and destroying their culture should be considered the forebearers of decolonial theory in academia. Further, even if we are to examine decolonisation as a formal set of demands for restitution

“The origins of archaeology as a discipline can be traced to colonial endeavours and the pursuit of instilling and maintaining racist hierarchies and colonialist attitudes.”

and justice, such calls to action have been occurring for nearly a century as well. To use a rather famous example of looted artifacts, the Benin Bronzes, originally looted in 1897 and still remain mostly displaced, were first claimed for restitution in 1936 (Hicks 2020, 196). The last few decades have also seen the instalment of legislation that supports Indigenous sovereignty over land, cultural artifacts, and ancestors in settler-occupied territories (Smith et al., 2019, Nash and Colwell 2020). In addition to the increased legislative support, communities that were colonized and/or looted have become active participants and collaborators through community approaches to archaeological research and excavation (e.g., Schmidt 2016, Creese and Walder 2018, Acabado and Martin 2020). Many of these collaborative ventures embrace the concept of “braiding knowledge” (Atalay 2012, 27), which gives community knowledge equal consideration in interpretation. Similarly, there has been a push towards approaching archaeology through other ways of knowing and doing, including Indigenizing practices (Watkins 2000) and using the lens of Black feminist theory (Battle-Baptise 2011).

Black and Indigenous archaeologists have always been and continue to be prominent voices among those leading the way towards decolonisation (e.g., Atalay 2006, Odewale et al. 2018, Carey 2019). Decolonial discourse has also intensified since 2020 in the wake of the global pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement (e.g., Franklin et al. 2020, Supernant et al. 2020, White and Draycott 2020). In addition, the formation of organizations such as the Society of Black Archaeologists, the European Society of Black and Allied Archaeologists, and the Indigenous Archaeology Collective are providing platforms for those who are doing radical and transformative work within

the discipline. These interventions that I have briefly summarised, among many others from the past 50 years, are paving the way forward towards a more decolonised practice of archaeology, providing future archaeologists with the tools necessary to further transform the discipline. Following this trajectory, it is likely that we will continue to see huge strides in decolonisation at exponential rates in the future, which I will discuss later in this article.

My Current State in a Decolonised Archaeology

So then, what great strides have I personally made toward a decolonised archaeology? Much less than I would have liked, to be honest. Although I was not formally introduced to decolonial literature until I was a graduate student, my lived experiences certainly echoed (however slightly) themes that I would later delve deeper into during my readings as an increasingly disillusioned PhD student. Generational memories of colonization run within my family, who immigrated from Hong Kong during the 1960’s to the United States. Growing up in a predominately white neighbourhood and pressured into assimilating into the American Empire, I had a very complicated relationship with my own identity, which would be compounded by my burgeoning interest in museum studies and archaeology (Fitzpatrick 2019). In retrospect, it makes sense that I was first introduced to the concept of decolonisation after I moved to the United Kingdom. In the country of my ancestors’ colonizers, it was impossible to avoid the remnants of colonialism, particularly within my own field of study. Whether it was being harassed online by strangers who were insulted by the idea of an Asian woman researching British prehistory or dealing with microaggressions among peers at conferences, I was constantly reminded that I was an intruder in what

was historically a white European man’s discipline.

These feelings spurred on a need to engage with decolonial theory as I continued to find my footing as a burgeoning academic. However, it is difficult to say that any of these interventions were successful: my first paper was roundly rejected for its “overtly angry tone” and for only engaging with decolonial literature on a surface level, which in retrospect was an accurate assessment of my work. My more recent attempts to decolonise were focused on my actual field of study, zooarchaeology, and were somewhat more fruitful, but this was mostly due to how little work has been done on decolonising the study of animal remains in the archaeological record. Both of these attempts demonstrated my eagerness for a decolonised discipline, but I felt that I lacked the necessary skills to add something substantial to the current conversation. My lived experiences have brought me to decolonisation as a necessary step for a better world, and as such I have attempted to “decolonise” archaeology in my own ways. These attempted interventions clearly failed to set off a revolution within the discipline, of course, and arguably much of this failure can be blamed on the naivety of a young PhD student who overestimates her pedagogical range. And although it would be ridiculous to map my own failures onto the discipline of archaeology as a whole, I could see how similar obstacles are faced by other archaeologists. So then, what do we need to do to continue our push for decolonised archaeologies?

The Future State of a Decolonised Archaeology

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the decolonial agenda within the academy is its appropriation and misuse as a “metaphor”, as Tuck and Yang (2012)

famously explain. For this reason, the term “decolonise” is quickly becoming a buzzword that is in danger of losing its true meaning. Fortunately, many academics are already pushing against this, demanding that we move beyond simply diversifying our reading lists and citations and consider the tangible actions necessary for radical change (Dar, Desai, and Nwonka 2020). Decolonial theory is about liberation, not only about representational or DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) politics (Kalinga 2021). As such, a decolonised archaeology requires much more drastic and transformative change to avoid becoming metaphorical in nature.

As for me? I am re-evaluating my pedagogical and practical range to engage with these conversations – not because I do not think I am intellectually unable to, but rather because I am unsure of what I can add, at least in my current state. As Chisomo Kalinga (2021) recently wrote in a Twitter thread, scholars from the Global North (like me) must strive to educate ourselves on centuries of decolonisation theory and praxis which have been embodied by people resisting colonizers all over the world, especially within the Global South. Before we can attempt to contribute to the conversation on decolonisation, we must work hard

“It may be that the limitations of white settler imagination are what truly stops archaeology from decolonising.”

to be students of decolonisation. This means relinquishing the proverbial platform to scholars from the Global South. Otherwise, we may find ourselves ultimately colonizing the conversation.

Despite the great strides that have been made, it must be stated that the movement towards decolonisation is not unimpeded: the repatriation of stolen objects remains a controversial topic of debate among museums (Kassim 2019), institutions in the United Kingdom have found themselves at odds with the government over depictions of colonialism (Syal 2021), and laws such as NAGPRA are once again targets of renewed attacks against Indigenous sovereignty over their own culture and ancestors (Killgrove 2020).

Can Archaeology Be Decolonised?

Ultimately, we are left with one final question: can archaeology, as a discipline historically designated as a weapon of colonialization, actually be decolonised? Schneider and Hayes (2020) have recently provided potential avenues for

exploring this: to decolonise archaeology, we must decenter archaeology. This involves critically engaging with the essentialist thinking that presumes Western epistemologies as the standard and ultimately is entrenched into every part of archaeology, from excavation to archives. Similarly, Smith et al. (2019: 536) have suggested that archaeologists decenter themselves in working with Indigenous communities, and instead shift to seeing themselves working for said communities. But is that even enough? Perhaps archaeologists must look towards our colleagues in museums who have recognised that their own institutions cannot be decolonised (Kassim 2017), but instead be transformed into something that is more representative of decolonisation as an ongoing process, rather than as a static endpoint in time (Hicks 2020, pp. 229, 236). It may be that the limitations of white settler imagination (Todd 2019) are what truly stops archaeology from decolonising, and that the next step from decentering archaeology is to divest from it entirely.

Regardless of what the future holds for decolonising archaeology, we must continue to re-evaluate and re-interrogate the way we practice and teach decolonisation without fetishizing it; as McDavid and McGhee (2010: 490) warn, it should not be about “doing good archaeology” or “being a good person in archaeology”, but rather changing and transforming our discipline because we must.

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#06

Introduction

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#10

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