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Debate Response

Historical leftovers, racialised Others and the coloniality of archaeology: a response to Frieman

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The interest that a ragpicker takes in rubbish and detritus, as described by Baudelaire and further developed by Benjamin (1999: 350), is not dissimilar to the archaeologist's concern with the remnants, the things left behind, abandoned. When filling the silences of the colonial archive, the archaeologist collects and catalogues everything that has been cast off, everything broken and discarded. Going through these jumbled leftovers, both archaeologists and ragpickers experience a deep intimacy with the objects they encounter: glass beads from a woven bracelet, a shell celt, textile remains of a hat, a ceramic cooking pot, a flint sceptre, an ivory brush handle, a wooden spoon, a bone needle, an iron sword, a rattle. In this way, archaeologists and ragpickers gather and collect other people's experience of textures, shapes, sounds, fear, traumas, joy, sadness and hopes.

Leftovers are always that—patchy debris, never complete, never completable, no matter how many scientific analyses we run, no matter the number of sites we survey and excavate. I therefore agree with the premise of Frieman's debate article (2024) that there will always be gaps in our data. Sometimes there is an ethical imperative to leave these gaps alone as the only way to avoid perpetrating further cruelty against the victims (Pollock 2016: 734). We therefore need to reflect carefully before we embrace these gaps as an archaeological resource.

Frieman contends that we should surrender to the unruliness of the archaeological evidence and embrace the power of the archaeological mess we have in front of us. It is the combination of the debris and the unknowns that opens a myriad of different past and present constellations. Because these historical leftovers belonged to people of various skin colour, gender, age, economic and social background, political capital and goals, cosmovisions and cultural understandings, their study, the analysis of abandoned objects—what archaeology does—has the potential to tell thousands of different and diverse stories. Bringing to the fore historically invisibilised agents—that is, people who did not write about themselves but who had material cultures—allows the mapping of power and inequalities and the charting of everyday resistance, creativity and survival. It is one of the most powerful agendas for a political archaeology.

I do not dispute any of this—I have made similar arguments myself (Marín-Aguilera 2021, 2023), as have many others (e.g. De León 2015; Franklin *et al.* 2020; Supernant *et al.* 2020; FKA-Herausgeber*innenkollektiv 2023)—what I find problematic is the fixation

with categorising other people, past and present, as ontologically different from us, as exotic Others. For example, "we are ontologically distant to the past people we study—our wildest imagining will not and cannot accurately reproduce their perceptions of reality" (Frieman 2024: 1685). People are and have always been different, but stressing radically different ontologies over common humanity is troubling.

Let me turn to Latin America, from where much of the ontological approach in archaeology takes inspiration (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2010), to explain how this idea of being ontologically distant has played into racialised epistemologies since 1492.

Even before the Spanish invasion of the Americas, discussions about freedom and humanity went hand in hand with the debate about, and practice of, slavery in Iberia—and the rest of Europe. Columbus defined the Kalinagos (then 'Caribs') from the Lesser Antilles as "cannibals" and in 1493 sent several of them to the Catholic monarchs so they could be sold as slaves and their "inhuman" voracious appetite for humans tamed (Sued Badillo 1983: 24–5). This was apparent when Columbus suggested to Queen Isabella I the enslavement of the 'Indians' (I use this term to refer to Indigenous peoples when referring to the literature in which they are identified as such). The Spanish queen consulted Castilian theologians and jurists, whose debates revolved around the humanity of the Indians and thus the possibility or impossibility of enslaving them. Such debate continued for years in Castile demonstrating two very different positions: the defenders of Indigenous peoples' humanity (e.g. Francisco de Vitoria, Bartolomé de las Casas) and those who considered them less-than-humans, and who were thus in favour of slavery (e.g. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda). Similar ontological discussions took place in Brazil in the nineteenth century, strongly connected to land dispossession (Weissheimer 2023).

Colonial structures survived colonialism—what Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano called 'coloniality' (2007). Deep-seated racism was at the heart of the white Creole republics newly founded in Latin America during the nineteenth century. Even when the Indigenous past was praised, contemporary Indigenous groups were excluded (e.g. in Mexico), massacred (e.g. the Putumayo genocide in the Amazon, the 'Conquest of the Desert' in Argentina) and their lands violently expropriated (e.g. the new Chilean State seized 94% of Mapuche land). Considered as lesser-beings, incarnating radical ontological difference, Black and Brown bodies were forced to live on the margins or were eradicated (e.g. 'La Matanza' in El Salvador in 1932 and the Guatemalan genocide 1960–1996).

In response to the rise of Indigenous activism across Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, governments across the region developed what the Bolivian feminist historian Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has referred to as the politics of the 'Indio permitido' (the permissible Indian) (2015). This mainstream political agenda limited, and continues to limit, Indigenous communities to cultural spaces while expropriating and/or exploiting their lands and denying them self-government. Black and Brown bodies were, and are, thus permitted as long as they do not challenge the neoliberal political and economic project.

The ontological turn in archaeology inherits the coloniality embedded in the neoliberal multicultural project (see Lazar 2022). In (over)focusing on culture, cosmovision and the different relationship with the environment that ontologically distant peoples have, archaeological ontologies obliterate racism, land dispossession, brutal extractivism, state violence and extreme inequalities. Subscribing to neoliberal multiculturalism, these archaeological

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ontologies restrict Indigenous peoples—past and present Others—to a theatrical and profitable form of their identities that turns them "into exotic objects of consumption" who live "in harmony with nature" (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015: 83–4).

In crafting a new archaeology out of this void—the many gaps and silences created through discrimination and oppression—we need indeed a radical reorientation. We need a transformation that relentlessly works for, and towards, the dismantling of coloniality in our discipline—and this endeavour requires more than a "slight shift in practice" (Frieman 2024: 1685). We must first unlearn our privileges to better question the status quo (our ethnicity, race, class, gender identity, ability level, religion and sexual orientation), and reckon with the crucial role that whiteness has played and continues to play in archaeological narratives and practice.

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