

Archaeology and social justice in island worlds

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ABSTRACT

Ongoing discussions about the problems of white supremacy and colonialism in archaeology are useful but have not, thus far, fully considered the exacerbated effects of these issues on small islands. In this opinion piece, we, two white women academics from the Global North with extensive experience working in the Dutch Caribbean and the Hawaiian Islands, observe these exacerbated effects in governance, academic hegemony, and community relations, and call for more consideration of the effects of our discipline in small island contexts. Ultimately, in line with the observations of local, descendant, and Indigenous scholars, we argue that archaeologists must invest in de-colonial, antiracist, and social justice efforts in heritage fields and industries by foregrounding the wishes and needs of island communities. This may involve modifying or altogether abandoning current motivations and practices to build a discipline that can be a positive rather than a negative in island worlds.

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Over the past few years, archaeology (and anthropology in a wider sense) has seen an intensification of the process of self-reflection that has included widespread acknowledgment of the discipline's colonial roots, environmental impact, and perpetuation of individual and structural racism and white supremacy (Mills and Kawelu 2013; Franklin et al. 2020; Jobson 2020; Flewelling et al. 2021; Reilly 2022). These issues have a particular tangibility in archaeology because we often destroy the resources that our discipline relies on, and because our data collection must often take place in the physical location where stakeholder communities reside. This entails a unique risk of damage to heritage; living cultures; the perpetuation of traditional and customary practices; and Indigenous, descendant, and local communities.

While the operational realities of these issues have been explored in various contexts, the peculiarities of their effects in island worlds have often been neglected in academic circles. One notable exception to this is the recent article by Mohammed et al. (2022) exploring the ongoing effects of colonialism on scientific research in the Caribbean, with a particular focus on biodiversity. These authors note the ways in which such research is prevented from fulfilling its positive potential (in both environmental and social terms) by the legacies of its colonial history. Although different in many ways, the insular Caribbean and Hawaiian Islands have a shared history of extractive capitalism and (neo)colonialism. In this opinion piece, we, two white women academics from the Global North, with extensive experience working in the Dutch Caribbean and Hawaiian Islands (see Fricke

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2020; Hoerman 2021), note striking similarities in the ways that archaeology operates in these locations, based on personal observations. The majority of stakeholders consulted in the development of this editorial agreed with the similarities and personal observations that we note, and in some cases also offered additional localised insights that we were unfortunately not always able to include in the scope of this opinion piece, although they would be extremely relevant for subsequent such work.

The current landscape of archaeology on small islands is one that still overwhelmingly resembles the white colonial beginnings of the discipline. The vast majority of archaeologists working in the insular Caribbean and Hawaiian Islands are white (often male and heteronormative) foreigners with no deep connection to Indigenous, descendant, and local cultures, communities, or places. Here we briefly discuss how the problems of white supremacy and neo-colonialism noted for the field as a whole by scholars such as White and Draycott (2020), Reilly (2022), and Flewellen et al. (2021) are exacerbated on small islands. Our aim is to call attention to the specific challenges faced by those who desire to advance social justice in the archaeology of small islands, and how existing guidelines for ethical archaeology must re-orient to prioritize Indigenous, descendant, and local agency and values.

Firstly, we observe that the present unimportance of small islands for the wheels of extractive capitalism (beyond their use as holiday destinations and military bases) means that these contexts are easily overlooked or deliberately ignored by colonial powers, who leave many island peoples lacking sovereignty and inhabiting a distinctly colonial present. Far from the colonial metropole, these places are often abandoned by well-established European and American systems of professional accountability, functioning as a kind of frontier space (see Tsing 2005) for heritage. Where these existing systems are applied (for example, in the case of cultural resources management in areas colonised by the United States), they are often woefully inadequate for the context, ignoring sociocultural differences between coloniser and colonised. In some areas, a lack of official heritage management structure or an inability/unwillingness by authorities to implement existing heritage regulations and plans (sometimes but not always due to shortages in funding and expertise) allows foreign researchers to operate almost completely unsupervised. Small islands' vulnerability to natural disasters and weather events, not to mention the economic pressures of the post-pandemic world (Douglass and Cooper 2020; Lustgarten 2022), may exacerbate these problems in the future as governmental resources are stretched thin.

Secondly, we observe that the small size of these islands; the displacement of Indigenous, descendant, and local knowledge systems; and their comparative neglect in the academic literature, allows scholars to easily dominate local heritage narratives, perhaps offering a niche for scholars who wish to become a big fish in a small pond. These islands therefore provide a way for foreign scholars to extract financial, professional, and social benefit from cultural intellectual property, biocultural landscapes, and heritage resources that do not belong to them. The lack of funding available for smaller knowledge institutions in the Global South and for young (particularly local, descendant, and Indigenous) scholars to carry out their own research leads to a hegemonic academic environment in which a few senior individuals are able to snowball funding and claim land as their own. This pushes out and diminishes the contributions of other researchers, and more importantly disregards and disenfranchises the Indigenous, descendant, and local knowledge systems that were already in place.

Thirdly, we observe that small islands often have shared heritage throughout an archipelago and have small, close-knit communities where news travels fast. In this context, it is neither possible nor desirable for archaeologists to remain secretive about their work. Anything less than total

transparency threatens the relationship between archaeologists and communities, but archaeologists may be resistant to this. Reasons for this resistance can include a fear that transparency opens up further possibility for criticism or decreases the impact of their publications, for example because they may lose the scoop or be perceived as activists. When such researchers are aware of the problems with their discipline, they may be inactive in trying to change the status quo either because they do not care, or because they are afraid to face the consequences of becoming an accomplice in de-colonial, antiracist, and social justice actions. Often, when professional archaeologists use the language of social justice in their project plans, funding applications, and for-profit work, they are leveraging this language to their own ends rather than authentically engaging with ethical practice and meaningfully upholding the desires and values expressed by Indigenous, descendant, and local communities. Good public archaeology is truly communities-based and supports local, Indigenous, and descendant communities' agency and authority over their heritage in meaningful ways; site tours and school group outreach are not enough.

What can be done about these problems of governance, academic hegemony, and community relations? Existing guidelines such as the Montpelier Rubric (2018) and advice in articles by Flewellen et al. (2021) and Douglass (2020) provide extremely good starting points but do not specifically address the problems encountered on small islands. Their core tenets remain highly relevant, such that archaeologists working in these regions must remember that the goals of their research are less important than those of descendant and Indigenous communities; that disciplinary boundaries are colonial artefacts, and must be deconstructed in order to produce the best science; and that archaeology is a toolkit that can be applied in a positive way, but must also be interrogated for (and stripped of) its white supremacy and (neo)coloniality. Flewellen *et al.* (2022) in particular have advocated for 'slow archaeology', shared Primary Investigator responsibilities between stakeholders and archaeologists, and a focus on capacity building, as ways that our discipline can improve, and small island scholars (both local and non-local) are providing context-specific guidelines. These include, for example, the St Eustatius Afrikan Burial Ground Alliance (see Kok 2022) and the Statia Heritage Research Commission (Haviser et al. 2022) in the Dutch Caribbean, and Kawelu (2015), Mills and Kawelu (2013), and the Kali'uokapa'akai Collective (2021) in the Hawaiian Islands. We strongly believe the onus is on archaeologists to promote social justice through deconstructing their power and privilege and making concerted efforts, alongside structural changes in cultural resources management and academia, to facilitate community agency and authority in heritage practices.

As scholars from the Global North working in small island communities, we must think about whether we are welcomed by Indigenous, descendant, and local communities, and how *our* practices specifically should change in order to align with de-colonial, antiracist, and social justice efforts, supporting Indigenous, descendant, and local agency in heritage management (see United Nations 2007). This entails, as an essential first step, listening to lineal and cultural descendants and local communities who are already making their wishes known. We must then learn to step back where we are not wanted, and reverse the established extractive practices of our discipline (Hamilakis 2007; Hutchings and La Salle 2015). Deep commitments to local communities are challenging to outside archaeologists for several reasons, primarily geographical distance and funding uncertainty. It can be hard for both parties to build relationships when no-one knows whether funding will continue into the future, and for this reason funding structures certainly do need to change. But in the meantime, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that meaningful relationships can be developed and maintained at a distance (see for example Flewellen *et al.*, 2022).

In order for this work, archaeologists must realise that what they do is more than a job; it is a wider responsibility, and in some cases, a lifelong commitment.

Current normative practices in small island archaeology in places like the insular Caribbean and Hawaiian Islands are not just bad for Indigenous and local cultures and communities; they are also bad for archaeologists and for science (Flewellen et al. 2022). The best research is produced in a collaborative framework, utilising different approaches and knowledge systems to answer research questions that are important to all stakeholders (Atalay 2020; Mohammed et al. 2022), with Indigenous and local values, perspectives, and authority prioritized. Archaeologists who elect to work in small island worlds have a moral and professional obligation to confront and dissect the privileges inherent in their legacies, frameworks and practices, and to actively engage in work and partnerships that shift archaeology from the negative it often is to the positive tool that it can be in small island worlds.

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