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Guest Editorial

How can archaeology help shape decolonial futures?

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Between 23 and 25 October 2024, about 80 scholars from five continents gathered at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at the University of Cambridge in the UK for the 'Envisioning Decolonial Futures Through Archaeology' conference (Figure 1). The conference facilitated interaction between a great variety of perspectives on what it means to decolonise archaeology and how our discipline can help shape decolonial futures. Based on our experience organising this conference, in this Guest Editorial we discuss what we think decolonising archaeology entails, some of its many challenges and the necessity to create spaces for interaction to take place so that guidance on 'decolonial thinking' can emerge. Here, we reflect on the critical themes of disambiguation, interaction, indigeneity, memory, practice and imagination for envisioning decolonial futures through archaeology.

Disambiguation

Archaeology and other academic disciplines are constituent parts of coloniality, understood as a structure of global inequalities that began to place certain parts of the world in a position of subalternity when Europeans first arrived in the Americas (Quijano 2000). Our field—as with anthropology or related fields that constitute what we understand today as 'area studies' (e.g. Egyptology)—is deeply entrenched in colonial practice. For instance, Mickel recently discussed how early archaeological practice in West Asia that had been deemed 'rigorous and scientific' actually worked as a platform to promote colonial discourses using ancient societies as a basis for modern European colonial perspectives on 'civilisation' (Mickel 2023). Likewise, Flinders Petrie, who is considered the father of scientific methods in Egyptian archaeology and beyond, used his work in Egypt to support eugenics, including providing osteological remains for experimentations in this field (Moro-Abadía 2006: 9; Sheppard 2010: 17–18).

Archaeology's history is one entangled with colonial discourses and practices aiming to reaffirm European superiority over colonised Indigenous communities around the world. The discipline's scientific stance has often created situations in which we face the rationality versus superstition dichotomy, both in theory and practice. For example, interpretations of prehistoric ritual are said to be essentially irrational, which disqualifies distinctive rationalities in the past (Brück 1999). Archaeology as science has also continuously undermined the

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Figure 1. Delegates of the 'Envisioning Decolonial Futures' conference 2024 in front of the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge (photograph by L. Clough).

traditional knowledge of Indigenous communities, often downplayed as simple, innocent and superstitious (Pyburn 1999).

Addressing the entrenched legacies of archaeology's disciplinary shaping and the inherent power imbalances that influence knowledge production remains a central challenge for a decolonial archaeological practice (Lydon & Rizvi 2010; Walsh 2014). More recently, some archaeologists working with Indigenous communities have adopted bold collaborative approaches that bring together academic and local forms of achieving knowledge to incorporate different ways of understanding the world inhabited by us all.

For instance, by considering archaeology as a form of engagement with the past, Cabral (2014, 2016, 2022) has established a symmetrical collaboration with the Wajãpi people of the Amazon, in the Brazilian state of Amapá. In this collaboration, the Wajãpi people are considered archaeologists and thus their way of making sense of the material traces of the past based on their knowledge system informed by cosmological narratives is a form of doing archaeology. Similarly, working on the Northwest Coast of North America, Gauvreau and McLaren (2016) sought to integrate Indigenous oral narratives with archaeological survey and dating techniques. Rather than using archaeology to contrast and contest local ways of making sense of history through material remains, their experience points to the fruitful outcomes of removing knowledge from colonial scales of importance towards achieving emancipation and social justice.

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The archaeologies described above allow us to envision decolonial futures for our discipline, even if today we can only catch glimpses of what decoloniality would look like in theory and practice. These archaeologies can be seen as the result of a process of un-disciplining archaeology, which implies de-linking our discipline from what we have become accustomed to think it needs to be, towards demolishing archaeology's hegemony as the only valid way of producing knowledge about the past through its material remains (Haber 2012). To achieve this, or a state of decoloniality within our discipline, we need to be ready to abandon any sense of superiority between the 'material' and the 'spiritual' or the 'scientific' and the 'irrational'—a process which is essentially disruptive and political (Hamilakis 2018). This process will result in a complete reconstitution of ourselves and will bring us to a state of decoloniality; it will allow us, paraphrasing Walsh (2014), to unlearn the rationality and modernity that (de)formed us all.

There is no single recipe to achieve a state of decoloniality in archaeology or in general. However, one factor is absolutely crucial to promote decolonisation: interaction. The examples outlined above show the great value of interacting on equal ground with Indigenous communities and their knowledge systems. These should be valued as equal to archaeology's scientific knowledge. Pursuing decolonisation through archaeology also presupposes facilitating interaction between different perspectives on what decolonisation is and what it should do for people. Various publications dedicated to discussing decolonisation in the social sciences have followed distinctive paths, from discussing resistance and reparation in a postcolonial context (e.g. Tuck & Yang 2012) to emphasising the need for delinking ourselves from modernity/coloniality (e.g. Haber 2016). To make interaction possible both between academic archaeologists and Indigenous and local communities who become archaeologists in the interacting process and between scholars working towards decolonisation in distinctive ways, we first need to explore the trajectory and strength of the concepts we deploy.

'Decolonising' efforts in archaeology have presupposed a critique of colonial ideologies and collaboration with Indigenous communities to increase representation (Bruchac 2014). 'Decolonising' usually implies 'decolonisation', which means to end colonialism towards independence. Both aspects of 'decolonisation' have traditionally been addressed in postcolonial studies, more than in decolonial discussions (e.g. Lane 2011). Blurred understandings of postcolonial and decolonial terminology can often prevent interaction, at a conceptual level, from producing effective results towards decoloniality (Lemos 2023).

Postcolonial archaeology seeks to revisit colonialism, from the standpoint of those who were colonised, through their material culture. It focuses on the voices of marginalised and silenced individuals who were either misrepresented or overlooked in colonial histories (Given 2004; van Dommelen 2011). This field also actively challenges the enduring legacies of colonialism, offering alternative narratives that prioritise the perspectives of those at the grassroots level, reshaping our understanding of past societies and political action today (e.g. Lydon & Rizvi 2010; Hamilakis 2025). By emphasising the enduring effects of past colonialism on people's lives today, materialised as various inequalities, necropolitics and wars around the world, widespread decolonising efforts today overlap to a great extent with postcolonial archaeologies. However, decolonising archaeology from a decolonial perspective entails more.

Decolonial theory—developed in South America from the writings of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano—addresses the lasting effects of colonialism from a different perspective. By

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recognising coloniality as an ongoing global structure of power, decolonial thinking also presupposes a disconnection from coloniality and its knowledge system (Mignolo 2017). Delinking ourselves from the colonial matrix of power is essential to establish interactions between different knowledge systems such as the ones mentioned above, promoted by archaeologists working on Indigenous lands in the American continent. Such interactions will gradually move us towards decoloniality.

Decoloniality differs fundamentally from decolonisation. While decolonisation describes the process through which former colonies achieved independence—often giving rise to nationalist movements that inadvertently perpetuate coloniality—it does not necessarily address the deeper liberation of the self from coloniality of power and knowledge.

Words matter. Understanding the trajectories of powerful concepts can foster meaningful interactions, from which change may arise. Envisioning decolonial futures presupposes theoretical clarity to guide a complete restructuration of ourselves. To achieve a state of decoloniality, we need to recognise more than the lasting impacts of colonialism. On the contrary, recognising coloniality as a multicentury global structure, which continuously operates in the same way and has produced the same global inequalities since Europeans first arrived in the Americas, will allow us to target coloniality's supporting pillars—including academic disciplines such as archaeology—in more effective ways. But it is equally important to recognise that there are many ways to achieve decoloniality. Every community should bring to the table its valuable experiences for us all to learn how to reinvent ourselves. We are all in the same boat. The key is to promote meaningful interactions so we can learn to unlearn together, to overcome power structures that aim to homogenise us, to allow diversity to bloom.

Reclaiming Indigenous space

Planning the 'Envisioning Decolonial Futures through Archaeology' conference demonstrated the need to accommodate one's many different positionalities, and the many positionalities within our archaeological community, allowing different perspectives to emerge and bridges to be built between them. But it was more important to highlight that Indigenous peoples have always been a part of Western knowledge systems, academia and history, despite colonial attempts to erase their presence (for discussion, see Graeber & Wengrow 2021; Steeves 2021). Also, we need to recognise that Indigenous approaches towards decoloniality are ways in which this stolen space is being reclaimed for *all* of us.

With that in mind, it is clear that discussions around decoloniality are inherently political and have wide-reaching social implications for Indigenous communities. This is even more impactful considering recent global events (González-Ruibal *et al.* 2018; Hamilakis 2018; 2025), including the intervention of Senator Lidia Thorpe, a First Nations Australian woman, in the Great Hall of Canberra's Parliament House. During King Charles and Queen Camilla's royal visit, Senator Thorpe shouted: "You committed genocide against our people. Give us our land back, give us what you stole from us, our bones, our skulls, our babies, our people, you destroyed our lives. Give us a treaty" (Butler 2024).

This speech really amplifies the anger, pain and the ongoing intergenerational trauma felt and experienced by Indigenous communities not only in Australia but around the world.

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For Indigenous communities, the post-colonial world does not exist, because settler-colonial realities persist to this day. It is essential to take into consideration the experiences of coloniality of Indigenous communities around the world when envisioning decolonial futures, which can be achieved by reclaiming the space that was stolen.

Reparation should be considered an essential step towards decoloniality; a condition to allow meaningful interactions between distinctive knowledge systems to take place and promote our delinking from the colonial matrix of power. The necessity for both reparation and decolonisation becomes evident in relation to archaeology, within which repatriation of Ancestors (the bones, skulls and people mentioned by Senator Thorpe) and the belongings of Ancestors is one active effort towards decoloniality. We have seen such efforts recently in Cambridge, through the repatriation of a Benin Bronze from Nigeria in 2021 by Jesus College (Khomami 2021). This fulfilled only the first aspect of promoting decolonial interaction (i.e. reparation), without focusing on the interaction between different knowledge systems to delink ourselves from coloniality. Another Cambridge example highlights the importance of creating spaces of decoloniality through interaction: the 'Bringing the Ancestors Home' project organised by Trish Biers initiated conversations with Indigenous descendants of Ancestors and their belongings held in the Duckworth Collection (biological anthropology collections held by the University of Cambridge). These are important first steps towards what we hope will be ongoing interactive processes, guided by respect for the requests of descendant communities.

According to Meloche, Spake and Nichols (2020: 7), "repatriation and research are not necessarily opposed". They speak of conducting research in collaboration with descendant communities who want to learn about their Ancestors' life histories, often because centuries of forced assimilation into coloniality of power and knowledge led to a disconnect from identity, now being relearnt and reconnected with by their descendants.

Where repatriation is rejected by Indigenous communities, we must ensure that we take care of Ancestors with respect and dignity, acknowledging that we are temporary care-takers, and should do what we can to ensure that their descendants are informed, and aid them in their requests for the return of their Ancestors. When research is deemed necessary, we must ensure that we as archaeologists conduct this research in an ethical manner regardless of national laws of ownership of ancestral bodies in the countries that we are working within (for discussion, see Biers 2023). We must do our utmost to ensure that descendant communities are informed and consulted, and that appropriate permissions are obtained. As archaeologists, these are actionable goals that we can take towards envisioning decolonial futures.

Indigenous archaeology can be used as a practical means to achieving some of these aims (Rai 2024). The first/official Indigenous archaeological projects began with the establishment of the Navajo Nation Cultural Resource Management Programme and the Zuni Archaeology Programme in North America in 1978. In Australia, evidence is emerging for the use of Indigenous oral histories and knowledge of deep time by settler-colonial archaeologists as early as the 1830s. Indigenous archaeology as a branch of archaeological practice was first defined by George Nicholas and Thomas Andrews (1997: 5) as "archaeology with, for, and by Indigenous peoples" and first formally defined by Nicholas in 2008. This archaeology places Indigenous communities in the centre of research aims, methods, practice and interpretation, and can be enacted in many different ways in different contexts. Those practising Indigenous archaeology enter, engage with and respect different worldviews and ways of

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being, while also recognising and working with the social and political implications of this type of archaeological practice. In other words, Indigenous archaeology can become an essentially decolonial tool, in the sense that it considers Indigenous knowledge systems in equal terms to academic archaeology.

Memory

The practice of archaeology in contexts of recent trauma and conflict presents unique opportunities, challenges and responsibilities for us to think about decoloniality. This is particularly evident in places such as South Africa, Brazil or Spain, where archaeological investigations intersect with living memory and ongoing struggles for justice (Oliveira 2002; Azevedo 2019; González-Ruibal 2020). For example, the archaeological investigation of sites related to enslavement in South Africa and Brazil (Bastos *et al.* 2016; Kootker *et al.* 2016; Lima 2020) demonstrates how memory-making through archaeological practice is inherently political and contested, further emphasising the political aspect of decolonial practice (see Wilkie & Bartoy 2000; Hall 2001; Shepherd 2007). This becomes obvious in the archaeology of the New York African Burial Ground (Figure 2) and the Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro (Figure 3). The excavation of both sites included the direct involvement of



Figure 2. The African Burial Ground National Monument in New York City (photograph by R. Lemos).

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Figure 3. The preserved remains of the Valongo Wharf in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the most significant entry point of enslaved Africans in the Americas (photograph by R. Lemos).

local Black communities, who had a huge impact on how fieldwork was conducted and finds were interpreted (Blakey 2001; Lima 2013).

Public memory and national myth-making serve as crucial components in constructing origin stories that shape national identity (Bell 2003). While ostensibly these narratives can foster social cohesion, they often do so at the cost of homogenising diverse experiences and histories, even resulting in strategic forgetting and marginalisation of certain groups (Errera & Deluliis 2023). The danger lies not only in allowing nations to appropriate emotionally charged histories but also in how national myths can reduce complex histories into simplified, unified narratives that serve political purposes (Dunajeva 2023). Including alternative actors in the archaeological process has been an important tool to amplify multivocality in archaeology and fight against racism, as exemplified above. Through interaction, archaeologists at the New York African Burial Ground and the World Heritage Site of the Valongo Wharf were able to confront uncomfortable memories and legacies and at the same time allow other voices to be heard (Blakey 2020; Lima 2024). Exploring the relationship between memory and archaeology on the basis of interaction can inform future decolonial practice by considering communities' knowledge systems as equally relevant as the scientific discourse of archaeology beyond employing Indigenous and local communities as informants only. This brings us to a crucial discussion about how to operationalise decolonial methods drawing from worldviews that are radically different from our own.

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Practice

Who writes, speaks about and does decolonial work? Positionality, the social and political contexts of our identity (be it gender, class, ethnicity), influences how we engage with and shape meaningful interactions towards decoloniality. In general, there is still a lot of disjuncture between the academic research produced by archaeologists and the histories and ways of engaging with the past that many people use. For example, in South Africa, a country deeply impacted by colonial and Apartheid legacies, this is reflected in what is valued as heritage, with one of the major examples being Mapungubwe. Despite being a World Heritage Site, most South Africans have little knowledge of this iconic precolonial state, which reveals a mismatch between what archaeologists and local groups value (Schoeman & Pikirayi 2011).

In recent shifts in archaeological theory, particularly the 'ontological turn', and engagement with Indigenous archaeologies, there is an increasing appreciation of the different ways in which the past is experienced. Yet, these different ways of accessing the past are held in parallel with western 'archaeological science'. Wylie (2015) speaks about the potential of moving beyond syncretic pluralisms in collaborative archaeology efforts (where the science and 'other interpretations' sit together), which she calls a tolerant but non-interactive pluralism. Rather, we should strive for a dynamic pluralism, through the incorporation of different worldviews, histories and scientific protocols into archaeological practice.

Reimagining archaeology

Imagining what a decolonised archaeology would look like requires us to fully engage, admire and recognise the inherent complexity and innovative potential of cosmologies and 'modes of doing' other than our own. Archaeologists from Indigenous contexts across the world usually face the challenge of toning down their traditions and other ways of explaining things in favour of what is accepted as scientific, academic 'rigour'. But what if we instead emphasise ways of thinking about and doing things other than the scientific way to completely renovate archaeology?

To answer this question, we can return to the examples from the Amazon and the Northwest Coast of North America mentioned above. Both cases exemplify how archaeologists can establish meaningful and effective decolonial connections that allow both our 'Western' academic and diverse Indigenous systems to produce knowledge together. For us to (re)imagine what Haber called an un-disciplined archaeology, our preconceived notions of rationality and spirituality will need to be adjusted and combined in creative ways.

Inspiration from other parts of the world can also be drawn on to help us to rethink archaeology and envision decolonial futures. For instance, in West Africa, archaeology has played a crucial role in uncovering the historical trajectories of complex societies in the region, including the development of early cities, trade networks, craft production practices such as metallurgy and ceramics, and cultural landscapes (e.g. Connah 2004; Monroe & Ogundiran 2012; McIntosh 2023). Key archaeological sites such as Djenné-Djenno in Mali, Igbo-Ukwu, Ilé-Ifẹ̀, the kingdom of Benin in Nigeria, and the Niger River Valley have shed light on the region's precolonial civilisations, with great emphasis on the long history of advanced craftsmanship, trade and urbanisation.

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However, archaeology in West Africa has continuously worked according to its colonial roots. Much of the early archaeological research in West Africa was conducted by European scholars who would have viewed the region through a Eurocentric lens. This led to interpretations that frequently downplayed or misunderstood the complexity of African societies. The legacy of colonial methods is still evident today in the predominance of Western research frameworks, control over research funding and the continued dominance of Western institutions in extracting research evidence and shaping narratives in West African history. Additionally, archaeological findings and heritage from West Africa are often housed in museums in Europe, rather than in local institutions where communities can access and engage with their heritage. This has contributed to a disconnect between local communities and the interpretation of their histories, and it limits the capacity of local scholars to build upon existing research and contribute new insights.

Decolonising efforts in Africa have managed to advance, despite major challenges (Lane 2011). There is a need for a deeper collaborative and transformative approach, which involves challenging and reshaping the frameworks through which we usually understand and interpret the African past. The idea of 'giving voices back' is not enough, because it presupposes that Indigenous and local communities are passive recipients of knowledge rather than active contributors to knowledge production processes. Rather than positioning ourselves as the primary knowledge producers, a collaborative and transformative approach recognises that communities hold valuable insights, where oral histories and traditions are rich resources for understanding the past. These oral traditions contain detailed narratives about cultural practices, events and connections to ancestral sites that are not always captured by conventional archaeological methods. By integrating these perspectives with archaeological evidence, researchers can achieve a more nuanced understanding of the past, respecting the intellectual heritage of Indigenous and local communities and allowing space for interpretations grounded on local realities.

Therefore, reimagining archaeology towards decolonial futures means we need to be open, individually and collectively, to unlearn the deep-rooted frameworks of thought grounded on the idea of a universal rationality. It is only then that we can learn other rationalities, grounded in cosmological narratives, including the perception of other humanities in nature (Krenak 2020). In other words, envisioning decolonial futures through archaeology requires an openness to reconstitute ourselves outside the colonial matrix of power that has disqualified forms of knowledge other than mainstream European academic thinking. Decolonised futures will also require an openness to test methods stemming from Indigenous, Diasporic and local knowledge systems that see enchantment when we see nothing (Simas 2019).

Are we ready as a field to incorporate knowledge from the Orishas provided by Babalawos, holders of the divination power in West Africa and many Diaspora countries, such as Brazil, when it comes to defining fieldwork strategies or even interpretation of finds? Are we ready to employ practices drawing from Amazonian cosmological narratives, which consider nature as human, in the care for archaeological collections? Are we ready to consult the Ancestors who dance and speak to us through the possessed bodies of adepts of African-Diasporic religions about the histories of the places we excavate? Regardless of the answers, the key is to establish meaningful and effectively decolonial interactions. For such interactions to take place, we simply need to abolish hierarchies of knowledge.

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