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Here we go again. The need to contest and refute biological determinism in archaeology

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While reading Michael L. Blakey's article 'On the biodeterministic imagination', I could not help but think, 'Haven't we been here before?' Blakey's article summarizes scholarship that dates back more than a century that critiques the use of nature and science to support claims that black and other non-white people were inferior, unintelligent or impoverished because of some innate deficiency. Blakey's summary of this work includes early 20th-century Boasian scholarship, as well as the writings by anthropologists of the 1990s and early 2000s, who identified the deconstruction of race as central to the discipline's decolonization efforts. In what can be argued to be canonical texts for anthropologists committed to work that seeks justice for all, Blakey outlines key arguments of individuals like Audrey Smedley (Smedley and Smedley 2012) and Karen Brodkin Sacks (1998) that detail the sociohistorical origins of the concept of race. However, Blakey's critique does not go far enough.

Blakey's article is largely written in response to Harvard Medical School geneticist David Reich's work with ancient DNA (aDNA). Reich, who established 'one of the country's first dedicated ancient DNA (aDNA) labs' (Lewis-Kraus 2019), revolutionized archaeological studies of prehistory. His lab has sequenced almost 2,000 ancient genomes, and his work in the field of palaeogenomics has helped archaeologists clarify important questions regarding the evolution of anatomically modern humans and their early migratory histories (ibid.). In recent years, Reich's analysis of aDNA from European and Oceanian remains have confirmed that for much of history, humans have been on the move and in a state of demographic flux (ibid.; Sedig 2019).

Reich's research has been embraced for its ability to highlight the origins of ancient populations settling into new areas. Yet such work has also raised the concerns and ire of archaeologists as concise explanations of arrival, intermixture or replacement muddy more complex processes of cultural production and exchange (Lewis-Kraus 2019). Moreover, Reich's slippery use of language regarding race and human variation has sparked concerns about the use of such findings to bolster racist claims of non-white peoples' innate inferiority. As Reich's work echoes old tropes of the presumed naturalness of race, Blakey writes a critical reflection on the persistent use of nature and science in academic institutions to buttress racist ideologies in society. Blakey does not only single out Reich's work; instead, his article describes a larger community of scholars whom he labels the biological determinists.

Blakey does not clearly state in his article the dangers that archaeologists face when collaborating or intuitively agreeing with biological determinists. Blakey limits his case studies in the article to the ways in which biological determinism impacts medical research, continued debates surrounding IQ testing, and large-scale projects aimed at using human genomes to study diversity. Yet archaeologists may view these as tangentially related to the aims of the discipline and not see how their work is connected to these debates. Moreover, Blakey does not cite the voluminous literature in historical archaeology and African-diaspora archaeology that calls for all archaeologists to recognize that the study of the past is political and identifies race and racism as a major problem that faces global society. African-diaspora archaeologists have challenged the field to use their work to both deconstruct race and combat racism in present-day society. Within this

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literature, scholars have also identified the ways in which race shapes archaeological interpretations of the past. They have noted that the small number of black and brown or non-white archaeologists remains a central impediment to countering racism in archaeology as well as society. Moreover, disciplinary commitments to scientific objectivity or empiricism often obscure archaeologists from recognizing the ways in which their research can be used to reproduce or support racism. Since the field of archaeology is predominantly white, archaeologists are further insulated from the negative consequences of their research since racism valorizes and protects people considered or identified as white.

African-diaspora archaeologists have called for scholars and practitioners to both recognize and work to combat the racism that continues to plague societies today. African-diaspora archaeologists have also emphasized that the study of the past is political. Consequently, archaeologists cannot simply be passive or objective participants in the authorship of history. In addition, the recognition that the study of the past is political goes beyond a simple nod to the ways in which racists and other ill-intentioned folk misuse or distort historical truths to promote or justify racist ideologies, action or policies. Instead, the recognition that the past is political is also a nod to the investment that the public and other stakeholders have in the findings uncovered by archaeologists.

Blakey asserts, 'A near fetish of DNA has arisen in Western science and society' (p. 1) As Reich has spearheaded new technological changes in genome sequencing, scholars from disciplines in the humanities and the natural and social sciences have turned to the genome to address questions about human behaviour. However, the use of genetics in this research is loaded with historical and political baggage that scholars seem loath to acknowledge or grapple with. During a time when it is considered orthodox that race is a social construct (Reich 2018a), genetics have become a neutral variable to study biological differences. DNA has provided a safe way for scientists to discuss human variation because the genomic make-up of each organism differs according to unique reproductive, social, political and economic histories. Yet geneticists do not attend to the impact of social, political and economic histories on DNA. Using as a foundation Richard Lewontin's seminal 1972 study, which found greater differences amongst populations of people instead of between populations of people, geneticists now look for significant biological differences in humans, while vowing that such work will not disrupt understandings of the unity and sameness of humanity but will instead reveal the essence of who we *really* are. In his writings and interviews with the press, Reich blithely states that race is a social construct and that this fact has become so widely known and accepted that it is orthodox. Yet, as Blakey notes, Reich speaks from a place of physical distance from the daily realities and ongoing historical legacies of race and racism. Moreover, his repeated claims that public awareness of race as a social construct is so pervasive shows an unfamiliarity with the robust scholarship on the history and continued significance of race in global society that suggests otherwise. Thus, as Reich and other researchers in the nascent field of palaeogenomics seek aDNA to better illuminate *Homo sapiens*'s early evolutionary history, Blakey writes his article as a cautionary tale to archaeologists who are in collaboration, or intuitive agreement, with biological determinists. While Blakey clearly notes that it is important for scholars studying human evolution, ecological theories of prehistory, biohistory and the tracking of major human migrations and inter-group relationships to recognize genetics' intrinsic subjectivity and political implications, the consequences of archaeologists collaborating with biological determinists are not limited to practitioners within these specializations.

Of particular importance to Blakey's article is how the concept of race became normalized in global society and an integral aspect of how humans came to view each other. As phenotypic traits were conflated with cultural differences to justify acts of social, political and economic exploitation, Blakey argues that the concept of nature became a means of 'disavowing current societal injustice as choice' (p. 1). His article is a decisive critique of the role that science and institutions of science have played and continue to play in the maintenance and reproduction of the concept of race. Histories of the origins of race have focused on the role that nascent fields like anthropology

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played in the authentication of the beliefs that upheld racial slavery, Jim Crow segregation and the eugenics movement (Baker 1998; Smedley and Smedley 2012).

Blakey acutely describes the intellectual conditions in academic institutions in the United States and abroad that led to the scientific legitimation and naturalization of the concept of race. He also highlights the continued fallacy of the beliefs of racial science in the past and present. The author notes that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, racial science took the disciplinary form of fields like eugenics and anthropology. However, today, fields like genetics play an important role in the reproduction of the key assumptions of racial science. Whether through medical research testing, statistical analyses of intelligence or biological explanations for slavery or Native American genocide, Blakey demonstrates that such research achieves two goals: (1) the minimization of the importance of European ideologies of white supremacy, which were reinforced by violence, physical dispossession, slavery and the extractive political and economic policies of colonialism, and (2) the reproduction of scholarship – already proved to be biased and incorrect – that attributes poverty and other social and economic ills to some innate biological trait or essence within non-white people. Altogether this contributes to the maintenance of racism and of white supremacy in contemporary global society.

However, Blakey does not clearly state the political, social or economic implications of archaeologists collaborating with Reich. This is unfortunate because archaeologists may not be clear about what is at stake (or simply do not want to acknowledge it because of their own white privilege). Much of this could be attributed to the demographics of the field; archaeologists are predominantly white despite the field being characterized by the study of individuals whose current descendants would be racialized as non-white according to phenotypical definitions of race. Archaeologists continue to struggle with the legacy of race in the lives of these peoples as well as coming to some consensus on exactly what the field's obligation should be to people marginalized by racism and economic exploitation. However, it could also be attributed to the artificial division between prehistory and history which can muddy the ability of archaeologists studying the distant pasts to understand how the results of their research can be used in the present or have socio-political implications for the daily lives of the contemporary communities who may have ancestral ties to the past peoples they study. This is further exacerbated by disciplinary or theoretical commitments to objectivity, empiricism or processualism, which make some scholars either hostile to or uncomprehending of the ways in which interpretations or artefacts of the past can be used to marginalize non-white and poor people.

It is very disheartening that archaeologists continue to ignore the voluminous scholarship detailing the history of race, the role of academic institutions in creating the concept of race, and the continued legacy of race in the lives of black people and other people of colour. There are several important implications that archaeologists should be mindful of when collaborating with Reich and/or other scholars exhibiting intuitive agreement with biological determinists. Archaeologists should be cautious of the continued misappropriation and use of their findings for research that upholds racism and white supremacy. There is a moral imperative to understand the ways our work is employed beyond what we intend. The moment and the language around race have changed. It is imperative that archaeologists stay actively engaged in what is happening in society because their work is political even if they do not see it. The heightened interest in genetics to address questions about human behaviour in the past and the present highlights the racial blind spots that continue to plague archaeology and the greater academy. While African-diaspora archaeologists have engaged with a body of scholarship that critically examines and foregrounds race, Blakey's article is a reminder that the larger field remains disconnected and perhaps disinterested in this work. The present moment requires a more explicit naming of the supremacist logics and the scholarship masquerading as science which informs them. Merging the critical scholarship on race that is produced by historical and African-diaspora archaeologists with the nascent field of palaeogenomics will perhaps provide scholars with the methodological and conceptual framework to avoid the pitfalls of which Blakey warns.

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