

Archaeology Meets World

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Introduction

Susan Pollock's 2015 Patty Jo Watson Distinguished Lecture, *The Subject of Suffering*, presented at the 114th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, and her subsequent published work on archaeology's responsibility to convey our understandings of humanity to the world at large, have prompted me to think about that engagement and what it means for our discipline from my own experience in the field. For the past decade or so, archaeologists from a diversity of research domains have independently but mutually argued that their data and perspectives are pertinent to the contemporary world. For the most part these are not self-identified archaeologists of the contemporary, nor is their perspective one of "trying" to make archaeology relevant to the modern world. Instead it is derived from a strong belief in the importance of the knowledge we have helped create and the perspectives we hold in addressing a range of issues for contemporary life. Archaeology is poised to go beyond itself.

Audience: the loading dock

As archaeologists explicitly recognize the importance of their work to humanity at large, they have expressed an intent to share their knowledge beyond the domain of archaeology. This intent requires avoiding a "loading dock model" typical of much of academia, in which scholars identify in their academic publications,

presentations, and classes, ways in which the knowledge and insights they have gained are relevant to issues of the contemporary world. Then they leave it at that. An approach of essentially "*here is relevant information, here is why it is relevant... people should pay attention*" never moves that knowledge into the domains these scholars (including myself) so identify. In fact, even if such information reached beyond the academy to relevant audiences, simply knowing something is rarely enough to change anyone's perspective or actions (Frisk and Larson 2011; Redman 2013). Instead, as I discuss below, engaging non-archaeology domains involves the time-consuming tasks of building trust in relevant contexts and translating academic findings into usable information. Happily, some efforts are being made in that direction.

Here, I briefly discuss case studies illustrating three different kinds of approaches to archaeological engagement beyond the discipline: policy, practice, and bearing witness to injustice. This is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of such efforts but is instead an acknowledgment of the breadth of this kind of endeavor (see Rosenzweig 2020 for a thorough review of the topic).

Policy case study: resilience to climate change

Management of the impacts of present and anticipated climate change is a major national and international goal. Planning for the

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future with data limited to the present and recent past, however, is hampered by short observation spans. Archaeologists working on resilience and vulnerability to climate change have argued that archaeology's long sequences provide cases of knowable, completed cycles in human eco-dynamics.

For example, a couple of interdisciplinary teams, the US southwest/northern Mexico focused Long-Term Vulnerability and Transformation Project (LTVTP) and the circumpolar focused North Atlantic Bio-cultural Organization (NABO) have brought archaeologists, environmental historians, mathematical modelers, geographers, and climate scientists together to investigate the relationship between environmental change and social change on the millennial scale. Each project engaged a series of cases, each case being a spatially coherent socio-cultural entity we referred to as a community (e.g., Mesa Verde, Faroe Islands). Our intra- and cross-regional comparisons of social-natural system responses to climate change investigated what factors promoted either stable socio-political change or the collapse of socio-political organizations.

Among the results relevant to policy-making today, was the fact that it is human-created vulnerabilities that result in so-called "natural disasters," the critical importance of reducing vulnerabilities ahead of time instead of scrambling for short-term fixes once disaster has struck, and the relationship between community-scale social conditions and the successful management of food security. These facts have already been well-argued and documented in disaster management studies, but rarely incorporated into policy making and long-range planning (Nelson et al. 2015). The importance of community-scale social conditions to stable social transformation in the face of climate change was also highlighted in an analysis that demonstrated that community instability was associated with institutional breakdown, identified through

the loss of community-wide religious or administrative institutions, and especially with the loss of human security (e.g., a decline in the availability of food and an increase in violence; Hegmon and Peeples 2018). And finally, a comparative analysis of two southwestern cases, one in which the socio-political system collapsed and the other in which it was transformed, concluded that increasing community inclusiveness promoted stable socio-political transformation, while increasingly hierarchical governance resulted in substantial inter-personal violence and social fragmentation (Spielmann et al. 2016).

Unfortunately, while a case can be made that the results of these studies are indeed relevant to current efforts to develop effective policies and practices in the face of climate change, we have stuck to the loading dock model of information dissemination. While all three examples above are published outside of archaeology journals, they remain in the academic domain.

So, what does it take to "be at the table" in policy making regarding climate change? The Resilience Alliance (RA; www.resalliance.org) and the Stockholm Resilience Center (SRC; www.stockholmresilience.org), in which a number of archaeologists participate, provide some helpful insights because these organizations have explicitly been interested in informing socio-ecological policy. The first RA conference, held in 2008 jointly with the SRC in Stockholm, purposefully included policy makers from the International Commission on Climate Change and Development, Nordic governments, the EU Parliament, the Swedish Governments' Commission for Sustainable Development, environmental NGOs and businesses for direct engagement in terms of how to incorporate the knowledge gained through international research on resilience in policy development. In a roundtable discussion at the conclusion of the conference, the policy makers discussed how much they had

learned through the engagement and a few ideas of how that knowledge might relate to policy. It is unclear that any direct outcomes in terms of policy ultimately resulted from that “deep dive”. Instead, however, since that time members of the RA and the SRC have participated in or contributed information through reports to a large number of international conferences and UN panels, and are members of a diversity of advisory committees and working groups that provide policy-relevant information both internationally and within Sweden (Stockholm Resilience Center 2017, 90–107). In essence, the SRC in particular has become a practice-oriented research institute upon which international organizations and state governments draw for policy-relevant information. That took a long and concerted effort in which archaeologists played a small part. How do we play a larger one?

Practice case study: food security for small-scale farmers

Globally, the majority (over 70%) of farms are family farms, and over a billion people rely on them for their livelihood. Millions of these farmers, however, are food insecure. In the mid-2000s, Rimjhim Aggarwal and I began collaborating on an interdisciplinary project on farming household food security (Spielmann and Aggarwal 2017). Our goal was to use archaeological insights from research on small-scale farmers’ enduring strategies for maintaining food security to evaluate contemporary development policy. Rimjhim is a colleague in ASU’s School of Sustainability; one of her specialties is international development, particularly in India, where small-scale farmers are particularly food insecure. Our perspective was that archaeology can provide important insights given the substantial body of archaeological research small-scale farming and the long-term adaptations that farming families have successfully employed for hundreds or thousands of years. The *longue durée*

perspective of archaeology differs significantly from “long term” policy studies in international development, which generally encompass a few decades.

We identified a robust set of strategies for maintaining food security among diverse prehistoric societies and then focused our project on household level food storage. Household storage increases the resilience of the household’s food supply both through an annual cycle and to interannual variation in rainfall in that an individual poor year or two can be compensated for using the stored products of better years. In comparing prehistoric and ethnographic data with those from contemporary settings, however, we found that household level storage has almost disappeared from the practices of contemporary small-scale farmers.

We argued that contemporary mental models are trapping policy makers and development organizations in a perspective that privileges top-down, highly centralized decision making and management of food security, even in the face of significant and persistent failures in that approach over the past several decades. The challenge of ensuring food security in the developing world has largely been framed in terms of how to increase production through technological fixes and then (in the case of India, particularly) how to accumulate and distribute food through a large-scale centralized system.

Our publication of this project was of the loading dock variety. After presenting papers at a couple of national and international meetings we published a book chapter (Spielmann and Aggarwal 2017). While on research trips to India, Dr. Aggarwal did, however, meet with colleagues who work directly with farmers to improve food security to discuss the possibility of incorporating household scale storage in their portfolio of strategies. She found no interest. In both her experience and mine in briefly

volunteering for an international NGO, the emphasis in development was on bringing small scale farmers into national and global supply chains.

It thus became clear that we ourselves would have to develop our own project in India to provide proof of concept and to engage development organizations and practitioners in India in a sustained way. That was beyond our capacities at the time. While the project was important to both of us, it was not central to either of our research agendas. Thus, as with the resilience and vulnerability project, insights from archaeological research, no matter how directly relevant to the contemporary world, understandably require sustained engagement with those organizations and individuals who are making decisions and working directly with the communities we think we can help.

Bearing witness

Bearing witness focuses on (in)justice, specifically the trauma, violence, and dislocation people experience through the policies and practices that comprise the structural violence embedded in societies today and in the past. In the words of archaeologists engaged in bearing witness, we are the ones who translate the materiality of injustice (Bernbeck and Pollock 2018), whose discoveries can draw emotional connections between the present and past (Voss 2018), who can provide “*a material-based understanding of the human experience that can transcend documentary and personal accounts of events*” (Hernandez 2018). Approaches to bearing witness are diverse, as some archaeologists focus on perpetrators and practices of injustice, others on victims and the enduring suffering caused by injustice, and yet others on whether the concept of victim is appropriate for the ancestors of descendent people. It is in this domain that Susan Pollock’s recent work and publications have made such important contributions.

Bearing witness with descendent communities

Several essays in the AAA forum on Archaeology as Bearing Witness (Hauser et al. 2018) concern collaborations with descendent communities. Koji Lau-Ozawa (2018) discusses his collaboration with former incarcerateds and descendants of incarcerateds at the Gila River Japanese internment camp in Arizona. The work of mapping the encampment and its gardens provided a forum for those who had been incarcerated there to tell their story, something that had been difficult out of context.

Barbara Voss (2018) collaborates with the Chinese Cultural and Historical Project in San Jose, California and is learning from the Chinese community there how to understand and interpret Chinese American culture history more accurately. The focus of their collaboration is the 1887 fire in Chinatown that was set by some of San Jose’s white residents. Voss’s Chinese community partners’ emphasis in telling that history is not on the tragedy of the fire but on the persistence and resilience of the San Jose Chinese community despite it.

And Sonya Atalay (2018) worked together with her elders to repatriate the human remains of over one hundred people from her nation. She writes that through NAGPRA repatriation, Native Americans bear witness, weaving together archaeological data, oral histories, and other sources of knowing, and she highlights the concept of *survivance* – the power of bringing ancestors home, a process of healing.

Unlike all the other examples discussed in this essay, in these collaborations the ‘audience’ and archaeologists are brought together in the enterprise itself.

Bearing witness of the past

Susan Pollock's recent research and publication have focused on suffering in the past at several different scales (Pollock 2016a; 2016b; Bernbeck and Pollock 2018). At the scale of the past in general, she points out that while suffering is central to human history, it seldom appears in archaeological narratives, and discusses examples where we fail to acknowledge the oppressively hierarchical contexts that produce suffering (Pollock 2016a). As a North Americanist it is abundantly clear that we also fail to acknowledge the suffering experienced in generalized processes such as increasing warfare. While, for example, increasing warfare is documented so clearly in the eastern US through the spread of the bow and arrow, increasing strength and number of palisades, and increasingly numerous violent deaths, there is virtually no engagement with the lived experience of the threat, the hostile landscape, and the vulnerability engendered by "warfare."

More specifically, Susan's recent research, in collaboration with Reinhard Bernbeck, has focused on two case studies that ultimately took suffering as a central issue (Pollock 2016a; Bernbeck and Pollock 2018). One project focused on a Nazi forced labor camp at former Tempelhof airport in Berlin. Nazis brought laborers to the camp from across Europe and housed them in barracks there until the end of the war. The focus of Susan and Reinhard's research was on the lives of the laborers, as the project excavated barracks in two of the camps as well as other contexts. Interestingly, it was only in the course of the project that suffering developed as an issue, an ethical responsibility, as they began to scrutinize the material framework that weighted on the laborers housed there – barrack construction, the lack of heat, personal items.

The second case study was on the campus of the Freie Universität where construction

workers had encountered a pit filled with human bones. Although archaeologists were not initially contacted about the pit and the bones were cremated after cursory examination, the following year Susan and Reinhard were able to reopen the pit to try to clarify what had been recovered and to expand the excavation to three more pits. When they also encountered rabbit, as well as specific sheep and pig bones, the spatial context of the pits became relevant – from 1927 to 1945 the grounds had been part of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics where people had carried out experiments on animals and humans, and to which human body parts had been sent from concentration camps. One question that Susan and Reinhard grappled with was whether to try identifying the human remains to see if data could be extracted that might allow them to locate the people's descendants, but decided on the rights of victims to "intransparency" (Bernbeck and Pollock 2018).

In both projects, as well as other recent work, Susan and Reinhard focus on documenting the perpetrators and means of oppression, violence, and dehumanization. In the process they maintain an openness to the narrative of the suffering such that it doesn't become just something that happened to those specific people in those specific times and places, but is an enduring fact of human existence to be called out and resisted. As an intensely personal experience, specific instances of suffering "can never be fully grasped". But we can examine the broader social processes and specific conditions that lead to or result from suffering, and those that alleviate it. To engage people beyond archaeology in their work, they have presented public lectures to diverse audiences and a film that was made of the Tempelhof project, in the Berlin segment of the *Böse Bauten* series on ZDF is reshowed, bears witness, recurrently on German television and available online (ZDF 2019).

Bearing witness of the present

Jason De León's Undocumented Migration Project, begun in 2009, is an on-going, deeply engaged anthropological and archaeological study of border crossings between Mexico and the United States (<https://www.undocumentedmigrationproject.org/>). Through his research De León has documented the U.S. federal government's strategy for deterring immigration across the Mexican/US Border and its evolution over time. That strategy, Prevention through Deterrence, coupled with the establishment of the Border Patrol in 1994, is used to enforce border surveillance in such a way as to channel migrants into the Sonoran Desert to reduce migration, and so that the US government can blame migrant deaths on hostile terrain. De León documents the massive scale of migration from Mexico, and through participant observation undertakes ethnographies of migrants, their preparations in Mexico, journeys across the border, experiences of the deportation process, and the devastation to families of those migrants who perished on the journey.

Through archaeological survey he and his teams have documented sites and trails used by immigrants and the archaeological record of the migration process, the diversity of sites, the clothing worn, and the items brought for the journey. Through use wear analysis (De León 2012; 2013) De León conveys the materiality of the suffering experienced by migrants in the desert, a suffering he can bear witness to because of information from migrants themselves. Items discarded at sites include worn and repaired shoes, the wear being worse on trails in shadier but rockier terrain; discarded water bottles far from sources of water, bloody socks, salt-stained clothing and backpack straps; personal items important to the individuals who stopped there.

In 2012 De León and his students came upon an immigrant woman who had died in the desert. Identifying her made it possible for him

ultimately to connect with her family and with their permission write about her as a person, an individual, to underscore the humanity of those who have died, and the massive and on-going devastation to the family from her death.

In addition to academic articles (De León 2012; 2013), and a book (De León 2015), De León has developed the website noted above and a global, participatory art project, Hostile Terrain 94 (<https://www.undocumentedmigrationproject.org/hostileterrain94>) comprised of over 3000 hand-written toe tags that represent the migrants who were found (most are not) who died trying to cross the Sonoran Desert. The locations of their deaths are marked on a map of the desert in the installations of these toe tags. Hostile Terrain 94 was to have taken place in 2020 but at this point is postponed due to Covid-19.

Discussion

Authors across these different approaches to bearing witness express the importance of archaeology in using the past to challenge the present, to "*prevent the repetition of iniquities*" (Lau-Ozawa 2018), to "*build and join a movement to alleviate social struggles*" (Hernandez 2018), "*to understand violent social processes and raise awareness of them*" (<https://www.undocumentedmigrationproject.org/>). We are also called upon to question our own perspectives and actions, to acknowledge and bear witness to our profession's colonialist and racist past "*and the harm caused by collecting and studying Native peoples' bodies and objects*" (Atalay 2018), "*to question established procedures and wisdoms*" and "*accept the deeply political nature of archaeological knowledge production*" (Pollock 2016b). Susan (2016a, 736) asks: "*How can archaeologists mobilize within and outside their field to reflect critically on past suffering in a way that leads people to emerge changed from the encounter?*"

Taking action and raising awareness are highlighted separately by different scholars, but

in the end are parts of the same whole. With respect to action, Hernandez (2018) writes: “*Unless bearing witness connects with powerful groups who are ready and willing to bring reform, nuanced accounts of social struggle will likely fail to resolve a majority of societal problems. In other words, understanding a problem is not the same as developing a solution. If bearing witness does not reach an audience with the power and motivation to act, then our accounts will remain academic talking points.*” This perspective harks back to the leading dock issue: is raising awareness of injustice and suffering in all their many incarnations enough, or are we called upon to engage directly with those with the power and in the contexts to act?

In the context of human rights and human suffering, however, those in power often do not take actions necessary to change practices and end suffering without immense outside pressure to do so. For example, Francisco Cantú’s autobiography *The Line Becomes a River* (2018), is an interesting companion to De León’s *The Land of Open Graves* (2015). Cantú, whose grandfather was an immigrant from Mexico, joined the Border Patrol with some hope of reforming it from within. His experiences and actions as an agent directly parallel the immigrant encounters with the Border Patrol – actions of the Border Patrol perpetrators and the suffering of the victims – that De León describes. Internal change proved impossible because Border Patrol behaviors, attitudes, and general inhumanity are too engrained, and Cantú left.

As we are witnessing in the US today (June 2020), there is abundant and enduring evidence that Cantú’s experience with the Border Patrol strongly parallels the countless attempts across the US to reform police organizations from within. None have succeeded; police brutality continues unchecked. The force for change thus must come from the massive increase in public awareness, or perhaps more accurately public recognition of the awareness they have had for ages, and public mobilization

to force people in power to make radical changes. Increased, politicized awareness can be a powerful force for action and change, to motivate those with the power to act.

Seize the day

The cases I have discussed here span much of the breadth of the discipline in terms of theoretical orientation and disciplinary practice. The one factor that unites them is a conviction that we have a responsibility to bridge the divide that separates our discipline from the contemporary world. As a discipline that studies humanity in an immense depth of time and breadth of geography, can we continue to divorce what we do from the needs of humanity today?

Materiality

Across these diverse cases materiality, the physicality of archaeological remains, emerges as archaeology’s unique contribution to understanding the past and the present. As Hernandez (2018) writes, “*Archaeology provides a material-based understanding of the human experience that can transcend documentary and personal accounts of events*”. And “*A focus on the material traces of ongoing contested social phenomena such as political violence, homelessness, and warfare can offer fresh perspectives distinct from the dominant narratives often written by those in power*” (De León 2015, 172).

The materiality of the contemporary and recent past has limitless possibilities in other social realms, other kinds of case studies, and is amenable to the sorts of comparative studies often undertaken in archaeology. In the context of Covid-19, for example, we read of massive discrepancies among hospitals in access to personal protective equipment and their capacities to assist patients. The materiality of those discrepancies provides an important opportunity to scrutinize, complementing the written descriptions and oral testimonies of people working in them.

What is the comparative ‘use wear’ (De León 2013) on N95 and surgical masks, gowns, and ventilators from hospitals in low-income cities, neighborhoods and towns compared with those from wealthier hospitals and residential areas? What does a mask look like that has to be worn an entire week *versus* one that can be changed from day to day or context to context? Are ventilators in such short supply that the wear and tear is actually very similar across all hospitals?

Prisons provide a reasonable contextual extension of Susan and Reinhard’s work on labor camps. What is the comparative lived space, the materiality of maximum security and white-collar prisons in the US? We have descriptions and testimonies, and there are periodic protests and on-going social actions against inhumane living conditions. But exposing an institution that is so central to structural racism in this country requires systematic, archaeologically informed study. There are abandoned ones and architectural plans (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/arts/design/architects-prison-death-chamber.html?searchResultPosition=4>); these are places to start.

Time

Collaboration with my sustainability colleague, Rimjhim Aggarwal, made me realize how different the archaeological concept of time is from that of other social sciences. She found archaeology’s time perspective particularly helpful in thinking about her field of international development, which tends to draw on programs at hand rather than on robust, enduring strategies. Hence our difficulty in making the case for the role of household level storage in food security in a development landscape bent on bringing subsistence farmers from around the world into the global marketplace.

An archaeological perspective on time does not have much of a chance in a “just in time,” “Constant Connect” kind of world. But

Covid-19 may have provided an opening for thinking of time in a somewhat different way. With people sheltering in place now for three months or more and so much of our lives on hold, there is an opportunity to think of lives and livelihoods, local knowledge and decision-making at all scales, in terms of vulnerability and resilience. While the 21st century, in terms of its global markets and complex financial systems, is different from much of what we study, much still persists and there is nothing we experience today that cannot be challenged by or helped with insights from the past.

Action

To be effective in bridging the divide between archaeology and the contemporary world the field would have to become much more open and flexible in its practices and world view. Efforts to engage the present with the material approaches of archaeology and the knowledge of actions and strategies in the past cannot be left only to very senior archaeologists whose careers are not jeopardized by calling for engagement with the contemporary world. Our careers are too far along to nurture the collaborations necessary for ongoing dialog with contemporary organizations and individuals, to build a broader archaeology from the ground up, one that addresses topics beyond those we identify as important. So this endeavor must be made less risky for younger archaeologists, those at the beginnings of their career. The tenure and promotion process would have to rely much less on senior professors for review letters and more on reviews from those outside the discipline, those engaged in practice. This is a path newer interdisciplinary, practice-oriented fields have been blazing for a few decades now; it’s not a process we have to reinvent. At this point, the academy may be more open to broader procedures for valuing faculty actions and products than our field is. Funding agencies, as well, would have to embrace a broader series of goals and research designs for projects than is now the case. And we cannot possibly heed

these diverse and prescient calls when our graduate programs do not provide training in the archaeology of the recent past and the present, and opportunities to collaborate with non-archaeologists on issues of mutual interest. Archaeology has immense potential to be more than it is. While people in archaeology today did not go into the field to study the present, who might join us if we decide to expand what we do and how we think?

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Susan and I were in the same graduate class together at the University of Michigan. From that time, she's been a close friend and invaluable colleague. In Ann Arbor we shared

a house for a year with Betsy Hart and used the summer to perfect southeast Asian vegetarian recipes. Susan volunteered for a few weeks on my 1986 field season at Gran Quivira, New Mexico, where she not only participated in the excavation, but also cooked for the last two weeks of the season, thereby saving us from canned three-bean salad, a go-to favorite of the previous cook. As many of you know, she's a superb chef! Susan was also my maid of honor, in an arboretum, so no whacked-out pastel chiffon dress 😊. In fact, when my soon-to-be-mother-in-law asked what our wedding colors were, I called Susan and asked what she was wearing. We went with those. Over the decades our opportunities to spend time together have been few, but whether in Binghamton, Berlin, or Albuquerque they have always been marvelous. Retirement does have its virtues, Susan; welcome!

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