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# Archaeology in 2022: Countermyths for hopeful futures

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## ESSAY

Year-In-Review

## Archaeology in 2022: Counter-myths for hopeful futures

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**Abstract**

Archaeology in 2022 features more calls than ever for a socially and politically engaged, progressive discipline. Archaeologists increasingly respect and integrate decolonizing and Indigenous knowledge in theory and practice. They acknowledge and embrace the fluidity and diversity of sexes and genders, past and present. They document patterns of migration, ancient as well as contemporary, to combat retrograde and racist narratives that remain pervasive in the public sphere. At the same time, the field has a deep-seated conservative bastion toward which many scholars retreat, arguing for an “objective” past that is free of political implications or interpretive ambiguity. As anarchist archaeologists, we see the myth of the objective past as one of many interconnected myths that have provided the basis for an archaeology that reifies and proliferates the current social order. We deconstruct myths relating to capitalist and colonialist ideologies of “human nature,” the assumed inevitability of the current order, and fatalistic commitment to dystopian or utopian futures. As alternatives, we present counter-myths that emphasize the contingent and political nature of archaeological praxis, the creative and collaborative foundation of communities, the alternative orders that archaeology uncovers, and the role of a hopeful past for constructing the possibilities of different futures.

**KEYWORDS**

anarchist archaeologies, capitalism, counter-narrative, colonialism, climate disaster, futures, migration, multispecies, myth

**Resumen**

La arqueología en 2022 destaca más llamadas que nunca por una disciplina progresiva, social y políticamente comprometida. Arqueólogos crecientemente respetan e integran conocimientos descolonizadores e indígenas. Reconocen y acogen la fluidez y la diversidad de los sexos y géneros, el pasado y el presente. Documentan patrones de migración, tanto antiguos como contemporáneos, para combatir narrativas retrogradadas y racistas que permanecen prevalentes en la esfera pública. Al mismo tiempo,

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el campo tiene un bastión conservador muy arraigado hacia el cual muchos investigadores se repliegan, argumentando un pasado objetivo que es libre de implicaciones políticas y ambigüedad interpretativa. Como arqueólogos anarquistas, vemos el mito del pasado objetivo como uno de los mitos interconectados que han proveído las bases para una arqueología que reifica y prolifera el orden social actual. Deconstruimos mitos relacionados a las ideologías capitalistas y colonialistas de “naturaleza humana”, la asumida inevitabilidad del orden actual, y el compromiso fatalista a los futuros distópicos o utópicos. Como alternativas, presentamos contramitos que enfatizan la naturaleza contingente y política de la praxis arqueológica, la fundación creativa y colaborativa de las comunidades, los órdenes alternativos que la arqueología descubre, y el rol de un pasado esperanzador para construir las posibilidades de futuros diferentes. [arqueologías anarquistas, mitos, contranarrativas, capitalismo, colonialismo, desastre climático, migración, multiespecies, futuros]

## INTRODUCTION

In a world shaped by capitalist and colonialist ideologies, myths that reinforce the current order can be understood as a dangerous product of unreflexive, poorly analyzed epistemological commitments that enact violence on nondominant groups. Anthropological myths, including those constructed out of the archaeological past, have contributed to willful misunderstanding, simplistic representations, and in many cases erasure of the lifeways of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities, migrants, women, and children (cf. Bruchac, 2018). But as Montgomery and Supernant (2022, 801) concluded in the last *American Anthropologist* year-in-review article on archaeology, “While there remain areas of tension and backlash, our review of archaeology in 2021 indicates that the discipline is at a threshold, poised to make meaningful contributions to a hopeful future.” To achieve our aims for this year-in-review article, we ask the following questions: How do myths and grand narratives define our values inside and outside of our discipline? From where do these epistemologies come? And how can a move away from grand narratives and totalizing ideologies contribute to socially just and hopeful futures?

Hopeful, future-oriented approaches to archaeology, including anarchist models, Black and Indigenous futures, or social movements like Landback, are often ridiculed as impossibly utopian, only workable on a small scale, and distractions from the “real” science of archaeology (cf. Montgomery and Supernant, 2022, 808). They are habitually and reflexively labeled as “imaginary” futures, in contrast to capitalist and colonialist ones that are naturalized as being more “realistic” attempts to foresee social possibilities (Fisher, 2009). Yet, the capitalist world is equally propped up by future-making practices no less imaginary (or perhaps better: idealistic) than those of anticapitalist or antiracist activists (e.g., Frieman, 2022). The apparent veracity of capitalist and colonialist interpretations of the past and present is dependent on the continued disempowerment and denigration of those being trampled by colonial and capitalist presents (e.g., Borck, 2018a). In a hopeful archaeology, all futures are equally “imagined.” Archaeologists thus have a role to play in interpreting the past according to the kinds of futures we might want for humanity—and nonhumans—rather than defaulting to an endless capitalist and colonial dystopia based on an unimaginative, reductive, and inappropriate interpretation of the past. Archaeology in 2022 has contributed meaningfully to debunking myths about the past and reframing our narratives to imagine better futures (Berruti et al., 2022; Cobb and Crellin, 2022; Fryer, 2023; Greenberg and Hamilakis, 2022; Jaffe et al., 2022; Laluk et al., 2022; Matthews, 2020; Papachryssostomou et al., 2022; Politopoulos et al., in press).

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL MYTHS AND GRAND NARRATIVES—A CRITIQUE

What do we mean by “myth”? A recent attempt to resynthesize the whole of human history concluded with the observation that, regarding the grand narratives of archaeology, history, and anthropology, “We know, now, that we are in the presence of myths” (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021, 526). Myths, in this case, are broad tropes present across the discipline re-created through retellings as specific grand narratives. Scholars (usually of the white, male, and tenured variety) have primarily produced grand narratives in service of their own career success and personal objectives. Myth has, of course, long been a fundamental topic of inquiry in and beyond anthropology. Myths provide explanatory tools for human beings to understand the world we live in, where we came from, and, in many cases, where we are going.

There are four interrelated myths common to archaeology: (1) archaeology is a neutral and objective exercise; (2) humans are selfish, competitive, and power-hungry; (3) the current societal order was and is inevitable; and (4) things will inevitably be better (or worse) in the future. Within

anthropology, versions of these assumptions have been critiqued for at least a century, particularly by Franz Boas (Patterson, 2001, 45–50) and his students, like Zora Neale Hurston (see Gupta and Stoolman, 2022; McLaurin, 2012). So why do we need to revisit them again? Myths and grand narratives are not just conceptually problematic. They contribute to lived forms of violent erasure that exist to reinforce and naturalize systems of oppression (Hartemann, 2022). And frankly, too many archaeologists (whether white, and/or male, and/or straight, and/or able-bodied) benefit from these systems.

Scholars and practitioners in wealthy nations and at elite institutions continue to rely on myths of resource lack to exclude people from less-privileged backgrounds, of diverse genders, or Global South and Indigenous colleagues. This pattern is reinforced indirectly by not providing funds for major conference attendance or not working harder to partner with—and secure funding for—colleagues who are historically disadvantaged. This arrangement maintains a form of neo/ongoing colonialism (cf. La Salle and Hutchings, 2018), compounded by the “privileging of theory” derived from predominantly Western hegemonic institutions and organizations (Winter, 2014). In another form of the capitalist realism myth, repeated claims are made by universities and other cultural institutions that there simply is not enough money to address this kind of inequality. In many cases, this false narrative originates from extremely wealthy universities literally built on profits derived from land enclosure, slavery, and Indigenous land dispossession (Lee and Ahtone, 2020). The austerity story is repeated by institutions that hoard belongings stolen, looted, or otherwise unethically procured from Global South and Indigenous groups (cf. Janes and Sandell, 2019). In reality, there is plenty of money and resources to go around at a global scale (O’Neill et al., 2018). They are simply not being distributed widely. This deadly combination of past and present mythologizing within a context of rapidly changing global climate and its associated human-made disasters calls for urgent action. Below we outline and then counter archaeology’s place within contemporary and historical myth, while also making suggestions for where the discipline could change course going into the future.

## MYTH 1: ARCHAEOLOGY IS A NEUTRAL AND OBJECTIVE EXERCISE

A persistent refrain to any attempt at a radical or different approach to archaeology is to ask scholars “not to politicize” the past. This regurgitation disregards a host of well-rehearsed and widely accepted postcolonial (e.g., Spivak, 1988) and feminist scholarship on the problems of objectivity in science (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991, 1992; Wylie, 1997) and the unavoidably political nature of archaeology (Greenberg and Hamilakis, 2022; Kiddey, 2020b; Newson and Young, 2022). Archaeology, in this outdated framing, is *only* about the past, which is arbitrarily walled off from the present in accordance with an aggressive form of totalizing chronopolitics (Borck, 2018a; Lucas, 2005). The goal of an archaeology that seeks to uncover “objective” facts is that, when piled high enough, it should provide us with the true and accurate record of the past (e.g., Perreault, 2019). Too often, “true and accurate” serves as shorthand for naturalizing models of cis heteropatriarchy, hierarchical relations, capitalist realism, and white supremacy (cf. Harding, 1992, 568).

A supposedly “neutral” archaeology provides us with bland and unrealistic grand narratives. The laser focus on the “origins of agriculture” and “rise of civilizations” both emerges from and makes unquestionable the assumption that state societies were inevitable. This then marginalizes and infantilizes Indigenous people and naturalizes systemic poverty and inequality. Women become biological vessels for the growth of new capital, children passive goods, and adult men from dominant social classes, ethnic groups, or power structures the only agentic members of society (cf. Frieman, 2021, 97–99). Ironically, self-consciously apolitical archaeologies also create fertile soil in which pseudoarchaeology flourishes, with 2022 providing a particularly glaring example (see Dibble, 2022), by presenting the field in jargon-laden terms as both boring and exclusive. A public fascinated by archaeology will find ways to engage with it, and an ideology of neutrality offers no tools to counter conspiratorial and supremacist thinking.

There are some archaeologists who would still cling to the idea that archaeology is a “neutral scientific practice,” but all archaeology is necessarily a form of interpretation, even when we use “hard science” and replicable methods to analyze data. We cannot visit the past, even the contemporary past, so all archaeology is a process of interpreting evidence *for* social practices, not evidence *of* them (cf. Barrett, 1988, 6). That said, materiality *is* evidence—it exists in, on, and under places; it evidences adaptations, survival, and constraint from particular forces. Archaeology can demonstrate, at the very least, that some of the narratives we have inherited over the past 500 years are inventions, or interpretations. Archaeological material can therefore provoke valid challenges to the status quo to offer alternative visions of the past, present, and future (Borck, 2018b; Politopoulos et al., *in press*). Ultimately, the practice of archaeology demonstrates that the world—past, present, future—does “not yield to clean judgments or bottom lines” (Haraway, 2022, 71).

## MYTH 2: HUMANS ARE BY THEIR NATURE SELFISH, COMPETITIVE, AND POWER-HUNGRY

Elements of evolutionary theory have haunted the social and political sciences since the eighteenth century, and social evolution has shaped scientific narratives in turn. Darwin, for example, is well-known to have closely observed the natural world, but he drew on Adam Smith in developing his ecological theory based on individualist competition and downplayed reciprocal exchange (Ghiselin, 2009). We argue that it is a myth that humans

are selfish, competitive, and power-hungry *by nature*; rather, modes of relations cause and incentivize such behaviors. There is an assumption that violence, oppression, and competition are the only way for a society to become meaningfully ordered. Witness the ongoing popularity within archaeology of models of the past that see social complexity emerging only from genocide (Kristiansen and Earle, 2022, 136–37) and self-interested accumulation of capital (e.g., Hayden and Earle, 2022). Without circumscription and the violent enactment of state-like borders (following Carneiro, 1970), so the story goes, we could not end up with the vast bounties of the modern developed world.

Capitalist states appear to be uniquely placed as enablers of greedy and violent behavior in the present. Billionaires, corporations, and governments (increasingly difficult to disentangle from each other) hoard unimaginably huge piles of wealth, while destroying entire ecosystems to wring every possible molecule of profit from the earth regardless of the scale of associated and cascading human disasters (Wutich et al., 2022; Zhang, 2023). All too often, uncritical archaeologists then project these contemporary modes of relation and patterns of inequality into the past, normalizing and naturalizing capitalist structures of power, innovation, and dominance (as critiqued in Frieman, 2021). The preference of many archaeologists for grand ancient cities, “beautiful” (according to Western aesthetics) material culture, and spectacular imperial monuments closes the tautological loop of this myth, which privileges past empires and elites above the oppressed and self-aggrandizers over those who resisted the allure of power (e.g., Borck, 2018a). The twin myths of inevitable progressive order and economic growth as something always necessary and desirable (cf. Kallis, 2018) justify oppressive actions with the aid of history as told from the perspective of the ever-shrinking minority who profit from the status quo.

### MYTH 3: THE CURRENT ORDER WAS AND IS INEVITABLE

Since the founding of archaeology as a discipline, the field has concerned itself with ordering the world, its history, and its sense of timekeeping. As colonial administrators found themselves in contact with communities new to them, they became hell-bent on sorting societies of the world into boxes of complexity, grouping them into racist categories of savagery and barbarism. These moves to impose “civilized order” brought their oppressed subjects no end of pain; archaeology’s complicity in this effort has been well-understood and critiqued by this point (e.g., Fabian, 1983). Yet this critique has not come with a wider reconciliation with how archaeologists helped *and continue to help* order imperial time and the world. Even as most archaeologists have nominally distanced themselves from the progressivist ordering of world history, the deeper framing remains steadfast (Frieman, 2023). This myth continues to underwrite one of the most orthodox assumptions within archaeology: the line of progress that we draw through the origins of agriculture, to the rise of civilizations, to the eventual (and by implication, inevitable and unavoidable) development of modern empires, capitalism, and European colonial dominance (Quave et al., 2021; Tsing, 2015).

These modern complexity narratives are both rooted in and justify neoliberal ideologies advocating for an interventionist state that was not interested in the common good of its citizens but rather focused on protecting economic growth at all costs (Blackmore, 2016). This framing underwrites neoliberal ideologies by maintaining that the creation of vast state-level hierarchies in the past was a conscious strategy of many, if not all, societies (Borck and Clark, 2021). Thus, when archaeologists document hierarchies emerging, these are too often assumed to have been natural and desirable processes. Conversely, any nonhierarchical political arrangement must necessarily reflect some kind of failure on the part of its participants, if not preemptively chalked up to perceived upper limits on the environment’s carrying capacity (Borck and Clark, 2023). Amazonia, for example, was long considered a region of “environmental limitation” (Meggers, 1971, 2011), though this model has been recently superseded (Heckenberger and Neves, 2009). Another outcome of archaeology’s grand narrativizing habit is the mania for “firsts, earliest and oldest” that imagines savvy operators foreseeing the complex outcomes of adopting agriculture, inventing metallurgy, or producing ceramics (Frieman, 2021, 186), as if their society was the adolescent civilization that would inevitably grow into our own mature world.

### MYTH 4: THINGS WILL BE BETTER/WORSE IN “THE FUTURE”

If the first three myths enforce objectivity and immutability of the past and present, then the fourth is concerned with the future. If all is maintained, ordered, and moderated, the future is bright! But this rosy picture violently contrasts with our lived realities. The arrival of climate chaos heralds a threat to the carefully crafted neoliberal order (we write this as the world experiences the hottest week since people began formally recording the weather). The future from this perspective is persistently imagined as a dystopian time of environmental degradation, nuclear disaster, and total collapse (Harms, 2022; Tsing, 2015). It is tempting to assume that the arc of history bends one way or another, but making the future and choosing what histories in which to anchor it are active processes.

At its annual meeting in 2022, the American Anthropological Association—an organization that has largely focused on and benefited from expanding knowledge of Indigenous people—featured the first Indigenous program chair in its 120-year history (Chin, 2022). At the same time, the association’s flagship journal featured numerous accounts of the ways that anthropology reinforces patterns of gendered and racialized violence (Bradford and Crema, 2022; Mickel, 2023), ableism (Durban, 2022), and the exclusion of scholars of color (Mondesire, 2022; Tallman et al., 2022). The point is not that the progressive or dystopian narrative paints the “real” picture of the state of anthropology or archaeology in the

present. Rather, this array of contradictory presents points to myriad possible futures. It is up to us as a discipline to determine what we do with the potential.

When people are constantly focused on “the immediate future,” they are not able to enjoy living their actual lives in the present. Capitalism traps us, forcing us to think constantly about the next cycle of paychecks and bills rather than enjoying today, sleeping when we are tired, eating when we are hungry, spending time with family and friends. Capitalism is wasteful. It uses up what it wants and leaves entire regions and populations to ruin (González-Ruibal, 2018; Khatchadourian, 2022; Soto, 2022). In the name of “sustainable growth,” we squeeze blood from the stone, and as it crumbles into dust in our hands, the policy recommendation from above is “squeeze harder.” The only “resilience” desired by capital is the resilience to endure more trauma, to continue squeezing and being squeezed.

## COUNTERING ARCHAEOLOGICAL MYTHS

If we accept that the “grand narratives” of the archaeological discipline are based on inappropriate and unacceptable myths, what can be created to replace them? On the one hand, we do not propose the kind of intellectual vacuum into which pseudo-archaeological myths can wander (we’re looking at you, Netflix and Neil Oliver). On the other, we recognize that even alternative grand narratives, while tempting, risk producing new forms of narrative or epistemic harm (Pantazatos, 2019). To avoid falling into the trap of creating our own grand narrative, we contend and accept that there are gaps, overlaps, conflictual meanings, and things unknowable regarding the past (Gero, 2007; Sørensen, 2016) and encourage the development of collective wisdom through smaller-scale studies related to counter-myths.

Building outwards from anarchist insights and imaginaries, we present counter-myths aimed at producing better futures from different pasts. We develop these counter-myths specifically as a call to arms to our colleagues, comrades, and collaborators to begin or to take up the work of building coalitions of local experts of all sorts, from scholars to professionals to community leaders, to study the myriad pasts of our interconnected world—both recent and ancient—with the future front of mind. We call you in to use archaeology as a toolkit to expand the affordances of our social and political relations and to shatter an increasingly brittle status quo.

## COUNTER-MYTH 1: ARCHAEOLOGY CAN AND SHOULD BE A POLITICALLY CONSCIOUS MORAL PRAXIS

Some might ask why, in 2023, we still need to make this point, since the inherently political nature of archaeology has been common disciplinary knowledge since at least the 1980s (e.g., Shanks and Tilley, 1987). But one more time for the people in the back: if you think your politics are “neutral,” what you really mean is that you support the status quo of white, cis male, elitist dominance, not only within our field but in the rest of the world. The myth of neutrality provides support for the historical and ongoing “military-industrial-academic complex” (Meskell, 2022). Archaeology needs to address “the forms of violence endemic to our profession” (Fryer and Dedrick, 2023, 335) at the same time that it looks ahead to a brighter future.

Embracing the politics of our discipline opens up new narrative opportunities that connect ancient and more recent pasts to the present and future and gives us scope to reinterpret some fundamental assumptions about method and theory (Cobb, 2022). At the same time, more orthodox liberalism does not provide the tools for actual human liberation. Harsha Walia (2021, 13) does not mince her words: “Liberal antiracist analysis, obsessed with superficial representation and flag-waving, purposefully fails to interrogate the *material structures* upending racism” (emphasis added). Such “material structures” are the bread and butter of archaeology. Following existing approaches to “environmental protection,” among other major challenges, will not be enough to build equitable futures if they exclude people from their ancestral places, as is the case for instance of the Maasai in Tanzania, who according to a UN statement (Mejia Montalvo, 2022) are being evicted from their land in the name of wildlife protection (and tourism). Such exclusion follows patterns of racism, settler colonialism, classism, and sexism.

Archaeology in 2022 plays an ambiguous role in underpinning the racialized myths that move “natural” places into the past and away from people. On one hand, much of the archaeology currently taking place reinforces the separation of people from their physical environment via the (often inappropriate, unequal, and unjust) application of heritage policies, laws, and statutes in a “development” context. The capitalist relations inherent to practice are conveniently shrouded in the language of “community consultation,” especially in “Indigenous” archaeologies (La Salle and Hutchings, 2018). On the other hand, in some cases archaeologists can work with local communities to reconnect people to alienated environments (for an example from Brazil, see Lesser, 2022) or reinforce connections to place (for an example from Vanuatu, see Flexner, 2022b). In the same liberatory vein, Herzfeld (2022) explores how individuals and marginalized local communities in Thailand and Greece use nationalist discourses of tradition to challenge state authority.

Politically engaged studies in contemporary and historical archaeology contribute clear evidence that demonstrates that governments and state-sanctioned “security” forces perpetrate killings through structurally violent regimes, for example, by weaponizing naturally hostile (to humans) environments, such as the Sonoran Desert (Soto, 2022) and the Mediterranean Sea (Stierl, 2023). Aside from the obvious example that European “expansion” led to entire homelands being stolen from Indigenous and First Nations peoples, modern nation-building has included myriad deliberate and atrocious attempts to ethnically and culturally cleanse Indigenous cultures from the face of the earth, for example, by forcibly removing

Indigenous children from their families and incarcerating them in boarding schools, where countless numbers died (cf. Montgomery and Supernant, 2022). Magnani and Magnani (2022) similarly observe the harms proliferated by colonial arrangements in relation to Sámi populations just north of the Arctic Circle. Most recently, the rise of ethnic nationalism, which both stokes and is fueled by reactionary populism (González-Ruibal and McGuire, *forthcoming*), seeks to categorize humanity according to racist and elitist lines (Walia, 2021). This fascist logic finds great purchase in the deep histories that archaeology contributed and contributes to, in our own progressivist categorizing tendencies.

Contemporary and historical archaeology have developed significantly over the last two decades to question how the past might be mobilized to improve understanding of equality, achieve social and environmental justice, and inform shared values in the present. Contemporary and historical archaeologists increasingly demonstrate that histories of slavery, colonialism, dispossession from land, and extraction (theft) of natural and cultural “resources” are what connect nationality and poverty with race today (Bradley and Noronha, 2022, 18; González-Ruibal, 2018). For example, contemporary human migration and displacement have received increased attention from anthropologists and archaeologists (e.g., Caraher and Rothaus, 2018; Hamilakis, 2018; Kidney, 2020a; Lau-Ozawa, 2023; Pantazatos, 2019; Radzinwinowiczówna, 2018; Rehman and Riggs, 2021; Soto, 2022; Stewart et al., 2018). Contemporary displacement and “illegal” migration are caused by legacies of colonialism and capitalism and “managed” using unethical bordering practices, themselves justified by laws and policies rooted in historical myths.

The structural causal link is maddeningly apparent to those taking a long-term archaeological perspective on so-called contemporary issues (Kidney, *forthcoming*). Unethical bordering practices include incarcerating border crossers in centers and camps that frame migrants as “Other” (Hamilakis, 2022), spatially and socially separated from “citizens,” while simultaneously imposing constant movement on those detained, in the form of processes of categorization, circulation, relocation, and deportation (Katz, 2022). The array of checkpoints, policing, incarceration, and forced medical examinations, including compulsory pregnancy checks, that border crossers are forced to undergo includes material traces from the use of medical instruments, chemicals, weapons, and locks (Radzinwinowiczówna, 2018). Contemporary archaeology mobilizes theory originally designed for understanding relationships between people, places, and things from the past to expose modern “security” practices as plain old torture, designed to dehumanize, humiliate, and hurt along racialized and heavily gendered lines.

As archaeologists, we need to recognize our own involvement and entanglement in oppressive regimes, starting with our individual networks, workplaces, and work practices. For example, in 2001, ESRI (producer of ArcGIS) published an article “highlighting the usefulness of their products to ‘maximize’ Mexico-US border security enforcement” (Stewart et al., 2018, 45). The Research and Innovation Programme, Horizon 2020—familiar among archaeologists as a major source of grants for European universities and researchers—is financing a project called “Roborder” (see <https://roborder.eu/>) to develop drones piloted by artificial intelligence, intended to autonomously patrol Europe’s borders. Drones of various forms will identify humans, weapons, and vehicles. Information will then be shared with border police (Bradley and Noronha, 2022, 124–27). As individuals, it can sometimes feel that we are powerless in the face of such organized surveillance systems operated by powerful institutions and backed up by the legal “right” to inflict violence (even death) on those who dissent, which is what makes unionization and solidarity efforts so vital and part of what drives our call to arms (see above; Black Trowel Collective, 2021d). We will have greater success in manifesting more socially and environmentally just futures for the majority if our struggles are linked.

## COUNTER-MYTH 2: HUMAN BEINGS (AND THEIR NONHUMAN COMPANIONS) ARE COOPERATIVE, COLLABORATIVE, AND ABOVE ALL CREATIVE

The archaeological record is fundamentally a record of cooperative human, and indeed nonhuman, endeavors. Nothing that exists from the human past came about as a result of isolated individual genius or initiative but rather emerged from constellations of flexible, creative, and collaborating people (e.g., Holland-Lulewicz, 2021). If there is any unifying feature of humanity (or indeed of hominins more broadly), it is our creativity (Frieman, 2021, 166–83; Morgan, 2022). Further, both animal and human communities, often entanglements of both, are built on relationships of cooperation, care, and mutual aid, something the philosopher Peter Kropotkin (1902) articulated quite elegantly but that has only recently been picked up on explicitly in “evolutionary” archaeology.

There are many examples of societies and communities (past and present) in which care and nurture—not capital—were, and remain, central values (e.g., Thompson, 2022). Certainly, this is achievable in the present. During the COVID-19 pandemic, hundreds of mutual aid groups emerged, weaving a network of community resilience that supported many vulnerable families (Fernández et al., 2022; Navarro Rupérez, 2021). We in the Black Trowel Collective also found in the crisis of the pandemic an imperative to act in line with our values within our archaeological community. We founded a mutual aid organization to support archaeology students around the world, adopting Sportula’s microgrants framework, and tapped into our collective and wide-ranging expertise to create tools for improved disciplinary praxis (Black Trowel Collective, 2021b, 2021c) as well as archaeologically informed interventions into current social projects (Black Trowel Collective, 2021a).

If we understand humans as “naturally” selfish and competitive, we will inevitably fail to recognize the multiple ways in which humans and non-humans build—and have always built—meaningful relationships based on care and love, including relationships with other species. The evolution of dogs from wolves offers us a classic example. It is accepted that domestic dogs derived from wolves in Eurasia (likely in several places and times; see Bergström et al., 2022), around 40,000 to 15,000 years ago. Until recently, wolves were thought to have been commensal scavengers approaching

human settlements for food left over from hunting, until humans found a use for them in hunting and protection and initiated intentional domestication practices. Current research, in contrast, emphasizes the *social* nature of dog domestication, with animals valued for their companionship and personal connection as much as any functional contribution to the campsite (see, for example, the dingo in Australian Aboriginal communities: Brumm and Koungoulos, 2022; Koungoulos, 2021). Similarly, Kanne (2022) draws on material from the Hungarian Bronze Age (circa 2300–1500 BC) to make a powerful case that horses directly impacted human modes of social and political organization. Horses provided humans with increased mobility and access that translated into new human-horse experiences, shaping the negotiation of political authority. She argues that horses were crucial to *resistance* to centralized control and social inequality. Her work offers a hopeful counterargument to sexist, patriarchal, and elitist narratives of the European Bronze Age as a time of men riding horses to accumulate wealth and women, resulting in the emergence of hierarchical complex societies (Frieman et al., 2019).

### COUNTER-MYTH 3: THERE HAVE BEEN, AND ARE, MANY KINDS OF ORDERS THAT WORK AGAINST ENTRENCHED INEQUALITY, CAPITALISM, AND THE STATE

Archaeologists of all people should understand that the vast majority of human experiences for at least 90% of the existence of our species and across most of the world existed outside of the coercive control of state structures. This does not mean there was no power or authority in the past, but that the form this power took was radically different from the arbitrary and violent nature of the power relations inherent to the state (Borck and Clark, 2021, 253; Borck and Clark, 2023, 205). Further, archaeological evidence suggests people in the past had far greater scope to negotiate, transform, and adapt to new and varied forms of social organization before we became “stuck” in the modern colonial order (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021).

The perceived inevitability of our imperial world order not only spills into the past but occludes our many possible futures as well. Museums in imperial centers in the Global North enforce a hegemonic control over the past through the violent theft of cultural heritage. Curators continue to wrangle over whether so-called universal museums represent spaces of wonder where people can learn to respect cultural diversity or straightforward hangovers of imperialist conquest, violent massacre of Indigenous peoples, and subsequent looting and destruction of their cultural heritage (Mackenzie et al., 2020; Savoy, 2022). These institutions take their authority from the patronizing claim that in this single global narrative, archaeology is an “objective pursuit” whose totalizing temporality is universal. This then further marginalizes and discredits subaltern colonized people and otherwise marginalized or minoritized communities. Black and Indigenous storytelling modalities that are spiraling, counterfactual, ironic, reversed, or otherwise unorthodox (see Whyte, 2018) are dismissed as speculative, impractical, and inimical to disciplinary progress.

This colonial temporality denies Indigenous concepts of time that interpenetrate in complex ways and are frequently intergenerational, so the past and the future are intimately connected through people, landscape, and things (Barwick, 2023; Bracknell, 2023; Hernández-Castillo, 2022; Porsanger and Virtanen, 2019, 292–93). Currently, as the world faces increasing threats from climate disaster, war, and population displacement and hostility, we find hopeful alternatives in Indigenous knowledge systems, such as the call to center “care” in archaeology (cf. Gupta et al., 2023; Supernant et al., 2020; see also Marshall, 2021) and in forms of radical autonomous organizing against divisive regimes (cf. Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013).

As anarchist archaeologists with diverse experience conducting research into spatial environments and models of social organization across a variety of temporalities and geographies, we are familiar with possible alternative orders, and we do not shy from joining calls for the radical overhauls necessary to improve global social equitability and environmental justice. Such overhauls include the abolition of prisons (Kaba, 2021) and national borders, which persist in segregating people according to racist nationalism (El-Enany, 2020; Walia, 2021), dividing humanity “in space, in law, and in thought” (Bradley and Noronha, 2022, 17).

Recent attempts have aimed at crafting an interpretive approach to archaeology that is more relational and more respectful of Indigenous concepts and values, and that integrates a rebalancing of what, exactly, is taken seriously as “theory” (Flexner, 2022a; Holland-Lulewicz, 2021; Marshall, 2021; Sanger et al., 2021). This work simultaneously demonstrates the difficulties of writing our way out of the fundamental assumptions that shape archaeology as well as the subject positions of academic theorists within (settler) colonial institutions and lives. We are living in the master’s house, and doing the best we can with the tools at hand; but until global theory production is less centralized, scholarly conventions still constrain us.

Following from this, archaeologists like to claim that we are storytellers. But whose stories are we telling, and for whom? What would ceding narrative sovereignty to descendant communities who stand to gain or lose the most from their participation in interpreting their ancestors’ stories look like? Contributions to Gould et al.’s (2020) and Schneider and Panich’s (2022) recent volumes offer us some possibilities. For instance, Laluk’s (2022) contribution to the latter volume challenges the marginalizing categories archaeologists use for Ndee (and many Indigenous) settlements—terms like “low visibility, highly mobile, ephemeral.” Among some Ndee communities, cultural heritage resources were and are partly managed through avoidance; villages were cleaned up when leaving, camouflaging settlements to prevent detection by impinging US settlers and their genocidal military (and, later, their archaeologists’ surveys; Laluk, 2022, 75). Today, the tenets of avoidance are also maintained in respecting ancient places and materials; the highest form of respect is to avoid these spaces. Starting from a position of respectful avoidance, with case-by-case permitting by



Ndee communities for tactical engagement with repatriation, serves to strengthen Ndee identification, their narrative sovereignty, and stories of persistence rather than archaeology's preferred "terminal narratives" (see also Laluk et al., 2022).

Nakamura (2022) argues provocatively in a review of *The Dawn of Everything* that Graeber and Wengrow's quest to usurp the "grand narrative" of history merely replaces it with their own grand narrative, changing the protagonists and antagonists in a rehabilitative search for freedom in the past. If we want to truly and materially decolonize our field rather than trade in moves to innocence and rhetorical games (Tuck and Yang, 2012), then we must encourage contradictory voices and cease striving for teleological narratives told by important men at great centers within a totalizing temporal framework.

Stepping away from grand narratives liberates us to participate in the counterfactual dialogue Whyte (2018) promotes, opening a way to simultaneously engaging with our ancestors and descendants. How do we return the gifts given to us by our ancestors, and how do we become good ancestors ourselves? For enfranchised and privileged white archaeologists, Whyte (following Davis and Todd, 2017) makes the more discomfiting observation that *this is the world* that white ancestors imagined and deeply desired for their descendants. As Krenak (2020, 66) observes, complaining about the world we have is pointless if we don't think about what we're building for generations to follow. If we want to foreground many orders of time, space, and society, that requires a material relinquishment of control over narrative, over heritage, and over land. To create new pasts and futures, colonial fantasies of rigid, racialized hierarchical order (really a nightmare for untold billions) must not only be diminished but actively destroyed. We invite you to join us as saboteurs of white ancestors' dreams. Detonating their singular future will free the myriad others that are possible.

## COUNTER-MYTH 4: ALL ANYONE HAS IS THE PRESENT, WHAT CAN WE DO NOW?

In the shortening shadow of climate chaos, rapidly rising racist nationalism, and ongoing armed conflicts, it can feel desperate and even futile to try to address problems that the 24-hour news media constantly reminds us are "unprecedented." But we, along with thousands of other activists and scholars, urge a more hopeful outlook (see, for example, Harms, 2022; Morgan, 2021; Tsing, 2015). Haraway (2022), argues that the division of past from present is a "frontier myth" that inhibits our ability to build powerful, more-than-human relations of care that extend through kin and country, bodies and technologies, to unplanned futures and unexpected generations. Ironically, the future capitalism forces us to reckon with is a *shallow* one. As archaeologists who reckon with more or less deep pasts, it is also for us to think not only of the immediate years to come but how our actions in the present can shape the way things might look hundreds or even thousands of years from now (Harrison et al., 2020; Mrozowski, 2014). If capitalism has had a few centuries to wreak planetary havoc, we need to think on a similar or even more expansive scale to imagine, create, and bring about more desirable, just, and plentiful-for-all alternatives. Importantly, though, we need to explicitly move away from critiques of the present focused on incrementalist tinkering. A hopeful future needs to be based on a radical past and radical action in the present.

All any of us has is *right now!* This might seem like a strange position for archaeologists to take, but, as anarchists, we find the present particularly hopeful because it represents survival (if not flourishing), and it is full of possibility. There has never been a better opportunity to enact real change than now. We draw inspiration from the words of Lourdes Huanka, president of the FENMUCARINAP (<https://www.fenmucarinap.com/>), expressed in the framework of 2022 protests against Boluarte in Perú: "Somos semillas autóctonas que estamos sembrados en toda nuestra patria del Abya Yala, en todos los lugares, volveremos a brotar, volveremos a salir en las primaveras porque ... no nos van a terminar masacrando" (We are autochthonous seeds, sown in all our lands of Abya Yala, in every place; we will sprout again, we will return in the spring because ... they are not going to get us massacred) (Interview for La Base #2 × 63—Perú: *masacre contra el pueblo*).

Ruth Gilmore (2022, 304) has long argued that scholars can and should make active interventions "because we have the precious opportunity to think in cross-cutting ways and to find both promising continuities and productive breaks in the mix of people, histories, political and economic forces, and landscapes that make up forgotten places." We certainly find ourselves hopeful that more and more of our colleagues are following Gilmore's imperative to be active in the forgotten places where they work: the cemeteries of formerly enslaved communities revisualized in immersive media (Gonzalez-Tennant, 2023), the closely guarded landscapes of Indigenous resistance and thrivance (Acebo, 2021), the abandoned spaces where activists came together to fight against nuclear militarism and war profiteering (Dézsi 2023), imagining alternative futures in the process. There is immense potential for solidarity-building within these forgotten places between the communities with whom these investigators work. There has never been a better time than now for archaeologists to follow Gilmore's call to counter the wreckages of racial capitalism and organize. At our best, we can serve as ambassadors of forgotten places, past and present, linking discontinuous assemblages of people together in the common search for futures that capital refuses to admit we might imagine.

Much of the literature on "futures" tends toward the apocalyptic and sees collapse—of societies and the environment—as an existential threat for the whole human species. Yet anthropologists and archaeologists demonstrated some time ago (e.g., McAnany and Yoffee, 2009; Overholtzer, 2013) that apparent "collapses" are largely collapses of the elite. Collapse refers to the end of monumental architecture, large aggregations of built structures, elaborate trade goods, or luxurious diets. For many, or perhaps most, people, what archaeologists interpret as collapse in the past represented the end of forced *corvée* labor, dissolution of standing armies, or rejection of a ruling class and associated ideologies (e.g., Borck and Clark, 2023, 201–5, 213). Instead of associating apparent collapse with disaster, violence, and ruin, perhaps we should be thinking of the opportunities

afforded to most people when the ruling elite are finally toppled. Rather than being scared of the fall, we suggest, following Krenak (2020, 62), to “put our creative and critical capacity to use making some colorful parachutes to slow the fall, turn it into something exciting and edifying—after all, we like nothing more than fun and games, enjoying our time on this earth.”

Nevertheless, billions of people (and nonhumans) on the planet currently live in apocalyptic conditions, from active warzones to poverty-ravaged suburbs, to towns, villages, and whole countries under water or on fire because of climate change (Wutich et al., 2022; Zhang, 2023). Indeed, some Indigenous and Black communities argue that the world already ended for their ancestors five centuries ago, with the arrival of settler colonialism, enslavement, and capitalism to their homelands (Krenak, 2020, 69; Whyte, 2018, 227). The world ended, and yet their children are here; and *their* children will be here after the world of capital has ended (e.g., Jamail and Rushworth, 2022). If we want meaningful futures, we must fight for those futures in the present.

As anarchists, we invite you to consider the collapse of capitalism and colonialism as a hopeful prospect instead of merely something to fear. Beyond the cruel capitalist understanding of resilience (and despite the overuse of this concept in some contexts), resilience can be perceived as the intrinsic strength of individuals and communities to fight back against powers that oppress them, or kill them, or steal their stuff and pollute their water. This is not to say we should naively assume that everything will work out for the best as climate change slowly (and in many cases, quite quickly) destroys food systems, political decisions hinder human mobility, and demagogues encourage a closing of minds and spirits around the world. Anarchist practices of mutual aid, collective action, and care must be enacted to ease the transition for those most vulnerable. Anarchist archaeologies imagine hopeful rather than dystopian futures, but the latter are still *possible* (Flexner, 2021). As we have noted throughout, anarchy is about choice, and we must actively choose the futures we want based on the pasts we know and imagine.

## TOWARD A CONCLUSION

Over the preceding pages, we've done our best to argue that it is not enough to know what has happened in the past; we must use that understanding to better the world around us and plan for the future. Thus, any review of the achievements and possibilities of archaeology in 2022 should also give us new paths to tread and new visions of archaeological practices in and well beyond 2023. Here, we take that imperative to write some concluding thoughts aimed less at summing up 2022 and more at better positioning ourselves, our colleagues, and our discipline for a complex future.

We currently live in a world where over 103 million people globally are displaced from their homes.<sup>1</sup> Between 2008 and 2023, the number of people in the UK who regularly rely on food banks has increased from just under 26,000 to three million (Clark, 2023). In the US, the figure stands at 53 million people.<sup>2</sup> These are two of the wealthiest countries on the planet! In our own professions, lab technicians and museum staff are striking because their wages are so low they can barely afford to live (Adams, 2022; Velie, 2022). These are not unfortunate, standalone instances of suffering; they are related manifestations of inequality—“sites,” in archaeological terms—caused by the current order of social and political relations: capitalism and colonialism. We advocate an activist practice oriented toward equality (Politopoulos et al., *in press*) and more-horizontal forms of human and nonhuman flourishing, and believe anarchist methodologies will help us to achieve this.

One reason that people react so dramatically to terms like “anarchy” is a deeply ingrained assumption that the power and authority of the state exist to temper the greed and violence inherent to “human nature.” This is both a weird Christian hangover and an unflattering reflection of the kinds of people who became influential in academic circles during the last two centuries. Whenever we whisper “anarchism,” people scream, “Disorder! Chaos! Everyone for themselves! Think of the wars and violence that would cause!” But capitalism and colonialism have directly caused increasing war and destruction during the last 500 years. Such events are naturalized as inevitable or necessary in the name of “security” and “resource management.” The harm caused by capitalism and colonialism can only be healed by mutual aid and solidarity.

Archaeology in 2022 exists within a context of struggles for unionization throughout the discipline; strikes among academics of all rank, from graduate students to professors; poor experiences of early career researchers (Brami et al., 2023); unmet museum-worker needs (cf. Raicovich, 2021, 154–68); and lack of support and long-term career stability among cultural resource management technicians while their industry continues to grow (Äikäs et al., 2023; Altschul and Klein, 2022; Black Trowel Collective, 2021d). We need to critically analyze how and where archaeologists are trained, where they work, and how these institutions replicate systems of exclusion and hierarchical structures. Those privileged with tenure or other forms of job security must put effort into creating genuine and realistic opportunities for our nontenured and precariously employed colleagues to actively participate. Everyone should be in a union, even if unions are often politically challenging (especially for anarchists!). In short, specific disciplinary concerns for archaeology (about professional precarity, our field's climate footprint, or ongoing problems with gendered and racialized violence, among many others) both reflect and contribute to broader struggles of global import. Humanity is trapped in a neoliberal capitalist system that decides what is valued and what is not, who is valued and who is not. As archaeologists, we have access to a unique and complex record of social practice, relations, and persistence stretching back millennia, and it offers hope and inspiration as we navigate an unequal present and an uncertain future. The only way forward is together. “Solidarity” is both a call to arms and a method of action.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.feedingamerica.org/about-us/press-room/53-million-received-help-2021>.

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