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Save the Date for Future Mourning: Prefiguration and Heritage

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At play within Lewis Borck's "Constructing the Future History: Prefiguration as Historical Epistemology and the Chronopolitics of Archaeology" (2019) and Cornelius Holtorf's response, "Heritage Futures, Prefiguration and World Heritage" (2020) are ways to understand the future through our actions in the present. A response to these articles that considers heritage, climate change and the future should probably begin with impending doom, rising tides, shattering storms, a recent, heartfelt loss of cultural heritage. How do we understand a future that extends from this excruciating present without incorporating mechanisms for mourning? Let me, instead, draw very large parentheses around and an underline beneath climate change (climate change). Perhaps bold too? (**climate change**) This is our catastrophe, our great challenge, the change that changes everything. It is happening, and then…?

As archaeologists we should be well-versed in the "and then." As archaeologists we know that all is change, everything is always changing, endless battleships of seriation diagrams dancing like sugar plum fairies around our heads. I always wondered if, at that last, pointy tip of the diagram, there was a sound like a slow exhale and a small puff of smoke as the artefact transforms into archaeology. The breathy sighs of material culture as they pass from memory. At least, from the memory of antiquity, as they become *archaeological*. And climate change has that very pointy tip at our throats. Well, to be honest, at the throats of our children. Or perhaps the throats of children far away in other countries where they don't have a fat buffer of colonial treasure and can't afford turrets at the coastlines and military flights with payloads of vaccinations. But even tucked inside these bastions of wealth and privilege, we are shedding what we call "cultural heritage" in polite society at a fairly remarkable rate. Of course, this loss does not compare to the great ravening mouth of development-concrete-fast-capitalism which pays the bills for many of our students, friends, colleagues. In the Great Concerns of capitalism and climate change, archaeology's rank is debatable.

It has been argued that these kinds of loss/rescue narratives do not enchant (Perry 2019), that such attitudes are cliché and that archaeology is a renewable resource (Holtorf 2001), but I can't quite manage the ambivalence that these stances seem to encourage. As Borck notes, continual production does not balance continual loss in a zero-sum game (pers. comm. December 21, 2020). I am not sure I could keep a straight face explaining to local people that their beloved landmark was going to crash into the sea in the next 5–10 years, but no big deal, right? *It's all heritage anyway*.

The question remains—are we able to manoeuvre our expertise into meaningful discussions of "and then…?" Borck (2019) discusses the management of cultural heritage and the construction of "future history" in terms of the preservation and inscription of UNESCO World Heritage sites and prefigurative action within archaeology. He and other anarchist members of the Black Trowel Collective (including myself) argue that we must attend to present practice to understand what kinds of futures we are forming by reinforcing narratives that support nationalism and the state. Our "and then" is actively being forged in present action, and archaeology has made a study of state societies while remaining relatively silent regarding heterarchies and egalitarianism in the past. Further, we have run our excavations as colonialist military incursions and our rescue operations as extractive, capitalist businesses. James Flexner (2020) substantiates prefiguration by arguing for a degrowth movement within archaeology, offering a way out of modes of archaeology that are complicit with increasing the instrumentalization of our discipline, stratification within society, and environmental destruction.

In his response to Borck's (2019) article, Holtorf aptly summarises prefigurative practice in that "it does not only matter what we decide today in relation to heritage but also how we reach these decisions" (2020, 3). Many archaeologists already incorporate elements of anarchism within their thought and practice. Terms such as "prefiguration" can connect these practices to a wider critical literature and to helpful praxis to improve methodologies. Though Holtorf agrees in principle with Borck's argument, he disputes the inscription of UNESCO World Heritage sites as a case study. He downplays their influence in prefiguring future history, instead pointing to individual experiences with social and experiential technologies as more impactful regarding the construction of future histories. Of note, Holtorf cites VR and immersive experiences as key to this impact. As a digital archaeologist I concur, but I wonder about the telescoping of perceived responsibility and impact between individual agency and national institutions. This is usually a strategy within neoliberalism, to ascribe personal responsibility to deflect from structural change and has been particularly pernicious within climate change arguments. Other liberal components of Holtorf's argument are meaningfully critiqued by Borck (2020), such as the invocation of identity politics and that inscribing egalitarian sites would homogenize their meaning.

Finally, Holtorf (2020) describes the positives regarding the World Heritage Convention, and undoubtably there are many. My experiences with regard to the inscription of the World Heritage site of Al Zubarah in Qatar have led to my ambivalence regarding the process, some of which has resonance in work by Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico (2013; Rico 2017). As an archaeologist employed by the Qatar Islamic Archaeology and Heritage Project (QIAH), I worked to further a nationalistic narrative that naturalised and inscribed the monarchy, used exploitive labour practices that employed large teams of men from war-torn and economically deprived countries, and contributed to the heritage-washing of a country with a problematic international reputation in support of a World Heritage inscription. These issues are too complex to fully unpack within the space of a response article, but I remain sceptical of the power of UNESCO inscriptions as anything but nation-building. The contrast was particularly acute when compared to working with the Origins of Doha and Qatar project funded by the Qatar Foundation, which was more involved with local stakeholders, outreach, training archaeology students, creating Arabic translations of the research, developing school materials that acted against colonialism, and attempting to record heritage before intensive urban construction destroyed the remains (Morgan et al. forthcoming). Yet I am less interested in debating the merits of the World Heritage Convention than of furthering the conversation regarding the use of anarchist concepts within archaeology and heritage to reconfigure the discipline and ourselves.

Borck's original article was a much-needed anarchist intervention into the realm of cultural heritage management. That it was met by a liberal stance is unsurprising; in the past this likely would have been my response as well. We are trained in an archaeology in and of *Empire*, the organised destruction under which we all live (Bergman and Montgomery 2017; Hardt and Negri 2000). This regime can also be called "capitalist realism" wherein "capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" (Fisher 2009). Unlearning liberalism and capitalist realism is a highly unsettling but joyful personal and professional reconfiguration, a lifelong process with no endpoint and arguably few academic rewards. It is difficult for archaeologists to think about the past in non-neoliberal terms, and to organise our work in prefigurative ways that prioritise egalitarian modes of working (but see Eddisford and Morgan 2018). Yet archaeologists are critical in lifting the veil of capitalist realism—we know that we have not always lived in societies organised by neoliberal principles; this knowledge is crucial to those who have been trying to imagine new ways to live in the shadow of Empire. As previously mentioned, many archaeologists are already thinking and working in anarchist ways (*sensu* Graeber 2009) and may be interested in being connected to the growing critical literature that draws from anarchism in practice and interpretation. For a short example of this, I will discuss a theme within the recent *Heritage Futures* (Harrison et al. 2020), that of loss.

First, it might be worth considering some defining characteristics of heritage practice: that of the necessity of transmuting sites and artefacts into assets to manage, a structure to organise these assets, and the proposed necessity of managing and controlling this heritage (Carman 2005). Within the instrumentalization and commodification that seems inherent within heritage practice it is difficult to imagine anarchist interventions. This difficulty may merely reflect our larger participation in late capitalism and the reification of nationalistic narratives reinforced by funders or even local stakeholders (González-Ruibal et al. 2018). Harrison notes that heritage can be described as a "practice of caring for the future" (2020, 42). A productive example of this future care through an anarchist lens can be seen in the formation of the Museum of Care, one of the legacies of the tragic death of David Graeber in 2020. The Museum of Care is an anarchist project with the goal to "produce and maintain social relationships." From the website: "the Museum of Care wants to rethink what it is to be a museum or an artist, and to produce spaces for freedom and care rather than monuments." The Museum of Care has its genesis in joyful mourning, memorialisation through creative interventions. There are echoes of this practice in "creative destruction" as described by Penrose (2017) with regard to the ruins of capitalism and Rico (2016; 2020) in understanding the heritage of destruction.

This mode of joyful mourning can be traced through much of anarchist thinking; it is perhaps inevitable that anarchists must often mourn, as egalitarian collective action has repeatedly crashed against the apparatus of state power. As anarchist and organiser O'Donoghue states, it "is inevitable that those of us who struggle, who revolt against the crushing daily violence of the state, capital, and all existing hierarchies, will be put in the cross hairs of repression" (2017, 453). In their discussion of the global organization of militant struggles for racial, economic and environmental justice, Hart discusses a "musical march" organized and conducted by students in honour of Rekia Boyd, a twenty-two-year-old black woman killed by a police officer in Chicago. The march was energetic and joyful, as the students "sang, danced, drummed and recited chants" to honour the dead lost to state violence (Hart 2017, 27). This march was met with harassment by the police, and Hart describes the intermingling of joyful

commemoration, sorrow, anger and resistance: “Let grief be part of the movement-building process for which we allow hallowed space, and let it build within us the compassion, wisdom, and rage that propel us into new battles” (2017, 34).

In *Heritage Futures*, professionals discussed loss, and “letting go” within museum and cultural heritage settings in general and in the specific case of Orford Ness (Bartolini and DeSilvey 2020, 353). The workshop held by the Heritage Futures team produced themes regarding storytelling and communication, and there was an acknowledgement of the wishes of the Orford Ness volunteers. These volunteers understood that not everything could be preserved, but felt that there should be a record kept regarding material remains. Our expertise is to produce this record with astonishing precision, but how does this constitute care without acknowledgement of transformation? In these discussions of managed heritage loss there does not seem to be a consideration of mourning.

We return to the hammer above our heads, in bold underline parentheses. Much of the uncertainty regarding climate change is removed. While we may be able to clinically discuss the proper management of ruination, we also should acknowledge our role in this process of grieving. Archaeologists have long studied burial rituals, destruction, and ruin; we, the experts in and caretakers of death, decay, destruction. Little of this has translated into our active participation in the destruction of cultural heritage and current heritage practices surrounding loss. As Moshenska (2020) notes, archaeologists have repeatedly failed as allies and as such are sidelined in public disputes regarding preservation, even when they agree with the protestors. Regardless of our own ambivalence regarding change and the loss or retention of heritage, participating in community reception of heritage loss and active construction of joyful mourning and creative destruction rather than retreating into a perceived uncertainty or clinical management gives us power to prefigure our future. The stated commitment of the Industrial Workers of the World, an international labor union, is to “form[ing] the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.” As sites fall into the sea, dry up with a lack of ground water, are exposed as glacial ice melts away, and bulldozed and sealed with tons of concrete, our considered response should be to collect and actualize appropriate methods to process current and future loss.

So, save the date for future mourning. There will be Neolithic burial rites, a rally, and a puppet show. We will all watch together as the henge finally succumbs to the sea. We will cry, we will laugh, and we will demand accountability and change, and the end of Empire. Because the best way to mourn is, obviously, to organize.

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