

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Heritage as liberation

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Fryer Heritage as Liberation

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Abstract

Why aren't archaeologists engaging in more substantive heritage work, and how might we do so? This article offers a conceptual framework for mobilizing our praxis toward the achievement of collective emancipation—what I am calling *heritage as liberation*. Heritage as liberation provides a mechanism for reckoning. It asks us to reevaluate our motivations and more clearly articulate what we stand for as archaeologists and heritage practitioners. I offer reflections on recent attempts by archaeologists to organize toward a just future, sketch what I think a practice of heritage as liberation offers that agenda, and then analyze the Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) heritage work as an example of what is possible when we practice heritage as liberation. I close the article with thoughts on where archaeology stands in attempts to repair and redress past wrongs and on the range of contexts that might see an emancipatory heritage praxis enacted. [archaeological theory, heritage, liberation, praxis, Equal Justice Initiative]

Resumen

¿Por qué los arqueólogos no se están involucrando en trabajo más sustancioso de patrimonio, y cómo pudiéramos hacerlo? Este artículo ofrece un marco conceptual para movilizar nuestra praxis hacia el logro de la emancipación colectiva –lo que llamo *patrimonio como liberación*–. El patrimonio como liberación provee un mecanismo de confrontación. Nos llama a reevaluar nuestras motivaciones y más claramente a articular lo que representamos como arqueólogos o profesionales del patrimonio. Ofrezco reflexiones sobre intentos recientes por arqueólogos para organizarse hacia

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un futuro justo; delinear lo que pienso que una práctica de patrimonio como liberación ofrece esa agenda, y luego analizo la Iniciativa de Justicia Igualitaria (EJI) de trabajo patrimonial como un ejemplo de lo que es posible cuando practicamos patrimonio como liberación. Cierro el artículo con pensamientos sobre dónde la arqueología está en relación con intentos de reparar y recorrer los errores pasados y el rango de contextos en que podría verse puesta en práctica una táctica de patrimonio emancipatorio. [teoría arqueológica, patrimonio, liberación, praxis, Iniciativa de Justicia Igualitaria]

This article has been a long time in the making—unfolding as the movement for Black lives shakes the foundations of racist and colonialist governance here in the United States (and worldwide). I first presented the seeds of what would become this and a series of other interrelated essays in 2016, then years into the movement and staring down the barrel at the impending election of Donald Trump to the US presidency. In anticipation of the problems a Trump administration might cause, a few archaeologists created a Facebook group called “Archaeologists against Trump.” The early core organizers of this group were archaeologists who had long championed political activism and engagement in their own work and scholarship. In this moment, they highlighted issues like the No to the Dakota Access Pipeline (NoDAPL) movement, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, threats to historic preservation legislature, climate change, and dangers facing scientific practice under the new administration. The group members did not shy away from linking their professional identities to personal political commitments—commitments they saw as affronted by an impending Trump administration. From early summer to election season, the group grew to around 1,000 members.

A few days after election day, thousands of anthropologists gathered at the 115th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). The AAA meeting’s inaugurating keynote speaker, Melissa Harris-Perry (a professor of political science and public intellectual), probed the hundreds of anthropologists in the auditorium who were still visibly unsettled by the election’s results. Harris-Perry reproached the crowd with cool composure: How is it that they had found themselves shocked at the election’s outcome? She then delivered an unapologetic speech

that rebuked the crowd for their (presumed) complacency, apathy, and misguided lip service. She declared, rightly, that it should not have taken the spectacle of the president-elect to drive people to action.

Cultural anthropologist Mariam Durrani (2016) shared this sentiment. Following the meeting, she expressed her disappointment in her colleagues who, although usually at least harboring silent disapproval, failed to voice their concerns about the rampant racism, sexism, and Islamophobia of Trump's campaign prior to the election. Only in the aftermath did they appear to emerge indignant (see also Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre, 2020, 68–71). Archaeologists against Trump, though, had done exactly what Durrani called for: they had opposed Trump's politics writ large—his tactics, discourse, and blatantly prejudiced agendas. But their aims had not initially targeted the overarching systemic issues that enabled the possibility of a Trump presidency, as Harris-Perry's keynote highlighted. Indeed, Trump's campaign was neither the first, last, nor most egregious example of this country's deep-seated racism, sexism, and xenophobia.

After the meeting, the Facebook group's membership spiked to over 4,000.¹ And in light of the lost election, they rebranded, shifting their angle from admonishing Trump to a more generalized rally toward social action. The new Archaeologists for a Just Future (AJF) carried the tagline “the past deserves a better future and the future deserves a better past.” It was an admirable pivot.

Still, in the aftermath of the rebranding, I found myself suspicious: Who were all these archaeologists suddenly ready to revolt? How many were actively working with Black, Indigenous, and other oppressed peoples in their fights for equality, sovereignty, human dignity? How many have stood by when the rights of local communities were violated in the name of protecting “cultural heritage” or “science”? (And did it even matter if they were here now?)

Almost immediately following their rebranding, AJF voted on and adopted a new logo: a raised fist motif, grasping a trowel (Figure 1). The motif embodied activist affect, nodding rather

conspicuously to archaeology. The image reads most generously as an icon of coalitional solidarity. The raised fist is an almost ubiquitous symbol for solidarity and civil liberties that occupies a long history among revolutionary and activist groups. Even so, the use of the motif unsettled me. It wasn't offensive; it just felt impertinent. The appropriation of a symbol that in the US context, at least, invokes images of the Black Power, American Indian, women's liberation, and United Farm Workers movements by a general collective of archaeologists felt baseless. Indeed, I had to ask myself: What was the motif meant to invoke? Archaeologist power? But that can't be right. Archaeologists are not a group against whom systematic violence has been or continues to be perpetrated. In fact, archaeology as a field could be characterized as an "ontologically racist" one that has regularly positioned marginalized practitioners to bear the burden of its antiracist work—when such work is bothered with (Blakey, 2020; Franklin et al., 2020, 756; Fryer and Dedrick, this section).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

To be clear, my aim is in no way to disparage my colleagues. After all, I joined the group, too, and over the years have participated in more than one initiative where a similar motif has been used.² More importantly, I pursued a career in archaeology because I believed—and still believe—that the discipline is capable of contributing to the formation of a more just world. Nonetheless, I'm stuck somewhere between relief that people appear ready to show up and frustrated awe that it took so long. It's a wariness. And a weariness. For some among us, this struggle has absolutely been at the forefront (see Flewellen et al., 2021; Society of Black Archaeologists, 2020). But the continued marginalization of community-based and advocacy-oriented research in archaeology, and anthropology broadly, as well as the still shamefully low numbers of nonwhite archaeologists in the discipline (White and Draycott, 2020), immediately suggests archaeologists have a long way to go toward the just future we now seem collectively invested in imagining. What do we stand for as archaeologists and heritage practitioners? And can we even be considered so united a community as to share such coordinated aims as "a just future"? In order for us to do the work of bettering the

future and the past (whatever that may mean), we are going to have to critically evaluate what it is that motivates us. That evaluation, as I've argued elsewhere (Fryer, 2020), will depend on a willingness to attend to our own positionalities (and teach our students to do the same) through regular, prudent self-reflection as well as dialogue with critical interlocutors.

In what follows, I sketch a substantive approach to heritage practice we might activate to achieve an archaeology that lives up to the vision set forth by AJF. I call this theory *heritage as liberation*. Heritage is a mechanism of collective identity formation that “completes and elaborates upon what is missing from the past in the present” (Meskell, 2015, 2) by invoking cultural practice, anchoring itself to things, and affectively bonding people to historical narratives from which they form sociopolitical consciousness. Archaeology is *one* form of heritage practice—regardless of whether we actively pursue it as such (Fryer and Raczek, 2020, 8; Rizvi, 2020). Heritage as liberation requires archaeologists, as well as the larger gamut of applied anthropologists and heritage practitioners working across adjacent fields, to reorient their motivations for engaging in this work.

Substantive theories, like the one I propose here, provide “working models” for action; they are what we might otherwise term *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive* theories. They are transferable, rather than generalizable, and they prioritize context—a value aligned with many modes of anthropological inquiry. There is no limit to the number of contexts that may be characterized as similar enough for the applicability of a substantive theory. This means prescribed actions for one context can be brought to bear on contexts of a similar nature without eliding their respective nuances, since they don't seek to draw generalizable conclusions. Rather, they encourage context-based, difference-conscious action. But heritage as liberation is not only difference-conscious: it seeks to root out inequity, which at times means rebalancing scales and achieving justice through the asymmetrical application of our resources.

In the pages to come, I submit that heritage as liberation *minimally* requires: (1) substantive theorizing, (2) collaborative intervention, and (3) vision. I do not argue that heritage as liberation is the only legitimate framework for archaeological heritage practice. But I am suggesting that we can

and should expect more from the heritage practices we cultivate. To illustrate, I examine what the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a legal advocacy organization in Montgomery, Alabama, has been able to achieve in the design and implementation of their Legacy Museum and National Monument to Peace and Justice. I ask archaeologists, especially, to consider what might be possible if we directed our aims toward repair and liberation, as they did. Although I aim my discussion at archaeologists, I see heritage as liberation as a praxis that can be effectively adopted within and beyond archaeology, operating across broad regional, temporal, and disciplinary scopes. I aim to demonstrate how heritage as liberation can—and I hope will—be mobilized globally, in the face of ongoing legal and political disenfranchisement, economic and religious oppression, and the violence of maintaining unjust hierarchies of privilege.

HERITAGE AS LIBERATION

In 1994, prominent cultural critic and social theorist bell hooks released a collection of essays titled *Teaching to Transgress*. With this body of work, she made the case for “education as the practice of freedom.” In a deeply personal opening account, she recalls how she came to learn education as such. She wrote,

we learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization. . . . My teachers were enacting a revolutionary pedagogy of resistance that was profoundly anticolonial. (hooks, 1994, 2)

She argued that for young Black girls like herself in the Jim Crow South, education was its most meaningful as a practice of freedom. Education as the practice of freedom emphasized critical awareness, respectful engagement, survivance, and deep (un)learning for the sake of reimagining the possibilities of one’s present social position and the future of the collective. It was a freedom gained from pedagogical emphasis on cultivating power through knowledge rather than indoctrinating, disciplining, and dominating societally othered bodies and minds. Lower Brule Sioux

historian Nick Estes (2019, 20) chronicles similar sentiments among Lakota elders who created and attended Native “survival schools” in the wake of the genocidal assimilation work undertaken by the American Indian boarding school system (see also Davis, 2013; Montgomery, this section).

hooks’s use of “as” in the statement “education as the practice of freedom” emphasizes the substance: the fundamental underpinnings of the concept being expressed. Acting here as a preposition, “as” denotes that the two nouns (or noun phrases) that bracket it are not only related or dependent: the thing that precedes the “as” is acting in the role, function, or character of the thing that follows it. The second noun is therefore fundamental to the first but does not constrain its range of possibilities (like “is” would). hooks’s freedom praxis addresses not only how we educate but for what purpose—education about what and toward what end. The philosopher John Rawls made a similar move when he constructed his now famous archetype: justice as fairness. For Rawls (1958, 164), fairness did not accompany but rather was the fundamental ideal of justice. Justice as fairness is constructed and practiced as a family of political principles that seek to level inequalities where social hierarchies confer impermissible benefits to certain classes of people. In 1985, he wrote, “justice as fairness as a political conception is practical, not metaphysical or epistemological . . . it presents itself not as a conception of justice that is true, but one that can serve” (Rawls, 1985, 230).³ Thus, hooks’s “education as the practice of freedom” and Rawls’s “justice as fairness” signal important philosophical orientations that make action-oriented rather than descriptive moves. Heritage as liberation does the same.

The close links between education and heritage work make applying pedagogical concepts like “education as the practice of freedom” to heritage appealing. In fact, some scholars have directly linked heritage literacy with collective and individual pride and student success. Joyce King (2006, 338), for example, argues for a pedagogy based on diaspora literacy (culturally informed knowledge) and heritage knowledge (group memory). What she calls “heritage literacy” relies on a praxis that “nurtures human freedom” and that counteracts “alienating ideological knowledge that obstructs the right to be literate in one’s own heritage and denies people the rights of ‘cultural

citizenship.” Scholars documenting the uses and abuses of heritage in nationalistic endeavors have also pointed to the essential interplay between heritage work and education—an interplay that carries with it the potential both to colonize and domesticate (Bahrani, 1998; Kohl, 1995) and to decolonize and liberate (Liebmann and Rizvi, 2008; Smith, 2012).

Laurajane Smith, a prolific critic of archaeological heritage practice, also relied heavily on “as” constructions in her foundational text *Uses of Heritage* (Smith 2006). She offered at least nine characterizations of heritage that relied on the word “as”: as discourse (5), as experience (45), as identity (48), as intangible (56), as memory (61), as process (65), as performance (66), as community networking (265), and, more generally, as authorized (versus subaltern). Building on Smith’s work on heritage as process and Emma Waterton’s (2010) work on heritage as discourse, Ryan Trimm (2018, 474–75) argues that it is also worthwhile to explore heritage as trope—that is, the etymological emergence of heritage and its “hidden resonances and lurking presuppositions.” Together, these works provide important alternatives to the idea that heritage is a thing imbued with innate value due, for instance, to its antiquity.

But these configurations do not function in the same way that hooks’s and Rawls’s statements do. hooks and Rawls reorient the conversation toward motivations. In Smith’s, Waterton’s, and Trimm’s configurations, the *as* functions to equate; it could be replaced with *is*: heritage is a process, heritage is a discourse, heritage is a performance, and so on. With the exception perhaps of “authorized,” these configurations provide descriptive characterizations but avoid value judgments. By contrast, in arguing for heritage *as* liberation, I do not suggest that heritage *is* liberation. Rather, I submit that heritage work ought to be made more substantive, motivated to serve the aims of collective liberation.

What Liberation Means

Heritage as liberation designates an intentional, socially meaningful, decolonial, antioppressive, freedom-affirming heritage praxis. Here, I characterize liberation in two corresponding ways (following Berlin, 1970). Negatively defined, it refers to freedom from forms of oppression that rely

on mechanisms of violence, erasure, and discursive disavowal to disassociate marginalized peoples from their pasts and render them invisible in society (for a helpful discussion of disavowal in heritage practice, see Flewellen, 2017). Positively defined, it refers to the freedom of collectives to control their self-representation so long as such representations do not serve to further oppress other collectives (thus, American white supremacists do not practice heritage as liberation when they defend the legacy of the Confederacy because they are not categorically subject to systemic oppression and because doing so is an act of expressive violence against Black Americans).

Practitioners who choose heritage as liberation work to right historical injustices, promote community solidarity, revise willfully ignorant or oppressively inaccurate historical narratives, use science to unmoor racism and sexism, and make available a means for economic emancipation and revival in marginalized and dispossessed communities (from whom our discipline so frequently extracts). The idea here is that heritage holds a particular potential to redress past violence and ongoing injustice through the upturning of dominating narratives about the past, which seek (explicitly or implicitly) to keep oppressed and otherwise marginalized peoples from assuming their full humanity. In contrast, when we practice heritage as liberation we facilitate the creation of physical, intellectual, and emotional spaces for communities to confront their pasts and validate their ongoing struggles on their own terms. As Flewellen et al. (2021, 231) so eloquently put it,

We cannot in good faith claim an interest in accessing the past without serious engagement with communities that bear the unequal burden of its consequences in the present. [But, u]ltimately, harmed communities should decide what meaningful repair entails. We must remain committed to antiracist practices in archaeology that transform our disciplines and, in turn, the politics of our work. The field must be held accountable.

My aims in this article are broad in scope. Rather than provide specific prescriptions for how we hold ourselves accountable, I urge practitioners to harness their creativity in order to apply heritage as

liberation in myriad contexts. Remember: substantive theories are transferable rather than generalizable. In lieu of specific guidelines, I propose a bundle of practices composed by (1) substantive theorizing, (2) collaborative intervention, and (3) collective vision. I discuss each in turn.

Substantive Theorizing

Heritage as liberation rests first on our capacity to engage in substantive theorizing about heritage, specifically with respect to how it both participates in and can be mobilized against the dominance of unjust hierarchies in society. Substantive theory in this regard considers on-the-ground experiences of what heritage *does* (how it acts in the world and how people act through it) as opposed to engaging in abstractions about what it is, who owns it, or how it could be used. Over the last decade, some heritage scholars have started to move the conversation in this direction, emphasizing that heritage functions as a social tool—“a mirror that society holds up to itself, to reflect upon and understand itself as it undergoes change, and furthermore to manage this social change” (Lafrenz Samuels, 2018, 2). But what is this social change? Is the change positive or negative? From whose perspective? We must be more explicit about what function we propel heritage to serve in society: it must be a mirror that society holds up to itself in order to substantively “change the lived inequalities of the historically disadvantaged” (MacKinnon, 2016, 739). Otherwise, toward what ends are we theorizing?

As a response to the lacuna in heritage theorizing, Christoph Brumann (2014) advocated what he called “heritage agnosticism.” With this concept, he reassured all of us struggling to mitigate the cacophony of multivocal stakeholders that encircle heritage sites and debates that it is permissible to study heritage “without preconceived notions of what heritage must be doing” (180). I can appreciate Brumann’s desire to create space for heritage specialists who remain unsure of where their own commitments align in the heritage politics they study. But I don’t agree with it. It’s true that maintaining a judiciousness about heritage and the role it plays in society is imperative. But agnosticism about its *purpose* is a luxury that some among us simply cannot afford. There is too

much at stake. How can an agnostic stance do justice to past peoples and their experiences, do justice to today's communities who continue to have their histories ransacked and disavowed and continue to be denied redress for the violence perpetrated against them, do justice to the future as best we can imagine it? But it's no surprise that agnosticism is the perspective Brumann advocates. Archaeology and anthropology, which produce a large portion of the world's heritage practitioners (Wells, 2017), and on whose methods many otherwise trained practitioners draw, notoriously traffic in thick agnostic description (Geertz, 1973; but see Jackson, 2013).

Moreover, many archaeologists are still remiss to call themselves heritage practitioners. For example, influential Southwest archaeologist Stephen Lekson (2018, 189) wagers the criticism that (American) archaeology, "if it's doing its job, should acknowledge and respect heritage—and recognize it as the . . . use of the past in the present. [But] archaeology is History and maybe science; if it becomes heritage, than it is no longer archaeology." Although his persuasive work goes to great lengths to disentangle archaeology, heritage, history, science, and anthropology, it ultimately leaves us with the same inability to articulate *why* we do archaeology at all—if not for the sake of what it means in the present. He clarifies that history is not without its biases but that those biases can be mitigated through a commitment to objectivity and historical truth-seeking. This position, though, rests on two tenuous assumptions: first, that heritage narratives do not seek to present truthful positions; and second, that the historical questions we ask of the archaeological record will produce more truthful answers because history is supposed to "lay out all the messy details of what happened" without concern for the many ways people might come to understand it (i.e., heritage; Lekson, 2018, 185). Scholars in Lekson's thought camp ascribe to a position that pits history and science in opposition to heritage as though the pursuit of historical knowledge in the service of scientific inquiry is less political than doing heritage. Yet, when asked *why* they practice archaeology, these same scholars would likely respond with some version of "because it can tell us something about ourselves and who we are that we may not have known or understood without archaeological research." Even with specific research questions in mind, the justification for archaeology nearly

always appeals to its apparent universal (heritage) value.

Somehow heritage became a dirty word. And archaeologists, as Brumann put it, tend either to be heritage believers or heritage atheists. Agnostic archaeological descriptions, whether derived from historical or anthropological lines of inquiry, do have important baseline roles to play: first, we must assert, name, and articulate what we are witnessing in the world and, to the best of our abilities, what happened before this moment. But we've gotten to a point where we can no longer feign neutrality in the questions we ask, the interpretations we make, or the intellectual commitments we adopt (Blakey, 2020, S192n5). Archaeology as it is currently practiced is always already heritage work. Doing archaeology without concern for what work it does in the world is a luxury. Can we afford it? We've got to look ourselves in that mirror and admit that what we are doing is making heritage. And we ought to be making heritage substantive.

A liberatory heritage practice will therefore be one that pushes beyond agnostic description to embrace substantive theorizing as a source of power reclamation and reparation for oppressed peoples. The communities of people with whom we work are invested in the theoretical aspects of research and not only its outcomes (Hartemann, 2021; Warry, 1992). When I say substantive theorizing, I'm not advocating for the proliferation of more specialized language. Potent theorizing sometimes requires the creation of specialized language: the ability to name with acute specificity what we are witnessing and feeling should not be undervalued. Yet we also have to recognize that the proliferation of specialized language in archaeology and heritage management has been a key site of heritage distancing and disavowal. Substantive theorizing, in contrast, turns theory—sometimes outlined in specialized terms—toward liberation, creating opportunities for (re)generative dialogue. In this spirit, hooks (1994, 59) tells us,

When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two—that ultimately [it is a] reciprocal process wherein one enables the other. . . . *Theory is*

not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end. (emphasis added)

When we direct our theorizing toward collective liberation, it can act as a receptacle for all the hurt, anguish, and pain surfaced by our experiences of violence (Enns-Kananen, 2016, 560–61; hooks, 1994, 74). It can become a location for redress and emancipatory action. Heritage as liberation embraces this space of theorizing as a source of power reclamation—a space born of rather than in opposition to our collective experiences of suffering and redemption.

Collaborative Intervention and Our Professional Responsibilities

A willingness to intervene in the systems of injustice we encounter is the second imperative of heritage as liberation. “Intervention” means not just recognizing and describing a thing or condition overlooked but also taking the steps necessary to respond to them substantively and with an eye toward remediation. That means not only working collaboratively but amplifying the liberatory work that is already being done by organizers in the communities where and with whom so many of us would like to “base” our research. Jun Sunseri (2019, 67) calls this “community accountable research” or “archaeology by community mandate.” We have to ask ourselves under what circumstances, and for what reasons, we are willing to intervene. Although research may be our conventional bread and butter, it’s important to remember that research may not always be the intervention that is needed or desired (Tuck and Yang, 2014, 236–43).

Heritage as liberation also demands that we pay attention to scale. Sure, we all have potential roles to play in our collective liberation, but putting too much onus on the actions of individuals is counterproductive. Heritage as liberation can only succeed as a collective enterprise: sustained substantive action cannot be achieved singularly. If we adhere to a theory of liberation that privileges individual agency, we risk favoring “individuality at the cost of community, collectivity, and cooperation” (Ringer, 2005, 762). This is in part because if we wield the notion of

liberation too loosely, it can beget the sort of paternalism that enables the very oppression we are attempting to counteract. Anything less than collective effort risks the unsavory side of liberation—the kind of liberation that engenders the sort of savior complexes that underpin “well-intentioned,” supremely oppressive policies or provide an expectant pen of scapegoats when the liberators’ efforts at freeing us ultimately fail. Governmental agencies, educational institutions, and corporations may hold the largest responsibilities when it comes to remedying past and ongoing wrongs to such an extent that something we might recognize as collective liberation could be possible.

Yet, as I consider what this might mean for the role of practitioners looking to see heritage practiced as liberation, I’m drawn to philosopher Melissa Lane’s (2017, 4) call to seek new professional ethics that target the “meso layer of activities and organizations lying between the state and the individual”—that is, organized bodies and professional societies, such as the American Anthropological Association, Society for American Archaeology, or the American Alliance of Museums. Indeed, in the wake of this most recent wave of the Black Lives Matter movement and the global COVID-19 pandemic, these organizations have been forced to consider anew the kinds of archaeology and heritage practice they will nurture moving forward, and the many ways that such nurturing will require an iterative process of dismantling and rebuilding (Archaeology Centers Coalition, 2021; Flewellen et al., 2021).

Participatory frameworks—public, community-based, collaborative, etc.—have been something to strive for in heritage research and practice (Colwell, 2016 ; Colwell and Ferguson, 2008 ; Golding and Modest, 2013 ; Silliman, 2008 ; Stull and Schensul, 2019; Wylie, 2015). But considering that they began to gain traction three decades ago, such frameworks ought to feel commonplace—like an expected baseline. Enacting a substantive praxis of heritage as liberation takes a willingness to mobilize our participatory work toward justice. Otherwise, it could just wind up being collusion and complicity. Despite the recently gained traction for public interest and community-based methodologies, many continue struggling to implement research agendas that

position participation as “a collective and collaborative enterprise [rather than] a one-way process by which expert knowledge is communicated to the public” (Gnecco and Hernández, 2008, 452). As Allison Mickel and Kyle Olson (2021) recently put it, “the only way to effectively push for changes . . . is to exercise our capacity for collective action . . . [by] listening to, learning from, and working alongside the communities most affected by injustice.”

Vision and the Role of Dissent

To begin practicing heritage as liberation, we must direct our theorizing and our collaborative interventions toward clear, antioppressive ends. In her work on Palestinian heritage NGOs, Chiara de Cesari (2010) offers a compelling example of how this might be done. The grassroots Palestinian heritage NGOs in de Cesari’s study were interested in counter memorial, artistic heritage acts as a means of “imagining and mapping out a different Palestine” (631). They engaged in “preemptive representation,” or the performance of a yet-unrealized space (632)—what I am glossing here as *vision*. De Cesari shows how heritage practice can be a potent mechanism of reclamation and solidarity-building: a space to envision what the nation *could* be beyond the state.

The successes of community-centric heritage projects in recent years demonstrate the strengths of collaborative envisioning based on principles of community solidarity-building, positive cultural-knowledge affirmation, and democratic participation. Cultivating assent among dissident publics—negotiating, as it is often referred to—is something we ought to take pride in when carried out well. But consensus need not be understood as the most constructive output of dialogue (Tringham, 2018, 61), nor can it always be trusted as the most honest outcome. Sometimes potential participants will appear to speak assent and agreement to the terms of a heritage project, but they may be harboring discomfort and dissent and be unable to express those feelings because of the politics at play (Raczek and Sugandhi, 2020). Moreover, since participatory research methods began gaining traction in heritage fields, practitioners have voiced resonant unease about the ways participation can lead to a lack of consensus between participants and researchers (e.g., Croke,

2010; Logan, 2012, 236). Coupled with fears of objections to their research and the pressures of academia or industry, many seem reluctant to do the sort of deep, intersubjective envisioning necessary to build substantive heritage work into their practices. They might opt instead to design their research projects and then take them to a community of interest for approval, thus fulfilling an ethical obligation but neglecting to offset the systemic and interpersonal hierarchies that advocates of community-centric research practices have long been calling for us to unsettle.

But, I ask: What besides dissent is to be expected when we enter into spheres that have real implications for real people? As Rawls (1958, 175) wrote regarding justice as fairness, the most virtuous of practices are those “where there are assumed to be competing interests and conflicting claims, and where it is supposed that persons will press their rights on each other. That persons are mutually self-interested in certain situations and for certain purposes is what gives rise to the question of justice in practices covering those circumstances.” At its core, this tenet of embracing dissent is an acknowledgment that when heritage is substantive we should expect that people will fight for and about it. Dissent reminds us to articulate what is at stake in our work and challenges us to determine how we can do it more effectively.

Many of the shifts that have moved archaeology and other heritage spheres toward more equitable practice occurred in response to the dissent of so-called stakeholder groups. Consider the repatriation movements that consumed debates in heritage-related fields during the 1990s and continue to occupy a great deal of space in heritage scholarship globally (Al Quntar, 2017; Nash and Colwell, 2020). The road to repatriation faced by Native communities has been long and grueling and rife with refusals from a multitude of actors (Fryer and Dedrick, this section). It'd be easy to paint this slow struggle as an insurmountable quagmire. Yet, this struggle has also engendered a creativity and ingenuity that has yielded strong examples of meaningful repatriations (Colwell, 2017, 2019). In the best of circumstances, by leaning into the challenges posed by Native activists, we've even seen the visionary emergence of what art historian Emily Moore (2010) called “propatriation,” or the proactive commissioning of new creative works from Indigenous artists by repatriating

museums to establish reciprocal rather than exploitative relationships between those museums and the Native communities their prior practices harmed.

Likewise, the involvement of New York's Black communities in the archaeological investigations of the African Burial Ground spurred the creation of a monument honoring the lives of those captive Africans and their descendants whose graves went unmarked by the city and upturned by real estate development and the ambivalent complicities of cultural resource managers (La Roche and Blakey, 1997). A similar situation occurred in response to excavations at the President's House, in Philadelphia, where the National Park Service had to reckon with how to present the United States' first president, George Washington, in light of the clear historical and archaeological evidence that he and his family enslaved numerous people (Aden, 2010).

For marginalized, dissident communities, demonstrating their unwillingness to acquiesce to narratives that write their histories out of existence and dishonor their dead is not just an exercise in epistemic militancy: it's an invitation issued to heritage practitioners and other corporate stakeholders to imagine our nation otherwise, and to live in its truth rather than continuing to bury it.

Heritage as liberation embraces dissent not only because it is an inevitable component of heritage politics, then, but because it pushes us to envision pasts, and the emancipatory futures they might engender, otherwise. These moments of dissent—overt and overshadowed—are pivotal spaces for heritage practitioners to reach beyond the goals of preservation and engender social change through intersubjective dialogue that takes seriously people's intersectional positionalities. When dealing with difficult histories in complicated, still-marginalized spaces, dissent reinforces an important unwillingness to get over a past that has not yet passed (Ahmed, 2017, 273–74) and to remain wary of memory-making projects that may result in the stripping of a community's right to self-representation. Simply put, dissent keeps us honest by setting high expectations for how we approach and care for people and their histories. And although I'm mostly concerned here with dissent raised by marginalized communities to our practices as archaeologists, we can also channel

dissent from those communities who would squander this sort of liberatory work, taking it as an invitation to get more creative and to persist in our conviction that heritage work can and ought to be emancipatory. The Equal Justice Initiative, to which I turn to now, seems to see things similarly.

THE EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE'S LEGACY MUSEUM AND NATIONAL MONUMENT TO PEACE AND JUSTICE

In April 2018, I attended the inauguration of the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The museum and memorial are the product of years of lawyering, social justice work, and archival research at the Equal Justice Initiative, founded by Bryan Stevenson. The museum offers a new historical timeline, presenting the problem of mass incarceration as symptomatic of the United States' legacy of enslaving and terrorizing Black people (Equal Justice Initiative, 2018b). Specifically confronting the issue of racial terror, the memorial is colloquially known as the "lynching memorial." This sobering space gathers the names, locations, and dates of death for more than 4,400 Black people "hanged, burned alive, shot, drowned, and beaten" between 1877 and 1950—roughly from Reconstruction to the civil rights movement (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017). I first visited EJI during the summer of 2016. At the time, the vision for the museum-memorial duo was just coming to fruition after nearly six years of intensive research and design.

EJI, primarily a legal advocacy organization, had done something unexpected: they started a community project that took heritage-making as a critical component of revisionary law-making in the South. From EJI's perspective, a lack of knowledge about—or the refusal to acknowledge—the history of race relations in Alabama and its ongoing impact on the lives of Alabama's Black citizens was impeding justice (see discussion of white ignorance, Fryer and Dedrick, this section). The Community Remembrance Project, an initiative housed under EJI's broader Race and Poverty Project and spearheaded by Jennifer Taylor, was collecting documentation of lynchings that had occurred throughout Alabama (and eventually 11 other Southern states). Researchers for the Remembrance

Project used historic newspapers and court documents (when they were available) to create their archive. They then took this gathered knowledge and developed a small in-house community museum (a predecessor to the Legacy Museum) aimed at recognizing the humanity of the victims of those lynchings.

The small exhibit displayed the products of EJI's "community soil-collection days" (Figure 2). On collection days, community volunteers were provided with memos written by EJI's staff that documented individual lynching cases. Participants were then asked to travel to the sites of these lynchings and collect soil to fill glass urns that would be imprinted with the name of the victim and the date of their murder. The material experience of digging the soil where the lynching(s) occurred and filling glass urns on behalf of victims engendered intense personal moments for many participants. One community volunteer recalled, "Digging in that soil was a poignant way to connect with the time, the event, and most importantly the man" (Equal Justice Initiative, 2016).

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

EJI coupled their lynching-site soil collections with a counter-memory initiative centered on erecting historical markers. In the South, pride in a uniquely Southern culture and heritage is a critical factor of daily life (Wyatt-Brown, 2001). But that pride is steeped in the dispossession of Native lands, the durabilities of slavery, militant hypermasculinity, the American Civil War, incomplete Reconstruction, and the reinstallation of white supremacy through the co-attendant politics of racial terror, Jim Crow segregation, and Confederate commemoration. Confederate monumentality has been the subject of a number of studies and continues to fascinate heritage scholars (e.g., Bauer, 2021; Fryer et al, 2021; Savage, 2018). Beyond tangible memorial products, even the US national holiday commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. had to be shared with Confederate general Robert E. Lee in the states of Mississippi and Alabama.⁴ Any skeptics doubting the social significance of memorial plaques need only turn to the series of markers commemorating Emmett Till—a 14-year-old Black boy lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after supposedly whistling at a

white woman—that have been shot up and defaced so many times that the newest marker was created from bulletproof steel and weighs 500 pounds (Ortiz, 2019).

The Civil War’s usual glorification and veneration exemplifies the kind of heritage-making that stands against liberation. Instead, it glorifies symbolic violence and racial terror, masks shame, and perpetuates racist ideologies. So, EJI produced plaques, analogous to those commemorating the Civil War, that instead highlight the history of the slave trade in Montgomery—their office being located on Commerce Street, one of the most prominent auctioning posts for the trade and sale of enslaved persons—and of lynchings in various counties throughout the state (Equal Justice Initiative, 2018a, 105–16). These two initiatives, alongside the extensive primary work EJI has done to fight for indigent clients, including adults convicted to death row and children sent to adult prisons over the past three and a half decades, culminated in the foundation of the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

As you enter the museum (Figure 3), you are confronted with the tangibility of the space they chose for housing their collections: “you are standing on a site where enslaved people were warehoused,” reads the salutation. You then pass through the initial corridor where holograms of Black people dressed in nineteenth-century garb present ghostly, embodied narratives about the realities of racial violence in hushed voices, drawing in visitors and setting a solemn tone for the experience. Emerging from the corridor, you are immediately confronted with a challenge to how you may conceive of the progression of American history. That is, the museum presents a revised timeline beginning with kidnapping (enslavement), passing through terrorizing (post–Civil War retaliations) to segregation, and eventually arriving at present-day racial violence and the problem of mass incarceration. At the heart of the exhibit space stand the glass urns gathered through the Community Remembrance Project. The experience is immersive and tapered—you are faced with revelatory information but must also make the choice to fully engage. This tapering works to dampen the chances of retraumatization for people who live these realities constantly while making

possible realization for those who've been consistently shielded from them.

Located less than a mile from EJI's central offices and the museum, the monument is an open-concept structure that conducts visitors through its winding, declining corridors. The 800 six-foot corten steel columns gradually appear to rise, hanging in metaphoric performance from the roof over the central portion of the memorial (Figure 4). Each column represents a US county and lists the names and dates of death for each of the known victims in that county. EJI had the wherewithal to understand that after years of grueling research, they had likely only recovered a fraction of the perpetrated murders. Hence, they designed a living monument: 800 matching pillars were laid waiting to be inscribed as research recovers the names and death circumstances of those yet unaccounted for. And they were right. In addition to the over 4,400 racial terror lynchings EJI documented for the years 1877 to 1950, since the opening of the museum and monument they have documented over 2,000 racial terror lynchings that were perpetrated between 1865 and 1876 (Equal Justice Initiative, 2020).

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

EJI was willing to reflect on and theorize how the heritage of racial terror in Alabama underpinned what they were witnessing in the legal realm, to mobilize community members and resources to intervene in the system along multiple axes, and to envision a more just future. They produced a multimodal, emancipatory form of heritage. That sort of multimodality may be the only way to achieve the triadic conditions I have outlined as the praxis bundle underpinning heritage as liberation.

As someone who practices archaeology, I remember being struck by how deeply archaeological EJI's approach was: they excavated the archives, ground-truthed local accounts, and quite literally dug into places that Alabama's non-Black community either didn't care to remember or deliberately obscured—two forms of erasure archaeologists are particularly adept at getting around (Figure 5). Thus, I'm left perplexed about where we were in all of the work that EJI did. One

answer might be that despite some of us expressing interest in the venture, EJI could not see in archaeology a capacity to undertake the kind of work they were seeking to do. But we might also reframe the question to ask why it took a legal advocacy organization to design and implement what is arguably the most significant heritage space to be constructed in the United States in the past half century? Perhaps archaeologists see lynching sites as too transient and ephemeral for archaeological investigation? To say so, though, would be an undervaluation of archaeologists' skill sets. Many of the places where Black people were murdered at the hands of white supremacists were the sites of multiple lynchings and hosted hundreds of spectators who surely produced the detritus necessary for archaeological detection. Ed González-Tennant's (2018) intersectional study of the 1923 Rosewood massacre that destroyed a predominantly Black community in Florida and Michael Roller's (2018) study of the Lattimer massacre—an attack on mostly immigrant laborers in northeast Pennsylvania striking against their working conditions that resulted in the deaths of at least 19 people—are cases in point for how even fleeting moments of violence can be archaeologically recovered. And if archaeologists can, for instance, devise ways of using microbiological and geochemical evidence of elephant dung to trace the conquest journeys of Hannibal of Carthage across Italy (Mahaney et al., 2017), we ought to be able to identify landscapes of racial terror across the American South.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

WHEREFORE ARCHAEOLOGY?

I cannot help but think that if archaeology as a discipline prioritized questions of justice and collective liberation, we might already have produced a landscape study akin to what EJI has amassed on their map of over 4,400 lynchings that occurred across the post-Civil War South (and the many others spread across the remainder of the United States). In a recent reflection, Laurajane Smith reminded us, though, "it's not all about archaeology" (Smith and Campbell, 2018). I agree. Yet, it seems to me that while heritage may not be *all* about archaeology, that doesn't mean it isn't

about archaeology *at all*. Archaeology is by no means a necessary heritage practice, but it is one whose tools could upend the very hegemonies it helped to create—if we'd only ask it to do that work. After all, if authorized heritage discourse has taught us anything, it is that the languages of archaeology possess an uncanny power (Joyce, 2002; Smith, 2006). To what end, then, will we choose to exercise it?

The substantive assemblages that archaeology can produce, the ways that archaeology can undermine hegemonic discourses about history and the past through the consideration of material evidence—these qualities suggest that archaeology already possesses the necessary assets to be effective in the struggle to actualize a just future. We've just been doing a shotty job at putting it to work toward such ends. I suspect part of the reason for this shortcoming is that others still perceive archaeology as a luxury discipline, a career that is in many respects pretty cool but has little bearing on matters of pressing import. I'm not being flippant here; archaeology often is cool. But as Larry Zimmerman (2018, 524) put it, "we have created an archaeology 'brand' . . . that trivializes what we do in order to attract public attention." Every time we cite archaeology's coolness as a primary motivation for the work we do, we risk cheapening its substantiality.

Indeed, scholars writing on the margins of archaeology who have been working on Indigenous, decolonial, queer, and antiracist approaches to the field for decades can still fall prey to this explanation. For instance, I attended a panel at the 2019 annual meeting of the AAA in Vancouver where just such scholars were asked to comment on the ever-changing space of collaborative archaeology. One of the organizers, a prominent archaeologist whose work has influenced my own, responded to an audience question about why students come to archaeology by saying, "Well it's cool"—a sentiment I believed undercut everything he and the panelists had been arguing for. Students are increasingly coming to (and sticking with) archaeology because of the potential that archaeology has to contribute to exposing and undoing historical injustices, which these and other scholars have been advocating. We have to own the conviction that archaeology is appealing to students and the public precisely because of what it could offer to these struggles

instead of mitigating the field's substance by falling back on the coolness that has been attributed to it by long-standing and even damaging tropes (such as those illustrated by archaeology's celebrity icon: Indiana Jones). As Sven Haakanson says of his work at the Burke Museum, their collections research and community collaborations are approached as "something that will have a larger impact than just a 'fun' project" (Haakanson, Barker, and Gonzalez 2021, 540) Thus, we must find and articulate stronger motivations—not in defense of our *relevance* but in service to collective liberation—or Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith (2009) might be right in their charge that "we take archaeology out of heritage."

How can we enact a substantive praxis of heritage as liberation in less obvious contexts? Paleoarchaeologist Kathleen Sterling (2015) offers us a strong model for how. She provides two examples that complicate the ways we understand the complex narratives of Pleistocene life: the ways that Neandertals and *Homo sapiens* interacted, and the problems with discourses that pit "primitive Neandertals" against "advanced Moderns." She does this by highlighting what Black feminist theory offers the analysis of archaeological contexts. Of course, such theories have been more frequently applied to historical archaeologies centering on the African diaspora or feminist epistemologies in archaeology broadly. For Sterling, however, Black feminist approaches whose core commitments center on liberation from oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1982) hold radical potential for prehistoric archaeologies. She writes, "a black feminist approach in archaeology has the possibility of being transformative, not only in the composition and practices of academic archaeology to produce a more just climate, but also in *fulfilling our obligations to past populations by presenting them as fully human*" (Sterling, 2015, 109; emphasis added).⁵ Bonnie Pitblado (2022) takes up a similar mantle as she tries to make sense of how our work so often loses sight of the humanity of paleoindigenous First Americans. She argues that it will take fundamental changes to how we think about, speak about, and ultimately represent past peoples as "fully human as we are" (Pitblado, 2022, 217; see also Steeves, 2021).

Arguments for attending to the full humanity of past peoples—no matter how distant in

time their lives may be from ours—are about the place of both justice and dignity in archaeology and heritage research writ large. It is an argument that recognizes the value in archaeological investigation and encourages us to push the limits of our contributions. Theorizing and engaging with substantive, justice-oriented theories outside of the conventional archaeological canon therefore has an important role to play in the effectiveness of heritage as liberation (Figure 6).

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

CONCLUSION

Today, over six years after their rebranding, the Archaeologists for a Just Future's Facebook page asserts: "We stand together in principled opposition to the fascism, imperialism, white supremacy, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslimism, anti-immigrant, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, and other structural and interpersonal manifestations of inequality." Admittedly, this galvanizing statement incites hopeful, if wary, feelings in me. The fact is, our audience—whether they be our students, peers, or the communities our work is beholden and indebted to—will continue to demand a connection between what is being learned and produced from archaeological and anthropological research and the lives that people are already living. But relevance, we must know, never survives the cycles of time. The only way to shift our discipline's ethos to one where archaeologists can actually be in a position to work toward "a just future" is for us to reevaluate our *motivations* for practicing archaeology. This is the potential of adopting a praxis of *heritage as liberation*.

Heritage as liberation is at its core a reckoning praxis that depends on us committing to substantive theorizing, collaborative intervention, and vision in our heritage work. Archaeologists, applied anthropologists, and other heritage practitioners bring important skill sets to bear on the interpretation and negotiation of the past, but ambivalence and agnosticism often preclude effective participation in social justice initiatives beyond the discipline. Heritage as liberation makes no room for complacency and admonishes complicity. It is an ongoing process that requires deliberate

reflection, followed by whatever unmaking and remaking that reflection might evoke. To adopt heritage as liberation is to submit to its continuous revision, to its recursivity, and to its persistent seeking of justice through heritage practice—even when that may mean asking ourselves to revisit and potentially abandon modes of inquiry we once felt sure would get us there. Perhaps our absence from collective reckoning projects like the one the Equal Justice Initiative has forged in Montgomery, Alabama, would be shocking if we were more inclined to practice heritage as liberation. While heritage practitioners may not always be clear on how the specific methods they employ in their respective professions can contribute to the amelioration of the kinds of grand social issues I have been gesturing toward here, it is possible. I am not advocating a new archaeology or asking us to replace, augment, or abandon it. I am asking us to *substantiate* it.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

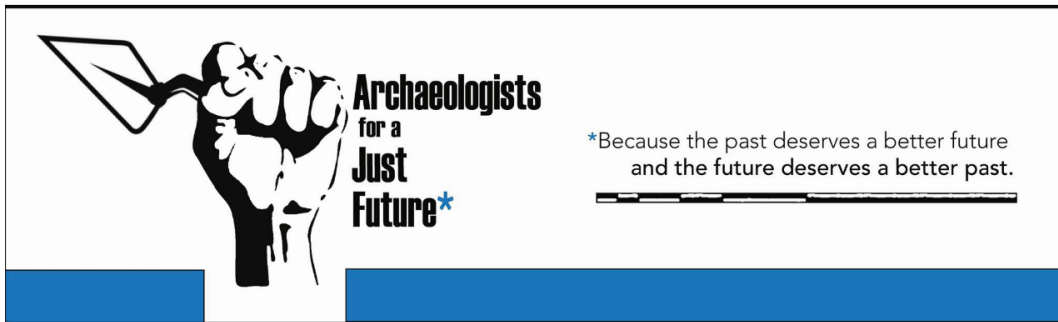


Figure 1. Archaeologists for a Just Future revised logo. Uploaded to Facebook.



Figure 2. Lynching memorial soil collection. EJI offices. 2016. (Photograph by author)

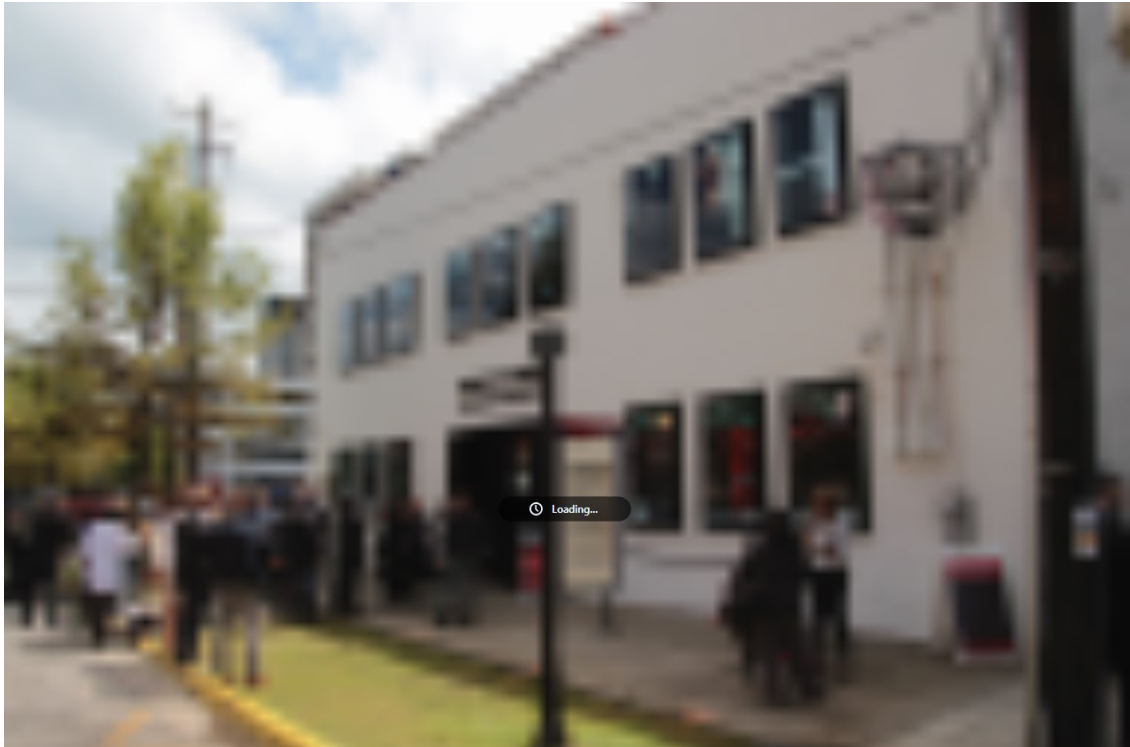


Figure 3. Legacy Museum. 2018. (Photograph by author)

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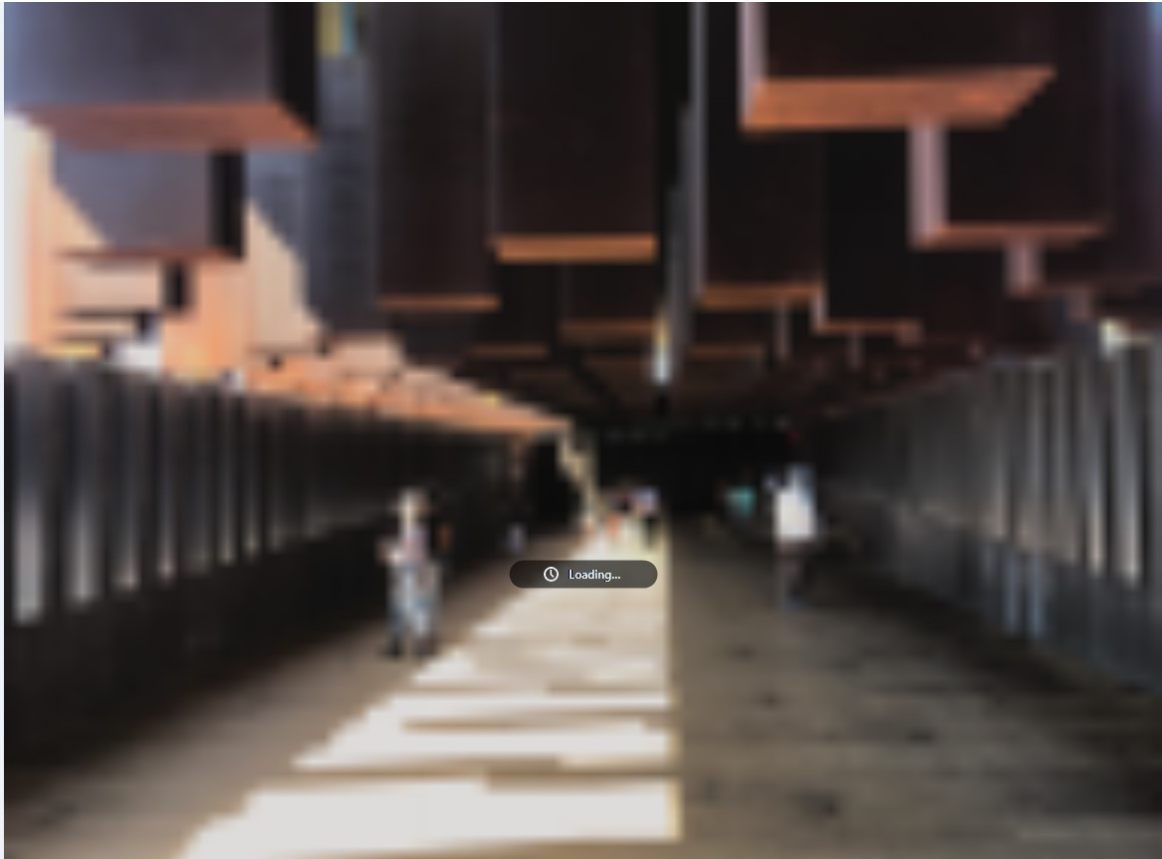


Figure 4. National Monument to Peace and Justice. 2018. (Photograph by author)

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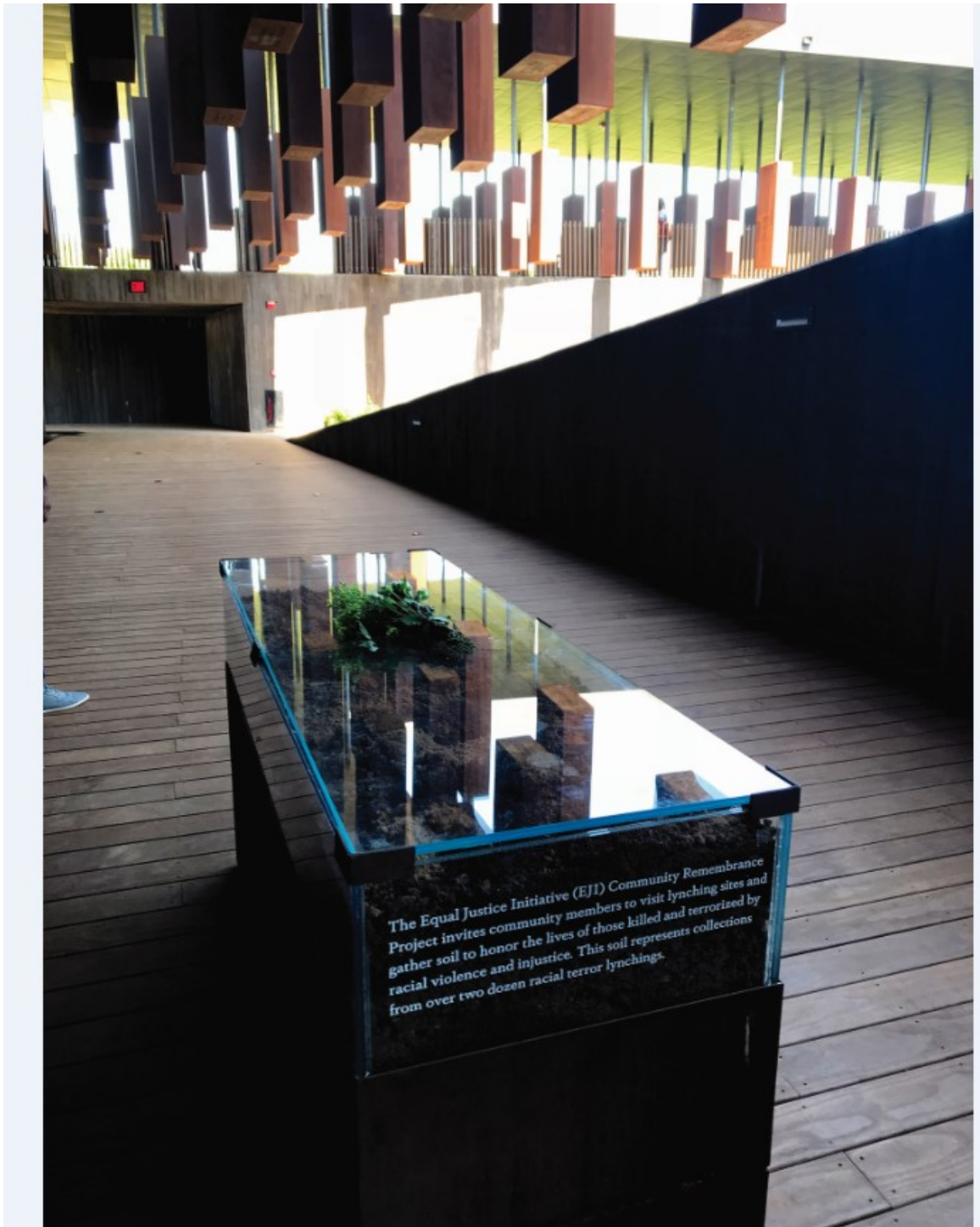


Figure 5. "Soil Casket." National Monument to Peace and Justice. 2018. (Photograph by author)

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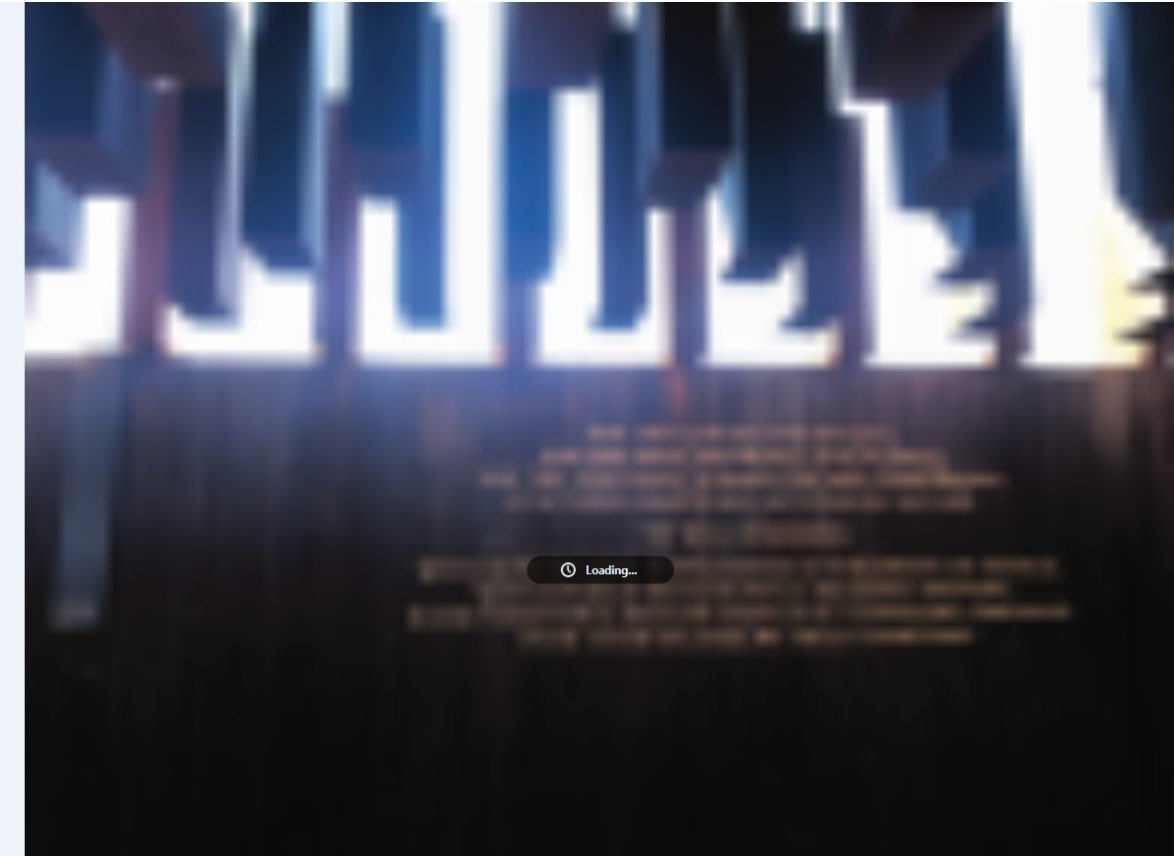


Figure 6. “A Resolution.” National Monument to Peace and Justice. 2018. (Photograph by author)

NOTES

¹ Membership was 4,061 on December 3, 2016. As of September 18, 2020, there were 5,894 members. In 2017, the group was converted from a public to a private page, allowing page administrators to screen people interested in joining.

² Versions of this motif have circulated in archaeological circles for decades as archaeologists attempt to navigate their relationship to activism. Indeed, the chosen cover image for a recent volume I am happy to have contributed to, *Trowels in the Trenches: Archaeology as Social Activism*, edited by Christopher P. Barton (2021), depicts a visually stunning version of the icon on its cover.

³ Rawls’s position as an ideal theorist—that is, one who assumes reasonably favorable social conditions and compliance from all actors when determining the hypothetical outcomes of enacting a theory—is a major source of the critiques made of his intellectual project (see Abbey, 2013; Mills, 2017). The seemingly utopic hypothetical position of the “veil of ignorance” on which his theory

rests has encouraged skeptics to read his work as impractical, if desirable. However, I read his project as one that asks us to imagine the world otherwise. Whatever he did or did not himself address, he provided a framework that made space for collective speculation and critical reimagining within the realm of political theorizing.

⁴ See Section 1-3-8 of the Code of Alabama and Section 3-3-7 of the Code of Mississippi. Arkansas also commemorated the birthdays of both men on the third Monday in January until March of 2017.

⁵ To be clear, the notion of “fully human” here is not one emerging from biological anthropological concerns for the genetic relation of Neandertals to *Homo sapiens*. Rather, it is a nod to a prominent strand of literature in Black studies—especially those influenced by Caribbean studies—that emphasize how Black and other nonwhite people have historically been depicted as less than human. See, for instance, Wynter (2003), Thomas (2019), or Weheliye (2014).

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