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Inclusive Comparisons for Undergraduates in Archaeology: Representation and Diversity in and Beyond the Classroom

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On the cover: Classic Maya palaces at Palenque (top), Kabah (middle), and Copan (bottom). Photographs by Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire.



INCLUSIVE COMPARISONS FOR UNDERGRADUATES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

REPRESENTATION AND DIVERSITY IN AND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Olivia C. Navarro-Farr

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As is the case with many of my early-to-mid-career peers, I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to teach a variety of undergraduate archaeology courses for some years now at various institutions, including state schools, a community college, and a small liberal arts college. I am now in my eighth year at an institution that considers faculty-mentored undergraduate research as its cornerstone. This means I find myself in the yearly position of ushering a wide array of students (Figure 1) through their own research theses incorporating wide-ranging topics, regions, and specializations in archaeology, anthropology, and even sociology. The aspect of mentored research that always invites the greatest challenge is working with students through theory. Though this is the case across these fields, I limit my conversation here to archaeology.

At my home institution, all archaeology students are required to take the archaeological method and theory course, which both I and my colleague P. Nick Kardulias offer rotationally. Ideally, students take this course prior to initiating their theses. Things generally go well with all the expected complications of any course, yet it is always a particular challenge to help students learn how to apply theory to their own homegrown research, data, and interpretations. Students seem to approach that experience tentatively, with some intimidation and a certain sense of, well—how does one actually “do” theory? The SAA 2019 forum on comparative approaches in Maya archaeology organized by Maxime Lamoureux-St-Hilaire, and this set of articles, are therefore entirely appropriate for addressing these challenges and have helped me think through some of these as they apply to teaching and mentoring. To this discussion, I bring my experience in mentoring undergraduate research, and I acknowledge the benefit of understanding how to best help students consider and apply comparative approaches for archaeological interpretation(s).

Comparative Approaches for Undergraduates: Mindful Inclusivity

In many ways, the key points of our forum discussion broke down the complexities of this fundamental element of archaeological research: how to think about comparable datasets across space, time, and scales. Comparisons and analogies are central to archaeological reconstructions of ancient lifeways; this is a given. When I teach my introductory courses in archaeology, I often begin by explaining to students that we must visualize the past, which requires some imagination. The way we populate these understandings and envision what past(s) looked like in the classroom for our students is through comparative analogies. These typically derive from cases with which students are familiar. For example, case studies from across ancient Europe may help familiarize uninitiated students to the ancient Maya. Using terms to describe chronologies such as “Early Classic” and “Late Classic” situate the ancient Maya along the standards of ancient Greece, with which many are more familiar, at least generally. Similarly, the way we characterize ancient Maya royalty is illustrated with language taken directly from medieval Europe. These terms are useful and illustrative and, as they are long embedded in our discipline, are unlikely to change. In the same way, the fantasy epic *Game of Thrones*, as an alternative, fictional, and magic-laden world influenced heavily by modern ideas about life in medieval Europe, provides a quick and widely followed narrative useful for illustrating what we understand about ancient Maya royal court politics and rivalries from archaeology and epigraphy. Yet this easy relatability of ancient Maya politics with more familiar European terminology and history reveals the profound and insidious impacts of colonization. That which is European is canon, familiar, and it is the lens from which we describe fundamental elements of ancient Maya political structure. Again, I do not argue with the fact that it can prove useful for instruction, and I acknowledge my own reliance on such material for comparative purposes. I do not think this



Figure 1. College of Wooster archaeology majors at the start of the 2019–2020 academic year. Rear row from left to right: Natalia Moonier '21; Kevin Rolph '20; Devin Henson '21; Alan Salacain '21; Benton Thompson IV '22; Cyrus Hulen '20; Anabelle Andersen '22; Anthony Eanraig Riggs '21; Rhys Niner '20. Front row from left to right: Anna Russell '23; Olivia Frison de Angelis '23; Nic Kennady '22; Raena Gamble '22; Laurén Kozłowski '20; Christine Weber '21; Olivia C. Navarro-Farr (author). Photograph by P. Nick Kardulias.

pattern of comparison is likely to change altogether; however, I do believe we should work to identify the effects of a colonized understanding of ancient Indigenous political systems as seen from archaeological science and demand that our students acknowledge and reflect on its implications. This permits students to build their own critical approaches to archaeological comparisons and helps them tease out useful elements for comparison from those that may be problematic.

Representation in Research and Teaching: Inclusivity in Comparative Approaches

My students seek inclusive representation; to be clear, my students want to see themselves both in terms of areas of inquiry about the past as well as in the actual practice of the research. When I consider the subject of archaeological comparisons for elucidating archaeologically based understandings of ancient Maya lifeways, I want my students to be aware of the diversity of scholars in the field and how the modern Maya are included (or not) regarding their own intellectual perspectives on continuity and change. I do this because increasingly diverse student populations seeking to participate in archaeological

research are longing to see themselves represented both in the field and in the intellectual currents we utilize to explain, theorize, position, and describe our research and interpretations. I argue that we must seek to foster such diverse participation all along the pipeline from undergraduate to future professionals (academic and otherwise) if our field is to gain strength and maintain relevancy. How can we create comparative analogies that more appropriately reflect diverse voices and participants? How do we acknowledge determinisms grounded in Western logics as we seek comparisons with ancient Maya lifeways? Once identified, are we equipped to critically evaluate such comparisons and seek others that may reflect the actual “world-system” that the ancient Maya, with their own vast diversity, inhabited?

To begin addressing these questions, we can refer to our own discipline’s historical grounding in scientific research principles, assumed to be unbiased and empirical. In doing so, we recall the implicit androcentric biases in the very language that structured the questions posed and assumptions intrinsic to archaeological science in its earliest years (e.g.,

the famous “Man the Hunter” example [Lee et al. 1968], or the emphasis in our periodization on tool industries—Stone Age, Iron Age, and so on [see Conkey 2003]). These androcentric biases were subsequently laid bare once the discipline broadened to include increasing numbers of women, whose scholarship has enriched the field, making gender more visible, has contributed toward peopling the past, and has helped articulate “critical analyses of heretofore assumed and taken-for-granted” (Conkey 2003:872; for more on contributions of Black feminist theory to these discussions see Battle-Baptiste [2011] and Sterling [2015]).

Another comparative example of what I describe comes from a sister discipline, and it involves recent innovative work in the genetics of skin pigmentation. Tina Lasisi (2017) argues that greater diversity in science yields a greater variety of scientific questions and otherwise unexplored research avenues. New questions reveal insidious biases that may be invisible to a scientific community that is majority white. For example, increased investigation of the genetics behind skin pigmentation reveals how previously held ideas about such variation were highly inadequate due not in small part to an overreliance on the variability within the far more nuanced examination of European populations as opposed to a comparatively shallow exploration of skin pigmentation variation across the continent of Africa (Lasisi 2017; Lasisi and Shriver 2018). In a similar fashion, thinking about the ancient Maya and drawing on comparative examples to illustrate or position such understandings also benefit from a diverse body of practitioners. I therefore reason that scholars should make concerted efforts to underscore comparative scholarship that draws on a wider breadth of experiences. For example, comparative approaches that rely on Indigenous ontologies (Kuwanwiswma et al. 2018; Woodfill 2019), oral traditions (Echo-Hawk 2000), Indigenous approaches to archaeological practice (Gneccho and Ayala 2011), queer theory (Blackmore 2011), and ethnoarchaeological data (Brown 2004) are important to utilize when considering evidence about lifeways of the ancient Maya world. Doing so provides important opportunities for students to see broad ranges of critical comparisons that both illustrate ancient Maya lifeways from comparative vantage points and also from diverse ontological perspectives.

Archaeology is enriched by the diversity of its participants and perspectives that guide how archaeological data is generated and interpreted. Our academic community must tackle the issue of representation proactively. A first step involves recruiting more diverse participation in archaeological fieldwork and coursework to create avenues for an increasingly diverse pipeline while also improving conditions and academic environments conducive to retention of diverse students and faculty. Moreover, our system of peer review,

which governs who and what gets published and who is granted critical research funding, must support a true arena of ideas encompassing many forms of diversity in scholarship. In acknowledging the diversity of individuals and ideas within our discipline, such an inclusive peer review system can avoid limiting publication to only those examples that reflect and reify the status quo and implicit biases within our field. Otherwise, we run the risk of perpetuating imbalanced interpretations of archaeological evidence, which can have the effect of limiting scholars of color, queer scholars, and other underrepresented perspectives including the descendants of the very people we study. Furthermore, as Jeremy Sabloff (2008) argues, we should be rewarding public-centered scholarship (including popular books, blogs, and online forums). We should also be mindful of including literature and scholarship that reflects the diversity of participants internationally (and, where possible, in different languages). Such approaches not only ensure balanced coverage of perspectives but can also strengthen student yield, as this would permit student appreciation for and understanding of the international dimensions of our research that reflect a global community of participants and specialists.

International Collaborations: Inclusive Practices

As a researcher working in a collaborative international context, I think it is also important to address comparative approaches in our practice while simultaneously endeavoring to craft successful collaborative research programs with our colleagues in Latin America. These efforts are not without challenges, and they should be considered in tandem with issues of representation and the history of colonialism. With regard to issues of representation, we must be mindful of the international communities of partners with whom we work and on whom we rely for permits, access, and, critically, excavation and infrastructure. Our efforts must balance working partnerships with emphasis on healthy and open communication with our partners in-country who represent varied backgrounds and experiences. Drawing on these and working collaboratively serves to strengthen research. In terms of collaborative direction on international projects, directors and senior staff must also work toward a balance of perspectives that draws on the strengths of all involved and avoids overly hierarchical relationships among codirectors based in the United States and those based elsewhere that may reflect intrinsic colonialist (e.g., English-language-dominant or U.S.-centric) biases. In the case of our project in Guatemala, our work has benefited from a shared directorial style in which a cohort of national and foreign directors work as a team on decisions and protocols for fieldwork and laboratory analyses at an annual meeting held at the College of Wooster. This style permits open and shared discussion of some of our project’s greatest fiscal, research, and collaborative challenges

in an open forum where all are invited to lend their unique perspectives. Decisions regarding everything from updating laboratory processing protocols to which areas of investigation will be prioritized yearly are considered and made collectively and in careful consideration of the perspectives and experiences of our international senior staff members.

Conclusions

In this short piece, my goal has not been to provide a laundry list of examples of more inclusive comparative approaches for studies in Maya archaeology. Rather, my aim has been to contribute to ongoing conversations about why diversity in scholarship matters for identifying how to critically evaluate cross-cultural comparisons in the archaeology of the ancient Maya. I have spoken primarily from my vantage point as a professor of undergraduate courses in archaeology. From this perspective, I have attempted to make the case for inclusivity in practice both in the ranks of our discipline professionally, and in terms of how we think about and/or critically evaluate comparative cases for our students to learn about the ancient Maya and to see places for themselves in our field.

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