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Bioarchaeology of the Self

As silly as it seems, I feel that I was always meant to be a bioarchaeologist. Some of my earliest memories are of watching television shows and movies about archaeology with my father. (Yes, this includes the Indiana Jones franchise.) When I got to college—long after my father had passed away—I chose to study anthropology. After taking a course on the human skeleton, the rest was history. Or rather: the rest was bioarchaeology.

Despite realizing my vision, I came to see myself—a Black person in anthropology—as an outlier, an anomaly in a field based on racism. I was trained in osteology with the remains of Indigenous Americans. When I advanced in my studies and began to work with skeletal collections, I was shocked by bodies stolen from all over the world. I shifted my focus: from the questions I could answer using these bodies to the questions these collections—the bodies of the unclaimed and unconsenting dead—posed to us in the present. Surrounded by so many bodies, many from members of the African diaspora, I realized that staying in anthropology meant studying myself.

It may sound obvious to some, but I've had to work extremely hard to help others realize that the remains we encounter are in fact people. My work is an act of care and remembrance for Black ancestors whose bodies are still "owned." For decades, bioarchaeologists have claimed to respect the dead and reconstruct life, but I am not convinced. I've lost count of the number of times colleagues—many with the best of intentions—have responded to my research with some variation of "I never thought about that!" And in my head, the

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response is always: "You never thought about this because you are not Black." When you call up "objects" from storage, walk the halls of collections, the force of recognition and relation does not cry out to you.

Writing up the historical context for one's dissertation is cut and dried for many; for me, it was one of the most visceral experiences of my life. My project focused on the remains of seventy-nine Black women held in the Smithsonian's Huntington Skeletal Collection. These women died in Progressive-Era New York City. Their unclaimed bodies were sent to anatomy classes for dissection. Behind these women, many of whom were widowed, I found the Black men who were—and are—sentenced to early deaths. In the course of my digging, I came across a passage about an Afro-Caribbean immigrant to New York City who explained that even though he was a skilled artisan, he could not practice his trade due to anti-Black racism.[1] I remember shutting the book immediately, and was unable to work on my dissertation for over a month.

Like the women I studied, I found myself "living in the wake."[2] Encountering that passage transported me to my own childhood. When I was six years old, my father died while working construction. The son of Afro-Caribbean and Latinx immigrants, my father worked for a roofing company in a position for which he was overqualified. When he was hired, his employer told him outright that he would have to work below his skill level so as not to upset his white coworkers. Grappling with racism and dehumanization is exhausting. Reading that passage about an Afro-Caribbean worker facing the same forces a century before my father died, I realized that here, in this improbable place, I was confronting the same forces in my historical work that so many families like mine had been facing for so long.

In Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, he argues that decolonization is necessarily a violent process—just as colonization was and continues to be. While we might first think of more immediate physical violence, and the process of colonized peoples reclaiming their autonomy, what might this tell us about the push to decolonize the academy? I often justify my work with Black bodies by asking myself, "If I don't do this, who will? What will they say about us?" It is as though I consider myself to be the lesser of some sort of evil. And indeed, I do still believe that my research involves violence. I touch and

1. Mike Wallace, *Greater Gotham: A History of New York City from 1898 to 1919* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 816.

2. Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

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study unconsenting bodies, the bodies on which—on *whom*—my career and identity as a bioarchaeologist are based.[3] While I hope to liberate them, to end their exploitation, I might still inflict harm. But in the process, I am learning that I suffer with them, and that—in doing so—I am called to care for all of us.

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3. Aja Lans, "'Whatever Was Once Associated with Him, Continues to Bear His Stamp': Articulating and Dissecting George S. Huntington and *His* Anatomical Collection," in *Bioarchaeological Analyses and Bodies: New Ways of Knowing Anatomical and Archaeological Skeletal Collections*, ed. Pamela K. Stone (Cham: Springer, 2018), 11–26.