Flexibility, Resilience, and Universal Design: Learning from the Experiences of Disabled Archaeologists

Laura E. Heath-Stout

SHA 2021 session on “Disability Wisdom for the Covid-19 Pandemic”

# Preface

Hi! I’m Laura Heath-Stout, and I’ll be talking today about what we can learn from the experiences of disabled archaeologists. I’m recording this video at my home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I am a settler on the lands of the Massachusett and Pawtucket peoples, and I am employed by Emory University, which is a predominantly white institution located on the ancestral lands of the Muskogee Creek people. For those of you who can’t see me, I am a thirty-one-year-old, non-apparently disabled, white woman with chin-length brown hair, and am wearing [details]. I don’t have slides, so the video just shows me speaking, with subtitles. If you would like an access copy of this paper to read along, or to look at my bibliography, you can find thse at lauraheathstout.com/sha2021. If you’d like to tweet about this paper, please tag me: my handle is @lauraheathstout, and I go by she/her pronouns. I’d love to hear what you think of my paper, so if you would like to discuss it, please tweet at me or email me at laura.heath-stout@emory.edu.

# We Are Everywhere

I’m speaking today about learning from the experiences and wisdom of archaeologists with disabilities. “*What* archaeologists with disabilities?” you might be thinking. Back when we went to conferences in person, you probably didn’t notice a lot of wheelchairs or white canes or ASL interpreters. There are organizations and gatherings of Black archaeologists and queer archaeologists, but I’ve never seen such a thing for disabled archaeologists (stay tuned, I’m working on changing that). If you look around your field project, you might be very sure that archaeologists are all nondisabled: indeed, we valorize our physical strength as we brave difficult terrain and wield pickaxes in search of knowledge.

But we disabled archaeologists are all around you. Many of us, including me, are hiding in plain sight: you wouldn’t know, looking at us, that we have chronic illnesses or mental health disabilities or learning disabilities or other “invisible” or “non-apparent” disabilities (Heath-Stout in press). Others are elders whose disabilities we can easily accept due to their age and status in the discipline. Some are younger and have apparent disabilities, but there are relatively few in this category.

As far as I know, the only systematic quantitative research on the number of disabled archaeologists is the Inclusive, Accessible Archaeology Project in the UK. Sixteen academic programs in the UK responded to their survey: of the 2060 undergraduate students enrolled in these programs in 2005, 13.6% had one or more disabilities, with 63.1% of those students having dyslexia or a similar learning disability (Phillips and Gilchrist 2005). Although this figure is fifteen years old and limited to undergraduates in the UK, it suggests that quite a lot of archaeologists are disabled. I hope that new research will further elucidate the numbers and demographics of archaeologists with disabilities.

Once you start looking for us, disabled archaeologists come out of the woodwork. My interviewee Amy, who has a mental health diagnosis, told me that “I actually am pretty open with people about that because this should not be a dirty f\*\*\*ing secret and I can't tell you the number of people that I've talked to who are like, ‘Oh my God, I'm also dealing with that.’” This has been my experience, too: I shared a bit of my own story of confronting structural ableism in archaeology as part of a paper I presented at the 2019 SAA Annual Meeting, and several colleagues “came out” to me as disabled themselves afterward.

Amy and others I will quote in this paper are interviewees from my qualitative research study of intersecting systems of oppression in the discipline of archaeology. I began this study in 2017 as part of my dissertation research, focusing on race, gender, and sexual orientation issues in the discipline (Heath-Stout 2019). In the seventy-two interviews I conducted for that project, four of my interviewees spontaneously brought up their experiences of ableism as they intersected with racism, sexism, and heterosexism. All four were non-apparently disabled: between them, they had mental health disabilities, chronic illnesses, and learning disabilities. These interviews, along with my own developing identity as a disabled scholar, inspired me to expand the study. This past summer, I conducted a second series of interviews with archaeologists, this time focusing on disability and class issues. The methods for these interviews are discussed in depth in my dissertation (Heath-Stout 2019, pt. 3): they were semi-structured conversations, which I present anonymously or pseudonymously, and the studies were approved by the Boston University and Rice University IRBs.

When I started recruiting disabled interviewees in the summer of 2020, I thought I would have trouble finding enough interlocutors. But once I started putting the word out that I was looking for archaeologists with disabilities to interview, lots of folks volunteered. Some were already acquaintances of mine, who disclosed to me that they were disabled for the purposes of my interview. A few had been interviewed for my dissertation and hadn’t mentioned being disabled because I hadn’t asked. I found that I had already been surrounded by disabled colleagues, without knowing it, just as Amy had when she started being open about her mental health diagnosis.

In my interviews, I heard about disabled archaeologists’ experiences as teachers and students, field and lab researchers, academics and CRM professionals. We’re everywhere, even when we pass as nondisabled to hide in plain sight. And we have things to teach you about how to do archaeology.

# We Are Your Colleagues, Not Your Liabilities

One of my interviewees, Tom, is a graduate students with a disability that affects his mobility. When he applied for field schools, he knew that directors might be concerned about accepting him, so he included a doctor’s note explaining his disability and assuring directors that he was perfectly capable of conducting the tasks of archaeological fieldwork. Yet this note did not clear the way into field projects for Tom. One director reached out to Tom’s advisor to ask if he really could do fieldwork, because of his disability. Another called the doctor to ask invasive questions, and was disappointed to hear that privacy laws prevented the doctor from sharing Tom’s medical information. He was rejected from a variety of field schools. His understanding, Tom told me, was that field school directors saw him as a liability: they thought he would be injured trying to do fieldwork because of his disability, then sue the project. This seems to have held true even when those projects had waivers for all participants to sign, waiving their right to sue in case of injury. Despite his passion for archaeology, excellent grades in archaeology courses, and strong references, field school directors saw Tom as a burden at best and a legal opponent at worst. Because of his disability, they did not see Tom as a contributor to their projects, and as a potential excellent colleague.

Disabled people are all too accustomed to being seen as burdens and as liabilities. Yet a key tenet of disability movements and theorizing has always been that we are valuable human beings, with unique gifts to share. This insistence on our inherent worth arises over and over in writing on disability. I see it in the theory of the social model of disability (Shakespeare 2013), which was developed by the British Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation in the 1970s: they argued that although their bodies were impaired, it was the inaccessibility of society and structural ableism that were disabling. The same rhetorical move is made in Deaf studies, when scholars H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray reframe “hearing loss” as “Deaf gain” (Bauman and Murray 2013). Disabled artist and activist Patty Berne makes the same point, writing, “The history of disabled queer and trans people has continually been one of creative problem-solving within a society that refuses to center our needs” (Berne 2020, 233). In her book *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha celebrates the “crip skills” that disabled people develop and bring to surviving our everyday lives in an ableist society, especially the “crip emotional intelligence” that comes from collaborating with one another to build communities and movements that support all of us, with all our diverging needs. (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 69–73). As she writes,

Embedded in [crip solidarity] is a giant paradigm shift. Our crip bodies aren’t seen as liabilities, something that limits us and brings pity, or something to nobly transcend, ‘cause I’m just like you. Our crip bodies are gifts, brilliant, fierce, skilled, valuable. Assets that teach us things that are relevant and vital to ourselves, our communities, our movements, the whole goddamn planet (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 75).

# We are Creative

So, what do our crip bodyminds teach us that is vital to archaeology? The crip skills of flexibility and creativity. The most shining example I have seen is Theresa O’Mahony’s work. O’Mahoney was the founder of the Enabled Archaeology Foundation, based in the UK, and a crusader for access in archaeological fieldwork. She recorded some of her wisdom in the British Archaeological Jobs and Resources Guide to *Enabled Archaeology* (O’Mahony 2015), which is freely available online. O’Mahony writes that with some thought and flexibility, archaeological research experiences can be made accessible to nearly anyone. She gives advice on working with disabled participants in advance to ensure access, training staff on the basics of disability and access, helping people tape trowels or spoons to hands with unusual shapes or limited grip, and even digging ramps down into trenches for wheelchair users. O’Mahoney brought a special crip combination of creativity, flexibility, and persistence to her work, born from her experience and expertise as a disabled person.

Our disabled bodyminds can also shape our interpretations of the past. One interviewee, Liz, told me that although being autistic means facing ableism, “it also comes with different ways of seeing the world, different perceptions, different skills and abilities.” She explained that “There is a lot of potential” for archaeological research in the skills that are related to her autism, from her strong spatial reasoning to the “connectedness in my brain between the left-brain, science-y, quantitative stuff and the creative stuff.” These traits of hers make her not only able to be an archaeologist, but especially suited to archaeological research.

# We Are Interdependent

Another key tenet of disability justice is interdependence. The mainstream disability movement has emphasized independent living, fighting the institutionalization of disabled people and advocating for people to get the support they need to live in integrated communities. More recently, queer disabled people of color have created the framework for disability justice, an inherently intersectional way of thinking about disability. One of the ten principles of disability justice is interdependence (Sins Invalid 2015). As writer A. H. Reaume (2020, 155) puts it, “Independence is a fairy tale that late capitalism tells in order to shift the responsibility for care and support from community and state to individuals and families.” This anti-capitalist, intersectional perspective emphasizes that we are all interdependent, and must rely upon each other.

I have seen this interdependence in action in disability activism. A few years ago, I attended a protest in front of the Judge Rotenberg Center in Canton, Massachusetts, an institution that until recently used electric shocks to punish disabled inmates for minor infractions. In order to get from Boston to the suburb of Canton, we took the commuter rail train and then the Ride, Boston’s paratransit system. Throughout the day, we all pooled our abilities and resources: those with good handwriting made signs, wheelchair users carried heavy bags and backpacks slung over the backs of their chairs, the sighted guided the blind over unfamiliar terrain, smartphone users double-checked the commuter rail schedule, people with Ride access told the drivers that the rest of us were their attendants so we would get free rides. We all checked in on each other, reminding each other to rest, drink water, and eat snacks. Everyone was disabled, but because we all had different abilities, we could rely on each other and everything that was important got done.

I have also seen interdependence in action on archaeological projects. After all, it is extremely rare for an archaeological research project to be completed, start-to-finish, by a single researcher. We excavate in groups, send samples to a variety of specialists, train students as we work: we are always collaborating. When a Mexican friend and I wrote a conference paper together, we divided the labor according to our skills and resources. We analyzed the ceramics together, and talked through our argument and outline together. Because my Spanish grammar is understandable but rarely fully correct, my coauthor wrote the text. Because she didn’t have access to expensive Adobe software and therefore hadn’t learned how to use it, I used my university Creative Cloud license and Illustrator skills to create all of the digital figures. Her native Spanish and my technology access complemented each other. I’m sure we can all think of many examples of this interdependence in our work.

Disabled archaeologists often see this interdependence very clearly. Liz, my autistic interviewee, reflected that a diversity of bodies and minds is essential for archaeological research:

One of the things that I loved about archaeology when I learned about it and first started fieldwork was, I had a colleague who talked about how archaeology needed a lot of different body types. You needed big strong people, and you needed small people to go into tiny spaces, and you needed everyone in between. I think that having different neurologies and neurotypes in archaeology will also enable different possibilities.

Postprocessualism taught archaeologists that we must be aware of the ways our knowledge is situated in our identities and experiences, and that our work should be multivocal. This collaboration and multivocality can and should include disabled voices.

# Conclusion

Disabled archaeologists are everywhere. We are your colleagues, not your liabilities. We are creative and interdependent. It is time for archaeology to acknowledge that ableism structures our discipline, and begin to dismantle it. Only by making our discipline accessible and welcoming to disabled archaeologists can we harness the crip skills, creativity, interdependence, flexibility, and resilience of disabled communities, and reach our full potential as a discipline. Thank you.

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