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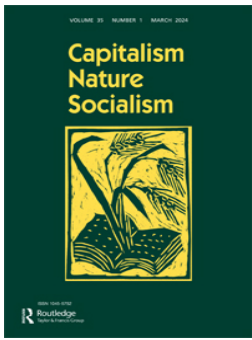
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The Political Ecology of Archaeology and the Archaeological Imagination in the Honduran Frontier

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ABSTRACT

Integrating political ecology and archaeology has resulted in innovative approaches for reconstructing past human-environment interactions and understanding the legacies that shape environmental degradation and resource struggles today. This paper contributes to this emerging interdisciplinarity by proposing a political ecological approach to investigate how archaeological remains are assigned value as resources, drawing on interpretive theories in both archaeology and political ecology. This article applies this approach to examine the archaeological imagination driving expeditions in eastern Honduras that aimed to find the remains of a site of monumental importance associated with the legend of the White City. Through a political ecological lens, it becomes clear that the interpretation of the region's archaeological heritage within the context of a legend is the result of displacement and resource control dynamics. Although archaeologists reject the legend as a credible source, actors continue to exploit its symbolism for prestige and profit. This approach highlights the disjuncture between profit-driven narratives of archaeological heritage and the socio-natures that underpin our imagination of such sites. The paper suggests that engaging with the socio-nature of archaeological sites may lead to more inclusive and nuanced interpretations of the past, showing how political ecology can contribute to public archaeology.

KEYWORDS Indigenous peoples; political ecology; archaeology; value; reflexivity

Introduction

Archaeologists and political ecologists have been long interested in understanding the forces of power that shaped human environments, but the effort to organize an interdisciplinary approach that can account for synergies in both fields is more recent (Bauer, Johansen, and Bauer 2007; Grant and Lane 2018; Morehart, Millhauser, and Juarez 2018). In this article, I contribute to this task by applying a political ecological sensibility to understanding the material conditions that make possible the interpretation of archaeological sites. Building on interpretative theories in archaeology

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(Shanks 2016) and the concept of environmental formation in political ecology (Sundberg 2008), I examine how historical patterns of dispossession and practices of speculation created both the material and conceptual space in which objects became valued as archaeological *resources*.

The legendary White City, envisioned as an archaeological site of monumental importance in the frontier region of Mosquitia in eastern Honduras, has drawn the attention of explorers and treasure hunters since the early twentieth century. According to Anna Tsing (2005), frontiers are ideological projects that construct “wild” space waiting to be tamed by order and in which resources are waiting to be made. By engaging political ecology, I show how speculative interests mediated the interpretation of archaeological debris as evidence of the White City. I understand speculation in the dual sense of the word as claiming something to be true based on faulty evidence and as a risky financial venture. As a political ecologist, my interest on this topic emerged from the controversy surrounding the ground-truthing of an archaeological site in 2015 and ethnographic fieldwork I carried out on Indigenous land rights in Mosquitia between 2015 and 2019. The evidence for the article is drawn from a review of secondary literature about archaeological expeditions in Honduras, media coverage, and field notes. The research covers two periods: those expeditions that took place during the banana enclave (1920s–1940s) and the most recent expedition that took place during a period of rising interests towards developing archaeological sites as nature tourism destinations (2012–2018).

This paper contributes to a political ecology of archaeology by tracing how the value of archaeological resources is made and transformed in socio-natures, concomitant with the speculation of natural resources. The sensibility to use archaeology to interpret the past, a practice that Michael Shanks (2016) describes as the archaeological imagination, is essential for understanding how romanticized notions of ruins produce value through the materiality of archaeological objects. Political ecology enriches the concept of the archaeological imagination by showing how this sensibility continues to evolve in the frontiers of global capital. This analysis also contributes to a post-Marxian political economy by demonstrating how the materiality of archaeological objects influences the production of value (Kay and Kenney-Lazar 2017). Beyond critique, a political ecology of archaeology reinforces the call for Marxist reflexivity in archaeology (Matthews 2005). Unpacking the materiality of the archaeological imagination should serve to reinterpret the past in ways that contribute to the making of more just futures.

Political Ecology and Archaeology

Political ecologists and archaeologists have a long history of interest in interpreting the political forces at work in creating and maintaining human-

environment interactions (Balée 2006; Binford 1977). More recently, varied terminology has been used to describe the interdisciplinary approaches that are developing across the two fields. For example, the introduction to an edited volume in the *Archaeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* called for “archaeologies of political ecology,” emphasizing how archaeological research could contribute to the “political ecologists’ ability to speak authoritatively on topics of resilience, sustainability, marginalization, and degradation” (Morehart, Millhauser, and Juarez 2018, [5]). Meanwhile, a paper published at *the Journal of Political Ecology* called for a “political ecology of archaeology,” mentioning how attention to “possible non-proximal factors” in political ecology could contribute to analyses of local ecologies in archaeology (Grant and Lane 2018, [450]). Despite the varied terminology, a shared objective is harnessing archaeological evidence to understand the materiality of landscapes and the legacies shaping today’s environments (Bauer and Ellis 2018; Douglass and Cooper 2020; Grant and Lane 2018; Logan 2020; Morrison 2018).

My approach to a political ecology of archaeology considers how environmental formations – described by Sundberg (2008) as the amalgamation of political economies, resource control schemes, and environmental imaginaries – mediate how debris from the past is transformed into archaeological resources. Key to this argument is political ecology’s insistence on challenging the society-nature binary by theorizing landscapes as socio-natures (Robbins 2011). Although archaeological objects are human-made, they are part of socio-natures. The passing of time endows archaeological debris with even more “natural” qualities, making it even harder to distinguish them from non-human nature. According to Michael Shanks (2016), one of the characteristics of modernity has been to use archaeological remains to make diachronous interpretations about socio-natures, a sensibility that he described as the archaeological imagination. A political ecological approach to the archaeological imagination contributes simultaneously to archaeology and political ecology by tracing how archaeological resources are made in socio-natures, on the one hand, and specifying how the materiality of objects creates value, on the other.

Joel Wainwright’s work on the cultural politics of ancient Mayan heritage shows the promise of a political ecological approach to archaeology. Wainwright (2011) discussed how Central American elites were influenced by the romanticized view of ancient Maya ruins circulating in Europe during the nineteenth century. The influence of the archaeological imagination is candidly portrayed in the anecdote of how Guatemalan Nobel prize author Miguel Ángel Asturias became inspired to write the 1949 novel *Hombres del Maíz* (Men of Maize), which ennobled the resilience of Mayan communities, during a visit to the British Museum. His social consciousness woke not from critiquing material conditions in Guatemala but from contrasting

the past glory of the ancient Maya to the marginalized conditions of present-day populations.

My approach to the political ecology of archaeology is based on unpacking the materiality of the frontier – understanding materiality in the dual sense of material objects and the concrete social relations that produce space. The “frontier” is an environmental formation subject to various modes of speculation and experiencing competing forms of territorialization (Rasmussen and Lund 2018). The frontier’s dynamic nature makes it an ideal setting to ask questions about the production of value. Political ecologists have long been interested in how the materiality of nature influences the social attributes of valuation (Kay and Kenney-Lazar 2017). A political ecology of archaeology in the Honduran frontier can show the intertwined process producing value for archaeological and natural resources.

The White City and the Archaeological Imagination

Real-life material objects provided the evidence that explorers misconstrued as proof of the White City. Mosquitia in eastern Honduras is part of the Isthmo-Colombian region, which remains less studied by archaeologists compared to neighbouring Mesoamerica (Hoopes 2005). About two hundred relatively small archaeological sites have been identified, likely dating between 1,000 and 1520 CE, suggesting a decentralized settlement pattern (Begley 2016; Cuddy 2007). For decades, academic archaeologists have tried to discard interpretations based on pseudo-scientific claims, but in practice the imagery of the White City has all but disappeared as the main referent guiding the archaeological imagination in Mosquitia (Begley 2016).

The materiality of archaeological objects in Mosquitia has contributed to different versions of the legend of the White City, revealing the speculative nature of the archaeological imagination. The version of the legend circulating among Western audiences is a modernist retelling of *El Dorado*. In this version, the White City is imagined as an archaeological site of monumental importance, possibly hiding antiquities of great value from the pre-Columbian period. Explorers built this interpretation by conflating colonial-era sources with folktales to support their speculations about a lost city. These sources were separate letters written to the Spanish king by Hernan Cortes (1526) and Bishop Cristobal de Pedraza (1544) speculating about a large population center in eastern Honduras (Begley 2016). The Spanish colonizers were looking for gold, labor, and souls to evangelize, but since the early twentieth century, the new “gold” promised by the so-called White City has been media spectacle. This spectacle is what gives value to archaeological debris, turning it into a resource that can be sold as an antiquity or draw tourists to a destination. As a speculative scheme, the value of these

resources increases with the perceived scarcity of places around the world that can still harbor such undisturbed sites.

In contrast to the spectacle of the lost city in the Westernized version, the Indigenous oral tradition emphasized that the White City was not lost as much as hidden from outsiders (Begley 2016). In this folklore, non-Indigenous visitors were barred from entering or taking anything from the site. Some versions maintained that the White City was the refuge of the old gods, and its mysteries could only be revealed to those who shared those beliefs or had extraordinary wisdom, like speaking all known languages. From the Indigenous perspective, the plausibility of the White City existed in their sensibility to read in the materiality of the landscapes the memories of what once was. The debris making this socio-nature could either reveal or hide the secret of the White City, depending on whether the viewer shared the ontological perspective that connected descendant communities with their ancestors through memories of gone landscapes.

The Frontier and the Making of Archaeological Resources

In archaeological research, the region of eastern Honduras where Mosquitia is located is known to have been part of a borderland region where multiple cultures crossed paths (Hoopes 2005). The term of Mesoamerica's southern frontier could be used to describe the region based on its neighbouring position to the most studied area in the north (Henderson and Hudson 2012). From the perspective of a political ecology of archaeology, I conceptualize the frontier-like status of Mosquitia differently from archaeologists. I am interested in how Mosquitia became a frontier in relation to the extractivist patterns of a capitalist World System. In this way, the Mosquitia region became a resource frontier in the sixteenth century.

The archaeological imagination of the White City was made possible by conflating two temporalities – the materiality of pre-Columbian objects and the experience of post-Contact displacement. Pech and Tawahka peoples, who escaped from Spanish control and the slavery raids of the British-supported Miskitu (Offen 2015), were forced to reduce their territory to the more secluded areas where many of the relatively undisturbed pre-Columbian sites have been identified since the twentieth century. Archaeological sites must have existed in other parts of the region, but they were most likely destroyed during the process of settler frontier expansion (Fernandez-Diaz and Cohen 2020). Therefore, the fascination over any undisturbed site associated with the White City reflects more the scarcity created by dynamics of frontier expansion than any intrinsic qualities about the site itself.

Post-contact territorial dynamics also seemed to have nurtured the mythical-like qualities that lured explorers to the White City. According to archaeologist Christopher Begley (2016), Indigenous communities interpreted

archaeological debris in the forest as markers of the last places where their ancestors lived relatively undisturbed. However, outsiders misinterpreted this folklore for evidence of a hidden treasure. In sum, the White City reflected an archaeological imagination built on a colonial logic of plunder, one that continues to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their territories (Mollett 2016). Next, I describe how this archaeological imagination mediated the creation of value for archaeological resources in Mosquitia.

The White City During the Banana Enclave

The legend of the White City would have probably not acquired such international reputation if it were not for the presence of U.S.-based companies in Honduras during a period known as the banana enclave (1880s-1940s). By the turn of the twentieth century, the Mayan site of Copan was the only archaeological site known to international audiences. U.S. businessmen working in mining and banana companies helped to introduce non-Mayan archaeological objects into the international market for antiquities and museum collections. Although these companies only had a limited incursion into Mosquitia, the attention they brought to Honduran archaeology helped raise the profile of Mosquitia as a potential area for archaeological speculation.

The agro-capitalism unleashed during the banana enclave transformed the socio-nature of the Honduran north coast giving way to extensive banana fields. This physical re-organization unearthed archaeological objects, mainly in the floodplains of the rivers that irrigated the banana fields. Company men, known as “banana cowboys,” were instrumental in promoting the speculation of archaeological objects outside the Maya area. They promoted excavations on company lands, bought antiquities from looters, and facilitated export permits with the government (Luke 2006). The archaeological interests of fruit companies were not restricted to Honduras. In neighbouring Guatemala, the United Fruit Company carved a portion of its plantation for the declaration of the country’s first archaeological park at the site of Quirigua.

Collaborations between U.S. companies and academic archaeologists helped to establish the value of objects as archaeological resources. Physical characteristics that made material objects aesthetically pleasant were not the only properties driving the value of these resources. As the discipline of archaeology matured in the U.S., artifacts also gained value from the place they occupied in making a collection that would be representative of imperialist ambitions (Trigger 1984). In parallel, U.S. private collectors were interested in increasing the financial value of their collections by creating an antique tradition in North America based on an Americanist archaeology to rival the European tradition based on ancient Greek and Roman artifacts

(Jenkins 2016). The president of the United Fruit Company, Samuel Zamurray, was one of the most influential mediators in the production of value for archaeological resources. He sponsored the Middle American Research Institute at Tulane University, contributing to the discipline. His daughter, Doris Stone, who began her archaeological training on company lands, became the first archaeologist to publish a monograph dedicated to the ancient peoples outside the Maya region in Honduras (Stone 1957).

Standing further east from the banana fields, Mosquitia remained a region of untapped resources for U.S. companies, museums, and private collectors. Banana companies had had limited incursions into Mosquitia's floodplains, ultimately pulling out when flooding spread the black sigatoka fungal infection (Soluri 2005). However, the fruit companies helped to put Mosquitia in the antiquity market. The first academic account of the White City was written by Edouard Conzemius, a Luxembourgian ethnologist who arrived in Mosquitia as a timber trader and who later worked for the United Fruit Company. George Gustav Heye, a U.S. millionaire who had the largest private collection of Native American art in North America and founded the Museum of the American Indian, became personally interested in the region's archaeology. Heye funded three expeditions organized by amateur explorers to find the White City (Preston 2015b). The last of these expeditions, led by journalist Theodore Morde, provided a particularly colorful, yet distorted account of the region's cultural heritage, shaping a lot of what the media sees as an archaeological spectacle.

In the 1939 expedition, Morde claimed to have found an archaeological site that locals referred to as the lost city of the Monkey God. The fantastical rendition of lost ruins was widely disseminated in the U.S. press and fueled the speculation around the region's archaeological resources. Although Morde turned out to be a fraud (Preston 2015b), his speculation of the White City provided a material for the making of a media spectacle that continues to reverberate until today, as demonstrated by the most recent expedition. By combining elements from the Lost World literature and Orientalism, Morde presented the description of lost ruins that U.S. audiences craved (Bonta 2017). Morde's speculations shaped the archaeological imagination over Mosquitia's cultural heritage for decades to come.

The White City as a Tourist Destination

Since Morde's expedition, many more explorers ventured into Mosquitia looking for the White City. U.S. filmmaker Steve Elkins was one of those who became fascinated with the speculations around the White City, leading his first expedition to the region in 1994 (Preston 2015b). In 2012, Elkins, in partnership with filmmaker Bill Benenson, was able to resume his search for the White City, this time supported by airborne light detection

and ranging (lidar), a technology that helped create a 3D model of areas in Mosquitia that remained unexplored. According to Elkins, his expedition marked the first time that lidar was used for archaeological prospecting, opening new horizons for the use of this technology (Preston 2015b). The 2012 expedition identified three potential archaeological sites in the core area of the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve, the largest protected area in Honduras. In 2015, a ground-truthing expedition confirmed the presence of an undisturbed cache containing several objects in the site labelled as T1.

The results of the lidar mapping and the subsequent confirmation of an undisturbed site created a media spectacle that reinvigorated the speculation around the White City. Newspapers around the world featured the news, which centered around the narrative of how explorers had discovered a “lost city” using cutting edge technology (Preston 2015a). Since the identification of the potential sites in 2012, the Honduran government had fully embraced the narrative of a modern-day archaeological discovery. However, archaeologists in Honduras and abroad were critical of how the expedition sensationalized the findings, which arguably was more reminiscent of treasure hunting than archaeology (see Joyce 2015). The archaeologists who joined the expedition after the initial identification of the sites were more careful in drawing a line between the speculation of the White City and the archaeological findings (Fernandez-Diaz et al. 2018; Fisher et al. 2016). However, this correction had little impact in how the two filmmakers that led the expedition continued to market its findings.

Far from a public relations faux-pax, the sensationalism was designed into the expedition from the beginning. Publicity, not science, was always central in the project, with two filmmakers organizing the expedition and a journalist writing the memoirs (see Preston 2013, 6 may, 2015a; Preston 2015b). U.S.-based cable networks aired documentaries in 2015 and 2021 showing the “secrets” of the lost city to international audiences. The Honduran government endorsed and aggrandized the expedition’s narrative of discovery as it served the purpose of promoting the country’s tourism industry. Access restrictions to T1, which can only be visited for scientific research, has not kept the Honduran Institute of Tourism from advertising the “White City” as one of the country’s destinations in its website (Instituto Hondureño de Turismo 2022). The government-run website attributed the discovery of the White City to Morde, showing that the main objective was to sensationalize the archaeological site rather than present accurate information.

The marketing of media materials arguably could have made the filmmakers leading the expedition turn a profit on their speculative investment. However, for the Honduran government, the financial speculation pointed in the direction of how they could use the White City’s fame to generate additional foreign exchange revenue from tourism. “Making” the next Copan would help diversify the destination offerings. In particular, the

framing of the White City seemed apt for promoting nature-based tourism, as had been previously done under an initiative known as *Ruta Moskitia* in the mid-2000s. In Honduras, efforts to promote sustainable tourism tend to come alongside other speculative schemes based on extractivism (Loperena 2017).

The irony is that the “White City” is neither an archaeological site nor a tourist destination. Archaeologists agree that the White City is only a legend. In a superficial effort to demystify the archaeological evidence, the site known as T1 was renamed as the Jaguar City in reference to one of the objects found there. However, the so-called Jaguar City is expected to remain closed to visitors for the foreseeable future due to ongoing research and inaccessibility. The misleading propaganda in the government’s website advertising the White City as a destination only confirms that it is a speculative scheme, both in terms of imagining an archaeological site and hoping to profit from it somehow.

Towards an Otherwise Archaeological Imagination

It is difficult to imagine the allure of the White City dissipating as a result of more archaeological research. Instead, a political ecology of archaeology might ask how to use the power of symbols such as the White City to create more inclusive archaeological imaginations. This process begins with a recognition of the privileged positions that archaeologists and heritage managers have in the making of archaeological narratives. Fostering a Marxist reflexivity in public archaeology involves creating spaces for collaborations to upend hierarchies in interpretation (Matthews 2005). The critical practice of community-partnered archaeologies contributes to the assembling of these collaborations (Atalay 2006; Blakey 1997; Grabow and Walker 2016). Two insights can be drawn from the Mosquitia for how museography related to the White City could reflect an archaeological imagination otherwise.

The 2015 expedition in Honduras led to the creation of a visitor’s center to store, study, and display the artifacts found in T1. Compared to a conventional museum, the center’s museography is structured by scientific tourism, as visitors can observe how scientists investigate the artifacts. The representation of pristine nature is integral to the experience of scientific observation – the walls are painted with murals depicting rainforest and endangered species. The collection includes not only archaeological artifacts but also taxidermy, providing a glimpse into the “nature” that buried the mystery of the White City.

While the museography at the visitor’s center attempted to represent the open-endedness of Mosquitia’s archaeological heritage, it continued to reproduce a narrative that erased history from the making of the

archaeological site. Naming the center *Kaha Kamasa* – the Pech term for the White City – was supposed to highlight the connection with descendant communities, but without contextualization, the name only reinforced the trope of discovery, as if calling the site by an Indigenous term was supposed to de-mystify the legend. Absent from the exhibit is the more accurate translation of *Kaha Kamasa* as a white house, not a city (Begley 2016). Distant from the singularity of *Kaha Kamasa* imagined by outsiders, the “white house” in Pech folklore expressed a relational ontology in memory practices, a collective memory of dispossession congealed in material remains found scattered across the landscape.

A more conscious effort to engage multi-voicity at the visitor’s center could involve providing the socio-historical context for the legend of the White City and making spaces for the local communities to speak for themselves about their attachment to this heritage.

A political ecology of archaeology should also highlight the connection that exists between archaeological heritage and territorial rights. Although archaeologists and heritage managers have a limited ability in changing the structural conditions that create dispossession, they can design museum experiences that cultivate progressive archaeological imaginaries. Even the location of a museum can either reproduce or upend dominant archaeological imaginaries. In Honduras, representatives of descendant communities criticized the extraction of archaeological materials from an area in the department of Gracias a Dios, following the 2015 expedition. These artifacts were later placed at the visitor’s center that opened in 2018 in the city of Catacamas in the department of Olancho. The controversy lingers as descendant communities, most of which live in Gracias a Dios, would like to see these artifacts displayed in their department (Galeana 2018). The repatriation of the artifacts to Indigenous communities would be an action in alignment with best practices in community archaeology (Atalay 2006). However, repatriation as the end goal by itself would potentially generate its own controversies.

Controversies over repatriation show the politicization of an archaeological imagination in action. In Honduras, the controversy over the objects found in T1 reveals the marginalized position of descendant communities in archaeological research and the heritage industry. After all, Indigenous representatives claim that displaying the artifacts in Gracias a Dios could attract tourists to this area (Galeana 2018). However, from the standpoint of an archaeological imagination, the controversy should also prompt questions about how to care for what was lost. Olancho was also once Indigenous territory, and descendant communities continue to live in the department. Mosquitia is a post-contact imaginary, one that once covered large parts of the departments of Olancho and Colon even though today it is mainly associated with Gracias a Dios. Perhaps maintaining part of the collection in

Olancho could serve as a window to critically engage the public about the *un-making* of places associated with the closing of the frontier.

Conclusion

A political ecology of archaeology is an invitation to disentangle the co-production of space and sensibilities about the remains of the past in order to foster imaginations for more just futures. Archaeological imaginaries are formed within environmental formations, which in frontier regions like Mosquitia are driven by speculative practices. Embracing the legend of the White City as a medium for contributing to community archaeology may seem paradoxical, but one of the lessons from political ecology is precisely to work through these contradictions. Museography informed by political ecology could emphasize the role that dynamics of frontier-making had on making the legend of the White City. Providing the public with this context could help foster a more critical sensibility for interpreting the past and imagining a desirable future.

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