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'Handle with care': literature, archaeology, slavery

Josie Gill ^a, Catriona McKenzie ^b and Emma Lightfoot ^c

^aDepartment of English, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; ^bDepartment of Archaeology, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK; ^cMcDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between literary and bioarchaeological approaches to slavery, and investigates how the methods and priorities of each discipline might inform each other in understanding what it was like to be enslaved. Both bioarchaeologists and creative writers have attempted to access the inner lives of enslaved people, yet there has been little interaction between them. This paper offers an account of a research project which brought together a literary scholar, two archaeological scientists and seven creative writers to explore how writing might not only communicate a history understood through archaeological evidence, but could itself inform approaches to that evidence. We discuss two key themes which emerged from the project: Conversation and Caring. These themes were crucial to the interdisciplinary process, as it was only through attention to our relationships with each other that we could begin to reassess the nature of material in each of our disciplines.

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Introduction

I know my ancestors were slaves, but what did they do? How did they live? How did they manage to survive it? We know so little and very little of what we do know comes from them. (Levy 2010)

The problem of how to understand the life of an enslaved person from their own perspective, articulated here by the Black British novelist Andrea Levy, is one with which writers concerned with the era of transatlantic slavery have grappled for some time. For Levy, 'The only way you can go any further is through fiction,' and her 2010 novel about Jamaican plantation slaves *The Long Song* sets out to recreate the world in which her ancestors lived. African American writer and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison has also addressed this lacuna in knowledge. Morrison contends that historical narratives, including autobiographical narratives written by slaves, are limited in their ability to convey the inner lives of enslaved people because they often had their purpose and style determined by a popular taste which 'discouraged writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience' (1987, 69). She writes:

CONTACT Josie Gill  josie.gill@bristol.ac.uk  Department of English, University of Bristol, 3-5 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1TB, UK

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Whatever the style and circumstance of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: “This is my historical life – my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race.” Two: “I write this text to persuade other people – you, the reader, who is probably not black – that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery”. (66)

In the face of narratives written to persuade a white readership that slavery should be brought to an end, Morrison understands her role as a contemporary black writer as being to attempt to access what is absent from these narratives, namely, the ‘unwritten interior life’ which she approaches using her ‘own recollections’ and ‘the act of imagination’ (71). This is a method she describes as ‘a kind of literary archaeology’ where ‘on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply’ (71).

Morrison’s use of archaeology here is metaphorical, following a long line of twentieth-century thinkers and theorists including Freud and Foucault.¹ As a writer, she is involved in digging, unearthing and reconstructing a vanished past from archival fragments and artefacts, in much the same way as an archaeologist digs for physical evidence of past lives. Yet it is also the case that archaeologists themselves have been increasingly concerned with the question of how to understand the inner lives of slaves. Research initiatives such as the EUROTAST project, which was set up to bring together researchers from historical studies, archaeology, anthropology and population genetics to consider the transatlantic slave trade, have made the ‘identities and lived experiences of individuals displaced by the slave trade’ (Abel and Sandoval-Velasco 2016, 173) a central point of investigation, seeking to ‘cast light upon histories that have long been suppressed by trauma, displacement and silence’ (150). Archaeologists working on the New York African Burial Ground project aimed to ‘tell a rich and absorbing story of the lives of enslaved Africans in colonial New York’ (*The New York African Burial Ground*, 2009) through examining their remains. Such projects utilize bioarchaeology in their approach to understanding the lives of enslaved Africans, analysing graves, bones and teeth to gain information on the sex, age, health and cultural practices of enslaved individuals (2009). Many archaeologists have viewed research into slave life as ‘a moral mission’, a mission ‘to tell the *story*’ (our emphasis) of the ‘poor, powerless and “inarticulate” – who had been forgotten by the written record’ (Singleton 1999, 1). That archaeologists and creative writers both aim to understand the inner lives of enslaved Africans is clear, but while each discipline ‘invoke[s] the other as a metaphor for its own practice’ (Schwyzer 2007, 6), there has been little interaction between these fields of inquiry, despite their similar objectives.²

This article offers an account of an interdisciplinary research project, ‘*Literary Archaeology*’: *Exploring the Lived Environment of the Slave*, which was a collaboration between a literary scholar and two archaeological scientists. The project set out to examine the relationship between literary and archaeological approaches to slavery, and to investigate where and how the methods and priorities of each discipline might inform each other in understanding what it was like to be enslaved. Our aim was to explore how contemporary

¹For a discussion of archaeology as metaphor in literary and critical theory see Schwyzer (2007, 6–9).

²Archaeologists have been concerned about the appropriation of archaeological concepts by thinkers in the humanities, who often detach such concepts from an engagement with things and the earth (González-Ruibal 2013, 1), while there have been tensions between black communities and archaeologists over the archaeological analysis of slave burial grounds (Nelson 2013, 529; Blakey 2001, 400).

fiction and archaeological data might be brought together to create a literary archaeology that is more than metaphorical; a method where writers begin with physical remains, and imagination, memory and living bodies become ways of making sense of the archaeological information revealed by the bones of long-dead slaves.

While there has been some excellent research on the relationship between material culture and literary studies, there has been much less attention given to the dynamic between scientific archaeology and literature.³ Within archaeology, there have been projects which seek to ‘give voice’ to people who left few textual traces through collaborations with artists (Schwyzer 2007, 31–32). However, Joanna Sofaer (2006) argues that such phenomenological approaches often fail to account for the materiality and specificity of the body. Sofaer suggests that scientific (osteological) approaches, which have sometimes been negatively viewed as treating bodies as fixed specimens, need to come together with experiential approaches to form a ‘theoretical and methodological space in which many kinds of bodies can be drawn together’ where ‘the physicality of the archaeological body forms the locus of this incorporation’ (11). Our project sought to create such a space, a space in which we could work toward a new approach to the experiences of enslaved people, and think through what it means to try to recover these experiences – a full understanding of which can arguably never be known. In what follows we discuss how we developed an interdisciplinary research process using science and creative writing as a means of approaching this complex and painful past. It is our intention that this article should be accessible to scholars working in each of our fields who are interested in interdisciplinary working across the sciences and the humanities, as well as to those interested in working with community groups. As Felicity Callard and Des Fitzgerald (2015) note ‘accounts of what interdisciplinary projects are like in practice are still relatively few in number, and most people are still reticent about the quotidian experiences that characterize them’ (7). We hope that this article goes some way towards filling this gap in knowledge.

Beginnings, background and methods

The ‘*Literary Archaeology*’ project was set up after the investigators met during an AHRC Science in Culture event for early career researchers from the humanities and the sciences. We realized that we were all interested in understanding the lives of enslaved people and in exploring the relationship between our disciplinary approaches to this subject. We created an interdisciplinary project focused around the following research questions:

Can literary engagements with slavery stimulate new lines of enquiry in the analysis of human skeletal remains and aid or inform the interpretation of archaeological data?

How might archaeological methods, data and physical remains inspire and enhance literary attempts to reconstruct past slave environments and literary critical ways of thinking about slavery and the relationship between archaeology and literature?

Can a synthesis of literary and archaeological perspectives enhance public understanding of the experiences of enslaved Africans?

³In addition to Schwyzer, work in the former category includes Wallace (2004), Hines (2004) and Van Dyke and Bernbeck (2015).

We commissioned seven black creative writers affiliated to the Bristol-based writers' collective *Our Stories Make Waves* to work with us. The aim was to create an environment in which writers, scientists and literary scholars could interact, exchange questions and ideas, identify gaps in knowledge and stimulate new ways of thinking that could potentially impact upon each of our disciplinary approaches. The writers would produce new creative works in response to the science, while the archaeologists would be inspired to consider new perspectives which could inform what they do and look for in the laboratory.

We held two workshops, the first of which was led by the academics. Gill gave an overview of transatlantic slavery and of some of the ways black creative writers have approached writing about slavery. McKenzie and Lightfoot presented information on archaeological approaches to slavery using two case studies; slave burial grounds at the Newton Plantation in Barbados and Finca Clavijo in Gran Canaria, where the remains of individual slaves have been subject to osteoarchaeological and chemical analysis. As this was an exploratory project, we considered it appropriate to use published data, enabling us to explore this new avenue of research while not disturbing burial grounds or bones unnecessarily.⁴ The Barbados study was chosen as the Newton Plantation is a site where human skeletal remains have been subject to extensive bioarchaeological analysis, while the Gran Canaria study was selected as Lightfoot had been part of the scientific team and had undertaken the isotopic analysis of the remains. The presentations provided a broad overview of slavery in Barbados between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, and in Gran Canaria in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. McKenzie and Lightfoot presented information compiled from the gray and published literature about four individuals from each site. The individuals selected encompassed a range of males and females, from young adolescents to older adults, and a mixture of individuals who had been captured and moved during their lifetimes, and people who had been born on the plantations. Information was provided about the completeness and preservation of the remains, sex, age-at-death, stature and all pathological lesions and cultural modifications which could be identified in the in the bones and teeth. The chemical analysis identified the likely diet of each individual, alongside evidence of geographical movement. McKenzie and Lightfoot brought human skeletal remains to the workshop; a cranium, (from a different context), and a rib from the Gran Canaria population which the writers were able to handle during the day. The afternoon was set aside for questions and discussion.

The writers were commissioned to produce new creative works in response to the case studies and we held a second workshop three months later, led by the writers, who talked about their feelings about the project and presented first drafts of their writing. Gill, Lightfoot and McKenzie shared their reflections on the process, and discussed the answers to questions that the writers had posted on an online forum which had been set up to facilitate communication between workshops. Across the course of the project, everyone was encouraged to write blog posts to record their thoughts and ideas as the process unfolded. The completed creative pieces were published on the project website and were read at public events in two museums in Bristol in October 2016. The workshops and public events were filmed and a short documentary was produced about the project and the public response to it. The work of the project took place in the city of Bristol, where

⁴The cases studies were based on articles by Santana et al. (2015) and Schroeder et al. (2009). The entire project was approved by the University of Bristol Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee.

there is an ongoing public debate about how the transatlantic slave trade should be acknowledged and remembered. Given that archaeology has the power to challenge ‘orthodox or hegemonic historical narratives by grounding history in the remains of the past, the unedited evidence for past lives’ (Shanks 2012, 10), it was important that we opened our project up to local communities in Bristol and began a dialogue with them which focused around our core idea; how writing might not only communicate a history primarily understood through archaeological evidence, but could itself inform approaches to that evidence.⁵

Our experimental, interdisciplinary approach, which involved face to face interaction with creative writers, discussion, creativity, dialogue, reflection, memory and intuition, moved each of us away from the normal methods of our disciplines; laboratory work, in the case of archaeological science and textual analysis, in the case of literary studies. It was important for us to move beyond our usual approaches in order to avoid what Callard and Fitzgerald (2015) call ‘the normative weight that this prefix – inter- – has come to carry’ where ‘a kind of transgression is apparently achieved by working between one discipline and another – and yet fundamental assumptions (e.g. about what an experiment might be, about who does it, about how its objects are produced, and so on) are left quite unquestioned’ (4). In order to understand if and how our disciplines could inform each other, we needed to establish an environment in which not only new approaches to slavery could take shape, but in which our very ideas about what constitutes knowledge and research in this area would be open to challenge, a way of, as Callard and Fitzgerald put it, ‘marking, folding, and perturbing the existing order of the world’ (44). Indeed, we were aware that the normative weight that interdisciplinary research has come to carry includes assumptions about the location of knowledge (i.e. that it is to be found in academia) and its producers (i.e. usually white, often male, university academics). Interdisciplinary research, particularly science-humanities collaborations, has rarely engaged the (critical) work of black thinkers or black communities. We did not want our project to be about academics telling or explaining, about scientists simply using the humanities to communicate their work, or humanities scholars critiquing science under the assumption that the scientist is a ‘crude empiricist’, ‘blithely washing sociological histories away with her all-conquering brain machine’, an attitude Callard and Fitzgerald contend has sometimes characterized cross-disciplinary interaction (34).

Working together equally, and with a group of local black writers many of whom had rarely, if ever, been involved in university-level research, meant that we could begin to bring our disciplinary expertise into dialogue with creative practitioners for whom the bodies under consideration evoked a range of critical and emotional responses. Whereas the role of universities has traditionally been to produce a corpus of knowledge where ‘the corpus to be produced was not the human body but a body of knowledge, profoundly disembodied’ (Currah and Casper 2011, 3), our project foregrounded the physical, biological body – both of the living participants and the dead – as a means of creating new forms of knowledge that could be brought within institutional walls. Accounting for the role of the body of the researcher in the bodies of knowledge they produce is something which Tim Ingold (2016) contends has been missing in science where, he argues, the sensations and bodily experiences of the scientist doing research have become somewhat

⁵Unfortunately there is not space here to discuss the public aspects of the project in detail.

removed from the scientific method (9). He argues instead for ‘a relation of *correspondence*’ between things and people, where the objective is ‘not to accumulate more and more data *about* the world, but to better correspond *with* it’ (10–11). We wanted to explore how such calls for a different mode of embodied knowing might work in practice, to test how our sensations, experience and feelings as individuals and as a group could cohere around the human remains of enslaved people, remains which are at once object and subject.⁶ In so doing we hoped to correspond with the material and with each other, and thus to begin the process of interdisciplinary working in earnest.

Findings

The results we present here are organized around the two main themes which emerged from the research process and the creative writing; *Conversing with Bones* and *Caring for Bodies*. Rather than attempting to map the impact of the project onto each discipline, we present the implications of interdisciplinary working for each of the disciplines within each theme, and draw some tentative conclusions about the benefits of working together. There is not space here to discuss all the creative writing produced, so we have based our analysis on two examples which address the emergent themes while pointing in interesting and significant ways to how literature and archaeology together can shape our understanding of the experience of enslaved people. For the full texts of these and the other works produced, please see our project website <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/research/literary-archaeology/creative-writing/>.

Conversing with bones

The first workshop began with a round of introductions, where everyone was encouraged to share their initial thoughts about the project. The writers felt at once excited to work with scientific information, while at the same time apprehensive and nervous – both about approaching the subject and about working with university academics. McKenzie and Lightfoot voiced similar feelings of trepidation about approaching the subject of slavery, conscious that the writers might be disappointed with the small amount of information which could be derived from the analysis of each of the skeletons. We were acutely aware that many of the questions that the writers had about the enslaved individuals – about how they lived and died – could not be answered through the analysis of the skeletal remains. Among archaeologists there are serious reservations about extrapolating too much from the physical evidence, as Rogers and Waldron (1995, vii–viii) suggest ‘palaeopathologists owe it to themselves, and to those on whose behalf they work, to do what they *can* do well. They do this best by not exaggerating the claims for their discipline, and by ensuring that the information that they do provide is soundly based’. They write that

In addition to general details such as age, sex, and height about the individuals they have recovered, archaeologists would like to know what diseases the individuals suffered from,

⁶The importance of understanding the interconnected nature of animate and inanimate bodies has been highlighted in work within the new materialist movement as well as by black feminist scholars (See Marshall and Alberti 2014; Coole and Frost 2010; Alexander 2006).

what they died of, what their occupation was, what their state of nutrition was, and as much as possible about their way of life, and the health of the population of which they were once a part. It is dismal to have to say that, in actual fact, very little such information is going to be forthcoming, and we have the distinct impression that a great many bone reports are a profound disappointment to their recipients. (vii)

The uncertainty that often accompanies archaeological interpretations has resulted in some nervousness in archaeology around giving ‘voices’ to the bodies it considers. This concern is articulated several times in Van Dyke and Bernbeck’s (2015) book on narrative in archaeology; ‘We must tread carefully as we attempt to imagine – but not speak for – the people who populate our imagined pasts’ (2), they write, ‘We can use our fantasizes to produce imagined past individuals and motivations for their actions, but real past people can’t reply by doing the same with us’ (5). Considering the ethics of voicing the dead they ask, ‘are recognition of past subjects and respect for them achieved through the construction of “human faces” with sensory experience, emotion, and meaning, or is this merely one further way for archaeologists to appropriate and subjugate past peoples?’ (10). The concern is that in the face of the impossibility of ever gaining a full picture of past lives from archaeology, the narratives which archaeologists create could be in danger of misrepresenting the ‘truth’ of those past lives.

By contrast, writers, particularly black writers tackling the subject of slavery, have typically been much less anxious about voicing the past, and have been explicit, rather than worried, about the way those voices connect to people in the present. Saidiya Hartman (2007), for example, writes of her attempts to uncover the lives of her enslaved ancestors in the face of having little information about them. As she goes ‘in search of people who left behind no traces’ (15), she begins to question her attempt, asking herself ‘Was the experience of slavery best represented by all the stories I would never know? ... I was determined to fill in the blank spaces of the historical record and to represent the lives of those deemed unworthy of remembering, but how does one write a story about an encounter with nothing?’ (15–16). For Hartman, the solution begins with imagining herself as a ‘vestige of the dead’ (18). Indeed, closing the space between the living and the dead is one of the ways in which black writers – perhaps most famously Morrison in her 1987 novel *Beloved* – have tried to ‘fill in the blank spaces’ and in so doing recover the voices of long-dead slaves.

Yet the dynamic that emerged at the workshops was not one where the writers simply took the responsibility of ‘voicing’ away from archaeologists who, perhaps in lacking an ancestral connection to the remains, might have concerns about the ethical implications of attempting to narrate their stories. Rather, what emerged was a literary anxiety about voice akin to the archaeological concerns expressed above, an anxiety encapsulated in Kisuule’s (2016) spoken word poem *The Slave, The Sea, The Static, The Silence*, which she wrote in response to the project. Kisuule dramatizes her encounter with the bones, focusing on the question of how to describe them, on how to create a voice for the person whose body parts she holds. The poem proceeds as a kind of conversation between the poet and the dead slave, the latter responding to the faltering descriptions of the former as the poet imagines how a long-dead slave might respond to their body being analysed and the bones speak back:

I see your bones
 Markings
 Lesions
 This honeycomb skull

Huh?

No, brittle snap skull

Come again?

No, concrete sponge skull

No, just a skull

I grip it

Waiting for answers

That won't come

The poet struggles to find a language which is authentic, but ends up speaking plainly and directly 'just a skull', searching for 'the least wrong words' as each attempt to voice the slave leads the poet back to uncertainty and self-doubt about whether the description, despite its basis in archaeological science, is true:

*I have worms in my bowels
 Tight tight feeling in the knee and the hip
 The times I come slowly down to my knees
 Dreamed that death come upon me
 Merciful and sweet*

Is this right? Is this true?
 Truth and fiction walk shoulder to shoulder
 Scheming to tear each other's hair out
 Interrogating eachother
 Interrupting eachother
 Fiction asks truth a question
 And truth responds
 With yet another question

*Why these people
 Asking me these questions
 In a language (I?) me don't know
 Can't you see here,
 I'm resting
 Don't I get no rest, even now?*

Truth and fiction are personified as slave and poet, squaring up to each other with more questions than answers, yet the scene also evokes something of the interaction of the archaeologists with the writers at the workshops, the overlapping and jostling of fact and fiction 'Interrogating eachother /Interrupting eachother'. The poet appears allied neither to the scientist nor to the slave, both of whom appear to have greater claims and access to truth than she. Yet at the same time the poet is also one of 'these people' asking questions 'in a language' which is foreign through being academic, as the ancestor and later the poet herself situates science and poetry as coming from the 'hallowed halls' of 'high academia'

where ‘we desperately, arrogantly / Try and approximate you’. Poetry and science are as one in their mutual attempts to enliven bodies, ‘I am a gravedigger/ Atavistic Frankenstein / Trying to make a beautiful thing / From monstrous parts of history’. While the poet’s job is to piece together a human from parts and remains in a way that is ‘beautiful’, she increasingly fears that her words are just more of the ‘many alien sounds’ that ‘have been attached to you’ – aligned to the scientific language that has labelled the skeletal remains ‘Individual N52’.

The poem thus emphasizes how both scientist and writer share responsibility for, and must justify, their intrusion into the lives of the dead and their attempts to create voices or narratives for people who don’t necessarily want to speak or be heard; ‘*They peerin in at me / They dig and dig and dig but / No dignity in this*’. Meaningful connection and communication appear elusive to each as they attempt to fill a gap in knowledge (represented by the space in the middle of the page) but in so doing only emphasize the past as an ultimately unknowable void, ‘But we rewrite history every time we cast our eyes back / The more elusive the past, the larger the gap for all / These jangling words to fall into’. Yet just as the poet seems to be giving up on language and on science, questioning the point of the whole exercise, the conversation starts to focus on the orifice which makes conversation possible – the mouth:

Like what – what would his teeth ache like?

Oh teeth ache like

No

Like sunsets

No, that’s not right either

Like fist fights

what?

Like,

what?

*Like,
what? Like,*

*Feels like a dream
Thinking of this place I was taken from
This place where I could come and go
Lay my head down where I please*

The past is losing its teeth
It opens up its mouth to tell the truth
And a million sugar rotted, rum corroded
Teeth fall out in breathless staccato

*I am losing my teeth
I feel em dancing around in my mouth
When I go to eat my saltfish
I spit em out into my Guinea corn*

I cannot sink my teeth into this story
I am met with things that crumble
On contact

Until this point, the interaction has been characterized by looking and sight, ‘I see your bones’, ‘Can’t you see here’, ‘we cast our eyes back’, a conversation based on regarding one another at a distance. However, by shifting focus to the mouth, the poet starts to come to terms with what it might mean to allow the past to talk. For although the poet struggles once again to find the right language, it is in the *attempt* to communicate, to speak and to listen, that understanding and connection is made. The poet imagines the rotten and neglected teeth of the slave as preventing the slave – and by extension the past – from speaking ‘the truth’, the past losing its bite and becoming instead ‘like a dream’, something which the poet is unable to sink her own teeth into. Yet the past of this section is also the slave’s past, the dream of ‘the place I was taken from’ remembered only in the music of the ‘breathless staccato’ and ‘dancing’ of the teeth now falling out in the anxiety dream-cum-nightmare that is slavery. In order for the poet to speak of the past (an act performed through the spoken word delivery of her poem), the dead must also speak of their past, a past revealed through science in their teeth. Voicing the past is thus revealed to be not about trying to ‘speak for’ the dead or trying to tell their truth, but about conversing with them about the past through conversations formed and informed by their mouths.

What the poem points toward is the ongoing, unfinished nature of this conversation where ‘Each time it comes to rest on the shore/ It is sent back on itself’ in a never-ending cycle of call and response. The poem thus speaks to archaeological anxieties about voicing the dead by suggesting that it is uncertainty which is to be embraced, that emotion and meaning are not fixed by description or narrative but endlessly reimagined in the process of engaging with the remains of enslaved people. The science can provide detail about what the person ate, ‘Guinea Corn’, about the place they were taken from, but rather than securing the person in history, the science informs an ongoing dialogue in which what is ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ shifts like the ebb and flow of the sea. The reciprocity foregrounded by the poem is therefore not only that between poet and slave, but between scientist and poet, and scientist and slave; conversing with the past is also a way for science and literature to converse with one another in the present, a conversation which the poem enables through its incorporation of science, and suggestion that archaeology might let the past speak through poetry. It was ultimately through listening and speaking, both to the past and to each other at the workshops, that we could begin address shared concerns around voicing past people and by doing so begin to unlock ‘the power of the disembodied and the stories that those who forcibly undertook the Middle Passage are still yearning to tell, five centuries later’ (Alexander 2005, 6).

Caring for bodies

While we had anticipated that most of the writers’ initial questions would focus on the scientific process, on how accurate the science could be and on what information the analysis can and cannot provide, there was also a lot of interest in the archaeologists as people. How did it feel for Lightfoot and McKenzie to handle human skeletal remains? What was their motivation? What were the academics getting out of this project and what were their universities getting out of it? Such questions placed both intellectual and emotional demands upon us that we initially found startling: we were doing this, we thought, to develop new approaches to slavery across academic and creative

boundaries. Yet it became clear that these kinds of questions were closely interrelated with the writers' feelings toward the case studies. They were interested in how the archaeologists engaged with human skeletal remains and the ethics of excavation. As Jenny Davis put it in a blog post following the workshop:

what is the proximity, in terms of time, when human remains, the excavated dug up bones are simple pure bone, yielding itself up for analysis, a microscope, objective scientific enquiry? When is it simply two milligrams of bone, and when is it ancestor? Is time simply the measure here? Or does memory determine this? (2016)

Such questions were, for Ros Martin, directly linked to the dynamics of how we would work together as a group,

These are our ancestors are they not yours and part of complex and painful intertwining histories of a global human community? Or are these mere bones, dug up, isotoped to discover what is it we do not yet know? What are we anticipating or hoping it will yield? And the yet to be acknowledged: black artists white scholars coming together ... What of our own unique histories will we examine and bring into consideration in studying this period, these sites? (2016)

There was a desire to find common ground, to think of ourselves as fellow human beings rather than as scientist, writer, scholar; yet questions of power and ownership of the research process circulated alongside this as the writers began to identify a gap between the academics' affective relationship to the individual case studies and their own:

The archaeologists offer a pile of bones. There's evidence of tooth decay, malnutrition, hard manual labour. Some individuals were born in Barbados, others were not. Overall, they deliver small answers to big questions. It's as if the bones are saying - after all I've been through, you wait a few hundred years and now you ask what it was like? Can't blame them for holding out. Maybe that is just as it should be. What did we expect? (Monteith, 2016)

The challenge for the writers was how they could be part of this process, whether they could or should reconcile the knowledge derived from archaeological science – as information and as method – with their own craft.

While these frictions made for some interesting discussions at the workshops they were a necessary part of our interdisciplinary exploration, as the creative pieces which the writers produced as a result demonstrated. Indeed, it was the creative writing which began to suggest a way forward. Valda Jackson's (2016) poem 'How I Feel', which she shared at the second workshop, addressed the issue of the scientific reduction of the human body to bone directly, beginning with a description of the unfamiliar experience of handling human remains:

We pass around human remains.
I hold a person's skull in my hand.
Feel its roundness,
toughness, It's weight
and texture, small pits and dents.
Like a thing hand-made.
Modeled in clay.
Sculpted ivory.

The scientific stuff of facts and supposition float in the air.
While I, cupping my hand atop the crown, marvel at its size, its density.

Compact.
Handled.

And so, so small.
I compare its scale to those of the living-breathing people around me.
There is much mass in flesh and fluids, skin and hair.
Weight and substance.
There is volume in breath ...
In life.

Through the first line of the poem, the poet establishes not only the unusualness of the exercise which is being undertaken, but that it is physical contact between bodies – living and dead – which is to provide the means by which the science is comprehended. The poet's first contact with the skull involves, perhaps surprisingly, its reduction from a 'human' to a material object, something the poet imagines having been 'hand-made', 'modeled' or 'sculpted', its 'pits and dents' assessed almost aesthetically, as an initially artistic response is contrasted with 'the scientific stuff'. Yet the poet takes on a scientific perspective as her observation extends to the people in the room, whose 'mass', 'weight' and 'volume' is assessed in relation to the skull. Making the living the object of scientific investigation, while the skull is a source of sensory experience and feeling, the poem not only establishes a sense of continuum between the bodies of the living and the dead, but inverts the scientific gaze onto the bodies of the scientists themselves. In so doing it is the poet who gains power over the process; science becomes ephemeral and loses its weight as 'facts and supposition float in the air' – only the 'weight' of the skull, of the flesh and breath of the living, is real.

Yet the weight which the poet feels is also the weight of responsibility: holding, handling, comparing and feeling, the poet must turn the object once again into subject, a body that is not owned, over whom nobody, including the poet, has power. The poet cannot retreat from this responsibility when, as she examines a piece of rib 'A sprinkling / that escapes its plastic entombment remains / caught / in the fold of my open book / The centre-fold'. The poet must bring the boxed bones to life, which she does later when she describes 'Rubbing my finger slowly down the inner spine / I feel the gritty uneven texture of ground bone'. Here, the poet's body, her book and bone are fused together as the way in which the poet will care for the bones comes into view: the rubbing of the spine (of the book) points toward the later verses, voiced by anonymous, numbered individuals, where in the aftermath of the whipping of a slave, another slave attempts to care for the injured slave. The whipped slave 'cannot bear a touch. / I cannot stand another hand / laid on me' but she watches her carer 'take my feet in your two hands / gently.' In the next verse, which is from the carer's perspective, the carer says 'I will not let you be un-held. Cannot.' The act of almost religious devotion with which one slave cares for another is what the poet attempts to replicate through her own sensory experience of massaging their bones. The poet's care for the bones is an analogue for the healing touch of her ancestor, and she must craft her writing with equal care as her book's spine becomes that of the slave, her poem a physical, breathing body where language is its fluid and its shape is a twisting, noded spine.

While, as the poet notes, the scientists present the bones in boxes marked ‘handle with care’ (which all involved in the process do), the poem suggests that real care for these bones involves something more – a care for subjectivity, a subjectivity which Sian Jones and Lynette Russell argue has often been stripped away by scientific archaeology which instead has sought ‘to locate fragments of knowledge deemed to be of real (objective) historical value’ (2012, 272). Jackson’s response to the stripped back fragmentation of the archaeological object is to develop a kind of artistic care which builds up rather than scrapes away: She is also an artist and made a film to accompany the poem in which she paints a picture of two women as her poem is read aloud. The film foregrounds a relationship of care between the body of the living (artist) and the dead, even though time stands between them, a disjuncture conveyed through the time lapse technique the film employs where Jackson’s creative process is shown from beginning to end.⁷

The poet-artist’s care for the remains and her evocation of caring relationships between enslaved people points toward two possible directions for future bioarchaeological analysis in this field. The first is the potential to investigate methods of care amongst enslaved people. What do the bones reveal not just about how the person worked and what they ate, but how they were cared for? What can bones reveal about healing practices and about relationships between different people? Can touch be accounted for? While care has become an emerging theme in Bioarchaeology we are not aware of such questions being asked in the context of slave burial grounds.⁸ Yet considering caring practices also has the potential to inform archaeological analysis by bringing into view the archaeologist’s relationship to the human fragments she handles and analyses. Knowledge and caring are, as María Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, 202) contends, relational, a recognition of which highlights the collectivity of knowledge-making that is often undervalued in academia. Ingold contends that in science ‘curiosity has been divorced from care’ and he writes that

We are curious about the well-being of people we know and love, and never miss an opportunity to ask them how they are doing. That is because we care about them. Should it not be the same for the world around us? Is curiosity a way of caring? (19)

Was Lightfoot and McKenzie’s very presence on the project, and interaction with writers, not a way of caring? A care enacted through their curiosity, but perhaps not articulated as such? If Jackson’s poem evoked care for the object and subject, the dead and the living, as interchangeable and continuous, then the care taken for the living in the space of the workshop suggested new ways of caring for the dead in the bioarchaeology of slavery; a care for the feeling, emotion and connection evoked by the bones and by the writers’ responses to them.

Conclusion

We live in an era in which the meaning and significance of transatlantic slavery is perhaps more contested than ever. Global protest movements call for the removal of colonial statues and iconography which commemorate those involved in the slave trade, and

⁷To view the film please go to <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/research/literary-archaeology/creative-writing/>

⁸See Lorna Tilley (2015).

call upon institutions built on the profits of the trade to publicly recognize the fact. In Bristol, a local group of activists called Countering Colston recently made international headlines when Bristol's Colston Hall announced it would be changing its name, removing that of the infamous slave trader who bequeathed tremendous wealth to the city. The group state on their website (as of July 2017) that they wish to 'Acknowledge and repair, as far as possible, the negative effects in the present day of historical slavery' and in so doing recognize the continuing impact of how slaves lived on black lives and identities in the present.

Yet there is debate about the degree to which the lives of enslaved people can or should be linked to experiences in our contemporary moment. This debate has not only arisen within archaeology where, as we have discussed, there is concern that giving a 'voice' to individuals could be seen as invasive. There has also been some critique within literary studies of the way 'many scholars have staked their own critical agency on a recovery of the political agency of the enslaved, making the slaves' "hidden history" a vital dimension of the effort to define black political goals' (Best 2012, 453). Stephen Best asks, 'Through what process has it become possible to claim the lives and efforts of history's defeated as ours either to redeem or to redress?' (454). What Best queries is why we try to recover the past of slavery; if it is for ourselves, to make sense of our present situation, then literary scholars and writers must question the ethics of such an enterprise, much as archaeologists continually do when considering the purpose and effects of their interpretations.

There are no easy answers to such questions, yet we would like to suggest that interdisciplinarity could be one way of beginning the search for answers, if not of keeping these problems in view. For what our project found is that bringing literary and scientific disciplines together did not result solely in a focus on the experience of individual enslaved people in the past and on what they might mean to us in the present. Rather, our project highlighted the relationships between things; relationships amongst enslaved people, relationships between the living and the dead, relationships between scientist, writer and literary scholar, the relationship between the public and academia. The creative writing produced from the project focused not on what we can know about the lives of long-dead slaves, but on how and why we might begin to know it, and in doing so suggested two relational dynamics – conversation and caring – as ways of opening up, rather than claiming, the past. In turn, these methods suggested ways in which to approach interdisciplinary working, conversation and care for one another being crucial to our shared project. Callard and Fitzgerald argue that:

emotional dynamics can have great power in enabling and closing down the pursuit of particular interdisciplinary research trajectories. To treat the emotional economy of interdisciplinary collaborative work as epiphenomenal to – rather than a significant shaper of – those cross-disciplinary research trajectories would be a mistake. (114).

The results of our project demonstrate just how closely intertwined the emotions and relationships of those involved can be with the approach to the subject under consideration. It was ultimately through attention to our relationships with each other that we were able to begin to rethink the material basis of each of our disciplines and to understand the overlapping, interdependent nature of information, facts, thoughts and feelings, in both literature and science.

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Notes on contributors

Josie Gill is a Lecturer in Black British Writing at the University of Bristol. Her research broadly concerns the intersections between contemporary literature, science and race. She was Principal Investigator of the interdisciplinary AHRC Science in Culture funded project ‘Literary Archaeology’: Exploring the Lived Environment of the Slave.

Catriona McKenzie is a Lecturer in Human Osteoarchaeology in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Exeter. She specializes in palaeopathology and funerary archaeology, and her research to date has focused upon skeletal collections from Gaelic Ireland. Catriona was Co-Investigator on the interdisciplinary AHRC Science in Culture funded project ‘Literary Archaeology’: Exploring the Lived Environment of the Slave.

Emma Lightfoot is a Post-Doctoral Research Associate in Biomolecular Archaeology at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at the University of Cambridge. Her research uses stable isotope analysis to investigate the social, cultural and environmental aspects of human food choice. Emma was Co-Investigator on the interdisciplinary AHRC Science in Culture funded project ‘Literary Archaeology’: Exploring the Lived Environment of the Slave.

ORCID

Josie Gill  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4349-0965>

Catriona McKenzie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7288-1319>

Emma Lightfoot  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0823-4720>

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