Introduction: Publishing festivalCHAT

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In the early evening of Friday, 23 October 2020, the entire CHAT Standing Committee waited with levels of anticipation, excitement, and anxiety usually reserved for very soon-to-be parents or recently interviewed job candidates, refreshing websites and emails every few minutes. We did this from our homes, locked down because of the Covid-19 pandemic, across the US, Greece, Spain, The Netherlands, Scotland, and England. As the minutes ticked down to seconds before the first festivalCHAT presentation went live online, we messaged one another on WhatsApp, reminding everyone to share the Code of Conduct[1] that we had created especially for the event, which encapsulates the ethos of CHAT—everyone is welcome and participants must engage with ideas respectfully. Without disagreements and diverging views, we cannot hope to create new knowledge, but such conversations should always be courteous. Integrity and compassion are attributes that are sadly not highly valued in the modern world, but they featured strongly throughout festivalCHAT, which claimed space for caring for one another, while disagreeing well.

The Covid-19 pandemic consolidated new ways of thinking about work for everyone. With some exceptions (not least vaccine scientists), academics were lucky that they could often continue their labour from home, albeit with some adjustments and notwithstanding the need creatively to reorganize bedrooms and garages as home offices. Despite academia's sometimes-irregular work schedules and ambivalent relationship with labour, the pandemic did not spare it from all disruptions. University staff and students had research trips, fieldwork, and courses indefinitely postponed or dramatically altered owing to lockdowns, quarantines, and illnesses (even deaths of loved ones and colleagues). Parents had to juggle home-schooling and increased housework alongside work, because 'work' did not stop. Limits on travel, closed offices and campuses, and digitally mediated teaching routines contributed to the increased entanglement of work and home and the erosion of the social, practical, and even physical conditions that had defined collective work experiences over the past century. Institutions sought to use digitally mediated forms of communication, from email to real-time technologies such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, to find new ways to capture some aspects of the office

and classroom across the uneven and dispersed work environments that resulted from the Covid pandemic. We were at once physically distant from one another and socially overcrowded, as our internet-enabled devices pinged, beeped, and called at all times of day and night, increasing pressure on everyone 'just to reply to this one', regardless of contracted hours or personal circumstances. Perhaps this is the primary trend we must resist most stridently in the coming months and years, before it becomes 'expected'.

As Orange, Lee, and Rothenberg account (Orange et al., this volume), festivalCHAT had its origins during the Covid pandemic and the desire not only to encourage some of the intellectual and social camaraderie embodied at in-person conferences, but also to reconsider the very nature of the academic conference in the twenty-first century. It is significant that a group dedicated to Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory would contribute to a reassessment of the academic conference. The annual CHAT conference had already embraced a wide range of scholarly approaches to the past that included recognizing the role of individual experiences in defining archaeology as a discipline (see Piccini, this volume). Moreover, the conference has always steered away from running parallel sessions, because we recognized the importance of the unstructured social interaction and serendipitous mingling that is necessary for fostering collegiality, creativity, and knowledge-making. At the same time, even pre-pandemic, the CHAT community had been debating issues pertaining to the traditional academic conference, underscoring the privilege and environmental costs of international travel. The concept of a digitally mediated festival balances between the positive and problematic elements of academic conferences not only in the age of Covid, but also in the age of hardening national borders and rapidly accelerating climate chaos. In short, how we produce knowledge as archaeologists is crucial for understanding what we recognize as archaeology.

Festivals, as Carolyn White's important new book emphasizes, produce both lasting records and ephemeral celebrations that nevertheless require *real* labour, capital, and commitments, and produce waste (White 2020). The tensions between the ephemerality and the cost of a festival represent a persistent concern for historical archaeology and the archaeology of the contemporary

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[1] https://festivalchat2020.wordpress.com/code-of-conduct/

world, as this tension traces debates on the impact of capitalism, colonialism, and modernity on lived experiences. As White and many other archaeologists, critics, and theorists have shown, a key feature of the experience of modernity and the commodification of entertainment, recreation, and pleasure is obscuring the labour that makes it possible. The site of Burning Man in the Nevada Desert relies upon a robust and complex support network that sets up, maintains, and breaks down the site before, during, and after the festival (White 2020). The World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893 put both capitalism and colonialism on display against a deliberately temporary backdrop that celebrated modernity while also serving to obscure the work of the hundreds of workers who kept the exhibition grounds clean and presentable for the millions of tourists who visited (Graff 2020). It goes without saying that the growing criticism of digital technology in academia and archaeology specifically has drawn attention to the ability of digital media to obscure the labour and creative processes by blurring the distinction between producer and consumer (Caraher, 2020). FestivalCHAT tacitly foregrounded many of the issues made more pressing by the intensifying pressure of the Covid pandemic (Angelo, Britt, Brown, & Camp, 2021). Lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing rules accelerated the fraying of the modern, industrial division between work-space and domestic-space and revealed that the idealised call for work/life balance represented little more than an effort to preserve the barrier between visible and invisible labour (for a larger consideration of these trends in archaeology, see Mickel 2021 and Everill 2009).

There were months during the pandemic when festivals, theatres, public parks and leisure facilities, religious buildings, schools, and community centres were closed, when it appeared that *all* we had left was work or loneliness. Zoom fatigue set in. The novelty of the online 'party' or quiz with old friends wore off. People retreated from the online 'community', recognizing that coming together—physically, being together—cannot be completely replicated via technologies (Merlington and Turkle 2011). As historical and contemporary archaeologists, we have always studied the myriad ways in which humans interact with one another through material things: how 'things' have social lives (Appadurai 1986) and human experience is immutably located within the material (Malafouris 2013).

Our hope is that this book serves in some small way to occupy the space opened by the recent critical breach in the facade of modernity by preserving a sample of the experiences present at the festivalCHAT. Our occupation of this space is partly driven by the desire to reclaim some time and space from capitalism (*sensu* Lukács 1971), space in which all wandering weary

festival go-ers are welcome to think together about how to prioritize things other than economic growth (cf. Kallis 2018). In keeping with the digital age, the work in this book represents both the production and the consumption of the festivalCHAT experience. We hope, however, that—no matter how awkward this conversion of experience is to a traditional publication—it preserves and honours some of the labour, energy, and conversation that festivalCHAT produced and embodied. In this way, we offer this volume as a modest contribution to the archaeology of a digital festival.

Organization

Two contributions introduce this volume. Angela Piccini's Foreword offers a historical reflection on the goals of CHAT from the perspective of one of its founders, in Bristol 2003. Chapter 2 by Hilary Orange, Daniel Lee, and Miriam Rothenberg frames festivalCHAT both amid the conversations in the autumn of 2020 when the distinctive format of the online conference took shape, and from the perspective of the organizers who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make festivalCHAT a reality. They also try to communicate some of the feeling of festivalCHAT by sharing some digital ephemera such as websites and social-media engagements, describing some of the innovative presentations, and sharing some feedback from participants.

The rest of the volume provides a more robust window into festivalCHAT through some of the contributions to the event. Tiina Äikäs's chapter uses the medium of the graphic novel to capture emotionally and professionally challenging experiences associated with gender inequality in archaeology. The role of images in her contribution reflects a key practice at festivalCHAT and in this volume. Sonia Overall and Ursula Frederick both produce visually rich explorations of the experience of the Covid pandemic in an effort to capture the impact of the material traces associated with pandemic life. Paul Mullins and his team use sometimes playful cartographic responses to pandemic life to communicate experiences of isolation, frustration, and anxiety that the pandemic produced. The three Covid-related chapters represent a significant archaeological contribution to the growing body of scholarship that looks to document and reflect on life during the pandemic. João Luís Sequeira, and Mariana Silva and Tânia Manuel Casimiro, documented spontaneous expressions of politics, recreation, and everyday concerns in the graffiti on the walls of the Lisnave shipyard and in bathrooms at two universities at Lisbon.

This book also includes contributions that expand beyond archaeology in ways consistent with CHAT's and festivalCHAT's efforts to embrace inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to our material world.

Katy Whitaker and Lara Band's CHAT-Chain-Mail used the age-old practice of chainmailed letters to create a sense of community disrupted by the Covid pandemic as well as to materialize a sense of distance often too easily obscured in our digital age. Eoghann MacColl likewise takes the Covid-19 pandemic as the point of departure for his visually arresting, poetic, and political meditation on exploring his surroundings with eyes focused by lockdown's deep local horizons. The Kokra family's contribution similarly starts at a home brought into new focus by Covid lockdowns. From there their work spirals out into their local landscape and reflects on how human-made and transported material interacts with the natural landscape to shape their surroundings. James Lattin's poetic journey takes the reader from the sea through the wayside. As we considered the Covid pandemic as a pause on the otherwise predictable trajectory of everyday life, in some ways it manifested itself as a wayside, and its tributaries continue to manifest globally, as some people have yet to be vaccinated, and Long Covid and increased structural disadvantage continue to ravage. Mansfield's work asks us to slow down and consider the places that we pass through physically on our journeys. Laura Zukowski's contribution takes a similar point of emphasis: the complex network of staircases that allowed late-nineteenth-century workers to traverse Pittsburgh's hilly landscape. Armed with a polaroid camera, Zukowski has not only researched but also documented these steps in aesthetically compelling ways. The ephemerality of a polaroid photograph may well capture something of the fragility of the stairways in Pittsburgh's cityscape. Chandler Fitzsimons foregrounds the materiality of analogue photography in the final contribution to this collection, as she reflects on the power of a medium to evoke eras, styles, and nostalgia.

The volume concludes with an afterword written by Shawn Graham, who embraces certain aspects of the festival experience with his approach to the contributions to this volume. Rather than looking for a kind of unifying theme or argument, he traverses the volume as one might encounter performances at a festival by implementing a 'ludic algorithm' to bring the volume alive as an active agent in its own summary. In some ways this monstrous drift through the volume embodies the contemporary festival, where the experience of the encounter exceeds the sum of its parts; but sometimes viewed through a lens tinted by substances that are, in equal parts, sacred and profane.

Reflections

This book took longer to publish than we expected. At first, we had hoped to have this in publication by the pilgrimCHAT event in 2021. That date passed with only the slightest pangs of guilt. At the writing of this introduction, we hoped to have this book available for order by the 2022 CHAT conference. Delays in the publication of edited volumes based on conferences are hardly unusual, but the delays associated with this publication reflect certain contemporary circumstances. First, we contend that the ephemeral nature of festivalCHAT made it challenging for many potential authors to convert their contributions to traditional chapters, and it was difficult for us, as editors, to corral the metaphorical cats without losing the vitality and nuance of different submissions. As a result, this volume is more like the kind of sampler that festivals often produce highlighting individual performances at the risk of depriving them of their specific context. Second, this volume came together across the relentless ebb and flow of the Covid pandemic, as it plays out differently across different parts of the world—and the 'post'-pandemic world ('post' pandemic in the same way that we are 'post' colonialism?)—is differently harsh and unkind. Walking the CHAT talk, we make polite apologies for the lateness of this volume but celebrate that its late publication is also a function of having acted with compassion, to everyone involved. In a way that paralleled the 'cruel optimism' of capitalism, our families, communities, and world were held hostage by the hope for future safety but only in exchange for present compliance with lockdowns, social distancing, and institutionally mandated protocols. Needless to say, our optimism about the future encouraged us to continue to commit to this and other projects, even as the world literally burns and the ground continuously shifts beneath our feet, leaving us variously anxious, exhausted, overwhelmed, and hopeful. Finally, the ever-unfolding global political situation and resurgent vitality of far-right politics have created a tumultuous, violent, and difficult backdrop compounded by the pandemic itself, global protests against racism, BREXIT, and, in the spring of 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the related cost-of-living crisis for some, starvation crisis for others. These events have proved distracting and, at times, paralysing for the editors and have prompted us to question whether 'festival' as a metaphor had sufficient gravity to accommodate the emerging horrors of the current situation. On balance, we soldiered on with this edited volume not pretending that we can offer any kind of salve for the horrors by which we are trapped but as a peaceful space of resistance to hate and greed. In this space, we collate forms of care, fun, and freedom. We could all use an escape, so grab a drink and head over to that shady spot in the Healing Field, to escape back to some of the highlights of festivalCHAT 2020!

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