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## Reflections on a Road Less Traveled: Alt-Ac Archaeology

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In 2003, with recent Ph.D.s in Near Eastern archaeology and anthropology in hand, we did something risky. We decided to step off the traditional academic career path and pave a new road. This approach, which has since become known as an “alt-ac” (alternative academic) career, is gaining many followers, particularly in the face of the increasing corporatization of the university, which has cast much doubt on the future of traditional academic career paths.

Our story is not unusual. Everyone knows that it is very difficult to find a job in archaeology. It’s even harder to find two jobs in one place. We were at an age where we were willing to take some risks, and we had an idea. As recent graduate students, we had both collected original data from our own analyses, and transcribed data from the published literature. Rather than see this as a rite of passage that all graduate students should go through, why not speed discovery and multiply the impact of that work by using the Web to share that effort? As we discussed this, driving along California Interstate 580 one afternoon in the year 2000, the Alexandria Archive Institute (AAI) was born.

In the fifteen years since then, the AAI and Open Context, have emerged as leading players as 21<sup>st</sup> century archaeological scholarship goes online. Open Context is an open access data publishing platform for archaeology, which is now referenced by NSF and NEH for data management for archaeology and the digital humanities. Its approach of “data sharing as publishing” emphasizes collaboration with dedicated editorial and information specialists (us) to make data more intelligible and usable. Open Context publishes a wide variety of archaeological data, ranging from archaeological survey data to excavation documentation, artifact analyses, chemical analyses of artifacts, and detailed descriptions of bones and other biological remains found in archaeological contexts.

The range, scale, and diversity of these data require expertise in data modeling and a commitment to continual development and iterative problem solving. Open Context has undergone several upgrades, the most recent in spring of 2015, to keep pace with technology changes and to leverage best practices in data stewardship. With data preservation through the University of California (the California Digital Library), Open Context now publishes more than a 1.2 million archaeological records from projects worldwide. This is on a scale comparable to that of a major museum (for instance, the online collection of the Metropolitan Museum of New York makes some 407,000 records available). Open Context has made this remarkable achievement on a much more limited budget than the online collections of major museums. Grant funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the NEH, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, NSF, and others has gone a long way largely because of the AAI’s status as an independent non-profit organization with an overhead much, much lower than large research institutions. The AAI and Open Context have also benefited from the growth of the Web and the

“ecosystem” of projects and individuals in similar roles—undertaking innovative work outside of traditional academic roles. At the same time, our vantage point outside of the tenure track offers us a different perspective on the Academy and its evolution. In this paper, we discuss our experience working for a decade in the “alternative academic” world and highlight the need for these types of careers to enrich archaeological scholarship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **The Rise of the Alt-Ac**

Over the past 30 years, Internet technologies have transformed the way that we communicate, both socially and professionally. While these technological transformations profoundly affect scholarship, they do so unevenly and in complex ways. To further complicate matters, while we see unfolding technological transformations, we also see profound and often disturbing restructuring of wider economic and political institutions that impact university funding and governance. Simply put, “Neoliberalism” now represents the dominant reality of today's universities. And by that we mean the rise of a loosely associated bag of ideologies that emphasize fiscal austerity, market transactions, and management techniques centered on metrics and surveillance. Above all, Neoliberalism has entrenched instrumentalism in scholarship. Investment in learning faces increasing pressures to make direct and immediate financial returns. Such instrumentalism has had very corrosive impacts in many areas of the humanities and social sciences, including archaeology.

From this transformed landscape has emerged a new type of scholar: the alt-ac. alt-acs, in hybrid institutional roles between libraries, research centers, and conventional academic departments, represent a key constituency in 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarship. The phenomena of alt-acs reflect the two major drivers of institutional change in the academy discussed above, the growth of the Internet (especially the Web) and Neoliberal governance. Some 70% or so of instructors in today's universities teach outside of the tenure track, work under short-term contracts with little or no benefits, and often see compensation so low that they need additional public assistance (welfare benefits). The growth of adjunct faculty ranks represents one of the clearest and most egregiously dehumanizing aspects of today's Neoliberal universities. However, while alt-acs share with adjuncts little or no job security or permanence, alt-acs, especially those working with digital technologies and new media, often have better prospects for employment outside of universities. This makes the overall economic position of alt-acs usually much less precarious than colleagues struggling in adjunct teaching.

Many alt-acs work under short term “soft-money” contracts, usually funded by intramural or extramural grants. The focus of these grants often centers on the “digital humanities” or projects to introduce new technologies into scholarly communications. Although most alt-acs seem to work outside of conventional academic departments, most still work for universities. Our work with Open Context is a bit unusual in this respect. Although most of our funding comes from grants, we have our own organizational structure (the Alexandria Archive Institute) that independently sponsors grant funded research and development. Because we run an independent nonprofit, we have more independence than many alt-acs who lack the status needed to become a principle investigator at a university.

This later point highlights an important limitation in most alt-ac careers. In some ways, alt-ac have more freedom to pursue interests that combine new technologies with humanistic and social science study than their colleagues in conventional departments. After all, most tenured and tenure track faculty still face “publish or perish” demands, with publication being very narrowly defined as articles and books. alt-ac don't have those same expectations and tend to create more data, software, and social media outcomes. On the other hand, alt-ac very much lack the intellectual and academic freedom of their tenured colleagues. The work of alt-ac is typically owned, as intellectual property, by the university that employs them. In contrast, full-time faculty usually own the copyright to the products of their intellectual labor. While this opens the door for “appropriation”, we haven't heard many raise this as a concern. Perhaps this is because funding conditions imposed by granting agencies increasingly expect open-source (non-proprietary) outcomes, and since many alt-ac work on grant funded projects, opportunities for appropriating alt-ac intellectual labor are limited.

Nevertheless, while the potential for appropriating alt-ac intellectual labor may seem like a minor issue, it highlights how alt-ac are strictly, and only, employees of universities. Many alt-ac have contingent and “flexible” contracts with their employers and no role in university governance. Few universities make an effort to invest in the long-term intellectual growth of alt-ac scholars. Thus, the compressed time-horizons of project-based intellectual work undertaken by alt-ac can inhibit longer-term scholarly programs. The lack of time for “slow scholarship” can hamper thoughtfulness and reflection needed to cultivate greater theoretical depth. It is simply too hard to budget enough time for such considerations on granting cycles that demand easily identifiable “deliverables”.

Without such long-term commitments, we would hesitate to embark on an alt-ac career dependent on university sponsorship. After all, the lack of long-term commitment suggests that universities regard alt-ac labor as a means to acquire extramural funding and attention for hosting innovative (and, ideally, splashy) projects that demonstrate technical prowess. As soon as attention and funding move elsewhere, the alt-ac is nothing more than a redundant cost that can get cut. This again motivates us to maintain an independent nonprofit organization, since it offers us a greater degree of mastery over our own destiny.

While independent nonprofit status offers us more opportunity for longer-term intellectual and academic freedom than perhaps experienced by many university-based alt-ac, the continual need to secure more funding to maintain our salaries does take its toll. Granting is highly competitive. Regardless of a proposal's other merits, one poor review by someone with a different theoretical or political agenda can sink a grant application. For tenured faculty, such issues are time-consuming annoyances. For alt-ac, including us, these issues can mean the end of one's salary. Moreover, unlike tenure-track faculty, this precarious status represents a permanent state. Alt-ac have no means of getting tenure and no means of ever acquiring the academic freedom that comes with a guaranteed paycheck.

That precariousness and contingency highlights the intellectual costs of Neoliberalism. We would be more outspoken about certain issues and directions in “digital archaeology” if we had some of the protections of tenure. Indeed, our activism and advocacy on certain issues, especially on open access and concerns about over-centralization has done us some damage in funding

competitions, at least judging from criticisms in some failed proposals. Obviously, criticism and debate are necessary, but they are activities that are more *survivable* by tenured faculty than by contingent al-acs.

### **The Changing Landscape of Archaeological Scholarship**

The above discussion about our status as alt-acs highlights just how deeply institutional Neoliberalism shapes how the academy engages with digital scholarship. Indeed, public policy for research has largely advanced engagement with digital data through Neoliberal logic. Public and private funding bodies across the world see “data management” as a strategic need. Most discussions about data management use the language of bureaucratic compliance rather than intellectual engagement. Discussions often center on creating new job-performance metrics to measure and reward data, or technical standards involved in preservation or in making data more fungible and interoperable.

Thus, we can imagine that many of our archaeological colleagues would regard “data management” as yet another bureaucratic hoop to jump through that involves new costs and complicated and opaque technocratic issues far removed from the intellectual core of the discipline. Because of the way digital data has entered scholarship, proponents of digital data often resort to strategies that make handling digital data as “painless as possible”. Thus, in the eyes of many researchers, grant data management now largely now means minimal steps at preserving spreadsheets and databases in digital repositories. In other words, a researcher’s primary responsibility toward data currently centers on preservation. This emphasis on data preservation with institutional repositories represents a new normative best practice. The idea that “data are for preservation” thereby reflects an incremental change in the conduct of research. In this perspective, conventional monographs or refereed journal papers remain the primary vehicle of research communications, and data are merely byproducts, not goals of scholarship.

Our work highlights a pressing need to regard data as more than a residue of research. We advance a model of “data sharing as publication” to address technological, ethical, professional, and intellectual concerns surrounding archaeological data (Kansa & Kansa 2013). Meaningful data sharing requires more than “dumps” of raw and undocumented data on the Web. Data must have adequate documentation and consistency to be widely usable. Open data publishing can improve the efficiency and quality of data-sharing in the same way that conventional publication improves dissemination of interpretive research findings (Kansa et al. 2014). Meaningful and appropriate data sharing requires effort, new skills, professional roles, and creation of scholarly communication channels. Currently, alt-acs like us play a major role in filling this niche. Unfortunately, the overall lack of long-term institutional support for more intellectually substantive approaches to data will continue to impede archaeology's ability to put data on a more sound theoretical foundation.

### **The Road Increasingly Taken**

The road that was once less traveled is now becoming a well-worn path. As an increasing number of PhDs compete for the decreasing number of tenure-track positions, many are exploring new and innovative career paths. The virtual office (aka Starbucks) is an increasingly popular workplace. In some ways, the rise of alternative academic careers represents a healthy change for archaeology. Alt-acs bring a diversity of skills and perspectives that many in

mainstream archaeology lack, such as computer programming, project management expertise, publishing, library science, and many more. Working in these areas can be intellectually engaging, and given the uncertain future of higher education, computational skills and work experiences can help alt-acs better weather continued Neoliberal “disruption”. If it wasn't for our self-motivated interests in computation, our graduate training would have left us very narrowly specialized to meet publishing expectations rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century concepts of the form and format of scholarship, but within an employment context dominated adjunct teaching and brutally competitive 21<sup>st</sup> century Neoliberal universities. An Alt-Ac orientation offers, if not job security, at least a wider range of adaptive opportunities to escape the dismal serfdom now suffered by many adjunct professors.

In looking back at our career path and noting some successes, we also need to be careful not to overly romanticize our particular path as alt-acs. Despite impressive achievements and accolades, including keynote speaking engagements, “best paper” awards, and even White House recognition, we still face continual funding uncertainty. We have now reached an age where many friends and colleagues are securing tenure, a more frequent reminder that our particular path offers no such intellectual protections. As we continue to work with digital data in archaeology and better grasp the depth and complexity of its challenges, the more we recognize the value of career-long support for scholarship.

So, we have mixed feelings about promoting an alt-ac path. Because we became alt-acs before the term was even coined and have stayed in the game for over 12 years, some people have looked at our path as a model. Many recent PhDs, when faced with only one or two open full-time faculty positions per year (each with hundreds of applicants) naturally look for alternatives, and some ask about following in our footsteps. Unfortunately, there just isn't enough support inside or outside of universities to make our alt-ac path a realistic model for junior scholars to emulate. At some point, the type of work we do needs to see more permanent support, whether through endowments for independent organizations or the creation of new positions at universities, museums, and libraries. If we want to cultivate intellectually substantive contributions with digital data in archaeology, then we need to better support the human capital—the scholars who engage in this area of research. Thus, the biggest challenges in 21<sup>st</sup> century archaeology have less to do with specific technical or theoretical challenges inherent in using data, but rather with providing more supportive and humane working environments for the scholars engaged in these issues.

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