

University of Maryland at College Park

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Public Profile

Megan E. Springate, MA

Historical Archaeologist and PhD Candidate in Anthropology at the University of Maryland, College Park

How did you become interested in the discipline of anthropology?

I have always been interested in people and their stories. I discovered archaeology quite by accident while in high school, when my mom came home with information about a three week field school that could substitute as a senior social science credit. I jumped at the chance to take high school credit outside the classroom, and fell in love with archaeology during those three weeks. We were excavating a mid-1500s Iroquoian Village just outside Toronto. As a result, I pursued archaeology at university, and was exposed to the other fields of anthropology, including cultural anthropology, medical anthropology, biological anthropology, and a touch of linguistics. Being a student of anthropology has deeply informed how I understand and relate to the world; by teaching anthropology -- both in the classroom and in public engagement settings -- I hope to impart some of the understanding and skills that I learned.

Occupation: Prime Consultant for the National Park Service's LGBTQ Heritage Initiative

Hobbies: Contra dance (especially queer/gender free!), laugh at the antics of my two cats, visit with friends, and unwind with too much TV and video games

What is the LGBTQ initiative and what does your day-to-day work look like in working for the NPS on this initiative?

The LGBTQ Heritage Initiative is one of several National Park Service projects exploring ways in which the legacy of underrepresented groups can be recognized, preserved, and interpreted for future generations. My primary tasks focus around the completion of the associated theme study, a document that provides historic context about American LGBTQ communities and sites to facilitate their nomination to the National Register of Historic Places and National Historic Landmarks programs, both of which are managed by the National Park Service. This includes identifying and working with authors and peer reviewers for the theme study, writing an introduction to the study, as well as a couple of other chapters, editing, and compiling the work. Other tasks associated with the Heritage Initiative include: responding to public comments; reaching out to partners and communities; maintaining a mapped list of sites across the United States that have LGBTQ history and heritage associated with them; preparing materials to support the Initiative (like a FAQ, website text and layout, a how you can get involved document, community outreach materials, etc.); and providing technical assistance to parks and those looking to recognize or share LGBTQ history and heritage. More information can be found at: <http://www.nps.gov/history/heritageinitiatives/LGBThistory/>

How do you put anthropology to use in your work?

One of the things I like best about what I do, is that no two days are the same. In archaeology, I could be preparing an excavation plan, talking to landowners and other stakeholders, doing historical research, digging small test pits, excavating large areas of a

site, teaching others how to dig and “see” archaeologically, washing artifacts, cataloging, filling out paperwork, doing analysis, writing reports, presenting to the public, explaining the importance of the archaeological record, preparing maps, working in Geographic Information Systems, collaborating with other archaeologists and historians... the list is almost endless. And then there are all of the activities I do for the LGBTQ Heritage Initiative, which I already described.

Anthropology has definitely shaped how I think about the world, which in turn influences my work. Two of the most important things that I have taken from my anthropology training are to value cultures on their own terms and to look at things from a holistic and intersectional perspective. To value cultures on their own terms to me means not judging or imposing my own cultural norms onto other groups. In archaeology, this means in part, trying not to make assumptions about family structures, gender identities, or cultural norms in the past and instead having research questions that will allow the data to provide that information. In the context of the LGBTQ Heritage Initiative, it means actively listening and responding to community feedback about the project, including naming, organization of the theme study, and providing space for many of the different communities under the LGBTQ umbrella, including those often excluded, to be represented. These many voices taken together, form the basis for a rich, diverse, and intersectional LGBTQ context.

What do you see as the future for queer anthropology? (i.e., most pressing issues).

One of the main strengths I see of queer anthropology is the challenge it makes of all assumptions and its demands to support our conclusions. For example, a queer anthropological approach challenges interpretations that assume that households consist of families and that families are by default heterosexual; it challenges assumptions of chrononormativity, or the idea that the past and present are necessarily distinct; and it challenges ideas that identities, like gender and race, are fixed. Challenges to these assumptions force us to think differently about things; opening up the possibilities of other ways of being; and provide a means of getting out of our own ways when we try to understand people, cultures, and societies both past and present.

The two biggest challenges that I see for queer anthropology are 1) to engage beyond the discipline and 2) to be deeply incorporated into anthropology, rather than relegated as a separate chapter or an upper-level specialty course. In engaging beyond the discipline, I am thinking both in terms of

What advice to you have for students interested in LGBTQ anthropology?

While LGBTQ still carries with it some stigma, and homophobia and discrimination are still very real around the world (including in the United States), the world has changed significantly and it is less of a risk now than ever to pursue anthropological work on LGBTQ issues.

I urge students to not ignore the risks of pursuing LGBTQ research, but there is fantastic work being done. I also urge students to broaden their reading outside of anthropology and take advantage of some of the great thinking about LGBTQ issues that is being done in departments and fields including American Studies, English, Queer Studies, Gender Studies, History, Performance Studies, Public Health, and Sociology.

And always remember our pioneers who made the work we do possible.

being interdisciplinary in the theories and methods used, but also in being published or presented in forums and language and venues such that other disciplines also find the work done in queer anthropology to be useful. If we truly believe that queer anthropology (and its predecessors and close relatives, gender anthropology and feminist anthropology) is important and transformative to the discipline, then we must incorporate it throughout the curriculum, including introductory classes, and not have it relegated to a separate chapter at the end of the book or confined to a specific lecture.

You are also working on your doctoral degree in Anthropology. What is your focus?

My dissertation is about the making of the modern American woman at the beginning of the twentieth century, using women's holiday houses as locations. These holiday houses were places where working women could vacation for free or low cost in rural or natural settings away from urban factories. While they all appear very similar, there were actually several different types, each with their own ideological underpinnings. Some were operated by unions, like the teachers' holiday house in Massachusetts; some, like the one run by General Electric in New York, by corporations as part of their anti-union strategies; and some, like my dissertation site on Lake George, New York, were run by church or moral reform groups in part as a way of keeping working women off the streets and teaching them values.

In your opinion, how should anthropology engage the public?

I think it is important to, as much as possible, include the public as collaborators or co-investigators in anthropological research, not as subjects, annoyances, or add-ons to projects. I don't for an instant claim that I am the paragon of this approach; in fact, I have more often not met these goals than I have met them, but it is something I consider and think about... a lot.

What does it mean to you to be a publically engaged archaeologist?

Being publicly engaged means working with communities when planning projects; it means being accessible to answer questions; it means being able to explain clearly what the decision-making processes were when planning and implementing a project (my research needs; needs of the communities; needs of funders; etc.). It means taking the time to answer questions while working and to not use jargon. It means, that when digging with community members, that they are given the information they need to do the work and are treated as collaborators and not just "free labor." It means that I need to shut up and listen when members of communities I am not a part of have something to say, I need to hear what they are saying and treat it seriously. It means not talking *at* people, but talking *with* people. It means needing to give up tight control of projects and be willing to compromise, adapt, and even sometimes let go. It means that (hopefully) these projects are places of meaningful conversation, learning, and relationship-building.