

***Conflict, Heritage and World-Making in the Chaco: War at the End of the Worlds?* By Esther Breithoff. 2020. UCL Press, London. ISBN eBook: 978-1-787358-06-5 (open access).**

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During my teenage years in the 1980s I was always fascinated by record covers, which with their art and design managed to attract attention and create expectations about the music on the LPs. It was no different with the fiction books that I was always reading or later on with archaeology books during college. It has always seemed me that it would be interesting if someone were to undertake an archaeological study using such materials. In the case of *Conflict, Heritage and World-Making in the Chaco: War at the End of the Worlds?*, the cover caught my attention due to its dark character: it appears to show the remains of an old hollow tree trunk with artificial wound-holes (later I read on the back cover that it has a piece of metal stuck in it) that allow us to observe the darkness inside. At the same time, the cover photography gives the sensation that if we were to pass our hand over it we would feel the rough surface of the trunk. In some way, the cover works as a sensory representation of many of the themes that the book deals with, such as dark heritage, war, destruction, ruins, death, isolated places, memories, ontologies, nature and senses, among others.

The book originates from Esther Breithoff's PhD research at Bristol University under the supervision of Nicholas Sanders, and discusses from a multilinear archaeological approach the Chaco War (1932–1935), which involved the armies of Paraguay and Bolivia. The thesis won several important awards such as “Best Doctoral Research Thesis, Faculty of

Arts”, from the University of Bristol (2016) and an “‘Outstanding PhD Thesis’ award for Excellence in Science and Research from the Luxembourg National Research Fund (2017). Beyond the prizes, it is important to bear in mind that a crucial aspect of the book is that Paraguay has been and still is a great blank page when it comes to archaeology. In this sense, the book constitutes a key contribution to rebuilding, from materiality, the history of the region.

Breithoff’s approach establishes a dialogue with some of the discipline’s most modern theoretical approaches, such as Olsen’s symmetrical archaeology, Ruibal’s archaeology of supermodernity and the present and Harrison’s studies of heritage, among others. From this perspective, Breithoff proposes to understand the Chaco War as what she calls a form of Anthropocene hyperobject, “massively distributed in time and space, viscous, inter-objective and non-localised” (p. 172). At the same time, this hyperobject has some similarities with a Latourian hybrid (she uses the words “heterogenous assemblages”). This original perspective allows Breithoff to generate interesting reflections about this “dark heritage”, or the dark side of South American modernity. It is agreeable when interpretations such as this take us out of the flat empiricism that most studies on the archaeology of conflict or battlefield archaeology tend to adopt. Breithoff does this with the skill of someone who is undoubtedly well versed in contemporary archaeological literature.

Another important contribution is Breithoff’s incorporation of the various ontologies related to these different “worlds” that she is studying, and which explain the use of the plural “worlds”. This makes it possible for “the other” to be visible, allowing for multiple perspectives for understanding the same situations. This is the first time that I have seen this type of approach applied in studies of “historical archaeology” in the region, showing the importance and potential of its use.

Through Breithoff's rich exploration of landscapes, objects, ruins, people, ontologies and histories, she creates an "assemblage/hybrid" that helps us to understand the complexity of this dark heritage and the significant change in the human–environment relationship it produced. This dynamic approach between human and non-human actors also creates a flow of continuous transformation ("becomings") of senses, sensorialities, memories and meanings, which constitutes the "foundations" for understanding heritage. In fact, sensoriality and the analysis of multiples senses are among the main interests of the study: senses such as hunger, thirst and heat are central elements of Breithoff's analysis of the way in which those involved in the conflict built their subjectivity. In parallel, she introduces other variables that had impacts on the experience of the groups in conflict, but this time associated with "pleasures": for example, in the case of the Paraguayan soldiers the drinking of mate/tereré and in the case of the Bolivians coca; or in both cases what she calls "trench art", a creative way to actively transform a place. Breithoff's approach reveals the way this entanglement of people, things and sensations built different realities and worlds.

At the methodological level of fieldwork, Breithoff chooses as the best option – at least for this stage of the research – a surface-survey approach, accompanied by some small and limited excavations. This appears to have been a smart decision, especially because she clarifies that her "aim is not to reconstruct each site 'as it was' in the past, but instead to document and discuss aspects of its material and discursive legacies in the present" (p. 117).

Although in general the book offers a refreshing perspective on approaching modern armed conflicts, I believe it also expresses some ambiguity which can lead readers into wrong interpretations. One example is the decision to start the book with a prologue that highlights the danger of the research place, with drug traffickers, dangerous wild animals and uninhabited areas, so justifying working with the protection of armed guards. This type of narrative ends up affecting the reader who does not know the place, and who ends up

building a stereotyped idea of South America as a deadly, dangerous region (as reflected at the beginning of the 1981 movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*).

Another issue appears at the beginning of Chapter 5, when Breithoff regrets that “the lack of clear regulations concerning the protection and maintenance of archaeological sites has resulted in the neglected and disremembering of many Chaco War sites” (p. 117).

Although I understand and share the author’s concern, this criticism of the lack of heritage protection policies is related to her position as an archaeologist/scientist/foreigner, interested in a topic that does not seem to have the same echo for the locals (although the Paraguayan government sees the subject as an opportunity to reinforce some nationalistic discourses). We need to consider the point that the study did not arise out of a demand from the local communities, or from the interest of someone from within the region. In fact, from what one can interpret in the preface, the research was initiated by Breithoff’s interest in studying “South America’s first ‘modern’ armed conflict” (back cover) , located “at the end of the worlds?”, according to her subtitle.

In particular, this “*end of the worlds?*” aspect confuses me, because even though the author makes it clear why she chose “worlds” in the plural, saying that the Chaco region is the center of the world for various groups (especially indigenous), why use this phrase? Even Breithoff included a question mark at the end of the subtitle. I wonder, is this enough to signal that the expression is not an affirmation but a criticism or questioning of the model of center and periphery? I believe that sometimes it’s a mistake to define something not by what it is, but by what it’s not. So, for me, the title could have been “War at the Center of the World”.

However, my last and biggest disagreement has to do with some probably unconscious decisions that Breithoff makes when approaching factual and theoretical issues. When it comes to empirical or documentary information, local/regional authors and sources

are mentioned; in contrast, however, when the discussion is about theoretical concepts, the balance is reversed, and the vast majority of the sources are European: quotations from European authors abound, while the presence of Latin Americans is minimal. In this way, the Chaco, Paraguay and South America, are summed up as a set of information (documentary or material) which is analyzed with foreign theories and concepts, leaving ontologies more as contextual tools than complex and complete realities.

Overall, *Conflict, Heritage and World-Making in the Chaco: War at the End of the Worlds?* is a very good book and an important read for all who seek to go further than traditional approaches to descriptive battlefield archeology. Breithoff's study makes it clear that it is possible to find a balance between theoretical discussion and the analysis of material culture, resulting in the potential to generate very rich interpretations of several aspects of the groups involved in the conflict.

Like the mystery hollow trunk tree on the cover, the book invites the reader to explore dark aspects of the Chaco worlds from multiple realities. Maybe the use of more local theoretical archaeological perspectives could have helped Breithoff to dispel the shadow of colonial logic; however, the dark injured trunk she presents us with will continue there, instigating the readers of the book to open up other paths.