



## **Perspectives in Anthropology: Chasing Impact Through Community** with Justin Dunnavant, Ph.D.

---

---

Dr. Justin Dunnavant, global archaeologist and science communication veteran, first discovered anthropology as an undergraduate student at Howard University. After an eye-opening study abroad at an archaeological site in Belize, he declared a history and anthropology double major, and studied abroad every year afterward. From Jamaica, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Mozambique and more, Justin's work illustrates a global portrait of Black archaeology. As a graduate student here at the University of Florida, he and fellow UF alum Dr. Ayana Flewellen co-founded the [Society of Black Archaeologists](#) – now a fully-fledged 501c3 with over 250 members around the world. The Society of Black Archaeologists partners with organizations such as [Diving with A Purpose](#), which connects Black scuba divers with archaeological teams to map slave shipwrecks all over the world. The St. Croix Archaeological Field School employs maritime archaeology to investigate the ecological impact of the slave trade; everything from soil and shoreline erosion, to coral mining and deforestation. Justin's science communication and public education experience runs the gamut, with features in [National Geographic](#), [Science Magazine](#), [Netflix](#), [Hulu](#), and more.

Today Justin serves as an Assistant Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles in the Department of Anthropology, where his research continues to center on historical archaeologies of Africa and the African Diaspora, maritime archaeologies and Black geographies. In collaboration with Delande Justinvil and Chip Colwell, he has contributed to the ongoing discussion of ethical human remains through the proposition of an [African American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act](#). Speaking briefly over Zoom, Justin shared his perspectives on intentional science communication and community engagement, defining a Black archaeology, and the importance of chasing impact.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

**Isis: Belize, Jamaica, Ethiopia, The Gambia, the Danish West Indies and the list goes on! How have your experiences in so many countries shaped the way you communicate your work to the public?**

Justin: Traditionally in archaeology, the idea has always been that you find a site or a community, and you work there for your entire career. And then you have a student, and they either work there or somewhere nearby. From the beginning, I knew I didn't want to do that, and I knew it wasn't going to be feasible based on my dissertation work and issues of political instability in the region [Horn of Africa]. So, it was through my graduate school career I realized that my goal was to chase impact over a particular project or site. The project in St. Croix presented a unique opportunity to test out a different model of doing archaeology that was based around community engagement first, and foremost,



and has research questions attached to it that are informed by the contemporary issues of that community. So immediately I knew that I needed to do this project in St. Croix. From the beginning, Ayana [Flewellen] and I designed the project to be sustainable without us being there, and that we could be a part of it for at least five years – with the realization that we would likely be called to other projects and opportunities by then. Again, we come back to this idea of impact. For me, it's like I'm an artist experimenting with different mediums. The message of your work that you are trying to convey to a community might be similar, but the ways and mediums you use convey that message are going to vary. Archaeology conducted in the Caribbean is going to look different from North and South America, or the United States. We have an opening here to critically think about what archaeology and community education based on their experiences look like.

**Isis: Tell us more about St. Croix! How is this project unique in the field when it comes to community engagement and education?**

Justin: Thinking long term, the first goal in St. Croix was to show that we could have an archaeology project that was based, first and foremost, on training. I think that's necessary because we come from communities that are greatly under-represented in archaeology. Training in our communities needs to be first and foremost if we're going to seriously tackle this issue of uncovering and recovering Black history and Black archaeology. The other goal was to create a model for archaeology that breaks the standards and the norm. Traditionally there's either one or two principal investigators on a project. We said we're going to get five, and the idea was that all of us would have different strengths that we could play off of, so that we could learn the best practices in each aspect of a field school. So, we had somebody that was really well versed in different types of archaeological methods, and somebody who was really interested in logistics and planning, as well as somebody interested in the youth and education components who was actually willing and able to take time to develop curriculum instead of saying "Hey kids, come dig with us for two days."

The other element that I think is often sort of overlooked and something that I am thinking about long term is what do we define as Black archaeology. Either people assume that if you're Black and you do archaeology, you do Black archaeology. Or if you work on a Black archaeological site, you do Black archaeology. But there are elements of the work that we do that are unique, community engagement being a big one. If you look at the archaeology done at most African American sites, community engagement is front and center. There are also shared elements in the goals of these projects, as most of us tend to study slavery and the slave trade. And while that's important, I think the more important thing is why we do that. There's this large element of recovery, counter-narratives and counter-mapping. If we pull together these major threads, we can then define what is a Black archaeology and use that as signposts to say, "If we're going to do archaeology in a way that addresses these elements, this is what it needs to look like." We don't have to necessarily be doing the same archaeology that we were trained and taught in university,



and we might have to think outside the box. The coral restoration project with Diving with a Purpose is a great example, since we're really trying to blur the lines between the social sciences and other disciplines. We're human beings that work in a world with real people with real issues. And just because we're archaeologists doesn't mean that we have to walk around with a trowel in our hand and that's the only archaeology we are allowed to do.

**Isis: A reimagining of archaeology! How has this project framed the way you approach science communication today?**

Justin: One of the things that Ayana and I have always said, is that all of our future excavations will always have a community engagement component, always have a media component, and always have a training component. We also always try to make sure that whatever we're doing has the seed of something much larger. So, when the opportunity for [Science Magazine](#) to come down to St. Croix presented itself, the idea was like "Okay, this is great, how can we take this exposure from Science and magnify it out based on our overall goals and objectives?" I feel like science communication skills are something that they've never taught in graduate school and most academics don't have, but I tell my students who are planning stages that "You need to have an overall goal and objective." With the Science feature, we had multiple goals. One was to validate us as "scientific researchers" because, when people see Science, no matter what they think about your work, they have to acknowledge the value of it. Being two graduate students who founded the project, that was important because specifically as Black graduate students, it's very easy for people to dismiss us. It also gave us the chance to experiment with different types of mediums. In addition to the magazine publication, Science also came down and [recorded short vignettes](#). And so that got us thinking about who and how people are responding to different mediums. Now that we know how they actually cut and produce these videos, what would it look like for us to get a film student on site? Someone who is just filming in general and using that as promotional material to get out there.

**Isis: It's part of the research plan at that point. It's no longer an afterthought, but a continuous effort while you're doing the work.**

Justin: Exactly, and that gets studied and researched just as much as the actual research questions do. Understanding what is effective and what isn't, reflecting at the end of year on what we did or didn't cover, what got a lot of feedback and what we may need to focus more or less on.

**Isis: It's a skill! That needs to be developed and cultivated to be done as successfully as you have. And with the visibility of platforms like Hulu and National Geographic, you also open yourself and your research up to scrutiny. How do you handle the various ways people respond to your work?**



Justin: For me specifically, most of the work that I do is meant to perpetuate further research and further study. So, I don't claim to have all the answers, and being an archaeologist, we rarely ever do have any answers. I think the more important thing is to get people talking and for people to actually have a dialogue. People may have issues with aspects of my research, I think that just creates more dialogue. I don't waste my time on things that I don't think are fruitful to the ultimate goal – which is trying to address the ills that Black people around the world face and have faced. With that said, when it comes to people who are supportive of it, I try to find individuals that are willing to take some aspects of it and continue to build. My goal, ultimately, is to be irrelevant. There should be other people coming in, before or after me that can take over all of these different aspects. There's a lot of work to be done, and I'm confident there is going to be no shortage of people to do it. I hope that we can encourage people to think about collaborative, creative ways not only to disseminate the work, but also creative ways in which to actually conduct their work.

Stay connected with Justin and all of his upcoming work here at [justindunnavant.com](http://justindunnavant.com) and on Twitter at [@ArchFieldNotes](https://twitter.com/ArchFieldNotes).