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Savage Minds Interview: Kristina Killgrove

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Kristina Killgrove is a biological anthropologist at the University of West Florida. Her research focuses on theorizing migration in antiquity and on understanding urban development and collapse through the analysis of human skeletal remains. She works primarily in the classical world, attempting to learn about the daily lives of the lower classes in Imperial Rome through osteological and biochemical analyses, but she has also worked on questions of population interaction in the contact-period southeastern U.S. and in Medieval Germany. A strong commitment to interdisciplinary research and teaching help her bridge the sometimes large divide between classics and anthropology. For more about Killgrove's work, check out her [website](#) or [blog](#), email her (killgrove@uwf.edu), or follow her on twitter (@DrKillgrove).

Ryan Anderson: **What brought you to anthropology? What made you choose this as your career?**

Kristina Killgrove: I've written a bit in the past (originally as a response to a [Savage Minds post on love letters for anthropology](#)) about how I'm an "accidental anthropologist." I never really set out to have a career in anthropology, as I honestly wasn't entirely sure what anthropology was until maybe my third or fourth year in college. What eventually brought me to anthropology, though, was a dissatisfaction with the field I'd chosen to major in: classics.

I've been interested in the ancient Greeks and Romans since I was a kid, and I would pore through classical archaeology textbooks, looking for deeper insight into how these people lived but realizing these texts were compendia of artifacts and architecture, lazily informed by historical records. Growing up and going to college in Charlottesville, VA (not even a mile from where Thomas Jefferson excavated a Native American burial mound), I knew that archaeology could do more, and I began to delve more deeply into the larger field of anthropology towards the end of my undergraduate studies. After taking a course in human osteology at UVa, I realized that what really bugged me about those classical archaeology textbooks was the lack of analysis of the human remains themselves. At the time (the late 90s), the number of classical archaeologists who worked with human bones (and wrote in English) could be counted on one hand. I decided that this lack of osteological information was a huge hole in our understanding of the ancient world and figured that, with my background in the language, art, architecture, and archaeology of the classical world combined with my growing understanding of theoretically-driven US anthropology, I could add new information about a civilization that had already been studied for the better part of two millennia.

So I bounced between graduate programs in anthropology and classics, settling on anthropology for my PhD because of two things: the anthro department at UNC gave me great flexibility to choose the classes I felt were most relevant to my research, and I was more passionate about teaching about monkeys, hominids, and skeletons than Cicero, concrete, and mosaics. It's been challenging to combine these two fields that have very different intellectual histories, at least in US academia, but I feel like they're coming closer together, particularly in light of recent developments in archaeological technology and digital humanities.

RA: What does "public anthropology" mean to you?

KK: The idea of a public anthropology, to me, means proactively reaching out to a variety of audiences using a variety of media to explain the basic tenets and specific research of anthropology. Anthropology is not a subject taught in grade school like chemistry, English, or mathematics, which means that most people don't encounter it--if they ever do--until college. This also means that most people don't know what anthropologists do or why it's important. Much more so than chemists, mathematicians, or writers, we anthropologists have to show what makes our perspective special, interesting, and important.

I also came at public anthropology accidentally, having chosen to start a blog way back in the early days of blogging as a way to practice short-form writing, the medium I've always felt most comfortable with. The current iteration - PoweredByOsteons.org - started during my dissertation fieldwork and has changed over the years to encompass larger questions within anthropology and academia, along with information about my research and my thoughts on my small, rather insular field of Roman bioarchaeology.

I count myself fortunate to have found a job at the University of West Florida, which communicates very well with the public about local archaeology through the [Florida Public Archaeology Network](). FPAN is a statewide organization but was founded here by archaeologist Judy Bense, now our university president, and literally everyone I've met since moving here last year has something to say or ask about archaeology. This history of engagement is one of the reasons I conceived of teaching this past spring's graduate proseminar that I called Presenting Anthropology. I wanted to create a course for our MA students that let them survey the ecology of anthropology on the web, carry out projects that could form the basis of a job or PhD application portfolio, and discuss strategies for bringing their take on anthropology to the public.

RA: What were some of the highlights of this course? What did you come away with after teaching this for a semester? Are you planning on teaching it again?

KK: I based Presenting Anthropology loosely on the TV show *Project Runway*. I've always been fascinated by the show because the contestants find inspiration for their creations in the oddest places and can whip up some fantastic outfit in a few hours' time. But sometimes their vision comes crashing down around them. It's really the same with presenting anthropology – inspiration can come from anywhere, and if you don't try to do something new and different, your audience is going to get bored. The highlights of the course for me were the students' projects, particularly the ones aimed at young kids (who are surprisingly under-served in anthropological outreach) and the audio and video projects. Students who had never thought about using these media to talk about anthropology or their thesis projects submitted really clever presentations. They learned to work with iMovie and Audacity; they used their latent skills as college radio DJs and art majors to put their own spin on the projects. We also discussed each project in class and read articles, websites, and other online resources regarding best practices for each medium used.

I had a lot of fun with this course, but if I teach it again, it will definitely need a bit more structure, especially in terms of the reading. There's not a whole lot published in terms of ways to present anthropology to the public, and I didn't have time to thoroughly dissect the bounty of literature produced by other STEM fields and communications researchers on presenting science in general. Teaching this class really confirmed for me that most anthropologists don't talk about the ways they present their work; we don't have much of a meta-narrative going on in the field about best practices in either teaching or talking about anthropology. The final assignment for this course was therefore a short seminar paper in which the students discussed their inspiration, choices, and reasoning for three of their favorite projects. Reading their reflections on their own work was interesting and, I hope, a good exercise in epistemology for them.

RA: Earlier you mentioned the fact that the general public doesn't really encounter anthropology, and how this makes it all the more necessary for anthropologists to speak out. In my experience, while there is a lack of knowledge about anthropology these days, there isn't necessarily a lack of interest among the general public. While I run into plenty of people who ask me the "what the heck is anthropology?" question, I also meet a lot of people who are really interested in the kinds of things that anthropologists study—human history, culture, language, and so on. I am intrigued about your mention of FPAN, and how that has served as a way to engage the surrounding community. Why do you think this network has worked so well? What are they doing right when it comes to public anthropology?

KK: Loads of people are interested in archaeology; it's pretty simple to find people who want to talk about local history (or even the ancient Romans) everywhere I go. But I also still get the "What is anthropology?" question, as the

overarching academic field isn't as well understood. One of the things that FPAN does well is foster community interest and involvement by dealing primarily with *local* history and archaeology. There are eight regional centers around the state, each with its own staff, website, and public-facing programs, and each highlights the archaeology being done in your own town or neighborhood. Since Florida has a lengthy history of exploration and colonization, there are a number of different time periods and therefore narratives of Florida's history. Owing to this history and the fact we're surrounded by water, we also have a great underwater archaeology tradition in the state. These shipwrecks produce some truly amazing artifacts, but the FPAN staff and university faculty are active in educating the public about how underwater archaeology works, how recreational divers shouldn't disturb wrecks they find, and how important it is to conserve waterlogged artifacts. FPAN also has field and lab volunteer opportunities, loads of talks at public libraries and historical buildings, activities like historical tours on foot and by bike, and plenty of kid-friendly things to do and see. So, really, FPAN is a way of making sure people have basic knowledge of local history and that they know where to go with their burning questions about the stuff they find in the ground or the water. At least, that's my perspective as still a bit of a newcomer here (and as one of the few faculty and staff who don't do Florida archaeology). The media and activities that FPAN produces, though, were definitely an inspiration for my Presenting Anthropology course and for my own attempts to engage the public in my Old World-focused research.

RA: So here's an issue: I think there are a good number of people who equate things like public outreach and public anthropology with a sort of "dumbing down" of the ideas of the discipline. What's your response to this kind of argument?

KK: It definitely takes some effort to code-switch, as it were, between talking to colleagues about your research and talking to the public. But just because you're using different terminology and a different approach for the public, that doesn't mean you're necessarily dumbing down the ideas. As you mentioned, anthropology is, at its core, about topics many people care deeply about and can relate to – history, culture, and language. For example, I've always been interested in culture contact, in migrants' experiences in a new situation, and I've explored this theme in my work with Native American, Roman, and most recently Medieval German skeletal remains. Since the U.S. is a big melting pot-slash-salad bowl of cultures, languages, and ethnicities, most of us have a family story of immigration. Whereas my presentations at conferences will often rest on name-dropping social theorists, my presentations to the public attempt to evoke in the audience those stories or memories of travel, language difficulties, and cultural faux-pas to help them connect with the lives of people who lived two millennia ago and half a world away.

And in all honesty, I prefer giving these public lectures to giving conference presentations. Not because I can't "talk the talk" of anthropological theory, but because figuring out how to explain the importance of my work to a general audience is far more interesting than figuring out which latest jargon terms need to be dropped. (I based a public talk a couple years back on the similarities between the 'We are the 99%' of the Occupy movement and the socioeconomic structure of ancient Rome; drawing parallels between the audience's experience and that of "the other" can be a powerful way to reach out.) If we only write for each other, and if we only give presentations for each other, anthropology will become a supremely insular discipline. With more of us writing blogs and engaging in public outreach, though, we might be able to return to a time when anthropologists like Margaret Mead were called upon as experts in an important field of knowledge. But both faculty and students need to learn to code-switch, to convey the same information to colleagues and the public alike.

RA: Last question. So how should anthropology go forward from here? What's the best way to push the field toward deeper engagement with wider audiences?

KK: This is a difficult question, and one that people like John Hawks have been trying to answer for a couple years now (see, for example, his amazing "What's wrong with anthropology?" essay). In essence, though, I think anthropology needs to be more open in general, rather than clinging to the hoary, closed model of my-data-my-publications-my-truth. This will mean convincing anthropology publishers to offer more open access options, as well as convincing faculty to publish in primarily open-access venues. It will mean convincing faculty to open their research to wide, immediate critique, and asking them to train their students to do the same. Academia is slowly but surely moving towards large-scale open access, putting the results of our work up for the critique of our colleagues and the public. It is potentially paradigm shifting for academia, which has a legacy of massive economic and class privilege issues, this idea of opening up the vaults of knowledge to anyone interested in the topic.

But in addition to opening up our data and publications, we need to do a better job of being open with and to the public. We need to actively seek out opportunities to talk to the public and engage them in a conversation about anthropology. Faculty members should take every chance they can to blog, give talks at the local library, and provide an opinion for a science journalist covering a story of anthropological interest. Talking with the university's PR person could help faculty hesitant to step out of the ivory tower. And faculty should encourage their students to take the pulse of their real and/or online communities and contribute to them. The students in my Presenting Anthropology seminar, for example, found fantastic new ways to reach out that I'd never considered – many wrote (and continue to write) on tumblrs instead of

longer-form blogs and have cultivated a set of followers, becoming invested in posting interesting information and gauging the reaction of the community. One student created a public archaeology project centered around FPAN and Foursquare; every two weeks, he added new media and new ideas to the project until it was fully formed and launched at the end of the semester. And another engaged in some gutsy performative anthropology: she covered herself in stripes of paint representing soil layers and stood on the campus quad for a few hours one day with a sign inviting gawkers to talk to her about archaeology and stratigraphy. The reactions these students got from both the campus community and the public have been terrific so far. Empowering students to engage with the public – and *requiring* them to engage with the public – is incredibly important in their development as anthropologists in the 21st century.

I strongly feel that by encouraging students and faculty to engage and be open with the public, we'll have less complacency in the field of anthropology. We can't just write for and talk to other anthropologists; we need to dig down to the essence of our work and express those themes to a public that really does want to know what we find out and how it relates to their understanding of the world around them.