An Archaeology of Violence and Coloniality in the Yucatan

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Historians often characterize Yucatan’s history of Spanish colonial domination as uneven and contested. Central to that uneven attempt at conquest are the several waves of violent reclamation and myriad other forms of indigenous resistance that occurred across the Yucatan between the 16th and 19th centuries. In this talk, I will focus on what is conventionally known as the Caste War of Yucatan, a devastating conflict that broke out just twenty-five years after Yucatecan Independence from Spain in 1821. I present the results of a regional archaeological and archival survey, conducted alongside longtime collaborators from a predominately Maya town called Tihosuco. Tihosuco was the cradle of the war and is located in what was the easternmost extent of Spanish inland rule in the peninsular provinces of New Spain and the settler postcolony of Yucatan (today the State of Quintana Roo, Mexico). Our work began as a survey of historic sites, likely constructed between the 17th and 19th centuries, that were abandoned or destroyed because of the war. I will focus on how studies of war and everyday life—two areas that Maya archaeology has made significant contributions to—might be brought together to address the experience of prolonged collective violence like that characterized by the Caste War.

Tiffany C. Fryer, formerly Tiffany C. Cain, is a Cotsen Postdoctoral Fellow in the Princeton Society of Fellows and a Lecturer in Princeton’s Department of Anthropology and Humanities Council. As an interdisciplinary scholar, she joins a community of scholars thinking about the Americas hemispherically. As such, she draws widely on methods and theories from archaeology, cultural anthropology, and historiography, as well as Indigenous and Black studies. Her broad research interests center on the notion of reckoning and our capacity to collectively grapple with how the political violence that settler colonialism propagates informs present day political consciousness and imaginations of the future among the communities it most oppresses.