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ARCH 1900  
2 November 2009  
Section Response 6

I found this week’s set of readings particularly interesting. All three readings not only pointed out problems in current archaeological thought processes regarding ownership and presentation, but also offered solutions or alternative ways of thinking.

Last week, we read articles that raised questions about who can claim possession of the past and who needs to have the past presented to them by those possessors. Knowing that this is a problematic mindset (ownership), I was unable to come to any decisive conclusions on how to instead approach ideas of stewardship. Following last week’s readings, I was especially engaged by Hodder’s article. First, he points out that there are problems with assigning “ownership” to the past. One of these problems is that the idea of ownership is “reminiscent of colonial attitudes, [and], in a post-colonial world this is no longer acceptable[[1]](#footnote-1).” He then proposed an alternative mindset that I personally found very simple to adopt. “A better approach is to say that no one owns a site—rather we all pass through as travelers or tourists[[2]](#footnote-2).” While this mindset may seem to take responsibility off of the archaeologist in terms of how he excavates, preserves, and presents his material, he also recognizes that “as we work as archaeological visitors in local areas, we have a responsibility to other visitors and to the need for sustainable travel. This involves caring for global tourism, but it also involves local issues and local concerns[[3]](#footnote-3).” Since every person around a site is a traveler through it, everyone is responsible for the site. In terms of communication, the archaeologist should “insist that an evaluation of the social, economic, and cultural impact of archaeological work [be] a central and integral part of archaeological work, both within national borders and abroad[[4]](#footnote-4).”

Silberman pointed out that when imagining ways to present archaeological materials, people sometimes confuse the appearance of many alternative voices with actual multivocality[[5]](#footnote-5). Multivocality is introducing narratives that challenge dominant interpretations in order to “promote the co-existence of potentially conflicting approaches and perceptions of [a] site’s significance[[6]](#footnote-6).” This is different, and more desirable and fair, than simply combining multiple voices into some sort of harmonious story. Silberman urges archaeologists to shy away from only catering to tourist desires for an easy-to-understand narrative and work to create a truly multivocal narrative. This type of thinking can be applied to work on both local and global scales and works well with Hodder’s idea of allowing the past to function for everybody.

Since my final project involves researching the history of the JBH, I’m sure that I will encounter evidence of many different narratives—on both the personal and broader scale. I think that there are several groups of stakeholders: us excavators, those working at the JBH, those personally connected to anybody who lived on the site, the visitors to the site, the students of Brown, and the general inhabitants of the greater area. Within these groups of stakeholders I’m sure there are a wide variety of interests and personal histories and the challenge in how to present information will arise in figuring out how to present unbiased information in a way that appeals and caters to all of these groups; but perhaps this where Hodder’s idea of multivocality in presentation will be useful and, also, ideas of ownership. With the varying groups of stakeholders, there are a lot of different people who could claim “ownership” to the site, but hopefully, I will be able to present my work in a way that treats the site as a place to travel and pass through—a place that is relevant to anybody interacting with it.

Hodder, Ian. “Sustainable Time Travel: Toward a Global Politics of the Past.” *The Politics of*

*Archaeology and Identity in a Global Contest* Ed. S. Kane, 2003.

Silberman, Neil A. “Virtual Viewpoints: Multivocality in the Marketed Past?” *Evaluating Multiple*

*Narratives: Beyond Nationalist, Colonialist, Imperialist Archaeologies.* Ed. J. Habu, C. Fawcett,

and J. Matsunaga, New York: Springer, 2008.

1. Ian Hodder “Sustainable Time Travel: Toward a Global Politics of the Past” (2003), 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hodder, 141.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hodder, 142.  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hodder, 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Neil A. Silberman “Virtual Viewpoints: Multivocality in the Marketed Past” (New York: Springer, 2008) 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Silberman, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)