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Archaeology of College Hill

Critical Response 5

Different academic disciplines think of the past and heritage in different ways. Historians see the past and our heritage as a story that explains who we are today. Anthropologists use modern perspectives to understand the past, therefore they see heritage as collective and incremental and something that exists today. Archeologists analyze the past through material culture and attempt to not use modern biases. They also strive to uncover new information about the past, and hopefully about the culture of all different socioeconomic groups. Consequently, people who are not academics also all see the past and heritage differently. People may believe that their heritage is merely made up of their family’s factual history and do not account for the culture and context of their family’s past. Or people may believe that they own the past of their society’s ancestors, and that others do not have the right to interpret or invade their culture’s history. The authors we read this week demonstrate the variety of ways the past can be studied and analyzed.

Shepard believes that there are stakeholders in the past, descendants who can lay claim to “the past,” whatever it may be. In his example case, he explains how those who can claim ownership and heritage must be identified before excavation begins, in order to prevent the situation that occurred at Prestwich Street in Cape Town. The subsequent work and discussions that had to be conducted at this site, could have been avoided if the proper steps had been taken, such as an archeological survey of the area and the inclusion of the townspeople. Shepard explains how ethics and morals must be considered, especially in the field of archaeology. Particularly, he notes that archeology should look to uncover “hidden histories,” the histories of the poor, marginalized groups of people. [[1]](#footnote--1) He says that archeologists must “think through the relation between archeology and society in all of its complexity and detail demanded by its context, and to develop forms of practice adequate to this conseptualisation.”[[2]](#footnote-0) This idea must be considered in the question he poses to the reader: “What does it mean ‘to give the past back to the people?”[[3]](#footnote-1)

The article by Bankoff and Winter explains how archeology cannot always be a trusted means in studying the past. The fields around the house that exist today are deceiving because they are “artifact(s) of the urban park movement of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries…”[[4]](#footnote-2) In addition, the lack of archeological material from slaves is “limited by the nature of their enslavement.”[[5]](#footnote-3) During the conclusion, the authors acknowledge how the past cannot always be studied the same way. In the case of the Van Corlandt mansion, it was the historical records that shed light on the lives of the slaves and not the archeological record. This article explains how archeologists cannot only assume that historical texts are biased to the elites, while archeology reveals the voices of the oppressed.

In the Brown University article about slavery and the history of Brown University, the university attempts to understand and study an important and unfortunate aspect of its heritage. This article studies the past by looking at specific events and people, such as the records of the Voyage of the Sally and the biography of Moses Brown. It also accounts for the importance of context, comparison and the development of modern ideas, by including information on the history of slavery in general, in Rhode Island, and in relation to the Brown family and Brown University.

At the John Brown House, we are studying the past from material culture, but we also feel like stakeholders in the heritage we are uncovering, since the history of this house is the history of our college. In addition, we are also involved with the Rhode Island Historical Society so we are also stakeholders in making sure the excavation is not damaging any aspects of the present condition of the property. As Bankoff and Winter would suggest, we are not merely using our archeological record as our only means of information on the John Brown House. We are also including the history of this house in ways similar to the report by Brown University, by looking at historical primary evidence.

In our publication we must make sure our report accounts for various audiences, since many different types of people will read it. We ultimately must decide how to present the past, however. I believe the past and heritage of the John Brown House should be viewed as part of our heritage as Brown students. Additionally, we should explain how this past connects to the history of Rhode Island, the city of Providence, and the University. As we learned from our readings, we should be sure to account for the descendents of the house, not only use archeological record as evidence, and include contextual information, as well as specifics, in our report.

1. Shepherd, Nick. 2007 What does it mean 'To Give the Past Back to the People'? Archaeology and Ethics in the Postcolony. In Y. Hamalakis and P. Duke, eds. Archaeology and Capitalism, From Ethics to Politics. Left Coast Press; Walnut Creek, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Shepard, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Shepard, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Bankoff, H. Arthur and F. Winter. 2005 The Archaeology of Slavery at the Van Cortlandt Plantation in the Bronx, New York. International Journal of Historical Archaeology, 9(4):, 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. Bankoff, Winter, 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)