

### Critical Response 5

Many archaeological projects today are driven by a moral impetus: to uncover the “hidden histories” of marginalized peoples—those “non-elites whose lives and activities were not deemed worthy by the dominant forces in society of inclusion in the documentary record.” When focusing on the marginalized (and mistreated) groups of the recent past—such as in slave-holding America and apartheid South Africa—issues of historical truth get tied in with issues of reconciliation. Archeology as a discipline must recognize the heightened potential for controversy and conflict and archaeologists must be sensitive to opposing perspectives. This need to engage with multiple audiences should affect the approach taken towards a specific archaeological site, including the questions posed, the process of excavation and analysis, and the final publications.

The attitudes by archaeologists and city officials toward the exhumation of more than 500 individual bodies and relocation for scientific study in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2003 represent a failure to acknowledge the legitimacy of controversy, given the social and racial context. Indeed, as Nick Shepherd concludes in *What Does it Mean 'To Give the Past Back to the People'? Archaeology and Ethics in the Postcolony*, “The Prestwich Street Exhumations is, first and foremost, a testimony to the failure of the discipline to engage... failure to develop an adequate conception of the relation between science and society, or the demands and dynamics of scholarship in a context of social transformation.” (Shepherd 111) This failure stems from a misconception of archaeology as an 'objective' science, removed from the distractions of politics and society. This conception is reflected in the report by the *Cape Times* on the frustration of researchers, as articulated by one anthropology doctoral student, “It's become politicised and because of that there have been unnecessary delays...Science is held captive until these two groups can sort out their problems” (Shepherd 106).

Instead, researchers should have viewed the politicisation as inevitable and understandable,

given the social context and the validity of rival claims to the significance of the remains of the dead. Both the proponents of and the opposition to the exhumation of the bodies on Prestwich Street stemmed from a moral concern over restoring honor to this group of the undocumented dead, which represent a cross-section of the underclasses of colonial Cape town. While the scientists expounded the objective scientific value of accessing hidden histories, they dismissed the angry protests of the black community as purely emotional and racially charged. In reality, the opposition stressed the equally legitimate symbolic value of retaining the cemetery as a memorial, especially given the recent history of the forced removal of black and Coloured residents from the neighborhood as recently as the late 1960s and early 1970s. As the Hands Off Prestwich Street Ad Hoc Committee appeal document explains, “for a large section of Cape Town's community, whose existence and dignity has for so long been denied, the discovery and continued preservation of the Prestwich Street burial ground can symbolically restore their memory and identity” (Shepherd 105). The document continues that exhumation “makes impossible a whole range of people's identifications with that specific physical space in the city. Such a removal of echoes, albeit unintentionally, the apartheid regime's forced removals from the same area” (Shepherd 105). Furthermore, issues of ownership come into play. While the scientists are concerned about exposing truths about and reconciling itself with “our history”, referring to a broader South African society, they reject the black community's desire to claim respect, based on a more exclusive reference to “our dead” and guided by specifically African values and customs regarding exhumations, burials and cemeteries. The underlying racial divide underscores such immediate angry responses, as when a homeless man exclaimed ““Why are white people, and white women, scratching in our bones? This is sacrilege... (Shepherd 102)

Unlike the case study from South Africa, the publications on the Van Cortlandt plantation in the Bronx, New York, and on Brown University in Providence, RI reflect a much more appropriate and sensitive approach toward studying New England's involvement in American slavery. The research questions posed stem directly from the authors recognition of the continuing significance of American

slavery and its residue in contemporary society. It is also evident from the publications that both authors began with the premise that broaching the topic of slavery is inherently controversial. Both authors indicate their own moral impetus to remind the North of its own slave past, with the belief that truth and reconciliation go hand in hand, while recognizing that this counters the prevailing norm of 'burying' the past and 'moving on'. Thus, Brown University appointed a steering committee with a dual-mission of researching Brown's historical connection with the slave trade and tackling the present day controversies around issues of reconciliation and reparations. Similarly, the publication on the Van Cortlandt plantation makes clear right from the title that the central aim was to explore specifically the "archaeology of slavery." Both publications begin with more than ample background information on the extent to which slavery penetrated all aspects of northern society at the time, as a way of justifying their research question. Furthermore, the narrow topic directly influences the excavation and the analytical presentation of the excavation in publication. The writing emphasizes the absence of material evidence of the slaves over the presence of elite goods in normative terms and interprets the significance of this absence in terms of the deprivation of slaves of their own material culture. Thus, these case studies raise awareness of the potential conflict and provide ample contextual detail to justify the perspective of the researchers, rather than falsely assuming that 'pure' scientific value is automatically sufficient.