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Critical Response 6

Last week, I argued that archaeologists need to be sensitive to multiple audiences, specifically in the contexts of America's slave-trade past and apartheid South Africa. The moral impetus behind this week's readings calls for an even higher imperative: not just to be sensitive to multiple groups but to achieve true multivocality. The concept of "multivocality", according to Neil Asher Silberman, ""is meant to challenge dominant interpretive narratives and to create spaces and structures at heritage sites that will promote the co-existence of potentially conflicting approaches and perceptions of the site's significance" (Silberman 141). The difficulty in achieving multivocality, lies in the fact that dominant methods, from pre-excavation to final presentation at a heritage site, currently confine interpretation to a single narrative, with a Western bent.

The widespread misconception that archaeology is an 'objective' science is a key factor limiting incorporation of alternative narratives. Ian Hodder is quite critical of the tendency—which he considers a "sort of intellectual colonization"—to describe methods rooted in Western theory as 'universal' or 'objective'. According to Hodder, "The view that the past can be objectively studied...implies a distanced analytical relation with the past that can alienate and be appropriated for Western interests.... The view that we "just dig" to answer "universal" questions is a modern form of ownership that is reminiscent of colonial attitudes" (Hodder 145-146). This attitude results in the formation of research questions and agendas within a Western institution, without the local participation and involvement. The research questions "may have little or no resonance among the people who travel through most—the local and global tourists" (Hodder 143). This leads to reactions, such as this one by a local Imam in the Prestwich Street graveyard case (form last week's reading): "Only scientists are going to benefit form picking over these bones—of what purpose and use is it to the various communities to which the dead belong to know what they ate 150 years ago or where they

came from?" (Shepherd 102).

The final stage of the process, the presentation stage, is also fraught with constraints to achieving 'true' multivocality. Silberman hones in on so-called "heritage tourism" and the popular "virtual heritage experience," which emphasizes new technologies and interactive presentation methods, such as virtual reconstructions and character simulations. According to Silberman, "The use of slickly produced multimedia representations of alternative voices from the past...should *not* be confused with the concept of multivocality.... It utilizes the *appearance* of many voices and multiple stories, while subtly undermining the presumed power of multivocality to contest dominant narratives" (Silberman 138). The difference lies in the definition of inclusion; the mission of social inclusion of marginalized voices does not match up with the commercially-conscious goal of inclusion of as many consumers as possible. As Silberman stresses, "Heritage has become increasingly tied to substantial investment and economic concerns.... they demand that it be coherent, easy to follow, and capable of holding the attention of the *widest* possible audience. That is precisely what true multivocality cannot and should not provide" (Silberman 141). The single narrative that these heritage sites—the thus unchallenged dominant interpretive narrative—is reflected in the simulated character-based voices and "inscribed in walking paths and circulation routes" (Silberman 141).

It is important to note that the conflicts that arise over notions of archaeological science are not malicious in intent, but stem from the moral cause to uncover so-called "hidden histories." Francis P. McManamon's article about the history of archaeology in America reveals the positive origins for the promotion of archaeology as a "public good". The Antiquities Act of 1906, the main piece of legislation regarding the preservation of archaeological sites and artifacts, set forth the idea that these resources were "most valuable as sources of historic and scientific information" and the "the information gained from proper archaeological study provides the major benefit...a benefit that must be shared" (McManamon 125). While Hodder and Silberman are concerned that archaeologists dismiss the perspectives of marginalized groups, McManamon is concerned that marginalized groups are often

too quick to distrust archaeologists.   Thus, McManamon laments, "It is unfortunate that those of a fundamentalist, ethnic nationalistic view have berated archaeology because archaeological approaches to understanding the past provide some of the best ways to enliven these important ancient cultures and times for broad audiences" (McManamon 129).

In a more nuanced view, Hodder admits that conflict is often "too simplistically drawn" and advocates hybrid methods and complex alliances. According to Hodder, "The global is pitted against the local that has to act back against universalizing and homogenizing tendencies.... it often seems that this opposition is too simplistically drawn. In practice we often see complex alliances between local, regional, national, and international agencies and groups...between governmental and nongovernmental...between archaeologists and non-archaeologists" (Hodder 198). At Catalhoyuk, Hodder involves all stakeholders, depending on international organization to empower local and indigenous groups. Hodder also recognizes that 'true' multivocality must move "beyond dialogue" and introduce "reflexive methods." Thus, at Catalhoyuk, Hodder has not only listened to the input of the local community, but has responded to their input and continuously adjusted the methodology used in further excavations and the educational programs developed on site to present the material. According to McManamon, in the context of Native American sites, Indian scholars have also called for the "combination of archaeological investigations with traditional Indian histories" (McManamon 130). For the combination of historical narratives to meet Hodder's test of multivocality, these two approaches would not only need to be represented but the consideration of one should reflect back onto the consideration of the other. Thus, oral histories might effect the research agendas and questions for archaeological investigations. Moreover, the contradictions would not be glossed over in the presentation for sake of ease and clarity.

These ideas have implications for our project at the John Brown House. In general, we must admit up front that the purpose of the class is to teach traditional methodologies for excavation devised within the Western academic realm. Thus, the scope of the class is limited to the narratives derived

from this approach. The site report, including the unit summaries and interpretations, must explicitly

indicate that our research agenda and our excavations stemmed from research questions related only to

the personal interests of the student excavators and related to the agendas of the RI Historical Society

and its house museum at the John Brown House. We must recognize the possibility that our unit

placements or our questions might have been altered had we first consulted with other stakeholders,

which in this case might have included neighboring house owners or any interested residents of

Providence or tourists. For example, maybe Unit 10 would have preserved and analyzed the numerous

pieces of slate had the owner of the house with a slate roof across the street had participated in the

process. We must also admit that other forms of evidence, whether documentary or oral, are relevant to

our discussion. Many of our final projects will serve this purpose, by bringing in other sources of

information, such as maps, newspaper articles, letters, images, cookbooks, etc. Finally, it is important

for our process to be reflexive in nature. Our blog entries are a good tool to serve this purpose. I think

our blog entries help serve this purpose. Our own biases are reflected in our blog entries. In the

production of our site reports, we need to be self-aware and read our own blog entries and identify our

own assumptions and notions.