Max Mankin
Archaeology 1900: The Archaeology of College Hill
Response Paper Two: Week Eight

The American Antiquities Act of 1906 marked a turning point for American archaeologists. Rather than digging to exploit unearthed artifacts and features for financial gain, archaeologists were required to disseminate results and interpretations of excavation. However, despite the law's noble intentions, it specifies neither how nor to whom archaeological findings should be presented, engendering many decades of debate among archaeologists over proper methods of presentation. In addition to struggling with questions of logistics and audience, archaeologists have difficulty pinning down how notions of nationality and ownership should influence dissemination. As archaeologists excavating at the John Brown House (JBH), we should consider the above questions in the context of our final presentations of materials.

Relating archaeological findings to the public can take on a range of formats from traditional, banal museum exhibits to fully immersive, multimedia-heavy productions which provide a "total immersive experience" for audience members (Silberman, 2008). Each format has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. Rather lackluster museum-type exhibitions are "multivocal," in that they allow audience members to make their own interpretations of the material record by providing only the bare minimum (date, location, material) of details. However, such displays are lacking in their ability to keep the attention of all but the most dedicated scholars and students with assignments regarding the subject. Multimedia-loaded interactive "total experiences" capture the awe and attention of the widest array of the public, e.g. not only students and scholars, but also families, tourists, and other non-archaeologists seeking an enjoyable but also educational leisure time activity. Unfortunately, total experiences provide audience members with preformed interpretations, denying them the opportunity to interpret the archaeological record for themselves. However, Silberman's approach to the issue models presentations as a dichotomy of two extremes rather than a spectrum between those two poles. For our JBH

excavation, a compromise between total and zero multivocality is our best option for presentation. Thus, we should provide a more engaging picture than a non-interactive museum exhibit hall typically does, so as to encourage interest in our findings, but also restrain from providing our audience with our complete interpretations, thus still allowing audience members to draw on both what we provide and their own experiences to make interpretations. We could facilitate audience interpretation and attention by incorporating, but not abusing, multimedia and posing questions rather than presenting our conclusions for the audience to blindly soak up.

The ideas of ownership and nationality play a large but complicated role in presentation of archaeological findings. Ownership of the past is a rather unhelpful concept, as it makes no sense to "own the past" (Hodder, 2003). Instead, Hodder's concept of "time travel" is more helpful, in that anyone whose physical presence graces either the site or an exhibit concerning the site may be classified a time traveler. If we accept Hodder's argument that our ethical obligation involves including all time travelers in the archaeological process, whether "state, regional, or local officials, tourists, local inhabitants, or archaeologists," crafting a presentation will be even more of a challenge. In fact, it seems as if a presentation to appeal to each type of audience member may be necessary. Likewise, nationality – the tendency to approach archaeological results with ones region, country, or people in mind – is not a straightforward issue either, in that practically anyone may legitimately claim a connection to a site through some combination of voluntaristic civic and inherent ethnic nationalism (McManamon, 2003). Therefore, it is nearly impossible to appeal to everyone's nationalistic tendencies with one presentation. Appealing to exactly no nationalistic leanings seems a logical solution, but returns us to the question posed above regarding the relative amounts of interpretation and pure facts (if such things exist) that we should be presenting. Based on the difficulties of incorporating generic nationalistic and ownership issues into presentations, it seems logical to consider audiences site by site to address such issues.

In the context of the JBH, our most obvious audience members include the Rhode Island Historical Society and fellow archaeologists. Moreover, our findings at the JBH have the potential to attract anyone with interest in the histories of Providence, the JBH itself, Rhode Island, colonial America, and the slave trade, as well as personal ancestry. Given our wide audience, the issues of ownership and nationalism are as equally ambiguous as before, and it seems as if we and our audience would be better served by a presentation which adapts based on an entrance survey of readers or visitors. For instance, the descendants of slaves who worked for John Brown obviously have a legitimate interest in what we uncover, but it would be unfair to them if we focused our presentation entirely on Brown's business endeavors and how they made Rhode Island into what it is today. Conversely, it is unfair to current Rhode Islanders to focus entirely on Brown's slave trading, as it may not relate to the average Rhode Islander. Likewise, focusing our presentation's attention entirely on John Brown is not fair to female time travelers to our site because women did occupy the house as well, and so on.

Legitimate stakeholders in sites include those interested in the history of the site as well as those with a biological, emotional, nationalistic, or psychological connection to the archaeological record in question (McManamon, 2003). However, as Hodder (2003) notes, it is difficult to predict the concerns of all of the "travelers" to the (exhibits concerning the) site and who those travelers may be. Of course, proper archaeological ethics dictate that we attempt to make our presentation of the archaeological record and some level of interpretations relevant to the interests of as many parties as possible. In reality though, this is simply not possible. It is unlikely that the same presentation would simultaneously appeal to children, state officials, and tourists, who prefer multimedia-laden presentations, as well as to archaeologists, students, locals, and visitors biologically connected to the site, who likely prefer to make their own, possibly nationalistic interpretations. As stated above, smaller presentations specifically tailored to certain groups are a logical option (given time and resources), but this presents only a slice of the whole picture to each group. Thus, a balance must be struck between presenting a specialized topic

and presenting a wider perspective. This will be a harrowing task for archaeologists given how difficult it

is to generalize for more than one site, but even considering it (especially for the JBH, where so many

sensitive issues relating to ownership and nationalism may be relevant), is a step in the right direction

toward appealing to as many parties as possible.

References

Hodder, Ian. 2003 *Sustainable Time Travel: Toward a Global Politics of the Past*. In S. Kane, ed., *The Politics of Archaeology and Identity in a Global Contest*, 139-147.

McManamon, Francis P. 2003 *Archaeology, Nationalism, and Ancient America*. In S. Kane, ed., *The Politics of Archaeology and Identity in a Global Contest*, 115-138.

Silberman, Neil A. 2008 *Virtual Viewpoints: Multivocality in the Marketed Past?* In J. Habu, C. Fawcett, and J. Matsunaga, eds., *Evaluating Multiple Narratives: Beyond Nationalist, Colonialist, Imperialist Archaeologies*. New York: Springer, 138-143.