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Critical Response 2 (Prompt 6)

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In conjunction with what was discussed last week, this week’s readings deal with ideas of ownership, research and excavation ethics, and contextually- and culturally-considerate communication. Hodder, McManamon, and Silberman offer well-rounded perspectives on these points, and present interesting parallels to our work at the John Brown House.

In his article “Sustainable Time Travel: Toward a Global Politics of the Past,” Ian Hodder maintains that the past itself is not owned by anyone, and would be better approached such that “…no one owns a site—rather we all pass through as travelers or tourists” (Hodder 141). Further, this provides that the “…boundaries between tourists and archaeologists become blurred” (Hodder 142). By this model, we consider each particular site as part of a collective global heritage. Thus, there should be a common feeling of understanding toward all cultures’ remains because we are imagining each individual site as part of a whole shared heritage, rather than emphasizing an “us” versus “them” attitude (which does little to foster responsibility for a site’s preservation). He supports tourism as a means of sharing information.

I particularly liked Hodder’s metaphor of travel to explain how archaeology and cultural/heritage research could be approached. Interestingly, it has virtually no roots in nationalism but is based in the simple ethics of the Golden Rule. Ownership, thus, becomes something of a nonissue, because respect and consideration for local traditions is automatically considered when conducting research because each person expects the same treatment regarding *their* local culture. But this is all describing an idealized world. It does, though, have practical applications, which effort to shift the focus of archaeology from “just digging” to considering the broader implications of this intrusive and destructive process on the stakeholder groups, both local and global. The multivocality of this new definition urges archaeology against creating research agendas set within a “Western academy” (Hodder 143) and toward developing ways of conducting research and communicating its results that are sensitive to local cultures. As Hodder succinctly explains, “… an evaluation of the social, economic, and cultural impact of archaeological work is a central and integral part of archaeological work, both within national borders and abroad” (146).

Neil Asher Silberman, in his article “Virtual Viewpoints: Multivocality in the Marketed Past?” puts forth that site presentations nowadays “… utilize the *appearance* of many voices and multiple stories, while subtly undermining the presumed power of multivocality to contest dominant narratives… by incorporating a mosaic of conflicting or contrasting voices into a single, embodied experience of ‘heritage tourism’” (Silberman 138). He argues that when information gleaned from excavation and research is presented for tourism, there is a sort of commercial “Disneyland-ification” of the archaeological sites. Citing the example of the Flemish location he works at, he wonders that site presentation, using sleek digital renderings and flashy visuals, has strayed from using these New Technologies for scientific and educational purposes and now focuses more on the spectacle of it all? Memorable visitor experiences to heritage sites that “offer a sense of involvement and interactivity” (Silberman 140) through interactive videos, reenactments, and virtual perspectives offer more personalized and exciting means of communicating by giving visitors something to sympathize with. But, he asks, does this have anything to do with multivocality? How can information be transmitted *effectively* while maintaining respect for the integrity of a site and its local culture? It seems that he is not altogether opposed to cutting-edge exhibits and displays but rather how they are being used and how they are causing people to consider the sites they visit. While Hodder seemed to consider the notion of a collective heritage in a positive light, Silberman’s analysis lends more to the stance that things are lost when the blanket of our “shared past” is laid over; nationalism becomes, to a degree, neutralized when ownership is removed.

Francis McManamon’s “Archaeology, Nationalism, and Ancient America” considers many of the same questions of ownership and communication as Hodder and Silberman, though strictly in the arena of American archaeology. “International expositions, world’s fairs, and museums exhibitions” (McManamon 120) served to expose American Indian artifacts and share research findings. But soon, demand became so great for authentic antiquities that looting of artifacts and unsystematic removal of artifacts to meet demand for private use became a serious problem, and legislative action was taken to attempt to protect and preserve these resources. I think this raises a number of interesting points and questions about Americans’ motivation for such research. Did this intense interest spring up from a desire to be closer to the majesty of the American landscape, or to truly understand the histories of indigenous peoples? Was the acquisition of artifacts by any means (legal or not) pursued to impress and bolster one socially, or was it because people felt a connection and ownership of these artifacts of a culture not their own? Was this appropriation of Native American cultural history by the descendents of European settlers ethical, as considered under Hodder’s model for a “shared heritage”?

In our excavations at the John Brown House, we must consider not only the present-day inhabitants of the local area but the stakeholder organizations and communities interested in colonial history, slave history, American history, architecture, urban planning, and so on. We must conduct our excavations such that we are respectful of these various groups and considerate of the data that they (or other future interested persons) would find valuable as we carry out this destructive process. We should present our information such that it is as clear and accurate as possible, visually engaging and factually neutral.

Works Cited

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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, pgs. 138-143.