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Critical Response Week 6

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Ownership, Nationalism, and Ethics

In “Sustainable Time Travel,” Ian Hodder discusses ownership and its relevance to the development of new archaeological sites. Hodder makes the argument that archaeology is not just an issue of digging, but a “particular mode of intervention in other people’s lives” (143). Rather than making the past exotic, archaeologists should approach their work on site and the current residents of a site as insignificant amounts of time in the overall lifespan of the site’s history. Under this mode of thought, the legal owners are less important than the “joint curatorial responsibility” that all travelers through the site share (146). The push for interdisciplinary discussion of land’s use, by archaeology, global travelers and local residents, is absolutely a valid point worth pursuing and enforcing (145). Although Hodder makes interesting arguments about the nature of ownership and the reality of the small influence over of one archaeological team over the ultimate fate of a site, his conclusion is completely impractical. The legal ownership of a site by one group, whether a normal citizen or a government body, protects the land from chaos. If all groups tried to possess the land at once, as no one truly possesses it in the long term, the current use of the site would be a constant struggle between interest groups; though archaeologists want to excavate, the current townspeople want to raise goats there. If there is no ownership, than who ultimately gets to decide? Ownership plays a key role in maintaining order over the use of a site, even if it is not always ideal use in the eyes of some archaeologists.

“Archaeology, Nationalism, and Ancient America” by Francis McManamon discusses the ways in which nationalism can affect attitudes towards archaeology. The tactile connection to the past, and evidence of a connection through the landscape, often drives people to connect with archaeological evidence as their right to be in a certain area. Americans made a key decision in our history when we chose not to allow artifacts to be treated as commodities. Archaeological resources are noncommercial goods, as defined by the Antiquities Act, which makes sense because these resources and the information they provide help the common good (125). Rather than allowing pieces of American past to be hoarded for economic gain, all people can access them to help formulate a personal meaning of national identity. Through the open access to information of where we have been, the logic argues, we can discover where we are going. Large waves of American nationalism have been civic, in which “American-ness” is open and voluntary, but under periods of administrative and political unity, nationality becomes more identified with inherent factors, chiefly ethnicity (126). In America, there is a desire for the public to connect with previous inhabitants, evidenced by polls that show overwhelming support for public funding to protect archaeological sites, as well as include archaeology in school curricula (134). Archaeology is a key tool in providing a national identity by connecting with current national members with their past counterparts.

“Virtual Viewpoints” struck my interest most, as I am producing a student version of the very multimedia presentations that the article critiques as falsely representing multivocality. Neil Asher Silberman paints such interactive methods of passing along information as somewhat unethical. Though these digital and interactive presentations claim to represent more than one viewpoint, Silberman claims that they are actually driven by the pursuit higher profits by presenting a narrative that will appeal to as widespread an audience as possible. In collecting evidence and choosing which details to present, and which to leave out, it could be very easy to fall into the trap of falsely presenting the view of one group with the alleged voice of many different groups. This reading instantly brought to mind the dilemma of the audio tour from last year, and how the John Brown House staff reacted negatively to the inclusion of some facts that shine less brightly in the modern era, namely the details of slave tunnels. How, as a responsible archaeologist, can I reconfigure the events of the past, and the evidence we have uncovered to be accessible and enjoyable as a leisure cite, or a location that is pleasant and valuable to visit, without slipping into the prioritization of visitor experience over political and social discourse? I agree with Silberman that this particular style of presentation is flawed in the sense that these multimedia presentations often feature a cohesive and inclusive narrative over the presentation of more difficult realities of the past.

However, Silberman’s attack on the presentational style as too widespread seems completely unfair and somewhat elitist. Many sites’ methods used to attract visitors during their leisure time relies on making the site out as a fun, interesting experience. Silberman critiques the staff of many archeological presentations for also being employed by theme parks and factory tours. I fall somewhat into this category, as besides shilling facts about our class’s experience on the site, I shill new songs and concert tickets on the campus’ commercial radio station. However, my job as an audio tour curator, or of any director of an interactive experience that converts history into a leisure activity is to make it appealing to the public. Widespread audiences should be able to connect with sites. What prerequisites does Silberman assume a visitor to a site should have. I think that adolescents should be able to connect to the history of the places around them. By crafting an Altman-esque narrative about John Brown’s home, younger people’s ability to connect to the past of the home would be prevented. The widespread aim of archeological site presentations is justified, because the most widespread audience possible, namely everyone, should be able to access and connect with its history. The stakeholders in the John Brown House, such as Brown University, the Rhode Island Historical Society, staff of the John Brown House, and local Providence community members, would be best served by an accessible method of interacting with the information catalogued by the John Brown House. How useful is all of the excavations that archaeologists complete, and the research they compile, worthwhile if the general public does not find it accessible?