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Response 5

“The Audience of the Past”

One of the more controversial topics in Archaeology right now deals with the ethical question of ownership of the past. Who owns the past? This question possesses connotations of ethnicity, religion, the people, and politics. First, who can even claim the past? Ownership entails that one is the owner and has legal rights to possess this ‘thing’. But what happens when this ‘thing’ occurred over 200 years ago, can you still claim ownership? Does one even need to be of direct descent to claim ‘it’? Can a group claim ‘it’? If the following questions are yes, then how does one repatriate ‘it’ to those of ownership? These are all questions that are addressed in the beginning of “Archaeology and Ethics in the Postcolony” by Nick Shepherd. In this paper, I will focus on the idea of ownership dealing with ethnicity and the audience for which archaeology interacts with: politics, the public, and publication.

Politics and archaeology is a very difficult relationship to describe, yet is crucial to the idea of audiences and heritage. If one were to look at almost any country, there is a department of antiquities or a governing force that deals directly with protection and preservation of archaeology and the public. In Shepard’s chapter, he deals with the idea of the government and archaeology in a “prevailing debate in post-apartheid society around issues of truth, reconciliation, and restitution, at the heart of which lie a number of fundamentally ethical questions: How do we atone for the wrongs of the past?” (Shepard 100). This poses a very serious question in my mind: is it our responsibility, as archaeologist, to atone for the past? Do we become implicated in these wrong doings? And it would seem that the answer is yes. We, as archaeologist and others in the field, are repatriating objects and inhumations on a daily basis, whether that is to an ethnic group like the Native and African Americans or to a foreign country. So what does that mean when we, meaning the government and/or archaeology, determine that atonement is necessary?

One instance of what it should not look like is Cape Town, South Africa excavation of Prestwich Street, were both archaeologist and the government agencies of the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) and the National Heritage Resources Act were involved. The public became outraged with the removals of the burials and yet even with public meetings, a positive end for all was not met. Shepard even describes this as, “a testimony to the failure of the discipline to engage… by the failure to develop an adequate conception of the relation between science and society” (Shepard 111). Therefore, if the government is not helping to develop this relationship between archaeologists and the people, at least in the context of Prestwich Street, then it seems that archaeologist must address the people directly.

The question is then, how do archaeologist address the public personally? First, it’s important to define who is the public? Is the public the people who are living there today, or instead the people who claim familial and/ or ethnical ties? Second, how does the public become involved with archaeology and/ or the historical record? Third, once they become involved what do archaeologists do?

In the case of the Van Cortlandt Plantation, the idea of slavery encases multiple different races, including Native Americans, Spanish Caribbeans, and Africans (Bankoff and Winter 294, 297). There is not just one group that can make a tie to this plantation. Interestingly, though the family was heavily involved in slavery, and can be documented through Frederick’s will of 1794 (Bankoff and Winter 296), there is still no evidence on his property of the slave trade. Therefore, the people who are able to make their ties to this place are Caucasians, which is noted in the visitors of the mansion who are neither Hispanic and/or African American (the ones that used the majority of the property) (Bankoff and Winter 315). Currently, the Colonial Dames, who own this property, are white washing history and only presenting the heritage of the Van Cortlandts and their importance to New York. Therefore, as archaeologists, until we find evidence of slavery on this property, we are little to no use to the public, and more specifically the ethnic communities, even if we have historical documentation.

This brings us then to publication of archaeology for scholars and the public. How do we present heritage and ownership of the past? It is this question that ties us closely to the idea of atonement. Recently, the Brown University Steering Committee published a report on Slavery and Justice; Ruth Simmons, who is of course African American, founded the Committee in 2003. It explores the history of slavery and how closely interconnected Brown is to the slave trade on pages 7 through 31. At the end of the book however is a section on recommendations for how the “institution can hold itself accountable for the past, accepting burdens and responsibilities along with its benefits and privileges” (Committee 83). While reading through this, there is a blatantly obvious agenda in this report. Yes, the history is true, interesting, and needs to be discussed, but at the same time it makes out John Brown and anyone dealing with slavery to be the devil incarnate. The last sentence ends with an air of drama, “Their service, like so much else about the university’s tangled relationship with slavery, would soon be forgotten” (Committee 31). There is a difference between historical fact and dramatizing of the past. As archaeologists, it should be our number one goal to tell the public both sides of the past and of a people’s heritage. When there is not equilibrium between the two of these, you are not atoning for the past, but making a further divide between archaeology and our audiences.

In conclusion, the idea of ownership of the past is based on the audience. It should be our goal, as archaeologists, to help bridge the barriers of the past when dealing with politics, the public, and publication. This ideal is not always possible, but should be one of our main goals. There is no point of archaeology if we do not help to educate other of the past.

Bibliography:

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* Slavery and Justice. 2006 Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, Brown University.