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ARCH 1900

Fall 2011

Critical Response 5 – Slavery and Ownership in Archaeological Interpretation and Presentation

Archaeologists have the unique opportunity to study the human past through excavations and material remains. With this study comes a responsibility not only to *examine* all possibilities and interpretations, but also to *account* or simply *allow* for these varying opinions and truths in siteinvestigations and publications. It is not that archaeologists have the inherent right or duty to “recover hidden histories,” “democratize the past” or “give the past back to the people,” as history is not something to be given or received by anyone (Shepherd 2007: 99). Instead, archaeologists ought to strive for a more holistic approach that is grounded not only in past historical contexts but in modern-day social and political contexts as well. Publications from historical excavations and investigations need to be accessible to *all* audience members, regardless of race, ethnicity, or education level, and they must thoughtfully confront, understand, and present all viewpoints surrounding issues in question.

The challenges faced in trying to accomplish these ideals are reflected in this week’s readings. Bankoff and Winter’s article regarding the presence of slavery on the Van Cortlandt plantation shows how the most apparent interpretation of material remains is not always the most accurate. As slavery was so integrated into daily life, so too was the evidence of slavery invisibly integrated into seemingly white, Dutch colonial remains, therefore biasing interpretations today (Bankoff & Winter 2005: 314-315). Only through backtracking and cross-examinations of historical documents, such as wills, decorative paintings, and general accounts from the area and time period, did archaeologists realize that slavery was a significant part of the daily economy and workings of the New York plantation (Bankoff & Winter 2005: 293-303). This crosschecking and dedicated approach to creating a holistic narrative is commendable; Dutch, wealthy ceramic items previously considered to be worn through continual use were reinterpreted as hand-me-downs to slaves by their master as a direct result of archaeologists striving to capture the multiple perspectives and realities of the past (Bankoff & Winter 2005: 312-314). Not only is the presence of slavery masked by these apparently “White” ceramics, but audiences also get a glimpse into the mindset of the slave owners, who would save money by giving slaves cast-offs rather than purchasing new, cheaper sets of dinnerware for them (Bankoff & Winter 2005: 312). An understanding of the social values of the time is equally as important as recognizing that slavery was indeed a presence on the plantation – all aspects go into creating a holistic, accurate, engaging narrative.

Similarly in the *Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice*, the committee investigates how money made off the enslavement of Africans (and the notion of slavery itself!) was intimately used to develop Brown University. That the use of “slave funds” in the University’s development was not unanimously considered controversial in the 18th century, or really addressed until recently is not only proof of biased historical interpretations, but also indicative of the social values held by the dominant elite of the time. Through the merchant records and personal letters of the Brown brothers, historians and the Brown community get a clear picture of how cavalier the brothers’ attitudes were towards slavery (*Report* 2006: 14). A broader look into 18th century economics and trade shows that slavery and triangular trade were incredibly important to most Rhode Islanders, evidenced even in pre-Revolutionary pamphlets proclaiming the colonists’ liberty to own and profit from holding slaves (*Report* 2006: 7-12). Even into the 19th century, when slavery was outlawed in New England, Rhode Island textile mills used cotton picked by southern slaves; in turn, many Rhode Island textile mills then sold cheap cloth back to southern plantation owners, who used it as “Negro Cloth” or clothing for their slaves (*Report* 2006: 26-27). Slavery, therefore, was a common occurrence and fixture in the everyday lives of Rhode Islanders, and it makes sense that it would be monetarily involved in the early years of Brown; all the more reason for it to be acknowledged and understood when crafting Brown’s past and present.

Shepherd’s work focuses on these theoretical and ethical issues of recognizing and publicizing biases in the historical record through a case study concerning the “exhumation of an early colonial burial ground in central Cape Town, South Africa,” a rescue project enacted after the bodies were found during construction for an expensive residential development (2007: 100, 112). Here was an example where a lapse in communication between the archaeologists and the community yielded ugly “vociferous and angry” clashes between the history investigators and the direct descendants of the colonial bodies (Shepherd 2007: 101). Issues surrounding the biases and interpretations in/of the past were exacerbated by political and archaeological jargon and miscommunications: the native Black South Africans felt that the predominantly White archaeologists were concerned solely with the “physical anatomical value of the human remains” and therefore were totally ignoring the social history of racism, discrimination, and individuals (Shepherd 2007: 107). The archaeologists, working under time pressure dictated by wealthy White land developers, did not have the time, or did not choose to take the time, to consult native, social historians (Shepherd 2007: 107). Natives saw this as a further conflict in the post-Apartheid racial tensions that have plagued the country for years, most specifically here regarding a distinction that had formed, between archaeology (a “hard-science,” analytical and unfeeling, primarily practiced by Whites), and history (a social study, emotional and understanding, interpreted by native Blacks) (Shepherd 2007:111). That the rescue excavation itself was financed and implemented by wealthy, White land developers was an additional grievance and further divided the community from the research.

Even if the archaeologists in South Africa *were* methodologically correct and had the best intentions, they failed because of their disconnect from the community; the distinctions between archaeologists and historians should not be so grand as to provoke social unrest within the community, nor should political, corporate institutions be given such sway in archaeological investigations. Clearly, the attempts to provide rich, holistic reports by studying the lower class Colonial bodies were not successful because archaeologists neglected to incorporate the whole community in the historical investigation. In trying to accurately present tumultuous realities of the past, archaeologists were hobbled when they did not include the natives in their work, when they worked to “discover” the past without consulting those in the present. This alienation is also seen in Bankoff and Winter’s article on the Van Cortlandt mansion and plantation; the property, now a historical site, is often interpreted so as to “emphasize its elite character, with scarce mention of the enslaved labor on (and by) which the mansion was built” (Bankoff & Winter 2005: 315). Visitors to the home are typically affluent Whites, as opposed to the Hispanics and Blacks that visit the surrounding parks, but do not usually take tours of the houses (Bankoff & Winter 2005: 314). Here, too, is a disconnect between the works of archaeologists and the communities in which the work has been conducted. Though not the direct fault of the archaeologists, as it may have been in South Africa, this is still a major blockade when trying to present holistic, multi-perspective views of the past to audiences. Site interpreters, like the Colonial Dames at the Van Cortlandt mansion, must be willing to cast aside their own biases and present the authentic, researched narratives carefully crafted by thoughtful archaeologists (Bankoff & Winter 2005: 315).

A lack of visible archaeological evidence might make it easier to ignore the fact that slavery *was* present on the property, despite the fact that archaeological and historical work have indeed shown that this was true. As ugly as it may be, the economies of New York, Rhode Island and the rest of the North *did* run, however directly or indirectly, on slavery during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries; present-day racial tensions *do* affect the perceptions of history and archaeology in South Africa, just as they affected occurrences in the past as well. It is necessary, then, to take all reality into account when examining origins, and then use it not to justify the actions and values of past slave-owners and bigots, but to better explain, understand, and propose future considerations of history and the residual issues playing out in the present. The Steering Committee Report, for example, poses several suggestions for how to implement the new, more accurate historical accounts into the Brown and Providence communities that range from creating memorials and research centers on slavery and social justice, to offering Providence public school teachers chances to take classes each semester at Brown (*Report* 2006: 83-87). The suggestions emphasize not only the fresh, more accurate interpretation of Brown’s past, but also give concrete methods of reinvigorating the community with this shared, open history. This approach, elegantly presented in the Steering Committee Report, is one that ought be taken by the interpreters at the Van Cortlandt Mansion and park, as well as archaeologists working in Cape Town – reach out to the community in a balanced, reciprocal manner, and work equitably to produce a holistic series of perspectives on the past.

Works Cited

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