Kaitlin East October 31, 2011

Response #2

The study of past cultures and places has too often been seen as an isolated endeavor divorced from the concerns and needs of the present. However, it is imperative as Hodder states, that archaeologists recognize that “if interpretation begins at the trowels edge, so too must politics” (Hodder 2003: 145). In attempting to incorporate this understanding of archaeology and the past as embedded in the present, researchers are met by a number of obstacles. One of the main problems involves presenting archaeological knowledge to the public which then must contend with the issues of nationalism, ownership, and ethics. In our excavations at the John Brown House, there are a number of diverse stakeholders that must be taken into account in our final project. By being aware of the issues of presenting archaeological finds to the public, and learning from the authors of this week, our excavations will better be able to incorporate the varied groups that are affected by our research.

Much of the problems in presenting archaeological finds surround the practicalities of disseminating such information to interested parties. Much of the research done by academics is presented to other academics and does not take into account others who are interested in the information. There exists no comprehensive and public forum for the dissemination of this data. Furthermore, much archaeology done by firms remains unpublished or is presented in an inaccessible form, thereby limiting the audience of such data. McManamon asserts that archaeological data, “must be shared through schools, parks, museums, public programs, books, articles, videos and other means of interpretation” (McManamon 2003:125). These different outlets will allow different views to be expressed in a myriad of different ways, and each will be able to attract and be useful to slightly different audiences.

The importance of disseminating archaeological information cannot be understated but the politics surrounding such activities are often insidious. The question of ownership of the past and of archaeological sites in particular, results in tension. Ownership is in that it can be based upon land ownership, religious beliefs, ancestry, cultural affiliation and many others. This is further complicated by the fact that there may be a connection to a site despite no physical or ancestral relationship (McManamon 2003: 131). Hodder suggests that, in order to overcome the conflicts of ownership, it is better to perceive archaeologists and other stakeholders as travelling through a place. This time traveling metaphor allows all to experience a site but maintains that the past, unlike objects from it cannot be owned by anyone (Hodder 2003: 146). This metaphor is extraordinarily useful because it takes into account the transitory nature of human lives in relation to the long time span of archaeological sites both in the past and into the present, and asserts that the past existed before the present individuals and will continue to exist after them and so no one individual can own it.

Another issue to contend with in presenting archaeology to the public involves nationalism. In many instances, archaeological sites and heritage can be used to create or legitimize national identities even if individuals are not living within state boundaries (Hodder 2003: 139, 141). In America, during the Progressive Movement of the 20th century, archaeology and the conservation of historically important sites created a notion of nationalism (McManamon 2003: 119). In contrast, some groups believe that archaeology distorts the past (McManamon 2003: 129). McManamon stresses that archaeology is one of the best ways of understanding the ancestors and the past, but that different interests should be accounted for (McManamon 2003: 129). National identity is an important part of individual’s identity but can be a dangerous theme if taken to the extreme. However, it is not the archaeologist’s job to determine to what use the evidence is put. As long as the data is presented in a way that explicitly states the interpretative nature of archaeological fieldwork and is available for peer review, there should be enough checks to ensure that no overarching ideals of nationalism are created that risk the scapegoating of marginalized groups.

Ethics is also involved in the presentation of archaeological data. Ethics is defined as, “a set of principles expressing the shared values of the profession as a whole, are the vehicle through which we establish the ideal for right conduct” (Beaudry 2009: 26). These ideals also state that archaeologist should respect the interests of other groups and especially those that are affected by their discoveries (Beaudry 2009: 26). According to Dawdy, the concerns of groups that will be affected by research in one way or another should be taken to account during the excavation itself in the questions that are being asked from the beginning, including whether or no they want to know about a particular history at all.

At the John Brown House there are a number of diverse parties that are interested in and may be affected by our excavations. These include the John Brown House Staff, interested academics, the Rhode Island Historical Society, future students, possible descendents of the family, and individuals who want to recognize the importance of slavery in building the John Brown House. Other groups may also be interested in our work including non academics who are interested in architecture, American history, New England history, and a number of other topics that can be at least partially addressed by the John Brown House. All of the distinctive groups are actually rather fluid and can overlap extensively or can be fundamentally opposed.

In presenting our final report it is important to take notice of all of these stakeholders to find out what is important to them. One way to do this would be to put up a public forum on the wiki that calls for concerns or suggestions from the public so that we may steer our own questions accordingly. For questions that we cannot answer on the ground, it could also be useful to bring in different types of information including documentary evidence and oral histories. We could also use other avenues to disseminate the data we will collect. We could present the information via methods such as video in order to reach a larger audience. Objects we find could also be incorporated into the John Brown House, and any discoveries we make could be used in the tour of the property in order to ensure that a wide public is aware of all the information available about the property. Perhaps we could approach the Rhode Island Historical Society to include an entire section in the tour on the front lawn of the property where we are excavating, and by so doing present some of our findings from over the years.

Archaeology is a part of modern people’s lives and allows them to understand the context of their lives; how they fit into history and how that history has shaped the world they live in. This could allow them to bring a more critical eye to the things they take for granted every day while simultaneously reshaping their notions of themselves. As such, archaeologists need to take into account the impact of their work. Presenting information in different formats can reach the largest number of these individuals. It is also important to, see researchers and others and passing through a space and not owning it, recognize that national identities are formed based on understandings of the past, and accept the importance of ethics and interests of affected parties in both the excavation and presentation of material. Archaeology can be incredibly useful to modern people as long it is carried out with this in mind and presented in a way in which many people’s perspectives are respected and accounted for.