Susana Ortega

ARCH 1900

31 October 2011

Critical Response #6:

In the process of delivering our archaeological material to the public, it is important for us, as archaeologists, to know how we are able to communicate with them. The four articles that I have read describe how the public plays an essential role and how presenting materials to the public should be handled. I will discuss about how ethics, ownership, and nationalism play into the archaeological process and how it affects the people.

In order to communicate with our audience, as archaeologists, Beaudry explains how we must pay “attention to the concerns and sensitivities of others whose present lives are affected by the recovery of information about the past” (20). Beaudry argues the importance of ethics and describes two considerations of ethics which are the “responsibilities to the profession; second, responsibilities beyond the archaeological profession to the public interest,” (19). Because some archaeologists lack the knowledge of ethics, it causes professional ethical issues. One example given was how the archaeological work done in the African Burial Ground in New York City has caused an angry protest from the African American community. The community believed it “was just one further attempt by the white majority to deny the existence of slavery in colonial New York” (20). This shows the lack of communication between the archaeologist and the community, which is why I agree with Beaudry in the importance of archaeological ethics. In this fashion, the archaeologists would not have ignored the concerns of the African American Community but taken it to consideration. Seeing that ethics is very important, graduate schools are now making sure that archaeology students familiarize themselves with this topic. Historical archaeologists are now also in need of “specialized training that goes well beyond methods and techniques of excavation” (23). He sums this up by saying “archaeological ethics are not just about us as archaeologists but are also about how we behave as professionals and how we relate people who are not archaeologists” (26). So it is our job to connect with the audience or stakeholders, the people who are affected by the information recovered, and be aware of their concerns as well.

According to Ian Hodder, he refers to ownership as “a particular relationship of the past–one based on rights to the material goods with which archaeologists deal” (139). Through ownership there are constant conflicts, and “regional and ethnic identities are key” (140). I believe this to be true because as archaeological material is brought to the public’s attention, it not only affects the archaeologists but the people as well. As Hodder explained, the conflicts over ownership are produced because the people believe they also have the right in the decision process with the material’s fate. Beaudry gives an example of the controversy, between the archaeologists and the community of Cape Town, over the ownership of the burial ground that was found (21). Beaudry believes the archaeologists did not handle the situation very well because they ignored their ethical obligations, which was to acknowledge their stakeholders or the protestors and not just their research. Due to the conflict in ownership, I agree with Hodder when he says “the past…is not owned by anyone…A better approach is to say that no one owns a site–rather we all pass through as travelers or tourists (141). By following this idea the past is not owned by anyone, yet it is accessible for all, which will allow archaeologists to communicate and inform to the public.

Dawdy describes public archaeology as three sets of different views; first is contract archaeology, where “archaeology is performed by government entities”, second is didactic archaeology, which is to educate the public, and third is community archaeology, where “community members are invited to participate in the creation and execution of research projects” (135). In this article, Dawdy questions if archaeology is useful and how archaeology can reach out to the public better if “we reorient archaeology away from reconstructions of the past and towards problems of the present” (140). Dawdy calls this new idea, futurist archaeology, where archaeology can be more useful to the community (142). This is also interesting to see how Dawdy questions if community archaeology can be no archaeology when she gives an example of how angry protestors of New Orleans were against the work of archaeologist (189).The work done by the archaeologists is for the public and is intended to teach them what has been discovered through their research, but in this case the people opposed this. This can go back to Beaudry and how it is important to communicate with the public and to also consider their concerns. Though I agree that archaeology can be more useful if it reoriented itself towards the present, I do not agree that it should only focus itself towards the present and future. I believe it should continue to focus on the past but also carry what they learned to present. We are then able to learn from past mistakes or apply and build on past discoveries, and thus we save ourselves from repeats and gain time.

In McManamon’s article, it describes nationalism as civic (similar to citizenship) and ethnic, where civic is shared by all the citizens and ethnic is the “individual ethnic heritages” (126). This brings us to local and global audiences, where a local can have more of an ancestral connection with the archaeological material but outsiders, who do not have any ancestral connection with it, can also have an interest into it. McManamon explains this by stating how modern Americans have an interest in the ancient past of America (132). This goes back to Hodder in how the past belongs to no one but that anyone can have access to it and form some sort of interest and connection to it. McManamon explains the importance of spreading America’s ancient past to modern Americans through educational systems and mass media tools for those who are no longer students (133). I believe it is our job to allow the public to have opportunities where they can learn and appreciate their past. He also states how “unless the majority of modern Americans feel a connection with the archaeological resources of ancient America, these resources will not be properly investigated, interpreted, or preserved” (134). This shows how the public is very important and can decide if our work is relevant or useful for them. So, it is essential to be in communication with the public and explain why the research is of importance.

With these articles in mind, I have a better understanding of my stakeholders and how they also are involved in my research on the John Brown House. The stakeholders that are relevant in our excavation at the John Brown House would be the Rhode Island Historical Society, Rhode Islanders, the Brown descendants, and Brown University along with educators. As an archaeologist, it is my job to be aware of my stakeholders and how my information will benefit them. I think with our final projects and working for the RIHS, we will be able to spread our findings to the community and give access to future students who will take this class. Future students will be able to access our weekly field blogs, compare our data sheets from past data sheets, and read each of our class projects. This gives the ownership of all who are interested in the history of the John Brown House and those interested in American history, which the Brown family had its influence to it as well.

So in conclusion, the relationship between the archaeologist and the public is very important. It is our responsibility to be aware of our audience and not just our intentions as researchers. Archaeologists must apply professional ethics in the field by involving the community in the archaeological process from the beginning and see how their findings will benefit the community. Whether it is futurist archaeology, time travel, or opportunities to learn about the past, the audience has a strong influence in deciding whether or not our work is useful, which is why communication with the audience is very important.

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