



From Past to Present: Heritage as an Avenue to Contemporary Social Concerns

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Public Archaeology Today

Archaeology is focused on the past but archaeological research and archaeologists need not dwell in the past. The rapidly expanding scholarship and discourse on heritage unites past and present, with a recognition of the social context for studies and commemorations. I have been directing the New College Public Archaeology Lab program in regional heritage as explorations of the underappreciated past for Sarasota/Manatee on Florida Gulf Coast and stressing the social implications of the histories and the silences. This is part of a trend in public archaeology with researching working toward the public good (e.g., Little and Shackel 2014). The program included small-scale excavations and laboratory analysis but also wide-spread public presentations to inform local communities about the history and to gather insights (see Baram forthcoming). The projects have increased what is known about the past and generated heritage interpretation for the public in a way that is inclusive, even cosmopolitan. And they have been organized to include undergraduate participation.

Grappling with Inequality: Race Haunting the Region

For the recent past of Sarasota/Manatee, Race haunts history. Archaeological investigations for the location of an early 19th century maroon community (Baram 2008), historic preservation of a segregation-era Black cemetery (Baram 2012), and recognition that a train depot was constructed to divide (Baram 2011), are reminders that "...the effort to speak about issues of 'space and location' evoke pain" (bell hooks 1990). While painful, historicized Race is a weapon against racism; to quote Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015:7): "Americans believe in the reality of "race" as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism – the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them – inevitably follows from this inalterable condition. In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of man." By interpreting the many histories for a place, undergraduate participation in the heritage projects offers insights into survival and successes even under challenging conditions. Heritage can divide people, or can engage community inclusion through cosmopolitan canopies (Baram forthcoming) where differences can be encountered and can flourish. For the undergraduates, involvement in such projects, whether in excavating, documenting, or interpretation the past, provides an avenue where they can grapple with community identities, contemporary politics, and commemoration.

Student Assessment

The projects in regional heritage have been wide-ranging. Student responses, collected with IRB approval, include:

"I found each aspect of work that I underwent for this project extremely rewarding and it provided a very unique workload that I would not have necessarily gotten during the course of my academic career" (Kevin Cigala, Spring 2014)

"...made me realize how challenging historic preservation can be. It requires a lot of research and creative thinking about how to target specific audiences. It also requires a balance between allowing present day uses of places and honoring the influence of the past on the space." (Ijeoma Uzoukwu, Spring 2014)

"Before this practicum, I had never realized how artful interpretation is, as well as how powerful it can be in inspiring the public to take action." (Nicole Ouellette, Fall 2013).

"I know that the students, including myself, were all terribly nervous.... However, once we were at the site,our ability to connect with a certain set of facts or emotions, made us more enthusiastic about sharing that information with visitors." (Jodi Johnson, Fall 2013)

Archaeological Investigations at Manatee Mineral Spring



Uncovering hidden histories, analyzing material culture, and presenting the past to the public

Historic Preservation Survey of the Galilee Cemetery



Documenting each and every grave marker - every black life, and death, matters

Heritage Interpretation on campus and across the region

Outreach programs, exhibits, and site tours: explaining the past and seeing places as having many histories, to encourage a cosmopolitan canopy where differences are appreciated and celebrated



References:
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Baram, Uzi 2011 "Transformative Transportation: The Early Twentieth-Century Railroad on the Southwest Florida Frontier" *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15(2): 236-253.

Baram, Uzi 2012 *Report on the 2010-2012 Survey of the Galilee Cemetery in Sarasota, Florida: Community, Race, and Commemoration*. Submitted to the Woodlawn-Galilee Cemetery Restoration Task Force. On file at the New College Public Archaeology Lab.

Baram, Uzi forthcoming Experiments in Public Archaeology as Civic Engagement: My Five Years with the New College Public Archaeology Lab in Sarasota, Florida. *Public Archaeology*.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi 2015 *Between The World and Me*. Spiegel & Grau

hooks, bell 1990 "Choosing the Margins as a Space of Radical Openness" *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990)

Little, Barbara and Paul Shackel 2014 *Archaeology, Heritage, and Civic Engagement: Working toward the Public Good*. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek.



Heritage as a skill set for undergraduates: being able to interpret heritage sites in a socially meaningful manner. Exploring the region in terms of Race is challenging, with heritage offering an avenue to address history and social change.