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Historical Archaeology: Why the Past Matters

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December 2008 Newsletter

Book Review

Barbara J. Little. *Historical Archaeology: Why the Past Matters*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press, 2007, 216 pp., figures, further readings, references cited, index \$59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59874-022-6, \$22.95 (paper) 978-1-59874-023-3.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Deb Rotman, Ph.D., RPA, University of Notre Dame

Historical Archaeology: Why the Past Matters is an exceptional text that is concise yet substantive. In this volume, Barbara Little spurs “the international archaeology profession to re-engage and reinvigorate discussions about site significance and public involvement” (p. 207). Through this fascinating survey of the discipline, Little reminds historical archaeologists about the unique impact we can have in making the past relevant to the present. This remarkable book will be of interest to archaeological practitioners studying the African diaspora as well as those seeking to understand social relations, power and inequality, and the many ways in which the modern world has been shaped by colonialism, capitalism, and globalization in a myriad of other contexts.

Little has consistently produced high-quality, intellectually-stimulating, and thought-provoking books and articles. *Historical Archaeology: Why the Past Matters* is no exception. The text is thoroughly engaging. Her use of anecdotes and humor draws the reader into the dialogue in a compelling way. Each chapter begins with an interesting quote – such as William Faulkner’s “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (p. 53) – which stimulates and orients the reader by crystalizing the theme of the text to come. The presentation of the book is relatively free of jargon and her comparative illustrations make the text especially accessible. In addition, her selected examples are ones to which her audience can easily relate.

An important structural theme of the book is that of *sankofa*, which first entered the lexicon of historical archaeology through the African Burial Ground Project in New York City. Little explains that this “Akan (Ghana) word refers to the concept of reclaiming the past and understanding how the present came to be so that we can move forward” (p. 15). Throughout the text, she reminds us of how research questions in historical archaeology can be inspired by *sankofa*, offering “opportunities for us to become aware of our common humanity and our common struggles . . . offer glimpses into the human story as a source of hope and renewal . . . [and] that respect – at least tolerance but perhaps even celebration – will flow from the present to the past and back again to the present” (p. 16). Significantly, *sankofa* reminds us that historical archaeological investigations are not mere academic exercises, but that the past matters and we are uniquely positioned as a discipline to convey its relevance to the public.

This book is organized into four sections. In the first, “What Are Our Ambitions?” Little cogently outlines the goals and themes of historical archaeology. Importantly, she asserts that the discipline is not defined solely by a particular time period or the inclusion of documents as a relevant data set. Rather, it is concerned with the social, cultural, economic, and political processes that have profoundly influenced the lived experiences of many peoples throughout the world in the past five millennia. Little also emphasizes that our work is akin to both the humanities and the social sciences and, therefore, interdisciplinary. In this section, she summarizes the role of historical archaeology in “preserving and interpreting sites, supplementing and challenging the history we know through documents, reconstructing people’s ways of life, improving archaeological methods, and understanding modernization and globalization” (p. 22).

Little continues by discussing “What Do We Care About?” in the second portion of the text. Particular attention is paid to the unique contributions that historical archaeology makes by identifying silences and giving voice to “muted groups.” She reminds us of Charles Orser’s haunts of historical archaeology; that colonialism, Eurocentrism, capitalism, and modernity shaped our past as well as influence of our future. Importantly, these forces and processes resulted in differential, rather than monolithic, lived experiences. Consequently, historical archaeology’s study of the past leads to the telling of multiple histories rather than a single

primary narrative. Little also highlights the nature of power relations under colonialism, capitalism, and slavery; emphasizing the inequality, racism, and ethnocentrism that are inherent to them.

Most significantly in this section, the author discusses ethical considerations in the practice of historical archaeology. Discussions of the finite nature of the archaeological record and our responsibilities as stewards of this non-renewable resource are often absent from books and other publications. Consequently, this feature of the text is especially important and appreciated.

An array of site types of interest to its practitioners are illustrated in “A Windshield Survey of Historical Archaeology,” the third portion of the book. Rather than simply an inventory of case studies, however, Little uses these examples as models of historical archaeological investigations that ask tough questions about the past, challenge our certainties in useful ways, and through which a different vision of the future can be imagined. Her discussion includes such diverse and global foci as early colonial settlements on the east coast of the United States, Spanish missions in the American west and southwest, the Medieval countryside of England, sites associated with Australia’s convict past, industrial landscapes of the mid-Atlantic U.S., and working-class neighborhoods in New York and Washington, D.C., among others.

Within this section is a chapter devoted to “African American Life.” Little briefly summarizes the history of archaeology of the African diaspora, beginning with plantation archaeology and ending with more recent considerations of “how the diaspora is intertwined with the widespread phenomena of colonialism, imperialism, and emerging capitalism” (p. 108). She surveys investigations of enslaved contexts, maroon societies, settlements of free African Americans and biracial communities, and densely-populated urban enclaves, to name a few. Importantly, Little discusses how historical processes – such as Jim Crow era policies, gentrification, and urban renewal – have perpetuated racism in the present, often “erasing” African American history from the landscape.

The final section is entitled, “Historical Archaeology as Public Scholarship.” Little addresses the challenges of interpreting, presenting, and commemorating varied and often competing experiences and understandings of the past. She reiterates the need for, therefore, consulting and collaborating with the people connected to and invested in the histories we seek to tell. Little also underscores the role of public education and outreach in cultivating cultural competence in a multicultural world. Furthermore, she asserts the importance of public dialogue about our painful pasts as central to the practice of an historical archaeology that “counters racism and racial denigration with a combination of academic work and social activism” (p. 153). In this way, Little challenges us to not just say that we learn from the past, but to embrace the promise of *sankofa* and to actually do so.

Although this text was not specifically written to address archaeology of the African diaspora, it is wholly relevant to this field of inquiry. Little’s emphasis on the themes of colonialism, capitalism, globalization, and modernity are central to understanding the lived experiences of peoples of African descent around the globe. Furthermore, her assertion for the need for an engaged historical archaeology – for which collaboration with descent communities and the general public is central to its practice – is appropriate and essential to the study of the African Diaspora and for all scholars exploring the historical processes that have shaped inequality, domination, and resistance throughout the world. This volume will be of interest to not only historical archaeologists, but also historians, cultural geographers, sociologists, political scientists, and many other academic practitioners. With Little’s engaging writing style, this book will also find an audience with local historical societies, high school history teachers, and other members of the general public.

I have only one critique of this work. Little clearly outlines in her introduction that she has chosen to keep citations to a minimum. Direct quotes were included in the “References Cited” section as is standard practice in the social sciences, while the books and articles from which she drew her examples were included in “Further Readings.” While this may have reduced the extent to which the textual flow was disrupted, I found the practice a bit disorienting. Consequently, seeking more information about a given case study was not particularly user-friendly.

I have had the pleasure of using this book in my historical archaeology course. The prominent featuring of socially-responsible scholarship has been a particularly appealing feature of this volume. Our discipline was fundamentally altered in the late 1980s/early 1990s with the passing of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the development of the New York African Burial Ground Project. Texts that highlight these important transformational moments in the discipline are scarce, but Little brilliantly foregrounds these critical projects and demonstrates their relevance to the future of historical archaeology.

Little has done a wonderful job introducing the breadth and complexity of historical archaeology. She concludes the text by stating, “In the journey of this book I have emphasized questions and questioning as a path of discovery. I have tried to keep the avenues open to find ways of *sankofa*, of learning from the past – and the ideas that we unconsciously and uncritically accept from the past – so that we might build a compassionate present” (p. 171). Arguably, Little has been successful in inspiring a new way to envision and practice our discipline.

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