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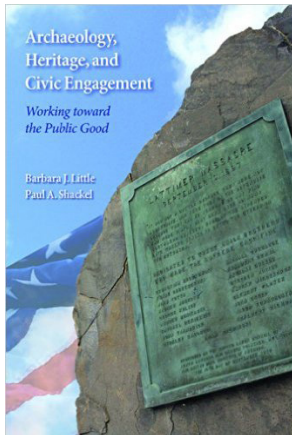
*Online Journal in Public Archaeology*

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## REVIEWS



Alexandra ION  
Institute of Anthropology 'Francisc I. Rainer'

### **Archaeology, Heritage, and Civic Engagement. Working toward the Public Good**

[Barbara J. Little and Paul A. Shackel (Eds.)]

Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press

ISBN: 978-1-59874-638-9

172 pages, 2014

*"Archaeology can de-silence people, places, and stories that have been made to disappear through willful destruction or neglect"* (Little and Shackel 2014, 136). In short, this quote perfectly summarises the message and goal of this book, to use/view heritage and archaeology as a means to give a voice to people, groups and events that have gotten lost in the midst of history. Written by two American academics from the University of Maryland, the book is an interesting addition to the debate on the role of archaeology and heritage in contemporary society, tackling the heated issues of power relations and struggles, racism, social and economic imbalances, conflict, and even climate change.

Following in the line of a number of projects and works (e.g. the journals dedicated to these intertwined relationships—Journal of Community Archaeology, Public Archaeology journal, AP: Online Journal in Public Archaeology—, and several studies: Atalay 2012; Little and Shackel 2007; Stottman 2010), the authors address the

important questions of archaeology for whom, and why are we doing archaeology? This title, in line with previous studies (Meskell 2002; Moshenska and Burtenshaw 2010; Rockman and Flatman 2012; Sabloff 2008), approaches the archaeological discipline from the angle of understanding it as a socio-cultural practice relevant for the present. As Cornelius Holtorf (2010, 27) phrased it, "Archaeology is not only a particular academic and scientific practice, but more fundamentally it is a cultural and social practice".

Since the first mentioning in 1972 of the term 'public archaeology' by C. R. McGimsey, there have been continuous attempts not just to define it as a sub-discipline, but even to question the character of the archaeological discipline as a whole in keeping with its broader goals, asking for an archaeology actively integrated with and attuned to the needs and struggles of society. Should archaeologists become public intellectuals (see Tarlow and Stutz 2013), active voices in shaping public policies, from climate change to economic issues? Do we simply understand public archaeology as a summary of strategies employed to make academic research accessible to the wider public and get them involved? Or should archaeology be understood as political action, and public archaeology viewed as an investigation into who benefits from the archaeological practice and discourse (Funari 2001, 239)?

With this book, the authors take this latter line of inquiry, claiming that archaeology in general, and the engagement with heritage in particular, should be used as a way of '*dismantling of structural and cultural violence rooted in past inequalities but supported by present day relationships and material conditions*' (p. 34). They proceed in unraveling this argument in 11 chapters, grouped in three parts which take the narrative from a 'Story of Self', to a 'Story of Us', ending with a 'Story of Now'. From the beginning, the authors make it their mission to express their personal voice and tell a story; why they care about these issues and how, this being

reflected in the structure of the book. This is a great way of shaping a narrative, even though the separation in three parts does not always make clear sense.

Throughout the book, many examples are chosen to support their claim, pertaining to issues of social justice, constitutional rights, role of local/indigenous communities, mission of higher education, violence and labour, museums and civic engagement, peace and archaeology in the age of the Anthropocene. The experience of both authors with these themes and community engagement is reflected in the way the text is written: it is an easy and pleasant read, grounded in multiple case studies, thus making it accessible to a wider audience, non-academics or undergraduate students alike. I would say that this is the strength of the book, its accessible style, making the reader feel that the authors are truly engaged with and committed to the values and proposed actions: an archaeology that is relevant for local communities, contributing to solving social injustices and promoting civil rights.

Even though there is a thread which takes the arguments from the wider context of archaeology in the Anthropocene and the Second Bill of Rights to the role of universities and museums in using heritage as a tool for civic engagement, there are recurrent themes throughout the book and each chapter that can be read as an independent entry, standing more or less on its own. The chapter I found to be one of the most accomplished in terms of highlighting the intertwined link between history-heritage-civic engagement-community-museum-social issues was Chapter 9, 'What is at Stake?', dealing with labour heritage and what the authors called 'a heritage of complicity'. Starting from the message of Desmond Tutu (p. 115) '*the past [...] is embarrassingly persistent, and will return and haunt us unless it has been dealt with*', the authors take the examples of incidents against mineworkers in USA history, immigration issues and 'contemporary slavery' conditions

in American sweatshops (the most famous case being the El Monte incident in California) to show how the workers can be empowered and their stories told through archaeological projects or museum exhibitions.

Overall, this title reads like a very American story, by dealing with specific challenges of mostly historical archaeology in that particular cultural context: racial issues, historical heritage which is still linked to memory, identity, etc., constitutional rights which are specific to the political history of the USA. Of course, other topics, such as labour heritage, are universally applicable in other cultural contexts. It would be interesting to see such an analysis taken further and applied to a European context where one encounters older heritage as well, which might have lost its immediate connection to a living community, and with the notions of community/inequality posing different challenges. How would then the authors' definition of heritage (p.39), described '*loosely as whatever matters to people today that provides some connection between past and present*', be rephrased for a European context?

Even so, beyond its American focus, this manifesto for a socially engaged archaeology raises several valuable points, and even though most of them are, of course, not new for those in the field of public archaeology, it still is an interesting read, full of compelling examples, and one which strongly accentuates the links between archaeology, heritage, and civic engagement. For all these reasons, the book is a recommended read for everyone interested in public archaeology, especially for those less familiar with the topic.

## **Acknowledgments**

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