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*Alternative Narratives and
the Ethics of Representation*
An Introduction

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Traditionally, archaeologists have constructed arguments through expository texts supported with images. However, there is an increasing clamor for and interest in alternative forms of archaeological narratives, involving writing fiction, making films, constructing hypertexts, and creating media that transcend the traditional limitations of expository prose and the linearity of language. Visual art, fiction, creative nonfiction, film, and drama have much to offer archaeological interpretation and analysis, as many critics since the 1990s have made clear (e.g., Joyce 2002; Pluciennik 1999).

Despite the hegemony of third-person expository texts in archaeological scholarship, archaeologists have long experimented with representational forms that transcend these boundaries, producing novels (e.g., Bandelier 1971 [1916]; Carmean 2010; King 1983; Nelson 1999, 2004), vignettes (e.g., Deetz 1977, 1993; Edmonds 1999; Flannery 1976; Mithen 2003; Spector 1991, 1993; Yamin 1998, 2008), plays (e.g., Gibb 1998, 1999; Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1998; Praetzellis, Ziesing, and Praetzellis 1997), performance art (e.g., Cochrane and Russell 2008; Pearson and Shanks 2001; Vilches 2007), paintings (e.g., Jameson 2003), musical compositions (e.g., Bullard and Bryant 1999), films (e.g., Archaeology Channel 2013; Avikunthak 2001), photography (e.g., Shanks 1997; Webmoor 2005), virtual realities (e.g., Archaeology Southwest 2011; Witmore 2005), hypertexts (e.g., Joyce, Guyer, and Joyce 2000; Joyce and Tringham 2007), and websites (e.g., Ashley,

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Tringham, and Perlingieri 2011; Metamedia 2010; Tringham and Ashley 2012).

The authors in this book seek to move beyond the customary limits of archaeological prose and representation. We explore narrative forms that range from creative nonfiction and drama through hypermedia and visual art. At the same time, however, we recognize that alternative formats pose a host of methodological and ethical challenges. While exploring new and not so new forms, the authors in this volume discuss bounds and delineate the connections between empirical data and archaeological imagination. We must tread carefully as we attempt to imagine—but not speak for—the people who populate our imagined pasts. This volume offers not just an array of ideas on and attempts at creatively employing narrative forms. It also provides reflections on the complexities and the ethical issues involved in constructing these narratives.

A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE ISSUES

This book is both a critique and an experiment. Authors discuss the goals, advantages, and difficulties of alternative forms of archaeological representation. Chapters in the volume are illustrated and enhanced by such media as paintings, sound files, dialogues, and links to online databases, videos, and PowerPoint presentations. Electronic publishing makes it possible to incorporate a range of media into written texts. This volume as a whole also represents an experimental attempt to engage with issues of representation in a hybrid format. A traditional hard-copy version will contain the text, black-and-white static images, and printed links to online material. The electronic “book” contains the text, images, and multimedia files so the work comes in two different forms. It is fitting to produce a volume on experimental narrative forms in a format that is itself an experimental step beyond the boundaries of traditional publishing.

Most of us agree that there are a plethora of good reasons to engage in alternative modes of archaeological representation. Public outreach is perhaps the most commonly cited reason for archaeologists to construct alternative narratives. Fiction, creative nonfiction, drama, visual arts, and other forms of storytelling can powerfully convey ideas to non-specialists who are interested in archaeology but are put off by the dry and jargon-laden technical writing style we archaeologists frequently employ. There is a shared sense among most of the authors in this volume that it is better for archaeologists to attempt to transcend traditional formal styles than to leave it to journalists and novelists to do (see also Kircher 2012: 87–110).

Of course, we as archaeologists spend years honing our skills at technical, expository writing. In the process, mentors and gatekeepers discourage us from

practicing the art of constructing metaphors or from developing an aesthetic sense for speech. We are disciplined into an objective, descriptive style to the point of self-censorship at the level of language use. We would need active deconditioning and retraining in creative nonfiction, fiction, or other forms of literary and artistic expression to improve our capabilities of representation. With this goal in mind, our colleague Brian Fagan (2006) has written a book coaching archaeologists about how to write readably and accessibly for wide audiences. However, Gilead (this volume) is justified in his concern that most archaeologists lack not only the training but possibly also the talent to be good creative nonfiction writers. There are plenty of bad novels written by archaeologists to attest to the difficulties of venturing into an unfamiliar genre. Thomas (this volume) discusses how unexpectedly difficult it is to create imagined narratives; he bemoans that he cannot “be the servant of contemporary literature, the archaeological record, and critical theory all at once.” If public outreach is the goal, should we then leave the storytelling to professional storytellers? After all, Bernbeck (2005) analyzed novels by well-known, non-archaeologist authors on the ancient Near East and concluded that some of them are extremely powerful. Thomas, in contrast, is disturbed by the lurid plotlines and lack of accuracy in non-archaeologist-authored novels (e.g., Auel 1980).

No one experiences life as a linear, written, expository narrative; why should we be confined to presenting it as such? We use the artistic as well as the analytical parts of our brains when interpreting the past. Experimental narratives and multimedia projects have the power to take us out of the two-dimensional world of data and into the multidimensional world of sensory life (Day 2013). It is easier to invoke not only the sights but also the sounds, tastes, smells, and tactility of the past using a range of media and imagined dialogues. However, these multi-sensorial attempts, realized in famous exhibitions such as the York Castle Museum in the United Kingdom, have been castigated as producing a false sense of authenticity by implying entry into a past reality (Walsh 1992: 110–15). “Felt history” is not the same as past reality.

If the creation of authenticity is at the core of some chapters, others use art to convey a new and distinctly non-authentic sense of aspects of the past. Contributions by Phillip and Judy Tuwaletstiwa and by Doug Bailey and Melanie Simpkin blur the boundaries between science and art, opening up alternative, artistic spaces through which to contemplate the past. Bailey and Simpkin (this volume) argue that we need to transcend disciplinary boundaries to help us understand the human condition.

The socio-political context of such ideas, however, needs to be taken into account. In our times, standard academic discourse loses its power, since

scientific truth claims are increasingly challenged in non-academic circles and public media. The contestation of concepts such as biological evolution and global warming shows this erosion of the power of scientific knowledge most glaringly. If we give up standard forms of academic, “dry” representation in the course of processes of representational change, we need to take stock of what we gain and what we may lose. This volume is part of a larger discourse on exactly that subject.

Public outreach, authenticity, and art are not the only reasons for archaeologists to explore alternative forms of interpretation. Experimental narratives enable us to think differently and talk differently about the past among ourselves—they benefit our work in all kinds of interesting ways. Many of the authors in this volume view experimental narratives as analytical tools that provide us as professionals with new ways of thinking about, not just representing, the past (see especially Bailey and Simpkin, Gibb, Nelson, Praetzellis and Praetzellis, and Van Dyke in this volume). Experiments in writing and in alternative representations more generally are not just means to convey the “content” to a fast-changing, media-savvy audience. Perhaps one of the most important points of our volume is that the same means of alternative writing and media very often have the effect of leading to new insights because such unusual forms require a knowledge of the past whose details and structures are often unavailable. Therefore, such representations can work in concert with, rather than as an alternative to, more traditional empirical modes of investigation (Edmonds 1999; Gibb 2000). Form is content, and for this reason we should embrace aesthetic and playful forms of representation; play is an important aspect of generalized human learning and innovation (Praetzellis and Praetzellis, this volume). Art and stories “to think with” can challenge traditional understandings and expand them. For example, using the format of a first-person singular narrative as a paper assignment in college courses is an excellent way to produce a critique of chronocentrism. The suggestion that Harappans had breakfast and similar ideas is just as unlikely as Kathleen Kenyon’s (1957) contention that the “Neolithic housewife” in Jericho needed hard floors to clean them adequately.

What do archaeologists learn when they venture out into these alternative spaces? As an archaeologist tries to imagine a series of events from the vantage point of specific human individuals in the past, he or she must make a host of decisions, bringing into sharp relief the lacunae in our interpretations and showing us what we know well, which ideas need work, and what areas we have completely failed to think about (Thomas, this volume; Van Dyke 2013). Hermeneutic interplay among scales can help archaeologists address

larger analytical questions. For example, Tringham (this volume) is ultimately interested in why and how Neolithic households in western Asia and southern Europe were involved in various and different trajectories toward urbanism and centralized authority.

These attempts at understanding the past are criticized by others (Bernbeck, this volume) because they necessarily involve a relationship with past peoples that is one-sided. We can use our fantasies to produce imagined past individuals and motivations for their actions, but real past people can't reply by doing the same with us. Were we to take this reproach seriously and seek remedial strategies, the obvious first step would be *not* to imagine a past Other but rather to imagine how, for example, the last Inka Atahualpa would feel after reading all of what has been written about him before starting any further hermeneutic experiments (see Gottowik 1998: 71–72).

THE INTERNET AND RELATED ISSUES

Archaeological scholarship involves deductive, inductive, and (one might argue) abductive reasoning; none of these happen in isolation from one another. Rather, investigations are hermeneutic attempts to construct present meanings from partial evidence of past practices and meanings, which are themselves multivocal and partial. Our imaginations are constantly in play as we navigate among these various kinds of fragments (Shanks 2012). Thus, it is not surprising that the archaeologists in this volume are interested in creative, nonlinear ways to nest and connect commentaries, data, and interpretations. For example, each page of the Talmud consists of two parts—the Mishnah, or the core text, and the Gemarah, a polyphonic commentary that explains and expands on the Mishnah. The Gemarah can in turn be surrounded by additional commentaries and references added over the course of a thousand years or more (Gilead, this volume). Midrash is a technique for fleshing out the interstices in Talmudic stories (Praetzellis and Praetzellis, this volume). Interestingly, both of these resemble non-electronic forms of hypertext.

The web has been employed to good avail in the work of Michael Shanks, Rosemary Joyce, Ruth Tringham, and others who have created multidimensional websites. Here, viewers/readers browse in free play, charting their own pathways through interrelated concepts and voices (Joyce and Tringham 2007; Lopiparo and Joyce 2003; Metamedia 2010; Webmoor 2005). For example, Joyce and colleagues' (2000) nonlinear, web-published *Sister Stories* incorporates Nahuatl voices through the writings of Bernardino de Sahagún, a sixteenth-century Spanish cleric who created the Florentine Codex by compiling

the words of male elites at Tenochtitlán. Shanks's Metamedia website (<http://metamedia.stanford.edu>) is home to interrelated projects that question the ways archaeological knowledge is constructed, represented, and disseminated. Ruth Tringham's Chimera Web, focused on excavations at the Neolithic site of Opovo, was an early experiment in online narratives (Joyce and Tringham 2007; Tringham et al. 1992; Wolle and Tringham 2000). Tringham's subsequent project, Last House on the Hill, was based on a Berkeley team's excavation of one house at Çatalhöyük (Ashley, Tringham, and Perlingieri 2011). The Last House project involved a printed monograph and an online digital database with maps, drawings, photographs, and video connected with narratives about analysis and interpretation.

Archaeological materials are fragmentary, as are the uses we make of them, as are all human understandings of the world. Tringham (this volume) describes her current efforts to move beyond hypertext into a platform that supports the endless recombination of fragments of narratives and data. For Tringham, infinitely recombinant fragments are an appropriate way to represent and share archaeological work with colleagues and the public. Archaeology involves "the cutting and reassembling of fragments of meanings, images, things, quotations, and borrowings, to create new juxtapositions" (Shanks 1997: 84).

Hypermedia also lends itself well to tacking back and forth among different scales of analysis. Anthropologists—from practice theorists to environmental determinists—continue to debate the roles of individuals and collectives in causing, participating in, and dealing with long-term change (see Robb and Pauketat 2013). As archaeologists seek to understand change over time, we must grapple with the problem of scale. A gradual transition from, for example, hunting and gathering to farming may appear relatively straightforward in the archaeological record, but it would have looked very different from the perspective of the individuals living through it—if anyone was ever "living through it." Archaeologists are good at seeing long-term changes, but our perspective tends to flatten individuals and generations, even centuries, into homogeneous time periods (Bailey and Simpkin, this volume). Tringham argues that recombinant histories allow us to think about the past from the perspectives of past imagined individuals and to juxtapose those insights against broad archaeological contexts.

Yet ultimately, most of us want to weave our open-ended, fragmentary montages into some kind of larger picture, through which we can make sense of the *longue durée* (Praetzellis and Praetzellis, this volume). Therefore, projects such as Tringham's need to be seen in the context of a field of tension within historiography in general. First, keeping the past as unwieldy, refracted, and

opaque as it is before any interpretation is done may simply counter the desire that is at the base of any historical and archaeological activities: to reduce the complexity of the past exactly to a story that is linear and that can be narrated, that can be said to be plausible if not approaching past “truths.”

What if those who are confronted with the disparate fragments feel overwhelmed by the task? Research about the attraction of the past in hypermedia and TV has confirmed that the simplified past is what non-specialist consumers are after. Pop-cultural and media-soaked archaeology can be described as fundamentally escapist (Kircher 2012: 35). Who, then, would tackle Tringham’s extremely demanding construction out of fragments? Finally and perhaps most important, what are the consequences of a past that can be reassembled in myriad ways? Isn’t a likely result the affirmation of the political status quo, exactly because one refrains from guidance about how to construct and interpret a story/history?

ETHICS AND NARRATIONS

Hypermedia foreground the constructed nature of archaeological interpretation, making the process of construction transparent. As visitors to hypermedia sites create their own courses of navigation, choosing from parallel and intersecting routes among texts, sounds, and images, they must make decisions about what to examine next. The traditional use of a library provides a good analogy for hypermedia use. Two important differences are the slower speed with which these processes happen in a “traditional” library and, equally important, the necessity to move and use the body to assemble one’s own textual construction. Hypermedia remove the body even further from the construction of narratives.

Engagement with hypermedia can quietly seduce visitors into a state of critical self-awareness, as they realize they are actively engaged in the construction of meanings through the juxtaposition of the materials they choose to read and view. However, visitors are just as likely to enter into a state of “clicking coherence” (Schmitz 2006: 254–55) by integrating many zapped sites into their own life-world, a process they will have learned to pursue without need of advice. Putting out hypermedia snippets is a conscious effort by archaeologists to integrate themselves into these new ways of making sense of the world. But it is impossible to task the visitor to stay within the confines of one’s own website, however complexly constructed that may be: won’t they leave as soon as they find elements that do not conform with what they are pursuing in their own life-world?