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

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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, indoubtable feature of the natural world. Racism – the need to ascribe home-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 handwork 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 undertook 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 required a balance between allowing present day uses of places and honoring the influence of the past on the place.” (Ijeoma Uzoukwu, Spring 2014)

“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

Historic Preservation Survey of the Galilee Cemetery

Heritage Interpretation on campus and across the region

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

References:


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

In this, bell hooks (1990) “Choosing the Margins as a Space of Radical Empowerment” Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End Press, 1990), offered the idea that Race is a weapon against racism.


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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.

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

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

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.