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Digging and destruction: Artifact collecting as meaningful social practice

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Abstract

Collected sites are commonly seen as places requiring expert intervention to ‘save the past’ from destruction by artifact collectors and looters. Despite engaging directly with the physical effects of collecting and vandalism, little attention is given to the meanings of these actions and the contributions they make to the stories told about sites or the past more broadly. Professional archaeologists often position their engagement with site destruction as heritage ‘salvage’ and regard collecting as lacking any value in contemporary society. Re-positioning collecting as meaningful social practice and heritage action raises the question: in failing to understand legal or illegal collecting as significant to heritage, have archaeologists contributed to the erasure of acts that aim to work out identities, memories, and senses of place and contribute to an individual’s or group’s sense of ontological security? This question is explored through a case study from the New England region of North America where archaeologists have allied with Native American and other stakeholders to advocate for heritage protection by taking an anti-looting/collecting stance. We explore alternatives to this position that engage directly with forms of collecting as meaningful social practices that are largely erased in site narratives.

Keywords: collecting, looting, vandalism, New England, social practice

Looting and artifact collecting are identified as some of the greatest threats to heritage preservation worldwide. The values and interests of experts--archaeologists, state officials, and heritage preservationists--are considered to be universal and of the greatest shared benefit. Those who loot, collect or otherwise cause destruction to archaeological sites through the removal of artifacts are seen as acting in opposition to these shared values. Archaeologists pay a great deal of attention to what they define as looted or collected sites. Yet little attention is given to the meanings and motivations for the practices that comprise ‘looting’ and ‘collecting,’ resulting in an act of erasure. The failure to acknowledge these artifact recovery practices as significant to

heritage (not just as a threat), has led to the erasure of social acts that aim to work out social relations, identities, memories, and senses of place that provide people with a sense of security and groundedness in the world. If, as Holtorf (2006, 101) contends, ‘destruction and loss are not the opposite of heritage but part of its very substance,’ why are the digging, collecting and discursive activities glossed as ‘looting’ overlooked as heritage practice? We address this question and build on Proulx’s (2013) advocacy of a ‘glocal’ approach to examine local encounters and experiences of collecting and looting in the New England region of North America. We first examine the multiple meanings of ‘looting’ and how it has been positioned in opposition to dominant, expert values and practices. This is followed by a brief consideration of Americanist collecting and looting and its distinctive settler state qualities. We then focus on the local experiences of collecting, looting, and site vandalism in a collaborative research project in the New England town of Deerfield, Massachusetts. We argue that archaeologists have neglected to examine the meanings of non-professional artifact recovery activities because they are perceived as antithetical to expert heritage values. We contend that some activities glossed as ‘looting’ may be better understood as *social practices* (peoples’ actions that allow them to ‘go on’ in the world [Ornter 1984, 149]) that provide individuals with *ontological security* (after Giddens 1984, 1990, 1991; Grenville 2007): a measure of confidence in who they are drawn from and the continuity and connection to place and heritage. To understand ontological security, one has to understand the particular sociopolitical circumstances under which it is formed (Grenville 2007, 449). Our use of Proulx’s ‘glocal’ approach and the Deerfield case study seeks to accomplish this. We conclude by offering some potential paths forward that are grounded in core values of reciprocity, sharing, and mutual understanding to minimize expert elitism and bridge the ‘us and them’ divisiveness of current relations.

The Problem of 'Looting'

The term 'looting' refers to stealing or robbing goods from a place. When applied to archaeological sites and cultural objects, 'looting' most often refers to the act of digging up artifacts for private collection or sale without the concomitant record of excavation, context, and lab work associated with scientific archaeology. These collecting activities have a variety of meanings, motivations, and consequences, and their legality depends on the context. However, the term 'looting' makes these aspects of collecting practices invisible. We recognize that continuing to use the term 'looting' and 'looter' carries a negative connotation and is imbued with the heritage values of archaeologists and preservationists. We use it here to problematize this singular gloss and argue that it includes a range of acts and practices that are heterogeneous in meaning and motivation, despite having been categorically designated a 'threat' to heritage by experts. We distinguish looting from legal artifact collecting where permission from a landholder or heritage custodian has been secured, and recognize that while both practices are considered destructive by archaeologists, they may also contribute to the ontological security of participants.

In fact, scientific archaeology, looting and artifact collecting share common features: each involves digging and recovery and each generates things and information while also destroying things and information. Despite these similarities, students of archaeology learn early on that these forms of practice are incompatible, even antithetical. Looters engage in 'the illicit, unrecorded and unpublished excavation of ancient sites to provide antiquities for commercial profit' (Renfrew 2000, 15) and/or 'excavation performed without proper permits' (Hollowell-Zimmer 2003, 45). Students learn that scientific archaeologists look for artifacts and features and record associations and contexts to produce knowledge and information, rather than individual profit (Renfrew 2000, 19). Looting, along with development and natural processes, is identified

as a significant problem and a threat to sites by archaeologists who espouse preservationist values that are entrenched in Western ideology (Lowenthal 1985; Holtorf 2006). The message broadcast to public and legislative audiences is clear: looting destroys patterning, context, and association data. As a result, artifacts and sites lose scientific and information value (Renfrew 2000, 19).

Archaeologists frame artifact collecting and looting as self-interested, anti-science, and an assault on collective rights to history and memory. These forms of non-professional artifact collecting are seen as more threatening to heritage sites than development or natural destruction because collectors ‘carry out selective destruction, targeting the best-preserved and scientifically most important sites for digging’ (Mallouf 1996, 198). The parallel targeting of well-preserved and scientifically important sites by archaeologists, however, is unquestioned. Artifact collecting offends the ideology of archaeology--grounded in the sanctity of the archaeological record--and denies archaeology’s primary task of producing knowledge (McGuire and Walker 1999, 164).

Non-professional artifact collecting is also understood as an affront to a collective right to shared heritage, as indicated in a recent article on looting of rockshelter sites in Virginia, USA: ‘Looters...continue to destroy *our* understanding of the past’ (Barber 2005, 31; emphasis added). Barber relays a sentiment shared by many archaeologists who assume that a collective past inheres in the artifacts sought out by collectors, and that collectors deny contemporary people their shared rights to that collective past by taking artifacts out of the public domain. Many archaeologists see themselves as having the authority and expertise to define what matters to people about the past, creating an imaginary shared heritage (‘our’ heritage) that ignores the issues of dispossession, marginalization, and equity inherent in heritage work in post-colonial settler states like the U.S., where Indigenous heritage has been appropriated by white elites and

the state for centuries. Some archaeologists argue that collecting and looting not only prevent the ability to access the artifacts that allow understanding of the past (or pasts), they actively prevent *remembering* because they leave behind ‘random objects that may be beautiful or valuable but which tell us very little about the people who made them...looting obliterates the memory of the ancient world’ (Atwood 2004, 9). However, such reflections fail to recognize both the destructive aspects of archaeology and the criticism levied by Indigenous peoples that archaeology is looting and the removal of objects from Indigenous places against their wishes only benefits scientific researchers (e.g., Deloria 1969).

Most of the literature about collecting and looting is focused on prevention through legal means and stemming distribution and consumption activities (i.e. the illegal antiquities trade). In an attempt to understand collecting as more than the actions of atomized individuals, some archaeologists advocate focusing more attention on the collector networks and ‘looting chain,’ recognizing that collectors and looters themselves rarely enjoy the biggest profit and that the incentive for these activities comes from demand of the illicit global trade in antiquities (e.g., Brodie and Renfrew 2005). Greater attention is also being paid to museum policies and practice. The result has been a flurry of international legal actions and in some cases, repatriation (e.g., Mihesuah 2000). Another productive approach has been to examine the sociopolitical context of collecting as a way of discerning structural problems that people seek to ameliorate through collecting and looting activities. For example, Van Velzen (1996) demonstrates the complex relationships between economic and social capital in her biographies of two *tombaroli*, Italian tomb robbers. Julie Hollowell’s (Hollowell-Zimmer 2003) research on ‘subsistence digging’ in Alaska demonstrates that artifact collecting can be a strategy to meet basic human needs,

drawing our attention to the historical, economic, and social contexts of collecting and looting that complicate moral and ethical judgments.

A recent study by Proulx (2013) offers an empirical basis for archaeologists' perception of the looting problem and demonstrates that non-professional artifact collecting is pervasive globally. Proulx (2013) advocates a 'glocal' perspective that examines the local encounters and experiences of looting by archaeologists from around the world as a way to locally contextualize this global phenomenon. Her study is based on a survey of the experiences of more than 2,000 archaeologists in order to construct a view of looting at both local and global scale. Nearly 98% of archaeologists surveyed noted that looting occurs in some capacity where they work (Proulx 2013, 118).

The harms of artifact collecting and looting are largely unquestioned and widely publicized by archaeologists. Many archaeologists find collected or looted sites and sites threatened by these activities especially appealing for investigation because they offer the opportunity to enact archaeological morals by 'saving,' 'protecting,' and 'recovering' data from threatened contexts. They are also places where anti-looting ideology is perpetuated. As directors of archaeological field schools on sites that have been collected with and without landowner permission, we recognize that our own practices and pedagogies have incorporated the anti-looting ideology of archaeology as an essential component of the training of future professional archaeologists. However, we also recognize that archaeologists are one of many stakeholders with interests in heritage sites who espouse a set of heritage values that may not be shared by all other stakeholders. Our experiences with multi-stakeholder collaborations and collected sites in North America have led us to question the fundamentalist anti-looting ideology that we have

perpetuated, recognizing that the meanings and motivations of the practices that we have collapsed as ‘looting’ demand attention, particularly in the context of a post-colonial settler state.

Americanist Collecting and Looting

Understanding collecting and looting in the American context requires the inclusion of activities motivated by more than just commercial gain. Americanist collecting and looting activities range from those that are profit- and prestige-driven to those aimed at satisfying personal curiosity or a desire to connect with or possess things from another time, place, or people (motivations that are shared by many avocational¹ and professional archaeologists). The broad contours of Americanist collecting and looting are shaped by the twin legacies of colonialism in a settler state and the desire to possess the objects of ‘exotic others.’ As a result, much of the focus of Americanist collecting and looting has been on Native American sites.

Looting was identified as a problem in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century, triggered by growing concerns about vandalism and pothunting at ancient Puebloan sites in the American Southwest, the increasing professionalization of archaeology, and the establishment of major museums. By the early twentieth century the first laws aimed at addressing the threat of vandalism were passed (Antiquities Act, 1906) and subsequent laws encoded the value of preservation and information potential of archaeological sites in U.S. federal law (i.e., the Archaeological Resources Protection Act [ARPA, 1979], Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act [NAGPRA, 1990]). These laws, however, are relatively weak mechanisms for protecting sites with archaeological deposits because they apply only to federal or tribal land, leaving most sites on private land unprotected (though many states have laws protecting unmarked burials) (Davis 1998; Gerstenblith 2013). Renfrew (2000, 81) points out this troubling fact, stating that ‘one of the greatest anomalies in the archaeological world is the freedom with

which a landowner in the United States may take a bulldozer to an ancient site...and destroy it in order to locate ancient pots for sale.’ In the U.S., digging and collecting artifacts on private land is often legal with landowner permission (unless human burials are present), except in a handful of states that require permits (Hollowell-Zimmer 2003, 45).

By the 1930s, collecting American Indian artifacts was enormously popular in the U.S. and Europe (LaVere 2007, 6). Concern for illegal digging activities increased in the latter part of the twentieth century, while legal destruction of sites by development and scientific archaeology increased exponentially. In the late 1980s, cases such as the looting of Native American burial mounds at Slack Farm, Kentucky, received popular media coverage in the pages of *National Geographic* and on the evening news (Fagan 1988; Arden 1989; Davis 1998). The images from Slack Farm, described as a ‘moonscape’ of looters pits, continue to be used today to illustrate the scale of the American looting problem to public audiences (Figure 1). Recent prosecutions of looting cases have also received national press coverage, including the prosecution of four people for ARPA violations in the American Southwest for removing artifacts from federal land without a permit, among them a professional archaeologist from an American university (U.S. Department of Justice 2011).

Today most academic and public concern about artifact collecting and looting is directed at developing countries or conflict zones (e.g., Iraq, Mali, Syria) where artifacts are being channeled into the global antiquities market (Renfrew 2000; Brodie and Renfrew 2005; Gerstenblith 2009), but the results of Proulx’s (2013) study suggests that it remains a persistent concern in North America. Proulx (2013, 119) reports that over 78% of archaeologists have personally encountered evidence of looting activity while participating in fieldwork (e.g., trenches, holes, pits, equipment, stashes of artifacts, etc.). When compared with counterparts

working elsewhere in the world, archaeologists working in North America were more likely to have personally experienced looting (Proulx 2013, 117). If looting is such a common experience for Americanist archaeologists, often providing the impetus for their interventions to ‘save,’ ‘protect,’ and ‘recover’ sites and artifacts from damage, why is it given so little attention as a meaningful heritage action? Americanist artifact collectors and looters engage with many of the same preoccupations of heritage practitioners--senses of place and history, materiality, community, identity--but the meanings of their practices are unexamined because they conflict with expert heritage values. We recognize this as a shortcoming in evaluating our own intervention at a site that has experienced a long period of artifact collecting in the New England region of northeastern North America. In the following case study we focus attention on collecting and looting as a heritage practice and the ways that our project’s preservation goals served to foreground the negative impacts of these practices, while erasing the heritage values and meanings of these social actions.

Looting and the Site Preservation Narrative: The Pocumtuck Fort Archaeology and Stewardship Project

The Pocumtuck Fort Archaeology and Stewardship Project (PFASP), initiated in 2006, provides a case study for examining the appeal of vandalized heritage and the erasure of the meanings of artifact collecting at a Native American heritage site. The project focuses on a seventeenth century Native American site located in the town of Deerfield, Massachusetts (Figure 2), and is a collaboration of a local museum (Historic Deerfield, Inc.), descendant community representatives (the Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs), professional archaeologists (including the authors), and local avocational archaeologists and residents (see Chilton and Hart 2008; Hart 2009, 2011, 2012). Deerfield has been the locus of self-conscious

heritage activities for over 300 years. The village is centered on a mile-long street lined with historic (seventeenth-nineteenth century) and historic-looking houses. The main street runs parallel to a busy state road, and is not far from a state highway that brings tourists and locals to the town for the consumption of heritage, history, and other New England products (e.g., maple syrup, agricultural products, candles, crafts). The dominant, modern heritage narrative of Deerfield begins with its identity as an historic English colonial frontier town within a Native American homeland.

Archaeology is one of the activities that has shaped the heritage discourse in Deerfield. Over the past thirty years the Department of Anthropology at University of Massachusetts Amherst has conducted a field school at sites in and around the village in collaboration with Historic Deerfield, Inc. Field school students are primarily undergraduates from UMass Amherst and other universities taking the course to get training in archaeology field methods for college credit. The field school began as a way to learn about the Native American past of the region that is absent in written records and has sought to challenge the dominant narratives of Deerfield's past (Paynter 2002; Chilton 2009; Paynter and Chilton 2009). Because of the intense interest of both avocational and professional archaeologists and historians, there are more than 120 documented Native American archaeological sites in the thirty-three square miles of the town, one of the most robust inventories in the state.

The PFASP grew out of long-standing relationships among professional archaeologists, individual avocational archaeologists, and Historic Deerfield, Inc. These relationships were founded on shared interests in historical and archaeological research and site preservation. A central goal of the PFASP has been to engage with contemporary descendant communities and local stakeholders. With this broader goal and a collaboratively developed research design that

addressed questions that came out of dialogue, site walkovers, and a stakeholder workshop, field school testing in 2006, 2008, and 2011 focused on the Area D site (19-FR-415), an early seventeenth century Native American site occupied before English settlement in Deerfield. The site is believed to be the 'Pocumtuck Fort,' a place where Native Americans constructed a fortification during the first half of the seventeenth century. Given that most of the research and public interpretation in Deerfield focuses on colonial Euro-American history and heritage, we chose this site as a way to highlight the complex sociopolitical context of the colonial period and to foreground Native Americans in this context. Each field school included an open lab on the main street in Deerfield village where visitors (locals and tourists) could see archaeologists at work processing and cataloging artifacts and hear about our fieldwork and research. During the five-week field school in 2011, 124 people visited the lab. That year we also initiated two blogs on the project website to keep project stakeholders and the interested public informed about developments in the field and lab on a daily basis. The site is on private land, and we cannot have the site open for public visits, so the blogs and open lab were attempts at providing wider access to information about our activities and findings.

One of the reasons the project has continued support from participating stakeholders is that artifact collectors were active at the site in the recent past (likely between 1997-2003) and there are local oral histories of digging at the site over the past several decades, all without landowner permission. This was evident in visual surveys of the site and was corroborated by accounts from individuals who witnessed or otherwise learned of the activities. In addition, our archaeological testing revealed evidence of recent disturbance consistent with the digging activities described (Figure 3). A great deal of speculation and hearsay surrounds the accounts of digging and collecting that were relayed to us by local residents and avocational archaeologists

(some who were affiliated with the project and some who were not). One informant told us that he heard from others familiar with the site that ‘treasure hunters’ and metal detectorists were active there in the 1970s-1980s. He also reported on the activity of a more recent ‘looter’ (a local resident known as an artifact collector by both avocational and professionals) who he witnessed digging a hole the size of a small car and sifting the soil through a screen at the site in 2003. Though the informant did not say what kinds of materials the collector was looking for and removing, it is likely that copper, brass and other metals were of interest because very few of these materials--common elsewhere at the site--were recovered in field school screening of the disturbed soil. The collector was likely less interested in ceramic sherds, fire-cracked rock, animal bone, shell, charcoal, groundstone fragments, and plant remains, which were found in significant quantities in our testing. We also recovered many small glass beads that were likely too small to be caught in the screen used by the collector. Since the field school survey of the site began in 2006, no new disturbances have been observed.

The informant reported firsthand encounters with the ‘looter’ ranging from friendly outings walking plowed fields looking for artifacts together to heated verbal and physical encounters. The informant related that the collector seemed ‘sorry and repentant’ for the destruction he and others caused at several sites in the Deerfield area. The informant reported the motivations for these collectors were sometimes monetary, often centered on relations of friendship and competition, and in some cases tied to coping with addiction problems. The pleasure of finding ancient artifacts and connecting with past people was also a strong motivation (also a common motivation for many avocational and professional archaeologists).

Site destruction and vandalism have become a part of the story archaeologists tell about the site. The disturbed areas are shown by archaeologists and field school students to site visitors

(mainly project stakeholders since there is no public access to the site) as part of the site tour.

Visitors to the public field lab are told by student interpreters that one of the significant threats to the site is looting (without specifics about who, what, when and why) and that one of the goals of the project is to conserve the site and protect it from further vandalism. In addition, the excavation permit applications, reports submitted to project stakeholders and state agencies, and public presentations made by archaeologists refer to looting as one of the major threats to the site. However, until now we have glossed it as simply a problem and threat to our broader goals of combating the erasure of Native American history, rather than as practice worth examining.

The narrative of ‘looting as a threat’ has been taken up by others beyond the project archaeologists. During a stakeholder workshop, a discourse emerged among project participants that focused on the disturbances at this site caused by camping activities and illegal digging and how to mitigate and prevent threats to the site (Hart 2009, 145-146). Many stakeholders had witnessed the effects of these activities firsthand. During the course of this discussion, several stakeholders (particularly avocational archaeologists and Native American representatives) raised examples of looting and collecting at other sites in Deerfield. These examples connected the Area D site to the broader historical and archaeological landscape of Deerfield and to the legal and illegal collecting practices and social networks of individuals who engage in such practices in the area (Hart 2009, 145-146). Invoking these other cases galvanized the preservation interests of project stakeholders in opposition to (and to the exclusion of) the goals of the ‘looters’ and others who did not share these heritage values. The Area D site was not just a singularly threatened site, but the locus of a direct assault on a shared heritage and *our* (inclusive of all of the stakeholder communities) collective right to know the history of this place and the peoples who have come before us. Stakeholders advised an approach of information protection,

keeping the site location and landowner information confidential and to ‘watch who we discuss things with,’ because of the threat of looting and the experiences many stakeholders had with collected or looted sites and collectors and looters themselves (Hart 2009, 146).

The fact that the site had been collected meant that there was a common interest for stakeholders who ascribe to the values of site protection and preservation. It also meant that those who did not ascribe to these values were excluded from participating in project activities. The collectors became a common foe for project participants, but one that archaeologists engaged with only indirectly through tangible evidence of their activities. Though we spent many hours in the field absorbed by the material traces of their presence (e.g., backdirt, discarded or displaced artifacts, features created by their excavation pits) and trying to interpret the depositional relationships of the soils they disturbed, we spent little time trying to understand these activities beyond their impact on the site and our interpretations (Figure 3). Through discussions with avocational archaeologists and other sources we gathered fragments about who the collectors were, how they came to be at the site, what they were interested in, and what they may have done with the materials they acquired. However, we were resistant to initiating direct engagement with them, lest we put our established collaborative relationships in jeopardy. The risk of undermining alliances with state representatives, descendant communities, and preservationists was also a factor. Collectors were wary of us and a direct attempt to engage from either side was never initiated.

Motivations, Mistrust, and Ontological Security

As Proulx (2013, 111) notes, it is difficult to develop a composite of artifact collectors and looters because they are not eager to be interviewed about the extent of these sometimes illegal activities, particularly by archaeologists (see Van Velzen 1996). This has been our

experience in Deerfield where much of what we know about collecting and looting activities is gathered from indirect experience and secondhand accounts. McGuire and Walker (1999, 165; see also Davis 1998) also affirm that data on who collects and loots in the U.S. is meager, but that limited knowledge suggests that looters come predominately--though not exclusively--from working-class backgrounds. The structural problems that explain collecting and looting elsewhere in the world (e.g., in the context of war in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Mali, or in the context of poverty in Latin America) has little resonance with observations and impressions gleaned from our direct and indirect contact with collecting in New England, where collectors participate in a range of activities including surface collection, excavation, and artifact exchange (e.g., sale, trade, barter) that are often legal (when done with landowner permission and not involving human burials or grave goods). Like elsewhere, particularly Britain, metal detecting has grown in popularity as a pastime since the 1970s because equipment has become accessible and reasonably priced. This is a technique often used by looters, collectors, avocationals, and professionals to locate early colonial period sites like Area D because of the concentrations of brass, copper, and iron found at such sites.

Most of the artifact collectors we have encountered in New England archaeology are male, white, of Euroamerican descent, older than 40, and working-class or middle-class. Their motivations are varied. Most do not collect solely for economic profit, though sale of artifacts for small amounts of money (usually under 100 USD) may be part of the motivation for some. Pre-Columbian artifacts from New England are not in as high demand as artifacts from elsewhere in the country (e.g., Puebloan sites in the Southwest, mound sites in the Midwest and Southeast). Most of the activities of New England collectors fit within Hollowell-Zimmer's (2003, 46) concept of 'low-end looting,': 'undocumented excavations in which the products are not headed

straight for the international art of antiquities market, but for less lucrative and often less visible markets or sometime for no market at all.’

Most artifact collectors report that they participate in these activities for social purposes that involve camaraderie and competition among friends, family, and community relations, connection to place, and to ‘understand what really happened’ to Native Americans who lived in the places they call home today (Mallouf 1996; LaBelle 2003). This is captured by Mallouf (1996, 199) who describes artifact collectors as ‘frequently begin(ing) their hobby as a result of their feelings for a haunt they have come to love...A growing obsession with artifacts then leads to interaction with other collectors with similar interests...the act of collecting becomes more of a communal than an individual activity.’ Many firmly believe they are salvaging artifacts that would otherwise be lost (LaBelle 2003, 116). These acts of digging, recovery, bartering, selling, and discussing finds that comprise collecting (legal or illegal) provide temporal, spatial, and human connections that offer people the ontological security to ‘go on’ in life. These practices may serve to combat the insecurity of social dislocation, economic instability, and alienation from place and heritage. This alienation is more pronounced in a place like Deerfield where the past is ever-present and certain pasts are elevated and celebrated (e.g., English colonial settlements and to a lesser degree Native American history), with little attention to the experiences and lives of more recent European immigrants and their descendants who make up the majority of the area residents, and the associated agricultural and industrial heritage.

Mistrust of professional archaeologists is pervasive among artifact collectors in New England, as is reported elsewhere (e.g., Britain [Chester-Kadwell 2004; English 2013]; the American Plains [LaBelle 2003]; Italy [Van Velzen 1996]). There is a sense that professional archaeologists just want to dig (and thus destroy or vandalize) sites themselves, and there is a

concern that they will not share information or access to artifacts, thus threatening the ontological security of collectors. The concern is that artifacts will be taken away by the professionals to be put in a museum or university basement. This sentiment was conveyed recently by a columnist for a local newspaper in the town we work in who reported that a source stated, ‘They’ll [professional archaeologists] tell you they keep everything secret to protect valuable sites from looters but, trust me, they’re the only ones looting these sites, and they’re doing it with the state’s blessing. Shouldn’t the towns and/or landowners of the sites they’re removing artifacts from know what they’re taking?’ (Sanderson 2013, B1). This opinion echoes English’s (2013) characterization of the concerns of British metal detectorists who ‘feared the hobby was being outlawed by an extension of state ownership, a theft of their past by an exclusive institutional elite. They perceived themselves as the public and the state as appropriating cultural property in the interests of a minority, not of the public at all.’ The feeling that state and institutional elites like professional archaeologists are co-opting cultural property for their own benefit is articulated by constituents in both contexts, despite significant differences between the U.K. and the U.S. with respect to a narrative of the public ownership of history (U.K.) versus the cultural trope of private property in a post-colonial context (U.S.).

Some mistrust stems from the rocky relationships among collectors and professionals dating back to the professionalization of archaeology. Some of it also likely stems from gender, class, and education differences, as well as mistrust of state institutions, including universities. It also relates to the perception that archaeologists have prestige and power, captured by a respondent to Proulx’s study (2013, 121) who works in the northeastern U.S. and notes, ‘In most field settings, archaeologists are seen as having access to wealth and power. So people try to access that through trade or sale or sometimes gifts.’

The mistrust of experts and state officials and resistance to the anti-looting ideology perpetuated by heritage professionals signals an opposition to: (1) state interventions in heritage matters, and (2) the heritage values of elite social classes, particularly professional archaeologists and heritage experts. Both are subsumed under what Smith (2006) refers to as the ‘authorized heritage discourse’. The authorized heritage discourse privileges the knowledge and expertise of professionals and excludes or disempowers many other stakeholders: ‘...expert knowledge and experts are not simply another interest or stakeholder group in the use of heritage. Expert values and knowledge, such as those embedded in archaeology, history and architecture amongst others, often set the agendas or provide the epistemological frameworks that define debates about the meaning and nature of the past and its heritage’ (Smith 2006, 51). Non-expert stakeholders are often treated as ‘empty vessels’ that need to be educated and enculturated to expert heritage values. Dissenting, alternative, and subaltern heritage discourses--particularly the views and actions of non-expert users--are left out of the authorized heritage discourse (Smith 2006, 34-35). In North America, the authorized heritage discourse has shifted in the past three decades from one that largely ignored all non-expert heritage users to one that is increasingly attentive to the interests and engagement of some stakeholders, particularly descendant and local communities (e.g., Derry and Malloy 2003; Kerber 2006; Jameson and Baugher 2007; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; Atalay 2012). This is evident in cases of site vandalism, collecting and looting, such as in the case of the Area D site, where the heritage work of archaeologists is often allied with the interests of descendant communities, states, and preservation organizations, and positioned in opposition to that of collectors and vandals. Although archaeologists engage directly with the outcomes of physical vandalism (assessing the extent of the damage, determining where or when damage took place, what was removed), we have paid little attention

at the time to the meanings of those actions, essentially erasing these intentional, meaningful actions.

This erasure flows from the process of historical production, described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995, 2) as the process through which ‘what happened’ becomes ‘that which is said to have happened.’ Trouillot (1995, 26-27) sees any historical narrative as a ‘particular bundle of silences’ accumulated at different moments in narrative creation and reproduction. These silences are not mere absences, but rather reflect an active process of erasure that attempts to disrupt historical continuity and memory (Trouillot 1995, 48). In the case of the collecting at Area D, ‘what happened’ includes digging and artifact recovery motivated by the promise of financial gain, camaraderie and bonds of friendship solidified through sharing artifacts and knowledge, and an interest in knowing something about a place and people otherwise little understood. These were meaningful acts that provided individuals with ontological security drawn from the continuity and connection to place and heritage. But these meanings have been erased in the way we have framed what happened as simply ‘looting.’

Collecting as Heritage Practice

Digging, recovering, exchanging, and talking or working with others are all actions part of non-professional collecting and these actions comprise a social practice that provides individuals with ontological security. These activities contradict the preservation and conservation ethic of most archaeologists, but they are as much an engagement with the past as excavation by archaeologists, reconstructing sites and objects by museums, and consuming heritage products by tourists (Holtorf 2006, 106). Digging and collecting are ways to experience heritage, affirm identities and social relationships, and engage in memory work. If, as Smith (2006, 44) asserts, ‘heritage...is a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that

work to create ways to understand and engage with the present, and the sites themselves are cultural tools that can facilitate...this process,' then we must acknowledge actions of vandalism and destruction as valid, meaningful practices, just as we do preservation and conservation actions.

Re-framing collecting as a form of heritage practice, not as destructive to heritage (as if heritage were something preexisting rather than constituted through social action), is risky for archaeologists and heritage professionals: we may alienate those that we have spent decades convincing of the value of preservation; we may threaten the viability of collaborative projects that seek stewardship as an outcome; and we may be accused of teetering on the brink of hyper-relativism. However, we may also open up the heritage discourse to those who have been marginalized in such discourses, and this may lead to successful solutions that address both acute and structural disparities. For example, to what extent do current historic preservation laws and professional archaeologists marginalize non-Native American, minority heritage groups from official heritage (see Chilton and Mason 2010), leading to a further alienation from the past for descendants of more recent European immigrants to New England? And one could extend this historical amnesia to American culture more broadly, as demonstrated by the popularity of television shows such as *American Digger* (SpikeTV) and *Diggers!* (National Geographic), which emphasize the fun and profit of digging up artifacts over the scientific knowledge produced from such objects.

Alternatives to a Fundamentalist Anti-Looting Ideology

Proulx (2013, 123) argues, 'looting...can no longer be dismissed as simply exaggerated, nor can concerns about looting be cast off as the mere products of scaremongering archaeologists with overblown imaginations and thinly veiled preservationist agendas,' and her empirical study

establishes this clearly. In light of this, how do we chart a course for the future, for Deerfield and places like it, that does not further alienate collectors and at the same time, stems looting activities? Several possibilities exist. The most commonly held position is that public education is the way forward. Davis (1998) argues that ‘the answer to reducing looting lies in educating landowners, collectors, and dealers about the loss of information about the past when sites are pillaged for artifacts with no records being made.’ Similarly, Van Velzen (1996) notes that tomb robbing in Italy would not be so lucrative or pervasive without the tacit approval of the local population; she encourages local participation, and she recommends that professional archaeologists focus on projects that tie into local issues and interests. However, after thirty years of public education programming by archaeologists in Deerfield--from archaeology days, open sites and labs, countless lectures, informal visits to homes and labs--there seems to be little change in the nature of relations among archaeologists and collectors. This is likely because public education efforts are largely one-directional, conveying the scientific value of artifacts and context and inculcating *our* values. This is summed up by McGuire and Walker (1999, 165) who state that ‘Most archaeologists seem to agree that we need to educate looters to appreciate the record, to see things our way’.

A second option presented by Potter (1994) is to recognize the cultural differences between collectors and archaeologists and ask *why* these individuals engage in these activities and what needs they fulfill. If, as McGuire and Walker (1999, 165) suggest, they ‘feel alienated from an archaeology which they identify as elitist,’ how can we democratize archaeology? Community-based collaborative projects have made significant strides elsewhere (for example, see Derry and Malloy 2003; Jameson and Baugher 2007; Smith and Waterton 2009; Atalay 2012), and it may be too soon to tell whether this will take hold in Deerfield. Finding shared core

values is crucial. For example, an important aspect of building trust relationships with avocational archaeologists for PFASP has been reciprocity and sharing of information. The reciprocal sharing of information with avocationalists had symbolic meaning in this context and minimized perceived divisions between professional and avocational. This reciprocity acknowledged the avocationalists' willingness to share information and research with professionals. We reciprocated by inviting avocational participation in fieldwork and sharing the results of the archaeological testing through visits to the site and lab, numerous in-person meetings, weekly phone calls, and documents, such as non-circulating reports. These efforts were intended to keep open communication and honor our reciprocal trust relationship.

The British Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) may prove instructive to Americanist archaeologists looking to address tensions among archaeologists and collectors, particularly metal detectorists, through formalizing reciprocal information sharing. Initiated in 1997, the PAS facilitates voluntary reporting of metal detector finds into a large database open to scholars and the public at large (Renfrew 2000, 84). PAS officers attend meetings of metal-detector clubs and make contacts. They borrow finds for recording into a searchable online database, photographing and drawing some materials and providing copies of description and identification to owners (Chester-Kadwell 2004, 54). Chester-Kadwell (2004, 62) characterizes the PAS as working to mutual benefit in the British context: 'The PAS leads to learning on both sides about British archaeology...Each engages in their own way, the archaeologist with her research questions and the metal detectorist by his fascination with all things ancient and collectable.'

While such a scheme provides a framework for information sharing among professional archaeologists and a range of non-professionals (e.g., avocationalists, collectors, metal detectorists) there are several limitations that should be considered when evaluating its transferability to an

American context. Though PAS encourages reporting of finds, finders are not required to report finds and thus, detectorists do not necessarily report their finds (Gerstenblith 2013). In addition, individual artifact ownership and possession may prevent other heritage stakeholders, particularly descendant communities, from accessing materials directly. This can be a significant issue in a settler state context where the cultural property of Indigenous communities can be owned by collectors when obtained legally. Efforts to recover objects of cultural patrimony from museums, auction houses, and private collectors (e.g., wampum belts, false face masks, pipes) indicate that this is a significant concern for Native American communities. A third issue for consideration is that a web-based database may create ‘digital divide’ issues, particularly for those in rural areas with limited internet access or for those that may not have the skills to access online sources.

Low-end collecting continues to be pervasive in the U.S., and we have experienced it directly in New England. If we are to find successful solutions to stem these activities archeologists will have to consider the local socio-political conditions under which ontological security is formed and ‘move beyond the us-them thinking that has polarized and at times prevented discussion in order to find some common ground for problem solving and collaboration with the people they have been calling looters’ (Hollowell-Zimmer 2003, 47). Rather than placing the blame at the feet of collectors, it should be incumbent upon heritage practitioners to better understand these social acts. Holtorf (2006, 103) argues, ‘if heritage is said to contribute to people’s identities, the loss of heritage can contribute to people’s identities even more.’ It is wrong to insist that collecting and looting takes away all meaning and value of artifacts. People may gain legitimate benefits from destructive practices, delocalizing artifacts from sites may create memories, and ‘fundamentalist heritage preservationism’ is harmful

(Holtorf 2006). In settler states, collecting, looting and heritage destruction may continue to amplify status inequalities or perpetuate colonialist ideas of exotic ‘others’ whose cultural patrimony becomes the property of individuals and ascribed monetary and/or prestige value. It may also galvanize alliances among heritage stakeholders through the exclusion of others whose interests are perceived as threatening or oppositional. To understand and evaluate the potential of these outcomes, we echo Hollowell-Zimmer’s (2003, 53) call for more on-the-ground ethnographies of collecting that examine the economic, political and social contexts that make this one way that people choose to engage with pasts. We extend this to include the need to understand collecting as a social practice that provides individuals with ontological security, as well as greater attention to the ways in which heritage can be used to ameliorate the insecurities of individuals and communities in the modern world.

Figures

Figure 1. The Slack Farm site in Kentucky seen from the air. The site was the scene of heavy looting which led to arrests and prosecutions (Photo courtesy of David Pollack and Kenny Barkley).

Figure 2. Map showing location of Deerfield, Massachusetts, in northeastern United States.

Figure 3. A wall profile of a test unit at the Area D Site (19-FR-415), Deerfield, Massachusetts, showing soil disturbed by artifact collectors.

Notes

1. The term ‘avocational’ has often been used synonymously with ‘amateur archaeologist,’ to differentiate these people from ‘professional archaeologists,’ on the one hand, and ‘artifact dealers’ and ‘pothunters’ on the other (Frison 1984, 185-186; Tesar 1988, 33-34; DeAngelo 1992). Here, we distinguish ‘avocational’ from ‘collectors’ because their relationship to the material record is similar to that of professional archaeologists, in that the knowledge and information gained from the context of material culture is valued (Hart 2009).

Notes on Contributors

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