Archaeologies that hurt; descendants that matter: a pragmatic approach to collaboration in the public interpretation of African-American archaeology

Carol McDavid

Abstract

Pragmatism’s anti-essentialist emphasis on contingency and plurality and its notion of truth-as-created (not discovered) have important implications for the interpretation of archaeological data, and for the ‘public presentation’ of archaeological research. This paper will examine a pragmatically oriented project in Brazoria, Texas, USA, in which archaeologists and local citizens (including site descendants) have collaborated to create an Internet website to discuss the politically and emotionally charged archaeologies and histories of an eighteenth-century sugar plantation. It will discuss ways in which a pragmatic philosophical framework has given archaeologists new ways of approaching and ‘conversing’ about their data, and new ways of dealing, openly and non-hierarchically, with the communities most affected by their research. It will also discuss ways in which elements of post-processual archaeological theory – multivocality, interactivity, reflexivity and contextuality – were incorporated within both the content and delivery of the website, and will close with a short discussion about whether these strategies were effective in creating an open, relevant, democratic and multivocal discourse about archaeology.

Keywords

African-American archaeology; pragmatism; plantation archaeology; Levi Jordan Plantation; Internet; reflexivity; multivocality; post-processual theory.

Introduction

In this paper, I shall discuss the Levi Jordan Plantation Web Site Project, in which archaeologists and local citizens have collaborated to create an Internet website to present and discuss the archaeologies and histories of plantation life in the Southern United States. The geographical context of this project is the small, rural community of Brazoria, Texas,
located about one hour’s drive south of Houston, Texas. Excavations at the Jordan Plantation have been underway for sixteen years, under the direction of Kenneth L. Brown at the University of Houston, and have focused primarily on the slave and tenant quarters (Brown and Cooper 1990; Brown 1994) of the plantation. The Jordan website project, for which I function as public archaeologist and ‘project leader’, is currently the primary public interpretative activity for the archaeological excavations. As such, it represents an attempt to see whether ‘the Net’ can provide a way for the descendants of the original residents of this plantation (both African-American and European-American) to conduct critical dialogues with archaeologists, with each other, with people elsewhere – and with ‘the past’ (McDavid 1999). My collaborators include Kenneth Brown, his graduate students, plantation descendants and other community members – all of whom provided content for the site (http://www.webarchaeology.com).

The project also formed the basis of my doctoral research at the University of Cambridge, where I used the Jordan website as a case study to examine whether Internet websites are effective communicative media for archaeologists to interact with their publics in open, democratic, multivocal and relevant ways, particularly when the archaeological interpretations themselves are ‘sensitive’ and ‘charged’ in contemporary social and political contexts. To examine this, I employed what has been termed a ‘self-reflexive postprocessual methodology’ in ‘real-site’ (as opposed to ‘website’) excavation contexts (Odder 1997). That is, I (and we, in the sense that the creation of the website was a collaborative effort) attempted to incorporate elements of multivocality, interactivity, reactivity and contextuality in the basic structure of both the content and delivery of the website. This paper will describe some of the specific strategies employed to do this – both on the screen and behind the scenes. It will close with some preliminary conclusions about whether these strategies were effective in ‘opening’ and ‘democratizing’ archaeological discourse.

I should offer some background information before continuing. Even though the Jordan archaeological project began in 1986, there was no public component until much later. For a variety of reasons (McDavid 2002b), in the 1990s it became necessary to create an active ‘public’ component for the Jordan archaeological project. One could argue (in retrospect) that the public should have been involved in the Jordan project from its beginning – but collaborative public archaeology projects were very uncommon in America at that time, and were only beginning to emerge as accepted subjects for academic historical archaeological research. In any event, in 1992 I was recruited by Kenneth Brown to develop the public dimensions of the Jordan archaeological research. My first project, conducted while I was a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Houston, was to conduct ethnographic research to learn if it would be feasible to locate public interpretations of this archaeology within the local community surrounding the plantation. It was unknown at that point whether these interpretations would be in the form of a museum, site tours or something else. I – we – needed to learn about the ‘interests and conflicts’ (Lene et al. 1987) that formed the social and political landscape of Brazoria, and to determine whether people in the community would support a project which would, necessarily, require them to deal publicly with some rather uncomfortable aspects of their community’s history. That research (McDavid 1996; summarized in McDavid 1997b) led to the website project described here. Therefore, my work with the Brazoria
community is ongoing, and includes many activities not related to the work described here.

Philosophical context

One philosophical approach has proved particularly useful as we worked together to create this website – American pragmatism, especially as expressed in the philosophical writings of Richard Rorty, Cornel West, John Dewey and William James (see, for example, Rorty 1991; West 1993; Dewey 1916; James 1996). One important idea borrowed from pragmatism is the idea that all human interaction can be conceived of as historically situated, contingent, pluralistic conversation. In pragmatist thought, particularly that of Richard Rorty, the ‘conversational’ metaphor goes far beyond the linguistic. Some human interactions – such as wars and social movements – are seen as meta-conversations in which ‘we’ humans decide, over time and distance, how to direct our lives. Pragmatists share an anti-essentialist, anti-foundationalist and pluralist point of view towards truth, and are keenly aware of the contingency of historically and socially constructed categories and practices. While pragmatists do not believe that one truth is as good as another, they do believe that humans can and will be able to discover, over time, which truths are more meaningful and useful. In Rortian terms, humans can learn which truths will help ‘us’ to be less cruel, and which will help us to understand each other better. It is a very optimistic approach, though not a nihilistically relativistic one: pragmatists may have a profound belief in the capacities of humans to determine their own fates – to ‘gure it out’ – but they also demand that each human speak up, loudly, to express his or her own voice in social, cultural and political life.

In our case, as archaeologists taking part in the ‘conversation’ of creating public interpretation of archaeology, this idea was enacted as we attempted to make our archaeological truth claims forcefully and creatively (Hodder et al. 1995: 28) embracing science (but not scientism) as our tool-of-trade – operating within a pragmatic realism that did not lead to relativism or scepticism (Goodman 1995: 4). At the same time, we sought opportunities for other ways of understanding the past to be expressed – such as oral history, folklore, genealogy and others. All of these ‘ways of knowing’ are represented on the Jordan website. As is true with archaeology at most (if not all) African-Amercan sites in the United States, the story being told necessarily deals with human acts of oppression and cruelty (see McDavid and Babson 1997 for other examples) – acts which are acknowledged and dealt with in different ways by different groups of site descendants. In order to allow space for these different ‘ways of understanding’ to emerge, and to deal with this potentially hurtful archaeology, the Levi Jordan website project was conceived of as a contingent, historically situated conversation. It was not conceived of as a ‘presentation’, nor was it regarded as an effort to ‘educate’ (though there are elements of both on the site). Most public interpretations of archaeology operate as one of these and, because of this, most have an unavoidably authoritative, hierarchical favour. They do not lend themselves easily to open discourse, disagreement or challenge, and tend to stop ‘conversation’ before it starts. In addition, both ‘presentation’ and ‘education’ do not fit as comfortably into the associative, multi-linear logic of the Internet. The Levi Jordan website was
designed with the specific intent of decentring the archaeologist as the expert about the multiple pasts of one community – archaeology was seen as one important voice, but one of many.

The notion that finding truths about the past is a result of our continuing experience with each other is something that, on one level, is taken for granted by the individuals I work with – many of whom had ancestors who owned, and were owned by, each other. Indeed, they are very matter-of-fact about the notion that ‘what happened’ for a slave was obviously different from ‘what happened’ for an enslaver. This issue was stated explicitly very early in our work together, in the Mission Statement and Statement of Goals written by members of the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society (LJP H S), the non-profit organization that runs the plantation (http://www.webarchaeology.com/html/about.htm).

This organization is composed of archaeologists, African-American and European-American descendants and other community members. What was not taken for granted, by them or by me, in the beginning of our acquaintance was the idea that my point of view, as academic, archaeologist, white, female, urban and so on was just as contingent. When I began to present myself – and, more importantly, to see myself – as only one actor in a conversation which allowed space for alternative truth claims, not as someone with a privileged, exclusive way of understanding the past, I began to have more credibility in the community, not less. As I continued to assure people that ‘we’ archaeologists regarded other ways of looking at history as legitimate, they began to trust us with more family stories, documents, pictures and so on than they had before. This obviously had a direct and positive effect on the content we were able to include in the Jordan website, but it also had a positive effect on the research itself. The principal investigator, Kenneth Brown, began to incorporate these local understandings into his research questions, as well as his interpretations of the archaeological and historical data (Brown 2000). Over time, this decentred, ‘conversation’ approach has had a very real and concrete effect on both the way the archaeology was done and the way it is being publicly interpreted.

Creating the website: process and structuring principles

Continuing my collaboration with the Brazoria community, in the summer of 1997 I began the process of creating, or ‘weaving’, this website, and, first, met with members of the LJP H S to obtain their support and initial input. At this point they approved the original website proposal, and began to contribute content for the site and make decisions about some of the more ‘sensitive’ content components. Working with these people and others (including Kenneth Brown and his students), I began to assemble various content components – data, texts, images and so on. By the end of the summer of 1997 we had published a prototype site, which I then asked my collaborators to comment upon. I spent the spring and summer of 1998 revising the prototype site based on the critiques received, and adding more archaeological, anthropological and historical data. At this point I added a variety of on-line interactive elements to the website, including an on-line discussion forum, feedback forms and a questionnaire. The final evaluation of this project (McDavid 2002b) includes analysis of the development process, as well as analysis of questionnaire, discussion, feedback form and e-mail data. Even though that evaluation is complete, the
website will remain, and we shall continue to change it based on what I (and we) learned during the evaluation period.

**Strategies**

I shall now discuss some of the strategies we employed to be reflexive, interactive, multivocal and contextual. I should emphasize that the website does not purport to be reflexive, multivocal and so on, but, rather, to employ some degree of all four elements in varying degrees in different parts of the site: there is certainly material on the site that is decidedly non-reflexive and univocal, although we do attempt to use even this material in a reflexive, transparent way.

I should first clarify terms. By **reflexivity** I mean that we hoped to reveal something about our own assumptions and ‘taken-for-granteds’, and that we attempted to be critical of these assumptions as we decided what sorts of content to include. Being reflexive also required that we be aware of what these assumptions revealed about our own ideologies, and that we be aware how our ideologies came into play as we dealt with each other. By **multivocality** I mean simply that we wanted to ensure that a diversity of people had the opportunity to participate in the ‘conversation’ of the website – in both content development and on-line phases of the project. This includes people who do not own and do not intend to use computers, and I shall discuss that further below. By **interactive** I mean that we wanted to provide ways for people to question our archaeological interpretations, and ways for them to approach the material from a variety of angles – using different disciplines and different ways of evaluating truth claims. It also means that we had to provide ways for us to respond to their questions and challenges. Finally, by being **contextual** we wanted to communicate how this archaeology depends on history, on ethnography, on genealogy and on the continuities and conflicts between past and present. These four elements, which came to operate as structuring principles for the website, overlapped and occasionally merge, as the examples here will illustrate.

I shall first discuss interactivity and multivocality. In ‘webspeak’, interactivity generally refers to buttons to push, video clips to see, sound bites to hear, feedback forms to submit and (less often) on-line discussion forums to participate in – what I tend to call the ‘bells and whistles’. In developing this website, however, we conceived of interactivity somewhat differently – as part of the ongoing process of communication between members of descendant communities and others collaboratively to create website content. This interactively developed content then became part of the interactive on-line environment, in which we did bring in some of the technological ‘bells and whistles’ mentioned above.

Likewise, multivocality here was not just the passive presentation of ‘different voices’, but the ongoing, active involvement of many diverse people in determining what ultimately shows up on the screen. Most importantly, we needed to find ways to include the voices of people who do not use and do not plan to use computers. I work with many descendants whose voices are an important part of both past and present in these communities. These descendants include the elders, and many of them have little or no interest in purchasing or using computers. Even so, we needed to find ways for their voices to appear on the website – a website that some of them will never see (though their
children and grandchildren will). I shall discuss two strategies that have proved useful in doing this.

First, we met with several of these key individuals and conducted oral history interviews. I and, usually, at least one other family member conducted the interviews. Frequently the family members were the ones asking most of the questions, and these interviews sometimes led to more inter-family discussions about history, genealogy, etc. Transcripts of the interviews were given to the family members involved, and subsequent meetings were held to clarify information, approve the interview segments used for the website, obtain pictures and the like. Portions of these transcripts were included on the website, with links to other parts of the website that were discussed during these off-line conversations.

Second, we adopted a policy of ‘asking permission’ to put certain kinds of information on the website – even when we did not have to, legally speaking. Much of the material we wanted to use was from public records – genealogical information, in particular, came from census records and public birth, death and marriage records. We wanted to include it, but we decided not to without explicit permission from at least some of the family’s descendants. Doing this had two positive results. First, it assured descendants that we respected their privacy and their families’ privacy, and reinforced our position as collaborators, not authorities with some ‘right’ to use and ‘converse about’ their families’ histories. Second, it opened avenues for additional information about the lives of the people who lived on this plantation. This information has not only enhanced our understanding of the past, but it has also helped contemporary people to see their ancestors in ways they had not before.

For example, it was during one of these ‘asking permission’ interviews with an African-American descendant that we learned something that has turned out to be very important to some of the European-American descendants we work with. It had to do with M. Willie Martin, the person who owned the plantation when the quarters area was suddenly abandoned, and who had been very involved in white supremacist activities in the late nineteenth century. Both archaeological and historical research have indicated that Martin had a lot to do with why the tenants left the plantation suddenly, leaving so many things behind to be excavated today.

We learned that Martin apparently regretted the actions of his youth – to the point that, according to the person who volunteered the information, he ‘repented’ these actions before his death. We learned of this from a descendant of the family of George Holmes, a person who had been enslaved on the plantation, as we met to discuss the possibility of putting some of the Holmes family’s genealogical records on the website. As far as we know, this explicitly expressed regret was unknown to any of Martin’s descendants, many of whom continue to struggle with the harsh reality of their ancestors’ actions. This new information was included on the website, and serves to put earlier historical information about Martin’s life in a more long-range historical context. More importantly, it serves to reinforce the ways that people’s lives, identities and knowledge about each other overlapped (and continue to overlap) in sometimes unexpected ways.

Along with the two strategies above, used to develop content interactively and multi-vocally with people who may not own computers, we also attempted to find ways for people without computers to see and use the website. To this end, I held a series of
on-line Internet workshops in the computer labs of local schools – they took place in junior and high school history, social studies and other classes. The data gathered from these workshops was part of what was used to evaluate whether the site succeeded in terms of openness, relevance, multivocality and democracy; as stated earlier, the conclusion to this paper will offer some of these findings.

I should point out that the website does not include many of the features that are usually regarded, by website designers, as pathways to so-called interactivity - such as Java applets, videos, audios and the like. We made a conscious decision to avoid many of those features because of the long download times they require, and because they demand the latest, fastest software and hardware – in a word, because of access (McDaid 2003). We have also avoided large images and some other technological features for the same reason. Our priority has been to enable people to see and enjoy the site with a minimum of frustration – even people with slower computers and slower modems. We aimed most of our time and effort at developing content interactively and multivocally, rather than just relying on the technology to create an interactive environment.

A final note on multivocality - we also developed a ‘participants’ section of the website. This includes short biographies of descendants, academics, students, other participants, as well as links to information they wish to put on the site under their own names. Whenever possible, the biographies are written by the individual participants, and sometimes they have used their own pages to publicize information about various community causes. This not only allows more local voices to be represented on the website, but it also highlights our collaborative approach. On these participant pages, archaeological and local agendas merge in mutually empowering, reciprocal ways, and the website project becomes more firmly situated within the social context of the local community – even though it is accessible to people all over the world.

I shall also comment briefly on some of the ways in which we attempted to incorporate reflexivity and contextuality. In terms of reflexivity, we felt it was important to reveal something about the assumptions of the individual archaeologists involved in the project. When the site was first created, most of the archaeological information on the site had been taken directly from published scholarly sources (Brown and Cooper 1990; Brown 1994). It tended, not surprisingly, to be very non-reexive, authoritative and static. We did want to use this material, but to find ways to use it more reflexively and transparently. Therefore, I conducted interviews with Kenneth Brown and some of his research students. During these interviews, we discussed how they developed their interpretations – how they went back and forth between ideas, theories and data, how they used various sorts of ethnographic and historical data, how they looked at artefacts and artefact contexts in terms of that data, and so on. After being taped and transcribed, portions of these interviews (reviewed and edited by the archaeologists who were interviewed) were then included on the website. We then added links from these interview segments to materials that were discussed during the interviews (diaries, ethnographic material, photos of artefacts, tables, documents, etc.). We also linked the interviews to the original scholarly documents, which are still on the website, to situate both sorts of documents as specific kinds of historical artefacts – as products of specific, and different, modes of knowledge production.

Finally, hypertext links within the website itself have proved the most useful way to
reveal the contextuality of archaeological knowledge. I should also point out that our choices about which hyperlinks to use, and where to insert them, had a number of rhetorical and political implications, and revealed a great deal about our own assumptions, theoretical and otherwise (see McDaid (1999) for a more detailed discussion of these implications). On the main ‘archaeology’ page, for example, there are links to history pages, ethnography pages and links back to oral histories written by family members. These link in turn to family genealogies, church histories and other documents. There are excerpts from a diary written (during and after the Civil War) by the plantation owner’s granddaughter, linked to an analysis of the diary by a linguistic anthropologist. There are links from this diary to information about people who lived and worked on the plantation, along with links to archaeological interpretations that have been informed by certain passages in the diary. There is oral history information from the African-American descendant community, linked to church histories, linked in turn to genealogical information about individual families. This is linked to and from archaeological data concerning African religious and healing practices – linked to information about burial traditions within the community, linked back to the oral history data that discusses those traditions. There is also information about the social and political contexts in which the people on this plantation lived (and in which their descendants continue to live), linked to archaeological data which resulted from those contexts. The idea of context – that everything depends on everything else – was enacted in the links we chose to make between various parts of the website’s content.

Conclusions

Earlier I stated that the Jordan Plantation website had two purposes – to serve as an important component of an ongoing community public archaeology project, and to examine some more general questions about the Internet and archaeological practice. I shall conclude this paper by offering a glimpse of the data gathered in aid of the second agenda. To restate, the primary purpose of my individual research was to investigate whether Internet websites could be an effective medium for archaeologists to communicate with diverse publics in open, democratic and relevant ways, and to see whether they could provide opportunities for multiple and contested understandings of past and present to emerge. In order to evaluate these questions, I examined several different types of data: qualitative data gathered during the course of creating the Levi Jordan Plantation website; qualitative and quantitative data gathered from questionnaires, e-mails and feedback forms submitted by people who visited it; and quantitative visitor data gathered from automated software (about numbers of visitors, etc.). The full results of this evaluation appear in more detail in McDaid (2002a), but I summarize them below.

First, it would appear that the Jordan Plantation Website was successful in being open to its visitors; feedback form and e-mail data made it clear that people perceived our desire for input, argument and challenge. People seemed to have responded to the site’s openness to the degree that they wished to do so. This is an important qualification, as the following remarks will indicate. Second, it was apparent that my experiment with creating a space for democratic communication space was not as successful – even though the
process of designing the site, described above, was extremely democratic. Unfortunately, website visitors did not tend to question the authority of archaeological findings or the authority of individual archaeologists or other people who provided content. They were, as would perhaps be expected given the positive results to the ‘openness’ question, quite willing to send compliments and to ask for additional information. They were not as willing to engage in meaningful, prolonged conversation about archaeology or history, with me or other project participants – either via e-mail or in the discussion forum.

Third, the experiment with relevance had mixed results: it succeeded insofar as certain groups of respondents are concerned, but did not with respect to others. Educators did tend the site to be particularly relevant: they seemed to enjoy having their students use the site and in this way the site was able to reach members of some minority groups more effectively. As would be expected, the site also appeared to be relevant and interesting to people interested in history and archaeology; for example, many people interested in genealogy, as one form of history, did and use the site. This had the effect of exposing archaeological information to those who might not necessarily have attempted to engage with it otherwise – they ‘entered’ the site through searches for genealogical information. However, I also wanted to reach and engage other ‘sorts’ of people – not just those interested in archaeology.

Fourth, our attempt to achieve multivocal communication was least successful. Although the design of the site did provide space for dissent (or, at least, comment) to emerge, for the most part visitors did not take the opportunities provided. It could be that my authority – or, rather, the authority of being part of a ‘scientific’ discipline – was simply too embedded in visitors’ minds for them to contest the findings of that discipline. People may have been reluctant to break established norms – one of which would be the idea that archaeological science can provide The Truth about the past. It could also be that my partial success in being relevant, and my attempt to be democratic and multivocal with regard to archaeology versus other ways of knowing worked against any tendency people might have had to argue. Multiple different types of content were already provided on the site, and it is possible that providing uni-dimensional content would have elicited more comment from people from different cultural groups. It is also possible that multivocality, as a goal, is simply not seen as important by many of the site’s visitors – that is, it may have been my agenda, but not theirs.

This may relate to my ‘liberal’ assumptions of what multivocality should look like. Whereas I de ne it as the idea of allowing dissenting points of view to emerge, others may see it as something simpler – they may take for granted the idea that different people see the past in different ways. Certainly my experience working collaboratively in the Brazoria community would support this. My collaborators have always operated in a multivocal way, and, as mentioned earlier, graciously and unselfconsciously accepted – and lived – the idea of ‘multiple truths, through multiple lenses’. It may be that site descendants (and members of other publics) do not need a ‘critical dialogue’ with archaeologists about their pasts and their relationships with it. It may even be arrogant of archaeologists to suggest that they do. If this is true, does that mean that multivocality is not a Good Thing? I think it is still a worthy pursuit, although I do think archaeologists should continue to look at the concept critically and re-exively.

Archaeology as a multivocal (and democratic and open) exercise is new: typically,
archaeological information has been presented in authoritative ways by archaeologists who want to promote archaeological agendas. The Jordan website is working against a long history of public archaeological discourse which has not encouraged debate and critique. Perhaps it is too early for archaeologists who do want to engage more openly, democratically and so on with the public to expect enthusiastic responses - at least in terms of large numbers of people. It could be that as more and more models of this sort exist, the average member of the public will develop the experience and knowledge to challenge archaeological and academic authority. This is by no means clear, however; almost 50 per cent of my questionnaire respondents already had some prior knowledge about archaeology and history. Presumably they had the understanding to express opinions, dissent, etc. - and they did not.

Before I conclude, it should be noted that, while some of the results described here are somewhat negative, each time I read over the e-mails, feedback forms and questionnaires I received, my impression is that our efforts to be open and relevant (and, even, to be democratic and multivocal) were appreciated by a good many people. This would be true even if the project had not been undertaken as part of an academic research project. A single local descendant put it recently, ‘Even if we never do anything else with this archaeology, doing the website will have been worth it’. In pragmatic terms, the project had ‘cash value’ for this individual (James 1995: 56) - as, I believe, it did for others. Truly interactive sites which have attempted to do what I (we) did are unusual, and the people who might benefit most may be those who are least acquainted with the Internet. Therefore, even though in some respects our experiments failed, each one taught us valuable lessons about how to improve, next time.

One intent of the Levi Jordan Web Site Project has been to help create a more democratic, socially relevant archaeology. Indeed, that is probably a major objective for any community archaeology, as the rest of this issue will no doubt demonstrate. It is important, however, to take that project farther, past the concerns of a ‘democratic archaeology’ into a larger arena, where citizens can actively attempt to use archaeology to create a more democratic society (Jeppson 2001). By creating a truly collaborative, diverse, non-hierarchical public archaeological project, what I have referred to here as a ‘conversation’ (McDavid 1997a) about the past, we are not only working towards the first objective, but, we hope, the second one as well.

This project represents one of the first times that members of both African American and European American descendant communities came together with archaeologists, in a setting of shared power and responsibility, to decide how to tell the stories of plantation life in the American South. This collaborative effort has been aimed at talking about the histories of both enslavers and enslaved, without doing either at the expense of the other, through the multiple lenses of history, archaeology, folklore, genealogy and other ‘ways of knowing’. By using the Internet to expand our local conversations to worldwide ones, we may be able to use archaeology to help create a more relevant, democratic world, where we all can discover what ‘truths’ about our pasts - and our presents - are most meaningful and relevant.

1638 Branard, Houston, Texas 77006, USA
References


McDavid, C. 2003 forthcoming. Towards a more democratic archaeology? The Internet and public...
Carol McDavid


