Is audit our object?

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The United States' war in Iraq has forced Archaeology to revisit a landscape where much of our discipline's imaginary was formed. The archaeological Middle East was and is a monumental landscape of architecture, sculpture, writing and the full complement of material culture deemed 'civilised'. Our fascination with material culture meant that most archaeologists did not protest this war until about 13 000 objects were taken from the Baghdad Museum (Ascherson 2003). The dominant sentiment was that archaeological salvage of objects superseded humanitarian concerns and uncritically vilifying 'looters' (Kennedy 2003); forgetting that archaeology itself can encourage looting (Renfrew 2001). Fetishing objects stems largely from Archaeology originating as a mode of surveillance and spectacle (see Nader 2001:610) where objects are prime, makers and inheritors secondary. At the 5th World Archaeological Congress (WAC) the objects vs. people debate was sharp but perhaps in need of deepening. It was perhaps not the destruction of objects and sites that was lamented as much as the systems of audit and control encapsulating the archaeological record that were at stake. Two months before WAC at the 68th Society for American Archaeology conference, September 11th's aftermath was credited with allying archaeologists to the US military's forensic anthropology unit. This alliance was not to allow better analysis of material culture - archaeologists are expert at that - but to acquire management protocols for recovered materials. This is a worrying development. Now as never before archaeology must assert its sovereignty from the state. The 'invader pays' principle should not mean archaeological expertise is for sale. This expertise can be offered to conflict-affected regions as multi-national coalitions in the service of the region's government or heritage infrastructure - if they even want help (King 1989). Connections between archaeology and state must be kept visibly ad hoc, even if this means losing some objects. We should de-centre objects by acknowledging absence, decay and destruction as realities for research, display and practice.

We should also provincialise this war by turning to wider constituencies like the southern hemisphere and the Indigenous world. For example, some Africans and South Americans affected by war and poverty consider the archaeological 'record' of their genetic and topographic forebears a consumable asset (Matsuda 1994; Labi & Robinson 2002). Less provocatively, most Kashaya Pomo indigenous Californians maintain that if objects like baskets are not used they 'die' (Violet Chappell, pers. comm., July 2003). Encasing these objects in museums arrests their intended life course and violates their maker's world-understanding. Sometimes lessons are heeded. Carver (1996) suggests de-emphasising the monumental, stressing instead sites' research and social potentials, which wax and wane over time, forcing our constant and tailored engagement with material record and current social contexts. But mostly our love of control discourages questioning core concepts like conservation - a passive verb and noun that abrogates responsibility and deflects attention either to politically passive times past (an object's 'original' state) or times future ('for our children's benefit'). Conservation as vehicle for 'western' scientific virtuosity over wider socio-ethical concerns classically demonstrate how fetishised objects divert attention from social justice (e.g., Scarry 1999). Similarly problematic is 'stewardship' - a foundational principle of many archaeological organisations. Stewardship originated as a nature-based conservatism advocated by William Morris and John Ruskin who longed for a 'commons' to counter Europe's Industrial Revolutionary destruction of 'nature'. But has 'stewardship' not come to mean 'ownership' (cf. Hardin 1968)? Consider the Ancient One from Kennewick, where a colonial jurisprudence over-ruled a coalition Indigenous claim despite non-Native USA legally acknowledging Indigenous sovereignty. Stewardship implies a collective and consensual project with equivalent access to heritage, riding roughshod over sensitive and off-limits cultural and biological property (cf. Wylie 1999). This is not always to

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acquiesce to originator communities but to let their knowledge and practice interact with archaeology's to produce a more adequate and creative social science. For example, when direct or moral inheritance cannot be established, the current custodians of a landscape could assume responsibility for managing that area's history and research (Wobst & Smith forthcoming). A truly post-colonial, emotionally engaged and critically robust archaeology would use a multi-directional set of negotiations in which different epistemologies converse (cf. McIntosh et al 1995). Archaeological techniques of audit and control must allow for the courage sometimes to let objects 'go' - because we simply can't have it all.

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