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ARTICLE

Acknowledging Death: Ending a Public Archaeology Project

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Abstract

Today's landscape of public archaeology foregrounds intentional practices, ensuring that archaeologists are aware of our actions and their repercussions. While we are intentional in our planning and implementation of public projects, this article argues that we are not adequately prepared for ending them. Many projects die for various reasons, get passed on to new generations of practitioners, and some simply come to a natural ending. A lack of discussion around project death, however, leads to unintentional endings or confusing continuities. Public archaeology is an intense emotional experience, and feelings of betrayal can emerge when a practitioner or the community partner exits the partnership unexpectedly. This article explores these issues from the perspective of an American scholar at a small public university and asks what an intentional ending to a public archaeology project looks like. It also asks how we can co-create and co-manage such an intentional ending with our community partners. Rather than fear the death of a project, there may be power in embracing the grief of ending a collaboration and soothing the emotional rupture. Finally, it concludes by suggesting that a rite of passage or celebration of the end may be necessary to mark the project as complete, allowing the partners to mourn and move on.

Keywords: American historical archaeology; community-based research; project endings; public archaeology

Endings are awkward. Death is scary. Archaeological practice is consumed with notions of time, decay, death, and life cycles. As a discipline, we are fantastic observers of these phenomena. Yet, when we reflect on our own interventions, it gets messier. In the realm of public archaeological projects, it is now the norm to engage in sustainable, intentional, and even empathic knowledge exchange with our community partners.[1] We have adopted a critical lens in public archaeology to avoid resource extraction and an academic colonial mindset. Yet, absent from these conversations is the question of how to end a public project that satisfies all parties. What does an intentional end look like?[2]

[1] For the purposes of clarity here, I will use the term public in reference to community-based and public-facing projects. This is not without reservation, as many discussions have been had concerning community versus public versus local. For a more detailed explanation of public versus community-based, see Flewellen et al. 2022 and Agbe-Davies 2010.

[2] In this article, I focus primarily on the public archaeology "project," though I also discuss public archaeology "programmes" in places. As rightly pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, there is a definitional slippage here

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In 2012, I created the programme, "Alex the Archaeologist," with the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, New York, based roughly on "Think Like an Archaeologist" from Brown University.[3] My programme foregrounded classroom visits in the Rochester area with sixth- and ninth-grade students, and with the help of the MAG staff, we made an impactful programme for our small museum and limited resources. We created lesson plans, digital resources, and videos, coupled with visits to area classrooms that corresponded to New York State curricula and teaching certifications, along with professional in-services. In 2016, after years of visiting classrooms and teaching hundreds of students in the programme, I could no longer sustain my involvement, particularly as my institutional obligations changed with the transition from graduate school to teaching at SUNY Brockport. One of my partners in the programme at the MAG, Sydney Greaves, worked with me to modify and continue the programme as "Archaeology Alive!," which remains active to this day without my involvement.[4]

When I started my current position at SUNY Brockport, I ventured to create a bigger, more intensive public project in the rural Finger Lakes area for underserved undergraduates, elementary and middle school students, as well as the local rural public. Frost Town Archaeology was created in 2017, and we have had three no-cost or low-cost undergraduate field schools, hosted six years of week-long summer archaeology camps for kids, welcomed the public for 15 family and community archaeology days, opened two exhibits, given five local historical society lectures, and held a public symposium with community member and descendant speakers in 2023.[5] In 2022, I wrote an article on my work at Frost Town, detailing what I thought would be a long-term future with multi-generational sustainability built into the structure of the project.[6]

I was wrong. Now, as I'm writing this in 2025, I have come to understand that my public project, because of time, money, and the waning interest of the project's public, is no longer as effective and may actually be holding back myself, my students, and my community partners. It needs to end. My students, whom I thought would be the next generation of scholars running Frost Town, have mostly moved on to other things, pursuing their own positions in the museum world and in research related to public scholarship. Despite my previous plans, I'm not sure if there will not be another generation running Frost Town. The project was still a success in fostering a new generation of public scholars, and its original research timeline and granting cycles are complete. I have also been open about my plans to pull back and disconnect from my community partners in the region over the next few years. But I am still left with the question of why this feels so bad.

In their 2020 article, "Community-Based and Participatory Praxis as Decolonizing Archaeological Methods and the Betrayal of New Research," Uzma Rizvi comments on the heartbreak and sense of betrayal associated with moving on to a new research project and leaving a

with non-profit, project management studies. In American archaeology, the main unit of archaeological inquiry is through the "project," though we often use the term "programme" to refer to smaller-scale outreach, sometimes under the umbrella of a project or a museum. In project management studies, by contrast, projects are temporary by definition and focused on deliverables, while programs are sustained efforts with long-term impacts. I would argue here that archaeological "programmes" in the American mold are often temporary, sometimes moreso than "projects." Definitional ambiguity, acknowledged by Reetz and Sperling (2024, 1), is an unfortunate hallmark or North American public archaeology and perhaps worth its own treatment, especially as to how such slippage can impact early career scholars.

[3] Ducady et al. 2016.

[4] Memorial Art Gallery n.d.

[5] Smith 2025. For more information on these efforts, see Smith 2024, 2025.

[6] Smith 2024.

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community behind. Rizvi highlights how community-centred archaeology can easily lead to feelings of responsibility and investment that go beyond the typical purview of research praxis. In caring for our communities and developing relationships, the prospect of ending those relationships feels wrong, dredging up a sense of guilt from the researcher as possibly having taken advantage of their subjects in a colonial dialogue, or a sense of betrayal when one or both parties do not want the project to end. I have found myself in exactly this predicament, feeling guilty that I openly plan to end my involvement in the area, and wondering what a mutually satisfactory and intentional end looks like.

I use the metaphor of death in this article because of its finality, understanding the power of thinking beyond project hiatuses or pauses to truly consider what an ethical end looks like. Writing from the perspective of an American academic interfacing with local community partners, I approach this topic by first discussing institutional expectations in American academia and the practical limitations in carrying out public archaeology as they pertain to notions of equity, empathy, and intentional practices. I then move on to a discussion of intentionality in considering the end of a project, going from unintentional ends as a methodological blind spot, to quasi-intentional continuities as fraught sustainability models. Finally, I turn to a consideration of community-based death rites as intentional ends, potentially offering public archaeology a blueprint to end a project via celebration and ceremony.[7] Ultimately, this article is about staying accountable to our communities throughout the process of carrying out a public project. Approaching this topic from the perspective of an American academic working in an American setting, this by no means represents all those who do public archaeology. Nevertheless, my experience may offer a point of reflection or criticism to approach other practices and models of public archaeology, both in the United States and around the world. As archaeologists, we know better than most that nothing lasts forever. Co-creating a meaningful or intentional end to a public project may help relieve some of the emotional burden and burnout experienced by research partners and help keep public archaeology viable into the future.

1. Institutional expectations and intentional paradigms in archaeology

At the outset of any public archaeological project, there is an envisioned future. Often, the language to describe the future of a project is through the lens of intentionality.[8] In archaeology, particularly North American archaeology, there are a number of paradigms for intentional project creation and management, including sustainability, high-impact, slow practices, and emotional awareness. Each of these stems from an attempt at a more ethical engagement with community partners. Our paradigms for intentional practice in archaeology have immense value for expanding access and creating a more reflective practice, yet they all fall short of clarifying an intentional end.

Sustainability can be seen as a future-minded approach to intentional practices. Its reach is large, ranging from paleoenvironmental analyses to Indigenous archaeologies and community-based research.[9] It provides a metaphor to think about public practice beyond the practitioner, relying on future generations and sustainable practices to ensure the survival of a project. It also gives us an excuse not to think about ending a project. The pre-

[7] This vantage point was heavily inspired by Shannon Dawdy's 2021 *American Afterlives*, which recounts the construction of death rites and rituals in the 21st century United States.

[8] Reetz and Sperling 2024.

[9] Goldstein 2023.

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eminence of sustainability in archaeology has been critiqued in discussions of eco-criticism as well as public archaeology.[10] Cristóbal Gnecco describes this notion perfectly: "By becoming 'sustainable', archaeology changes to remain unchanged," ultimately reinforcing a status quo.[11] Although helpful for thinking beyond the present individual or project impact, sustainability does not provide a clear end to public projects.

To address issues of access, American universities have placed emphasis on high-impact practices (HIPs), particularly in the humanities and social sciences, which look to academics to create opportunities for students and community members that focus on direct involvement in research. HIPs have a statistically higher impact on Indigenous students and students of colour in higher-education spaces. Yet, HIPs also tend to be less available to students outside privileged institutions and require double or triple the amount of time investment of other, "more traditional" research.[12] HIPs, as the name would suggest, also emphasize impact over aftermath. When planning a public project, the ethos of HIPs then encourages beginnings but does not facilitate endings.

North American archaeology has also seen the rise of slow practices to counter concepts of impact, rapid output, and colonial extraction.[13] This can also be seen in the work of digital public archaeologists who collaborate with communities to carefully ensure they are included in data production and sharing, particularly among Indigenous groups.[14] Slow methodologies emphasize empathy, shared discovery, and embracing different communities outside of academia. Yet, importantly, slow archaeology also necessitates longer-term, cumulative projects that may not yield many publications, grants, or even exhibits quickly.[15] We have not quite figured out how to adequately reward those who engage in public projects without the publication element, making this type of work difficult for early-career scholars, though there has been progress in including language surrounding public projects in tenure requirements.[16] But even a slow approach still does not clarify an ending, just a more thoughtful beginning and continuation.

Archaeologies of care have also become extremely important in discussions of intentional public projects. Supernant et al.'s *Archaeologies of the Heart*, foregrounds emotion, empathy, self-reflection, and connection to highlight stories of archaeologies engaging with communities in respectful and honest ways.[17] This turn towards empathy and sincerity is not new in archaeology, but the explicit discussion of the archaeologist's emotional well-being, including joy, heartache, and grief, serves to humanize the connection made between the archaeologist and the community, especially in public archaeology.[18] Radical self-awareness, emotion, and connection help us home in on ideas that many public archaeologists have felt and discussed without a shared terminology for years. It also allows us to consider concepts of emotional burden and the difficulty of a more empathetic engagement.

[10] Hutchings and La Salle 2019.

[11] Gnecco 2019, 1665.

[12] Risam 2022, 2025.

[13] Caraher 2019. These notions are extrapolated and interpreted from other disciplines, including anthropology, critical theory, and food movements.

[14] Gupta et al. 2023; Kansa et al. 2011.

[15] Importantly, during the 2019 TAG North America conference in Syracuse, New York on "Slow Archaeology," the organizers rightly pointed out the fact that these methodologies can be too slow, echoing the points above regarding relevance and privilege; Syracuse University 2019.

[16] Risam 2022; Smulyan 2022.

[17] Supernant et al. 2020.

[18] Spector 1993; Tarlow 2000.

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But it does not make the work any easier. When we consider honesty, empathy, and open engagement to be best practices in interacting and co-creating projects with communities, it sets us up for pain and loss.[19] It also does not provide a clear way to channel that pain or loss into an ending of any sort. In other words, we are more emotionally aware of the pain we are feeling, but are left without a method to resolve it.

With concepts like sustainability, HIPs, slow archaeology, and archaeologies of empathy and emotion, we have conflicting advice on how (and how fast) we should administer our projects depending on who we want to reach or who we want to protect. Yet, these are all considerations about beginnings or continuations, not endings. As ethical practitioners, we must resist the extractive economy of academia, maintain our humanity by engaging in empathetic practices, and protect our mental health in the process. Without a discussion of endings, this is a difficult dynamic to maintain, leading to burnout, jaded public archaeologists, and a bleak future.

2. Unintentional endings

Most projects plan for a future, including a timeline and research goals. Recent works on community-based PhD theses and intentional public programming emphasize intentionality, sustainability, reciprocity, and mutually beneficial research, and provide thorough pathways for determining research goals, timelines, and stakeholder interests. But they do not provide a roadmap for disengagement.[20] The end is still implicit, and this lack of discussion across the discipline is arguably leading to unintentional endings of public projects.

The reasons why projects end abruptly are familiar to most of us. The challenges of doing public archaeology have been discussed previously, both in terms of money, labour, and time.[21] Money is admittedly more accessible for public projects now than ever in academia, at least through 2024, yet granting agencies usually necessitate the expenditure of funds within a limited timeframe, truncating projects.[22] Simultaneously, archaeological practice tends to be very demanding with physical and intellectual labour. Public projects can be even more labour-intensive as they require consistency and accountability to others in order to be effective. After the initial phases of building a project, most of our labour is maintenance and regular engagement, which are both exhausting and necessary to avoid the extractive tendencies of higher education.[23] Because of this, time commitments are what undo many public projects. Especially at the most precarious stages of academia, time is the most valuable thing for creating the materials necessary to both secure a job and tenure. An outreach programme or public project can become a barrier to success because of the time it takes to be effective, never mind issues of labour or money. Ultimately, these demands can lead to disengagement by the researcher because of scheduling and burnout, resulting in declining project participation, unexpected hiatuses, or an unintentional ending. Community partners also suffer from burnout, stemming from the same host of issues described above.

[19] Surface-Evans 2020.
[20] Atalay and McLeary 2023; Reetz and Sperling 2024.
[21] Little and Shackel 2016; Moshenska et al. 2011.
[22] Smulyan 2022.
[23] Risam 2025, who refers to Baldwin 2021.

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Projects can also experience waning interest. Perhaps it represents an outdated technique or vantage point. Perhaps changing the interests of the public means your project is no longer viable or desired by the community. This should not be seen as a threat, but instead a reflection of the changing nature of society's needs. Archaeological inquiry is constantly changing, and often the best way to update programming or a waning interest in a project is to simply end one and start a new one that better reflects the needs of modern communities and archaeology's public, as well as current academic thought. An unchanging project becomes an artifact of a past moment and potentially harmful.

There can also be a sort of "founder problem."[24] If the labour of the project or programme is not diffused, relying too heavily on one person to continue the efforts, it can quickly collapse if that person disengages. This is particularly true of archaeology, which necessitates an "expert" or qualified leader to oversee excavations. We are hard to replace in these roles. I believe that many outreach efforts and public projects are particularly dependent on one person or very few people, especially when administered from lower-tier academic institutions. This is not viable in the long term, and arguably not ethical, but I think more common than academics would like to admit. It is also a trade-off, making projects precarious that could not otherwise exist because of a lack of funding or a lack of institutional acknowledgement.

And then, there is the undefined hiatus. Many projects lose funding or interest and enter into a hibernation period in hopes of resurrection.[25] This is a kind of liminal state. Their project websites may still list resources, which can remain important for teachers or other interested publics well beyond their hiatuses. They may even have equipment or didactic material in closets at institutions waiting to be accessed and used again. Conceptually, these projects are meant to be in stasis, but they do not stay static. A project website, for instance, may slowly decay over time (hyperlinks dying, images pixelating, utility waning) until the project is archived, revived, or deleted, becoming archaeological itself.[26] Interest in the project erodes, materials become outdated, and it may only exist as a sort of memory or ghost.

In recent years, we have seen a proliferation of this sort of end with ageing project websites of long-ended research endeavours that are not updated or taken down. We even see projects that are ostensibly dead but remain impactful. Arguably, some of the work I did in the mid-2010s with "Alex the Archaeologist" operates in this capacity. The resources we developed from 2012 to 2016 are still accessed and engaged with regularly, including two interactive iBooks, which are used by middle school teachers today.[27] In my own university classroom, I have used and reused the digital remnants of many public-facing projects, including OKAPI island on Second Life to explain the Turkish site of Çatalhöyük to my students, despite the project's death and deletion in 2012.[28] The project lives on within Vimeo and YouTube videos but is otherwise defunct. Without a clear end, these examples are what unintentional endings can look like. While they can remain impactful, as resources

[24] This term has been used in association with independent publishing in recent years, particularly as press founders retire or die, leaving the press in freefall.

[25] The concept of hibernation period is also featured in discussion of non-profit arts organizations ending as well, similarly described by Bach 2009.

[26] Tringham and Ashley 2015.

[27] Memorial Art Gallery Staff and Jenna Shay 2014; Sydney Greaves 2015.

[28] Tringham 2022; Tringham and Ashley 2015.

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or shadows of the original project, it is largely out of the control of the original partners. These projects or resources are essentially abandoned.

3. Project continuities—between intentions

To avoid abandonment, we often seek project continuity. The logic here is that if it is doing good work with the community, the simple solution to individual burnout or the founder problem is to hand the project off to the next generation. But continuity is the default goal of a project that still does not envision its own ending. My experience with a handoff is with my "Alex the Archaeologist" programme, which was handed over to the MAG and rebranded as "Archaeology Alive!" Much of my original material was left intact, and the spirit of the programme remains the same. In retrospect, this type of hand-off was fortuitous. It represents a transition from an academic institution to a non-profit institution that can continue the work and modify it according to its needs relatively easily. It also did not involve actual excavation, which made the handoff much easier. In some ways, this is an ideal exchange, though it does not necessarily ensure the survival of the programme forever, but rather just for the duration of the tenure of the new coordinator.

Many projects have a sort of intergenerational institutional handoff built into them that can lead to lasting engagement. The "Think Like an Archaeologist" programme previously mentioned, for instance, heavily relies on a rotating set of graduate students who are paid to administer it as part of Brown University's Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World. The institutionalization of the programme ensures a consistent stream of engaged, if inexperienced, practitioners who can continue their efforts as long as there is interest and funding for the graduate students. While providing a roadmap for institutions with money and graduate student labour available, this is the exception, rather than the rule, for public programmes and projects. Academic handoffs require a steady stream of interested practitioners who are based at the home institution and motivated to participate in it (either via money, academic obligation, or tenure requirements). Outside of well-funded spaces, such as Ivy League institutions and their financial peers, it can be difficult to do a handoff, owing again to the economics of academia, rather than any lack of desire among others to continue the work. While it is not impossible to do a handoff outside of the original academic institution, that creates a host of issues in terms of visibility, logistics, project ownership for university advertising, as well as buy-in by the second institution. It is often easier and more desirable to create something new.

Ultimately, passing along the work really serves to pass along the burden of care necessary to sustain a public project, whether that is to the next generation of scholars, colleagues at your institution, or the community partner you have been working with. By lauding this type of project continuity as best practice, we are, in theory, trying to decentre the academic for future success and maintain an impactful project. Still, when an archaeologist collaborates on a public project, they are fostering relationships and caring for their community partners. Handing the project off glosses over the emotional rupture that takes place between the departing archaeologist and the community.[29] It also reflects the hope of sustainability with a new generation or new leadership, but no guarantee of a limitless future. A project designed for sustainability defaults to a model of interchangeability, undercutting public archaeology's radical self-awareness and push for empathy and emotional connection between research partners.

[29] Rizvi 2020.

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4. Intentional endings—moving on

What does an intentional ending look like then? How have successful public projects ended to the satisfaction of the entire community? We do not have a good answer to this question. Being archaeologists, obsessed with death, ritual, and the passage of time, this is surprising.[30] Archaeological project endings are normally only discussed in terms of object-oriented best practices for data dissemination and storage. We have developed the means to mark the end of a work cycle, but not the end of the relationships we have fostered during that process. For public archaeology, this absence is stark, given the emotional connections and importance of community relationships.

Nevertheless, archaeology does have intentional ceremonial endings with communities when it comes to the reburial of human remains and associated cultural objects. Ceremonies surrounding reburial have become standard procedure for Indigenous groups in the United States and Canada over the last four decades, as archaeological ethics and legal restrictions demand the return of Indigenous ancestors' remains to their descendants. It has also opened up conversations about what a traditional reburial ceremony looks like and what it means for stakeholders, including the involvement of archaeologists. These ceremonies can be celebrations after the relatively smooth transition from archaeological recovery to traditional reinterment, marking the end of a respectful, communicative relationship. This was the case with the remains of Shuká Káa found in Alaska in 1996, reburied in 2008. This reburial ceremony included archaeologists and bureaucrats who had maintained open communication and respected the wishes of the Tlingit throughout the research process. Ceremonies can also represent the conclusion of protracted emotional strife and cathartic reclamation. Such was the case with the famous example of The Ancient One from Washington State, who was found in 1996 and, after years of legal battles and transgressions of Indigenous sovereignty, returned for reburial in 2017.[31] In contrast to Shuká Káa, the Ancient One was buried in secret by five descendant tribes without researchers present, a testament to the failure of archaeologists to listen to descendant communities and the distrust that results. In both cases, the ceremonies represented an important transitional rite, not just for the community's culture, but to mark the end of either archaeological collaboration or the violent colonial control of an ancestor's body.[32]

In the United States, ceremonial rites are also administered at African burial ground sites during reinterment after excavations, again serving as a way to end the collaboration between archaeologists and the descendant communities, while honouring the traditions of the deceased.[33] For example, the 2003 ceremony at the African Burial Ground in New York City served to reinter the individuals who had been exhumed and studied as part of a project that transformed into a protest-then-community-based excavation in 1991. The "Rites of Ancestral Return" ceremony served to mark the end of the archaeological intervention and the research stage of the project, reinterring 419 individuals into seven funerary mounds, accompanied by a six-day, multi-state procession and a final celebration in New York with music, dancing, and speeches.[34] The ceremony operated as a funeral or a rite of passage. It was not associated with the monument dedication or registration as a National Park; those

[30] Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this obvious blindspot.
[31] Kakaliouras 2019; Nichols et al. 2021.
[32] Fforde et al. 2020.
[33] Frohne 2015.
[34] Frohne 2015 provides an immensely detailed recount of this and other ceremonies held for the African Burial Ground in New York; Herndon 2021.

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would come later in 2006. It also did not signal the end of all collaboration between the community and heritage practitioners, nor even the end of the project exactly, but instead the end of that stage of collaboration between the archaeologists and the community, and the interventions involving direct contact with the human and material remains of the burials.

It is easy to dismiss the example from the African Burial Ground or even Indigenous rematriation/repatriation and reinterment ceremonies as unique circumstances for public archaeology. In all these examples, the ceremonies were designed by the descendant groups to mourn individuals. Simply put, we often do not have human remains in our excavations, nor a strong desire by a descendant group to organize a ceremony. While not the same intensity of emotions, most, if not all, public projects are heavy emotional investments and care-based interactions by design. Public archaeology also contends with landscapes of enslavement, coloniality, poverty, or other emotionally intense circumstances, along with the descendants of such trauma.[35] But when there are no human remains involved or rematriation/repatriation to descendant groups, we are at a loss as to how to mark an ending or who should start that conversation.

As material culture specialists, we are object-oriented by training, and while the principles of community care and emotional well-being have become important to us, we often rely on objects or remains to provide the excuse to hold ceremonies and end relationships. But those rituals and endings also help mend our social fabric and facilitate mourning the loss of the project and our connections to the community.[36] Embracing a ceremony through a project funeral, even without the transfer of remains or objects, may help acknowledge this mourning process and fill the void of an unsatisfactory ending.

Ceremony is powerful, even if it is just a minor event with interested stakeholders in the form of a community gathering or celebration. Museums often hold closing ceremonies to mark the end of an exhibit or collaboration with stakeholder communities. An exhibit closing, for instance, is often framed as a party or celebration, allowing the museum's public to say goodbye. It also implies the rebirth of the space, knowing the gallery will be stripped and restored for new exhibitions, collaborations, and public interactions. It serves to unstick the space, the labour, and the objects within, and ushers the exhibit past a liminal state into its afterlife.[37] Perhaps we should treat our projects like this. I believe that many archaeologists and community partners already do a version of this, marking the end of collaborations with dinners, events, or even small ceremonies. But we are unaware of what exactly we are doing, and we do not write about it enough in academic texts.

When a project goes into decline and when it is clear that it cannot sustain itself much longer, it enters into a liminal zone, which is described above as the unplanned hiatus or hibernation period. Project liminality, as a state of existence between social statuses, leaves the burden of care for all parties frozen without resolution. It gets stuck. The weight of this

[35] Surface-Evans 2020.

[36] Paraphrasing Dawdy 2021, 60.

[37] There are also many resources for discussing museum closures regarding legal concerns and responsibilities to the public. In a 2018 webinar by Janice Klein for the Alliance of American Museums, she discussed the role of mourning in museum closures as well, relaying first-hand accounts of the value of funeral rites and rituals as part of the permanent closing of museums. Such a treatment recognizes the emotional value of museum and heritage spaces for the public. Closing a museum marks a finality not unlike ending an archaeological project: dispersing objects, providing for the storage of records, and ultimately severing the relationship with the community.

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care may stymie a future of different priorities or growth. Public archaeological projects, owing to their complex design, do not naturally have clear endings. Planning a ceremonial end or even a funeral can serve as a rite of passage to transition a project from this liminal state to one of perceived completion, intentionally ending the collaboration and saving the project from perpetual liminality.

5. Towards an afterlife of public projects and programmes

In public archaeology, emotion and connection are foundational. Being humble, receptive, fallible, and intentional are all essential to engaging with groups outside of the academic bubble.[38] Connecting to others in this capacity is incredible, and every archaeologist should experience what this feels like at some point in their career. But we also need to be aware of disconnection as well, both intentional and unintentional, in this delicate relationship. Every project ends eventually. If we are to truly co-create these projects with our community partners, we must also learn how to co-manage an ending.

The hesitance by archaeologists to let things go or to let programmes or projects move on beyond their intention is evidence that we have not yet decentred ourselves as the researcher in the conversation regarding public interfaces. Sustainability of our public efforts is perhaps "archaeology future-making," privileging our discipline rather than meaningful engagement with communities.[39] Expecting others to carry on our name or our legacy in the form of never-ending projects with an infinite future places that burden on the people we hoped to reach. Acknowledging the end can serve as a counter to these issues. Collaborating with community partners to plan the end of a project does not quite decentre the researcher, but it fulfils the promise of collaboration in all stages of the project. It may also lead to a more satisfying result. Lifecycles have endings, like death, and should not necessarily be feared or denied.[40] Once we can accept that our projects will end, we can understand how to grieve this end with our communities and part ways with compassion and respect.

An essential step in planning an ending is to co-create project goals with community partners and establish project timelines, as discussed by scholars already.[41] Being clear about intentions for the project, both from the perspective of the academic and the community, is vastly important for all those involved. There is also a conversation to be had about the irregularity of funding cycles, which might hinder or accelerate the project, depending on institutional support and grant writing success. At the same time, duration and goals are only part of the equation. There also needs to be a discussion about the end and the grieving process. What might an ideal ending look like for all involved? We have to ask our community partners about the body of work created, especially data ownership, results, and dissemination. Each community has different needs, laws, and capacities, which will change what a project looks like after its end. Communities should also be consulted as to how they want the project to end, whether it be continuity through the replacement of personnel or a more finite conclusion. It is possible that no party wants anything special, just acknowledgement of an end, a sense of closure, and space for grieving. It may also be worth considering creating an event or a funerary ritual to mark the end, celebrating the work of all those involved, and giving closure as a rite of passage.

[38] Hoffman 2020.
[39] Hutchings and La Salle 2019, 1658.
[40] See Dawdy 2021.
[41] Labrador et al. 2024.

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Academic and granting institutions should make more of an effort to include not just sustainability statements for project data but also be more direct in asserting the need for a peri-mortem plan. Inserting questions such as "What provisions do you have in place for ending the project?" or "What conversations have you or will you have with your community partners about project longevity and/or expectations for an end date?" or even "How will you mark the end of your project with your community partners?" might be a helpful start. These would not just identify the intentions of a public practitioner but also force anyone applying for a grant to carefully consider the idea of intentional project continuities or endings.

While writing this piece in 2025, the American humanities and social sciences are under direct attack by our own government. Although projects and grants flourished in 2021–2024 after COVID, it is likely that many humanities projects may be facing their end unexpectedly over the next few years. It is timely, then, to consider how we might end our projects intentionally, even if we did not initially plan for such an ending. This should not be misconstrued as defeat, as ending a project allows a new and perhaps more effective collaboration to take place that may be better equipped to resist the attacks we are currently facing.

Acknowledging death completes the life cycle of a project and mitigates the burden of care placed on both professional practitioners and non-academic stakeholders. It can provide a fertile foundation for new, community-driven interests, have an impactful afterlife, or it can unbind the original intention of the project for potentially fruitful future engagements by others in the community or outside of it. We should not fear death but embrace the potential in planning a project's demise, being as intentional as we can about its end and its afterlife.

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