

**Conference on Public Archaeology**  
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**Keynote**

**Public Archaeology: Where are We Going?**

Good morning everyone. [all the thank yous]

**[INTRO]**

Thank you to FPAN for hosting this inaugural space for public-minded archaeologists.  
So let's see who is here. Who are we?  
Show of hands.

First, who makes their home in Florida?  
Who has come from another state?  
Another country?

Who here is an archaeologist? Students included. Avocational archaeologists included.  
Who is a cultural heritage practitioner who practices something other than archaeology?  
Again, students and avocational included.  
You can be more than one.  
Who is a community member who works with archeologists or other cultural heritage practitioners?  
How about traveling companions and family?  
Who else? Anyone else? What's your connection?

Let's find out a little more.  
Like any of you who may do your public archaeology by talking with various publics, I want to get a sense of who is here.  
Who works in an academic setting?  
Or a cultural resource or cultural heritage management company?  
Who works in a museum?  
Any level of government?  
What else? Anyone in a different professional setting?

So we're getting a certain sense of who is here - all connected by what we have in common.

Thank you for being here and for being in the public archaeology community.

### **[Fundamentals: SOCIAL CAPITAL]**

So here we are, in this conference, playing out the basic social theory of bonding social capital. I imagine this is a familiar concept. Bonding social capital builds internal cohesion within a group - here we are a group of people who care about public archaeology; it's homogenizing and can be comforting and welcoming.

But of course bonding does not come without exclusion.

As we look around to see who's here we also get a sense of who is not here. Who is excluded when we're included? Sometimes that's appropriate; for example, we don't necessarily need astro-physicists or architects to be at this conference. And sometimes it matters a lot. And the categories and identities that we notice and name matter.

I hope that we'll all figure out throughout this conference, who is missing and what would it take to make the circle wider and more inviting.

The complementary type of social capital to bonding is bridging to create networks between groups, to cross social divides and to enhance wider community cohesion. I want to mention two legal scholars – John Powell and Stephen Menendian – because they have built on the social capital literature to offer a framework of “Othering and Belonging.” We use these terms a lot now but I'll want to repeat their definition of Othering. They define othering as a [quote] “*set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities.*”[end of quote]

Othering, therefore, promotes and justifies injustice. They believe that the only sustainable solution is inclusion and belonging, stating that [quote] “*the most important good we distribute to each other in society is membership.*”[end quote] Bridging is a strategy that overcomes the false idea that we are separate.

**It's worth stating again: “the most important good we distribute to each other in society is membership.” That's our touchstone for this hour. How does the purpose of public archaeology intersect with that idea?**

Bridging social capital is one of those things that archaeology can contribute to through the histories we research *and* through planning and carrying out that research with local and descendant communities. Truly collaborative archaeology enhances mutual respect and interdependence between us and the groups we partner with.

I titled this presentation “Public Archaeology: Where are We Going?” I want to spend a little time on some Fundamentals to ground us and then a little time on Where I think Public Archaeology is. Then I’ll draw some of those threads together to think about where we are going and the choices we make on that journey.

So, the fundamentals start with the social capital of bonding and bridging and othering and belonging.

### **[WEBS OF POWER]**

Public archaeology needs those concepts because we want to work across boundaries. I think we also have to understand something about the webs of power in which we live and work *and* the webs of power that were in play in whatever past societies we study.

There are many theorists, practitioners and advocates with something to say about these entangled webs of power, but let me point to just one who states this very clearly in a way directly relevant to our work.

I draw here on the work of the late anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer. You may know him as one of the founders of the organization “Partners in Health.” He spent his career working for health and human rights, most famously in Haiti but in other poverty-stricken places too.

Farmer had this to say about “the social machinery of oppression,” that is structural violence. He observes, that [quote] *“Erasing history is perhaps the most common explanatory sleight-of-hand relied upon by the architects of structural violence. Erasure or distortion of history is part of the process of desocialization necessary for the emergence of hegemonic accounts of what happened and why.”* [quote - repeat if it seems necessary]

It is not enough, however, to focus solely on history. Farmer explains why:[quote] *“Both parts of this explanatory duty—the geographically broad and the historically deep—are critical. Those who look only to the past to explain the ethnographically visible will miss the webs of living power that enmesh witnessed misery. Some of the links that must be made visible are the living links. . . . Those who look only to powerful present-day actors to explain misery will fail to see how inequality is structured and legitimated over time. Which construction materials were used, and when, and why, and how?”* [end of quote]

What we as archaeologists investigate about the past is entangled with the webs of living power. Working with local and descendant communities requires acknowledging

not only the standpoints and biases of archaeologists, but also those of communities: their own complexities, their various roles in the social machinery of oppression, their own injustices, and their intersections with other communities.

Let me quote again Farmer's question concerning how inequality is structured and legitimated: "*Which construction materials were used, and when, and why, and how?*"

Archaeological research, designed in collaboration with affected communities, can provide some insights into the material expressions of that structuring and legitimating. One of archaeology's strong suits is investigating evidence to analyze how wealth, identity, power, and hierarchy functioned in the past. If we can deeply analyze archaeological and archival evidence, along with community memory, can we start to see how structure, culture, and interpersonal actions formed a stable system that persists into the present? On the ethnographic side of the project, we need similar deep analysis to describe the current lived experience within present day webs of power. These webs are stabilized by structure, culture, and interpersonal actions and because they are so stabilized, they resist transformation.

So the ways we talk about and learn about and teach about the past matter in real time every day. We are part of the webs of power.

**I'll state our touchstone again: "the most important good we distribute to each other in society is membership." How does our purpose intersect with that?**

### **[ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ARCHAEOLOGY]**

Let me wrap up the Fundamentals that ground us with four assumptions that I make about the practice of archaeology. These help me think about our purpose and our possibilities.

**First**, archaeology does work in the world. We practice in the field, labs, offices, for-profit businesses and nonprofits, classrooms, museums, and elsewhere. And we have impacts: social, political, cultural, physical, economic, ecological, and who knows what other sorts of impacts.

Archaeology plays a role in those webs of power – either supporting or disrupting, for example, ideologies of privilege and hierarchy, based on any combination of perceived gender, race, and other identity markers.

So that's the first assumption, that our work has impact.

The **second** is that we and our work are not neutral. There's a T-shirt that I see pretty often now - it says: "Museums Are Not Neutral". Same for us, right? Archaeology as a practice is not neutral. Nor are archaeologists as practitioners neutral. We are embedded, with varying degrees of consciousness, in our social, cultural, economic, and political contexts and we are steeped in our biases. How did Howard Zinn put it in the title of his memoir?: *You Can't be Neutral on a Moving Train*.

My **third** assumption is that we have influence over the work that archaeology does in the world. We don't necessarily have control over what people do with our work, but we do have influence. I think it would be a mistake and an abdication of our responsibility to give up our power by claiming that we don't have any or by insisting on our neutrality.

Each of these three assumptions is entangled with the idea that there is a usable, useful and used past, a concept that has powered history and history wars for over a century.

My **fourth and final** assumption is drawn from decades of archaeologists' collaboration with descendant communities. That is, archaeology cannot stand alone, not if we believe we can make relevant contributions to society today and in the future. Transdisciplinary work is needed, across academic disciplines and across types of expertise outside of professionalized spaces, within communities.

So there are our fundamentals:

We have social capital concepts about othering and belonging.

We see that webs of power functioning now and historically are related to each other and that we are involved. And we have reason to think that we can help address Farmer's question concerning how inequality is structured and legitimated: "Which construction materials were used, and when, and why, and how?"

And we can accept - at least for the sake of argument - that archaeology does work in the world; that our work is not neutral; that we have influence but not control; and that we have no choice but to work across boundaries if we are going to make positive contributions to a usable past.

**Let me turn now to some thoughts about where public archaeology is.**

### **[WHERE ARE WE?]**

There is an ethical through-line in archaeology that is many decades deep. And it can seem frustratingly long and minimally productive. But, at least some contingent in generations of practitioners for at least 50 years have recognized that archaeology has both the potential and the obligation to do what we can to make the world a better place.

Archaeologists – many of you in this room – increasingly see our work as socially responsible and therefore take intentional actions.

We see a groundswell of archaeologists who center social justice in their research and action, to right wrongs. Some of those wrongs were created by archaeology as a practice in the past or in the present. For some of those wrongs, rooted in the past, archaeology may be able to help expose or explain or provide ways to reimagine them and take action against current inequities.

Increasingly, we theorize and practice civically-engaged, community-focused archaeology and we want to empower descendant communities and work toward justice. We talk a lot about rehabilitating the field from its colonial, capitalist, racist, and androcentric roots. We embrace all kinds of labels: activist, engaged, feminist, queer, critical, anti-racist, and public. And we seek structural change in the discipline.

As an example, explicitly anti-racist archaeology works with descendant communities to rehabilitate the archaeologies of enslavement and freedom-seeking and to fight for rights of Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC). Ayana Flewellan and several colleagues, for example, in an article entitled, *The Future of Archaeology is Antiracist*, emphasize that [quote] “Black archaeology is explicitly political and grounded in intersectional analyses. It entails collaboration with descendant communities and seeks redress, through dialogue with them, of the harms that archaeology and heritage practices have perpetrated against communities of color.” [end quote]

Indigenous archaeology reclaims not only human remains and grave goods but also the rights of Indigenous people to control their own ancestors, bodies, cultural material, and stories.

Queer and Feminist archaeologies oppose hierarchy and call for a new kind of archaeology with different questions and methods, engaging all aspects of identity, rejecting the normative.

Climate crisis archaeology identifies adaptation strategies of ancient people who coped with adverse climate events or other crises. The goal is to offer citizens and policymakers insights for seeing and escaping our own increasingly disastrous future.

A nascent archaeology of the heart draws on our human capacity to love one another and our world, to treat each other as fully human, deserving of compassion and dignity.

These are all essential interconnected components of *Where we are*, as public archaeology.

Many communities who work with archaeologists value archaeology as a path toward sharing their stories and demanding fair treatment. Some of this fair treatment is to counter the injustice of erasure.

Epistemic injustice, which is unfairness related to knowledge, becomes apparent in the erasure of histories. It also appears when we erase or ignore present-day communities in projects concerning their history or impacting the places they live.

I want to briefly offer three specific projects as examples for where we are. And I'll offer our touchstone again as a prelude: **“the most important good we distribute to each other in society is membership.” How does our purpose intersect with that?**

The examples are public archaeology projects at Amache in Colorado, the Ransom and Sarah Williams Farmstead in Texas, and the Anthracite Heritage Project in Pennsylvania.

Nearly twenty years ago, Bonnie Clark at the University of Denver began a long-term community-engaged project at the site of Amache in southeastern Colorado. Amache – once known as the Granada Relocation Center - was one of the ten main incarceration camps that held Japanese Americans during World War II. Students in the field school in historical archaeology and museum studies worked together with former internees, family members of former internees, and residents from the town of Granada.

Clark has observed how engaging with communities of survivors and descendants can destabilize the practice of archaeology in productive ways. That work can expand our conceptual frameworks. She calls the clash of knowledge systems that happened during the field seasons *hermeneutical hotspots*. These hotspots flare up when different forms of knowledge clash, such as between archaeological terminology and the language of lived experience in the incarceration camp. For example, worldviews clashed over meanings of the word “artifact.” For archaeologists, the word felt neutral. Neutral. But a former internee was disturbed that childhood toys were labeled as “artifacts,” because the toys then had become simply data, estranged from personal meaning.

Few residents of the United States outside of the Japanese American community know much about the largest displacement of the US population in the 20th twentieth century. Clearly epistemic injustice has been done to Japanese Americans through the erasure

of their experience in national public memory. But collaborative archaeology can help to counter this. One of the former internees volunteering with the project expressed this.

Dennis Fujita was born at Amache. He returned after he retired because he was attracted by the social justice goals of the project and he's written about his experience. He writes that he appreciated the opportunity to both contribute to archaeological research and to [quote] "*personally heal from the psychological wounds of incarceration.*" [end of quote] He and his nephew joined other Japanese Americans as volunteers with the archaeology team. Fujita is clear about his own goals toward epistemic justice, writing that, [quote] "*For some of us, "sharing these stories with the general public is the ultimate goal."*" [end of quote]

Moving from Colorado to Texas now.

I suspect that many people here have run into structural barriers to community-based and community-led work. Maria Franklin and Nedra Lee – when they were both at the University of Texas – described their work with the Ransom and Sarah Williams Farmstead project south of Austin. They developed the oral history and community outreach portions of the project but the CRM context presented familiar challenges. These challenges included limited funding and restrictions on the use of the funding, very hurried schedules, and barriers to non-professionals working on-site. The normal structure of work got in the way of community members joining the archaeologists in fieldwork. Everyone involved saw that increasing community participation would be good for both CRM and the profession as a whole. So, the CRM firm performing the archaeology for the Texas Department of Transportation—Prewitt and Associates, Inc.—hired African American students as field technicians and trained them. That structural change to the normal business practice allowed the community collaboration that was essential to the project. Franklin's and Lee's goal was to create a multivocal narrative bridging the community's memories with the results of the archival and archaeological research.

The project investigated the Williams family's thirty-year occupation that started in 1871 when Ransom Williams purchased 45 acres in Bear Creek to become part of a minority of Black landowners after emancipation. The Williams were one of just two Black families in the town. The descendants' interpretations of race relations in their close-knit community helped the researchers understand how the Williams family could successfully live in Bear Creek for thirty years even though they had to cope with persistent anti-Black racism. The Williams's land ownership supported their autonomy, but it did not build wealth and it did not protect them from racism. The community members who embraced the project did so at least partly to raise the visibility of Black

history and to recognize the contributions of their ancestors to the development of Texas. Community input improved the project results and provided a way for the community to share their stories and their resilience.

And now to Pennsylvania for the third and last of these short vignettes.

In 2009 Paul Shackel and his students established the Anthracite Heritage Project in northeastern Pennsylvania. Their original purpose was to explore the archaeology and public memory of the 1897 Lattimer Massacre as an act of collaborative commemoration. The Lattimer Massacre occurred when a sheriff and his rapidly deputized posse fired on unarmed striking coal miners. The ersatz lawmen murdered 19 men and injured at least 38 more as they attempted to flee. This event is one of many acts of violence against immigrant workers that has been all but erased from the public memory. Shackel's project quickly expanded beyond the Massacre site both archaeologically and ethnographically. The project focuses archaeologically on the work and daily lives of immigrants who came to work in the coal mines and ethnographically on the experiences of recent Latino immigrants living in the region today.

Shackel has written about the project's goal to connect the descendants of earlier Italian and Slavic immigrants with present-day Latino immigrants through [quote] *"universal values that we all want and desire—such as peace, good health, education, and the ability to sustain oneself."* [end quote] Such connections are meant to build empathy and make the Lattimer project - and history of immigrant work – relatable to anyone, regardless of the group they identify with.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the techniques to connect people through mutual values was a mentorship program in partnership with the community-based nonprofit Hazleton Integration Project. Local teenagers from both Latino and non-Latino communities were able to work alongside university students in the field and lab. More recently, with the same intent to build bridges and disrupt the othering of the newer immigrants, they've partnered with the Pennsylvania Anthracite Heritage Museum in Scranton for an oral history project called "We are Anthracite." Interviews are featured on the museum's website and will eventually be integrated into the physical exhibits that are under renovation. The interviews with six Latino immigrants – some who have lived in Pennsylvania for decades – feature stories about their arrival, love of the land, challenges, work, community, and history.

### **[THREADS]**

In these three projects and many more – many of which you yourselves are involved with – there are some common threads about Where We Are in public archaeology.

One of those threads is collaboration with communities – both descendant and local – and serving the needs of those communities with appropriate humility. Collaborative community-based archaeology is reinventing the structure of the field. Archaeologists have expertise to offer but “nonexperts” often teach the “experts” what they find significant about the past and how it connects to the present, if the experts are willing to learn.

Another of those threads is epistemic justice: fairness about knowledge.

In Colorado: the poorly known incarceration of Americans in America during World War II.

Near Austin: the resilience needed by Black families to cope with violence and impoverishment.

In Northeastern Pennsylvania: the invisibility of literal class warfare.

In each of those quick examples of our colleagues’ work, they were collaborating with communities to find and share stories that have been erased or hidden or dismissed – and as we see increasingly – outlawed.

**Here’s our touchstone again: “the most important good we distribute to each other in society is membership.”** What does it mean for us?

Public Archaeology cannot work in a vacuum.

I want to respect and salute our colleagues in the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) who are holding their annual conference right now across the state in Jacksonville – in the same city where three people were murdered in early August in a Dollar Store by a white supremacist. Carter G. Woodson established ASALH in 1915, so the organization has been around for a long time. For over a century they have been demonstrating the vital importance of studying and preserving history to the health and resilience of Black communities.

ASALH resisted calls to boycott the state of Florida to protest the state’s actions against teaching Black history. They are instead making the point - right now - that they will not be intimidated but will faithfully follow their mission to promote the study of African American life and history.

Related to that, I want to quote a short part of ASALH’s statement condemning the racist killings in Jacksonville:

*“Recently, some of these gunmen, such as this one in Jacksonville, have targeted African Americans. They have sought to start a race war by killing African Americans and inspiring other white supremacists to follow in their footsteps. They want to strike fear in African Americans and terrorize our communities just as white supremacists have done in the past.*

*But the members of ASALH know the history of these gunmen. We have seen their actions in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Rosewood, and Ocoee, Florida, as well as elsewhere in the United States. Since we know about them and their racist actions, we do not fear them. Just like our ancestors we will stand fast in our opposition to their violent actions against our communities and work with other Americans to take the guns out of the hands of those who should not have them.”*

I believe it is crucial to appreciate that people who are hurt by history have a stake in it and are the ones who can most clearly see the social justice implications for it.

ASALH's statement is not only about physical violence; it is also about cultural violence and structural violence that seek to distort and erase and outlaw history, knowledge, and learning.

There are webs of historical and ethnographic power that are stabilized by violence: direct physical and psychological violence, cultural violence such as erasure and lies, structural violence hidden in our everyday institutions. We all are entangled in these webs of power.

Let me quote again Farmer's question concerning how inequality is structured and legitimated: *“Which construction materials were used, and when, and why, and how?”*

We can re-state that question specifically for public archaeology: How has public archaeology been used - and when and how and why - to structure and legitimate inequality and injustice?

But there is the flip side to that question. How has public archaeology been used - and when and how and why - to structure and legitimate dignity, equity, and compassion?

And those two questions together are the key questions for *Where are We Going as Public Archaeology*.

As we consider where we are going it is important not to equate power and violence. Power does not equal violence. There are domains of power and both violence and

positive peace-making operate in them. They mirror each other and we each need to decide which to support – violence or peace - there is no neutral.

So, where we are going is not about the past. There is no refuge in the past. And we can't get there anyway.

What we need where we are going – in addition to collaboration, service to and with communities, and humility – is imagination.

Imagination to see people in both the past and present as human beings worthy of dignity, equity, and compassion.

Imagination of new ideas beyond ideologies of privilege and hierarchy and instead toward what we hold in common.

Imagination to create structures and incentives for *remembering and knowing* to counter organized forgetting and weaponized ignorance.

The author and poet Wendell Berry has observed that our resort to violence—our violent way of life that destroys land and people—is a failure of imagination. He sees imagination as a force of justice and offers it as a “way of knowing things not otherwise knowable,” the “power by which we sympathize,” and the “power by which we see the place, the predicament, or the story we are in.”

There's good news here in that archaeology is one of those practices that thrives on imagination. I think we have the tools we need.

But I want to ask you:

How can we imagine the paths to bridging and belonging, to overcoming the false idea that we are separate, to creating mutually beneficial relationships that connect us?

What do we need to change in our own attitudes, beliefs, disciplinary practices, and structures?

## **[DISCUSSION]**

**We have some time for discussion.**

I don't know about you, but for nearly all the public meetings or workshops or whatever that I'm in, we set ground rules or group guidelines for discussion.

A popular guideline is “Use “I” statements” so that each of us speaks only for ourself and not for others. Another – “Share the Air” – encourages leaving room for others to express themselves. This one essentially recognizes that we all have unique backgrounds and life experiences and because of that we need to welcome and respect others’ perspectives.

And then finally: be willing to examine our assumptions. We all need to observe our own ways of thinking and be willing to challenge them. I don’t think we could learn much if we weren’t willing to do that.

So I’d like to propose that our group agreements are to speak for ourselves, share the air to welcome other perspectives, and examine our own assumptions.

Do those group agreements feel reasonable to you? Thank you; I appreciate you agreeing to them.

I’ll share our touchstone one more time: **“the most important good we distribute to each other in society is membership.”**

Now I have a couple of questions for you about where we are going in public archaeology. I am hoping that we can make some fresh meaning together.

Then we can open it up to questions for me and for anyone else.

Does anything change for you when you think about public archaeology countering violence with peace-making?

Does anything change for you if public archaeology shifts our focus to uplifting dignity, equity and compassion?

**[DISCUSSION]**

Notes:

This talk was drawn from:

Little, Barbara J.

2023 *Bending Archaeology toward Social Justice: Transformational Action for Positive Peace*. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.

See the following for specific citations mentioned in the talk:

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