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## Book Review: Transforming Archaeology: Activist practices and prospects

Sonya Atalay, Lee Rains Clauss, Randall H McGuire, John R Welch (editors), *Transforming Archaeology: Activist practices and prospects* [<http://www.lcoastpress.com/book.php?id=488>] , Left Coast, 2014, ISBN: 978-1-61132-962-9, 266 Pages, \$34.99 (US) Paperback

Review by Suzie Thomas



[[http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-wtIFMj5omH4/U9IV1AsqB-I/AAAAAAAAAMQ/zyO3qo3T-4k/s1600/488\\_tn.jpg](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-wtIFMj5omH4/U9IV1AsqB-I/AAAAAAAAAMQ/zyO3qo3T-4k/s1600/488_tn.jpg)]

The focus in this book, for the most part, is on the genuinely empowering potential that may be found through the research and practice of archaeology, if carried out in a way that responds to, works with, and is guided by the needs and views of local and descendent communities.

In a particularly nice touch, each chapter begins with the contributor's personal perspective, as they reflect on their own careers and attempt to pinpoint retrospectively the moments when they regarded their work as 'activist' in some way. Similarly, each chapter ends with a 'Considering Methods' section, in which the contributor picks out and elaborates on one particular aspect of activist archaeology.

What sits between the personal opening and practical closing of each chapter is also insightful. The interplay between each chapter, in which there is ample cross-referencing (particularly in Ferguson's concluding chapter), is a useful way of reminding the reader of the parallels and differences between chapters, and indicates the extent to which the book was crafted as a collaborative and reflexive endeavour. It is clear from the outset that, while each contributor provides their own arguments, some common ground was laid. However, that is not to say that consensus in message and voice was reached completely, and we are reminded subtly on a number of occasions that there was not

Many of the chapters give case studies from personal experiences. Perhaps understandably given the roots of the publication, the majority of case studies discussed come from North America (for example Atalay, McGuire), although McAnany presents work with Maya communities in Central America and Pyburn reflects on recent experiences in Kyrgyzstan. Nicholas also provides an overview of other international projects that have come to fruition as part of the IPinCH [[https://www.blogger.com/editor/static\\_files/blank\\_quirks.html#\\_edn1](https://www.blogger.com/editor/static_files/blank_quirks.html#_edn1)] project. Some chapters are more theoretical, such as Castañeda's, which explores thoroughly the concept of activism and argues for the term to be interpreted broadly.

From a personal perspective, I am about to embark on a new project with colleagues from both Helsinki and Oulu Universities, looking at 'difficult' or 'dark' heritage and its impact on local communities – Finns, Sámi and others – in Finnish Lapland. I envision the experiences shared in these pages will greatly help inform our approach. I also found the chapters by Welch and Ferris particularly thought-provoking as they questioned the 'accepted' goals of current archaeological practice. While commenting (presumably) on the situation in the USA and Canada, the point about the extractive-consumptive paradigm has a relevance for the current archiving crisis in the UK, and I daresay in many other countries as well. Other approaches which may take time for the discipline to accept (if indeed it does) concern the ownership of information. IPinCH projects deposit their data with the local community, and access is granted to the researchers on the community's terms. Nicholas notes that in practice it was difficult for protocols and procedures at partner universities to accept this alternative status quo.

The expressed desire within the opening chapter to transform not only archaeology but also the world beyond it is optimistic but also rather ambitious. The editors state that they will measure the success of the book not in terms of citation numbers, but based 'more on the intellects and imaginations liberated from the shackles of an inward-looking and self-serving archaeology'. This is an admirable goal, and most who are involved with community archaeology in particular will agree that archaeology should be less about personal success, and more about the benefits that can be achieved with and for others, especially groups that are in some way marginalized or disenfranchised. However, in terms of changing the wider world, Ferris and Welch note objectively that 'from the State's perspective, the call by First Nations and other groups to have a role, or even the primary role, in managing and deciding outcomes for the archaeological heritage is a relatively easy "give" in the complex and ongoing mediation of issues of sovereignty, fiduciary responsibility and autonomy'.

Clauss criticizes labels such as 'public', 'engaged' and 'participatory' in her chapter as 'contrivance', and the publication clearly aims to be seen as more than just a textbook for those with an interest in community engagement as a sort of sub-discipline to 'mainstream' archaeology. Several of the authors (Welch and Ferris, Ferguson) observe that an overwhelming 90% of archaeology in North America is carried out under the auspices of archaeological resource management – commercial archaeological contractors, municipal employees, museum staff, and in other applied settings. The challenge will be to encourage this large but usually very busy constituency of the archaeological community to take the time to read the book.

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[i] [[https://www.blogger.com/editor/static\\_files/blank\\_quirks.html#\\_ednref1](https://www.blogger.com/editor/static_files/blank_quirks.html#_ednref1)] Intellectual  
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