

Cosmopolitan Archaeologies*. Lynn Meskell, ed. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. 296 pp.

Reviewed by Claudine Payne

Before I comment on the substance of this book, I have three complaints, large, medium, and small, for the publisher and editor. The first and greatest—a fatal flaw, in fact—is a printing error which resulted, in my copy, in the elimination of an article by Jane Lydon on Australia and half of an article by Ian Lilley on New Caledonia. All comments below therefore exclude these two articles. So, a warning to the reader: If you buy this book, check it carefully first to make sure it is complete. My second complaint is for the editor. Several of the articles are written in long-winded, self-important, and turgid prose styles, leaving me, at least, frustrated and annoyed. This obscurantism is unnecessary, as illustrated by the lucid styles offered by Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ian Hodder. And finally to the editor or copyeditor, a small but annoyingly distracting issue—the verbs “affect” and “effect” have different meanings and are not transposable.

In its simplest form, cosmopolitanism is the philosophical view that all humans are part of one community. It has several variants depending on whether this community is viewed as economic, moral, or political. Many of the archaeologists and ethnographers contributing to this volume follow a contemporary variant of cosmopolitanism articulated by British-Ghanaian-American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah.

One of the most important insights of the book builds on Appiah’s discussion of the seemingly paradoxical concept of “rooted cosmopolitanism.” Applied to archaeology, heritage, and preservation ethics, this means that context is essential. What works in one situation may not work in another. Should the Taliban be able to destroy images that offend their religious sensibilities but which others regard as cultural treasures (Colwell-Chanthaphonh)? Should Thai villagers be able to modify ancient stupas as part of contemporary ritual (Denis Byrne)? Should historic Ahayu:da now in museums be returned to the Zuni, who may allow them to disintegrate as they were originally intended to do (Colwell-Chanthaphonh)? Colwell-Chanthaphonh calls this the preservation paradox—“one group’s notion of cultural preservation can be another group’s notion of cultural destruction” (p. 143).

This brings us to the heart of the book—the concept of heritage preservation varies across cultures. Archaeologists must therefore learn new ways of addressing and thinking about heritage practices. More and more, archaeologists must draw on their anthropological training both in the practice of archaeology and in the preservation of antiquities. The contributors to the volume present case studies which illustrate this issue.

In her introduction, Lynn Meskell offers an overarching view of cosmopolitan archaeologies, a concept which, as far as I can tell, is a fairly new one. She notes early on that because of its rootedness, universal solutions are not likely. And indeed many of the chapters in the book point

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more to questions, complaints, or problems. If the concept of cosmopolitan archaeologies is indeed fairly new, then the emphasis on criticism is predictable. Nonetheless some of the chapters, such as Alfredo González-Ruibal's on "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism" and to a lesser extent, Sandra Scham's on the construction of the Middle Eastern past, read like graduate students challenging the state of the discipline (and sometimes the world). I would have preferred a more constructive approach.

Whether you agree with the ideas in this book or not, it was certainly eye-opening to me as an archaeologist working in public outreach and heritage preservation. Although most of the articles deal with the practice of archaeology outside the United States, many of the cases described have parallels here. For example, I immediately recognized Meskell's dilemma in dealing with South African parks in which nature was privileged over culture, a situation familiar to archaeologists interacting with Arkansas state parks (and probably other states' parks too). Similarly, Scham's comment on "the difficulty of getting people to care about places that they don't view as their patrimony" (p. 175) resonated with me as an archaeologist living in a town filled with Euro- and African-Americans and trying to persuade them of the value of researching and preserving the area's Native American past.

To end this review, I recommend that readers pay particular attention to Hodder's chapter, "Mavili's Voice," on the cultural heritage of Turkey. This lovely (yes, I know it's not a word usually found in reviews) article lays out the complexity and multi-strandedness of "cosmopolitan archaeologies" beautifully. Moreover the reader even gets to meet some individual "voices"—Mavili who worked on the Çatalhöyük project and narrated a documentary, Sadrettin, a guard on the project who wrote a book about his experiences working at the site, and even the female archaeology students at the site who continue to wear head coverings despite university dictates against it. As with the other chapters, no solutions are offered, but Hodder's description of archaeologists walking a fine line in dealing with issues of heritage and preservation serves to emphasize Meskell's introductory contention that the volume "reveals a new suite of roles and responsibilities for archaeology and its practitioners and it suggests that these newly forged relationships are inherently cosmopolitan in nature and ethos" (p. 1).

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