Archaeologies of Listening
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Archaeologies of listening should foster ethical, inclusive practice. But that is not always easy, especially when we may not like what we hear. How we negotiate the politics of the present while staying true to the evidence of the past is the central challenge of responsible, ethically engaged archaeological practice. Drawing from efforts to engage archaeology as an integral part of peacebuilding in post-Troubles Northern Ireland, I want to address the risks and the rewards of collaborative cross-community practice. Positioning archaeology as a means of bridging the divisions in postconflict settings toward the creation of a stable, shared society requires an ability not only to listen but also to hear and respect the strength of personal and community narratives, even when those narratives may be founded on fundamental misrepresentations of the past.

In Northern Ireland, society remains divided into two communities, broadly drawn as Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist. Today’s divided identities are understood to be rooted in the seventeenth-century expansion of British power over Ireland, expressed in part through the importation of loyal British settlers as part of the Ulster Plantation scheme, launched in 1609—plantation in this instance meaning the planting of people. Engaging people in the present with the archaeological evidence relating to this contested period, seen as the origin of what has been termed an ethnic conflict between the Catholic descendants of the Gaels and the Protestant descendants of the planters by some analysts (e.g., McGarry and O’Leary 2000), carries considerable risk. The deconstruction of long-held narratives can render community collaborators anxious and sometimes angry. Fundamentally, the mobilization of this past for
the benefit of the future involves choices over the exploration and interpretation of archaeological evidence and in so doing destabilizes oppositional community identities, making cross-community collaborative practice essential.

The need to balance issues of evidence, ethics, and respect for individual and community narratives is the subject of constant negotiation but is core to the development of an empirically informed, ethically engaged archaeological practice. Echoing Wylie’s (2015) endorsement of collaborative practice as the locus for “some of the most creative archaeological learning,” perspectives gained from cross-community collaborators not only have improved archaeological practice and methodologies but have opened up new interpretative possibilities. Furthermore, working alongside trained facilitators has emerged as a productive approach to embedding an empirically honest archaeology within conflict transformation (Horning and Breen 2017; Horning, Breen, and Brannon 2015). Listening is core to successful peace negotiation and is core to an archaeology that is actively engaged in the process of building shared, nonviolent futures.

Background

In 1998 the Good Friday Agreement ushered in a welcome, if still unstable, end to the 30 years of violence known as the Troubles. Since 2006 and the signing of the St. Andrews Agreement, a power-sharing executive has been in place, initially dependent on an unlikely alliance between the Republican Sinn Féin leader Martin McGuinness, once an Irish Republican Army (IRA) commander, and the Presbyterian firebrand Reverend Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) at the time of the agreement. The political structure is wholly reliant on and defined by a consociational model employing a principle of parity of esteem between the two traditions (Coakley 2009), politically represented by the two main parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP. While there are other political parties, the population overwhelmingly continues to vote according to community identity; only one mainstream party, Alliance, attempts to court the interests of people across the divide. Any major decision-making requires cross-party, cross-community support, and, crucially, leadership is shared between the two largest parties—the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). Inability to agree means the Assembly is prone to collapse. The Assembly was dissolved in January 2017.

Notwithstanding this latest political crisis, the Troubles probably seem like distant history to anyone outside of Northern Ireland. Visitors to Belfast no lon-
ger routinely encounter police barriers, empty blockaded streets, and the ruins of bombed-out buildings. British Army bases have been decommissioned, central Belfast streets have reopened to automobile traffic, and there has even been a softening of the hard-line sectarian imagery on Belfast’s legendary painted gables. Economic policy encourages development and seeks foreign investment. Tourist numbers are up, but not just because of Belfast’s trendy urban scene or the undeniable beauty of the Ulster countryside. The Troubles themselves now serve as an attraction, with several firms offering voyeuristic black taxi and bus tours of Troubles hotspots along the back streets of North and West Belfast, where over 1,000 lost their lives in sectarian violence (Sutton 2001). The extent to which tourism can contribute positively to peace-building in post-conflict societies is a matter of considerable debate (Farmaki 2017). Economic gains can be more than overshadowed by insensitivity and the negative impacts of constant reminders of conflict. In Northern Ireland, the touristic desire to observe the physicality of the sectarian conflict may bring much-needed revenue to tour operators (often ex-prisoners); at the same time, it provides a considerable economic imperative for the retention of hard-line murals and other overt symbols of violence and division (Cochrane 2015).

In cruising past the many “peace walls” and separation fences that continue to divide Belfast neighbourhoods, few visitors are likely to guess that the majority of those living in close proximity to the walls strongly advocate their retention and cannot envision a time when they would not be necessary (Byrne, Heenan, and Robinson 2012). Furthermore, for those who grow up in peacetime but in the shadow of these physical barriers, negotiating their own personal safety is fundamentally linked to the perpetuation of sectarian division (Browne and Dwyer 2014). Most of these barriers are also located in neighborhoods that experience high levels of economic deprivation and low educational attainment, both key risk factors for paramilitary recruitment (Hargie, O’Donnell, and McMullan 2011) (see Figure 10.1). The tourist gaze in this respect is inconsequential to the daily realities of those who dwell nearby.

In short, contemporary Northern Ireland remains a deeply divided society. Geographical segregation is the norm; only 6.9 percent of schoolchildren are educated in an integrated (Catholic and Protestant) environment (Hayes, McAllister, and Dowds 2006; Hughes et al. 2016:1092; McCully and Barton 2009). The majority of the 88 peace lines (walls dividing neighborhoods in conflict) in Belfast were constructed after the Good Friday Agreement (McDonald 2009). While the high levels of violence have decreased and society has become
“normalized,” security alerts still occur on a daily basis and the risk of a return to violence is ever present. For example, in 2013, the bomb disposal unit was called out on average once every day of the year (Kilpatrick 2013); in 2016 security alerts occurred daily and MI5 raised the alert level for a terrorist attack by Northern Ireland dissidents on Great Britain from moderate to substantial (Kearney 2016). Security alerts routinely precipitate road closures that impact on that most mundane of activities (the daily commute), affecting even the most privileged members of society.

The psychological impact of conflict is manifested in high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder and elevated suicide rates that have been directly attributed to the legacy of conflict (Ferry et al. 2011; Tomlinson 2012), particularly affecting those who grew up during the height of the conflict in the 1970s. Furthermore, clinical evidence suggests that the negative impacts of trauma, if left unacknowledged and untreated, can be passed down to the next generation (Downes et al. 2012). Given the small size of Northern Ireland, it is rare to encounter someone whose life was not impacted in some way by the violence. However, perceptions...
of victimhood are widely variable not just among those individuals who personally suffered or directly witnessed violence (Brewer and Hayes 2013; Cairns et al. 2003). More pertinently for peace-building, there is political disagreement over whether all those who died in the conflict (including perpetrators) should be considered victims (Little 2012:89). To create “moral equivalency” between perpetrators and their victims is anathema when some of the root causes of the divide—the historical narratives addressed below—have not been meaningfully tackled. The political failure to establish a widely acceptable means of addressing Troubles-related violence, crime, and alleged collusion between security forces and paramilitaries exacerbates the psychological trauma.

The June 2016 Brexit vote, in which the United Kingdom as a whole narrowly voted in favor of leaving the European Union (EU), has further increased levels of anxiety and uncertainty in the province. The majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the European Union and now face uncertainties over the financial and political impact: strengthened border controls, loss of EU Peace and Reconciliation funding that has supported a multitude of cross-community initiatives (including those aimed at former paramilitaries and at-risk youth as well as our heritage-related programs), and loss of market access as well as agricultural subsidies for Northern Ireland’s farms (Hayward 2017). When the United Kingdom leaves the single market and customs union, border controls will have to be implemented—most likely reinstating borders either between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in some form or, less likely, surrounding the whole island of Ireland, notwithstanding the Republic’s continued membership in the EU. Neither is conducive to building and maintaining a peaceful society with strong links to both the Irish Republic and Great Britain. Brexit has rendered an already challenging future even more precarious.

The archaeology students at Queen’s University Belfast whom I have taught are overwhelmingly from Northern Ireland and are drawn from both traditions. Although most grew up during peacetime and all certainly profess mutual respect and tolerance, it is clear from talking to them that differences, division, distrust, and even despair remain common. After reading Hamilakis (2009) and others on archaeology and the Iraq War, and Blakey (2008) and others on the New York African Burial Ground, the conversation about archaeological ethics, stakeholders, and responsibilities often turns to the local. Students commonly volunteered their opinion that they thought it was much better that archaeologists from outside Northern Ireland came into the province to deal with the contested period that lies at the heart of the Troubles and at the center of my
own research, “because we can’t get past our own bias.” Insofar as I was not born in Northern Ireland, these comments may have been meant for me specifically. But my family ties to the region are strong and deeply rooted, and I have worked in Northern Ireland longer than some of them have been alive. Put simply, like anyone else in Northern Ireland, I have my own perspective and biases.

So why are 18–21-year-olds so despondent about their own future? The answer lies in the paradoxical reality that the structure of the peace process itself impedes full integration because it is founded on a principle of ensuring parity between the two communities. In all aspects of government funding, for example, equivalent amounts must go to initiatives from each tradition, while the dominant political parties break down along sectarian lines, as noted above. Parity and mutual respect were and are critical aspects of peace-building but inevitably reify difference, rendering efforts to explore and encourage commonalties over difference extremely challenging yet all the more critical to building a truly peaceful society.

Archaeological Interventions

What role can archaeological sites play in conflict transformation? Conflict is a deeply complex phenomenon with multiple and interlinked root causes. Among the central facets of many conflicts across the globe are historical power relations where particular groups advocate for cultural or political supremacy over other groups (Jeong 2000:32). Directly implicated in contemporary difference in Northern Ireland are the still contested and unresolved histories of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the English Crown extended control through the mechanism of plantation, a colonial effort to supplant the Gaelic Irish population that, despite its intent, did not succeed. The archaeological record of this period overtly complicates the accepted dichotomous narratives through highlighting complexity and particularly extensive evidence for the emergence of shared, syncretic practices drawing on Irish, Scottish, and English traditions; the reliance of plantation settlements on the demographically dominant Irish population (Breen 2012a and 2012b; Donnelly 2005; Horning 2001, 2013a); and continuity in preplantation settlement patterns and landscape use (Breen 2012b; Donnelly 2007; Donnelly and Horning 2002; O’Keeffe 2008). In the present, such tangible evidence possesses a profound capacity to challenge understandings of the perceived divide between Irish and British identities and contribute to the emergence of a shared Northern Irish identity.
That the evidence from the seventeenth century so strongly contradicts accepted narratives about the primordial divide between the two traditions raises legitimate questions about the construction of ethnonationalism in Northern Ireland. Some analysts (e.g., McGratton 2010:183) outright reject the notion of the Troubles as an ethnic conflict at all, instead arguing for an approach in which “an emphasis is placed on how historical processes, power disparities, and the perception of shifting threats and opportunities may influence political transitions and create the context for nationalist mobilization.” McGratton’s perspective of identity as fluid rather than fixed is welcome and in step with contemporary archaeological understandings, particularly in relation to colonial encounters. That said, rejecting the importance of identity as a cause of the Northern Irish conflict and barrier to peace-building is fine as an academic exercise, but it does not play out very well as part of public discourse in which the Troubles are understood to have been fundamentally about identity. People’s sense of self and identity remains grounded in essentialist narratives; as such, the strength of those narratives must be appreciated and addressed if they are to be effectively challenged as part of building a more peaceful society. More succinctly, the Troubles undoubtedly resulted from a complex admixture of political, economic, and geographical factors. But most who lived through it understand it to have been principally the result of (as yet unresolved) ethnic rivalry and antagonism, so it is from that standpoint that any effort to effect positive change must begin. The tangibility of archaeological evidence can provide a refutation of mythic narratives in ways that are much more viscerally powerful than words on a page.

Over the last decade, archaeological projects focusing on the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries have begun to tap into that power by incorporating community groups and schools in excavations, with an emphasis on field experience and the potential for shared discovery (Horning, Breen, and Brannon 2015). Such immersive practice gives individuals the opportunity to physically engage with process of discovery and, importantly, the space to individually decide what the evidence actually means. As such, engagement and conflict transformation become embedded in the practices of archaeological fieldwork and material interpretation (Horning 2013c; Horning, Breen, and Brannon 2015). Being complicit in the discovery process makes individuals responsible for seeking an interpretation and an understanding of what is found. The excavation process thus can become transformative through this encounter with evidence and negotiation over meaning, provided that all participants understand that they are working together in a safe space, which has to be created through consensus. Participants acknowledge
feeling empowered. One local community group involved in a project directed by my colleague Colin Breen of Ulster University acknowledged not only that they had learned about the complexity of the plantation period but that their members were also more “willing to reconsider their own identities in light of what they have learnt through engaging with professional archaeologists” (Ballintoy and District Local Archaeological and Historical Society 2013).

The process of community archaeology itself often matters more to our collaborators than does the outcome in the form of the data that get carted back from the field and analyzed in the lab. As such, a critical distinction must be drawn between inclusive archaeological projects that aim to enhance community cohesion and coproduction of narratives from the more traditional versions of community archaeology that employ volunteer labor to perform otherwise traditional archaeological projects (see the extended discussion in Horning 2013c as well as the discussion in Martindale and Nicholas 2014). How we move from one model to the other is not straightforward, as shifting from traditional top-down models of public archaeology into collaborative practice effectively requires philosophical reskilling.

Advocacy and inclusivity necessitate a lessening of control and a conscious (not tacit) acknowledgment that one is making a choice in how to interpret and approach the past. Doing so without compromising or abandoning our concomitant ethical responsibilities to the dead and the actualities of their experiences is extraordinarily difficult. The real risk here is that in relinquishing control and in prioritizing the present over the past we simply construct usable pasts that may not be empirically honest. Usable pasts have long been at the heart of nation building and empire building and in those contexts inevitably privilege the elite and, in a capitalist world, justify inequality. Focusing intentionally on the marginalized other is a common riposte to concerns over elite bias and can be very effective in situations where there are clear structural inequalities and an imbalance of power. This is most aptly demonstrated in the increasing number of projects that aim not only to engage indigenous communities but to actively collaborate and incorporate different forms of knowledge-making (see, e.g., discussions in Atalay 2012; Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2008; Martindale and Nicholas 2014; Nicholas 2010; Silliman 2008).

The particularities of the Northern Ireland situation preclude any such easy choice over which histories should be rediscovered, prioritized, or mobilized. A focus on a marginalized other does not work in Northern Ireland, where both communities self-identify as marginalized others. Choosing one voice to
prioritize over another would hardly aid the cause of peace and would implicate the researcher in fostering continued division and unrest. Such a choice would de facto be understood as a political stance.

The two communities are roughly equivalent in population, so neither has the upper hand. On the island of Ireland, the Catholic, Nationalist community is numerically dominant. Despite the assumptions of many in the broader global Irish diaspora, however, there is actually little public or political appetite in the Republic for reunification of the island. Many in the Republic have never traveled north of the border and view Catholics in the north more with suspicion than with any kindred connection. In the context of the United Kingdom, the Protestant Unionist community has a demographic majority. Within the United Kingdom, it is often Ulster Protestants who argue the loudest for the Union and for a British identity. Yet that identity is always understood as contingent on a contractual agreement—that Great Britain will continue to protect the Ulster British. Significant numbers in Scotland and Wales seek independence, while, as cogently argued by Colley (1992) two decades ago, being British more often than not really has meant being English. The notion of a UK identity has been, if not wholly shattered, certainly fragmented by the Brexit vote of 2016. The English, like the Irish of the Republic, are also ambivalent about Northern Ireland, viewed as a financial drain on the Exchequer and a source of anxiety, as represented by the “substantial” status of the terror alert. Whatever the future holds for society in the north of Ireland, arguably it will have to come from within. When no one else wants you, you have to forge your own identity and your own future.

What role can presentations about the past play in peace-building? Since the Good Friday Agreement, the museums sector has endeavored to strike the difficult balance between critically engaging the past and trying not to alienate its audience. Since 1998 the Ulster Museum has mounted a series of temporary exhibits aimed to address a range of contested histories. The most challenging of these exhibits, interestingly, date to the first few years of peace. The Icons of Identity exhibit (October 2000–April 2001) juxtaposed symbolic objects relating to iconic figures sacred to one tradition or the other tradition (e.g., St. Patrick and William III), and aimed to challenge the Two Traditions model of understanding these figures through historical context. However, there is a fine line between challenging the divide and reifying the divide. Displays that overtly juxtapose perspectives from either side run a risk of essentializing those differences. Reactions are often extremely strongly worded, as was the case with the recent Remembering 1916: Your Stories exhibit at the Ulster Museum (Blair
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(2016), which used community-sourced objects to tell the connected stories of the 1916 Rising in Dublin and the 1916 Battle of the Somme, respectively core parts of Republican and Loyalist narratives.

Perhaps the most provocative museum display mounted in the early years of peace was the *Conflict: The Irish at War* exhibit (December 2003–August 2006), which explored the role of conflict on the island of Ireland from the Mesolithic to the present. Critics charged the museum with “giving the impression Ireland is a place of interminable violence.” Furthermore, the museum was accused of harboring a Unionist bias by implying that “the Irish are a race apart, genetically predisposed to conflict . . . [which] provided ideological cover for the British state and its claim that it is somehow a neutral arbiter in the conflict” (McLaughlin and Baker 2010, 46).

My take on the exhibition was more positive for two reasons. First, the displays relating to twentieth-century conflict explicitly acknowledged the active role played by material culture. The gallery was packed full of weapons, flags, uniforms, bullets, and the ordinary possessions of people who found themselves caught up in violence. Second, the museum acknowledged its own role in relation to social memory and the ongoing negotiation of narratives by inviting visitors to pen and post their comments not only on the display but on their own experiences of violence. This approach made the museum space active in healing and the process of conflict transformation. Others were less impressed with the open-ended nature of the display: “the plurality of voices might just as easily be considered a way of avoiding any genuine effort to interpret and explain the past where it is so vociferously disputed and open to sectarian interpretation” (McLaughlin and Baker 2010:47). Perhaps to the relief of its staff, the museum then closed its doors for major refurbishment. When it reopened in 2009, all the color had been drained from the displays on the recent past. The very small Troubles gallery featured no material culture and relied solely on stark black-and-white photographs, perhaps in an effort to distance the experience from the present.

In November 2014 a new permanent modern history gallery opened, focusing on Ulster from 1500 to 1968 (the Troubles were still relegated to the black-and-white annex). Curatorial staff worked closely with academics (including myself) to select objects that would convey the complexities of the period and invite contemplation over its lasting significance. My top choice was the enigmatic “Dungiven Costume,” the name given to a set of threadbare clothes found in a bog that incorporates elements of sixteenth-century Irish fashion (woolen mantle), English fashion (jacket), and Scottish fashion (tartan trews), along
with leather shoes constructed in a traditional English manner (stitching) but repaired with Irish lacing technique (Horning 2014). The hybridity and ambiguity of the clothing inevitably provoke questions about the identity and experiences of the last person to wear these clothes. The small space of the gallery and the limited text (in keeping with current museological practice) lessen some of the potential power of the objects on display. Visitors must engage with a touch table to receive contextual information about objects in the exhibit. This is perhaps a strategic approach: only those prepared to be challenged will take the time to watch the short video clips. Reviews have mainly been positive, with one critic commending the museum for “producing an exhibition that carefully walks the tightrope of Irish history” (Crooke 2015:45).

If public institutions like museums that are charged with curating the past and giving it meaning in the present struggle to balance on the tightrope of sectarian legacies, what hope is there for archaeology, a discipline that has not always paid attention to the contemporary significance and impacts of archaeological stories? I would argue that it is actually easier for archaeology to make a difference than it is for museums, because we have the ability to involve community members in the discovery process, as discussed earlier. Rather than being confronted with the end product of research in a carefully crafted museum exhibit, where the choices made and the depth of research are left implicit and thus impossible to assess easily, we can involve others in the co-production of knowledge. The acknowledged subtext for the Modern History gallery is that Irish history is a shared history, like it or not. That, too, is the message coming from the archaeological record. But arguably the messages are all the more powerful and are rendered more palatable when based on shared practice.

Archaeological sites, places, or excavations therefore can serve as shared spaces where dialogue is encouraged through informed and participatory investigation, functioning as a joint recovery of narratives. Challenging people’s understanding of the past means challenging their identity in the present, so it does carry risk. Archaeologists are not generally trained to handle such risks: to understand when you might inadvertently do someone psychological harm and to know the best ways to carefully manage the destabilization that can occur. To date, the immersive projects, incorporating community partners into archaeological projects, have concentrated more on those groups who traditionally would be open to explorations of the past—local history groups and schools. The success of these engagements efforts thus far has led to a more challenging series of projects in conjunction with the Corrymeela Community, a shared gover-
nance civil society formed in 1965 with the aim of bringing people together from across the sectarian divide in safe and neutral surroundings. The members of the steering group for the project (see the acknowledgments), made up of trained Corrymeela facilitators, archaeologists, and museum professionals, generally agree about the importance of engaging more difficult to reach groups (including ex-paramilitaries, survivors of Troubles-related violence, at-risk youth, etc.) with the tangibility of plantation-period archaeology in an effort to impact on the present and future. But agreement on precisely how to do this and, indeed, what the evidence might actually have to contribute to peace-building is less straightforward but has led to some very productive discussions.

Most important has been the evolution of the program itself, which is focused not on fully formed collaborative practice but on creating the conditions that may lead to such working in the future (Pettis 2015). The aim is simply to begin a conversation over the meaning of the past in the present and to facilitate engagement with the tangible evidence of the plantation period. Together, the members of the steering group drafted and signed a code of practice to be accepted by participants at the start of any program. In addition to being up-front about our aim to connect an exploration of the past with peace-building in the present, the contract is based on a series of five principles: (1) facilitators should work to create a safe environment where people feel valued, accepted, and respected; (2) those who hold expertise should use knowledge in a manner that acknowledges this power dynamic and empowers participants; (3) participants should have an opportunity to explore their values and beliefs in freedom and without expectation that they should change; (4) when exploring history, care should be taken to honor and respect the stories of those in the past; and (5) participants should be given opportunities to own their learning process and shape the direction of programs. A key outcome from the Corrymeela perspective lies in just bringing people together and creating a space in which participants can feel free to express themselves and listen to others with respect. For my part, what I have hoped for in addition is for individuals to develop awareness that people in the past—the Irish and English and Scots who for better or worse were compelled to engage with one another—had no foreknowledge of the present. The Troubles may seem an inevitable outcome of the plantation period from the perspective of the twenty-first century, but from the vantage point of 1609 or 1611 or 1630 the events of the late twentieth century were far from inevitable. Of far greater concern to the majority, of whatever identity, was negotiating the needs and realities of the day, from the quotidian to the creative.
Our programs involve a full weekend residential where participants stay at the Corrymeela residential center situated on the scenic north coast of County Antrim. Costs for participants in the first stage of our project were covered by our grant funding from the Heritage Lottery fund, while we experts donated our time. Friday evenings focus on ice-breaking activities and a bit of a discussion about the Ulster Plantation, then on Saturday we visit a series of plantation-period sites with complicated histories and also have an artifact handling session (see Figure 10.2). In the evening the groups produce posters (what my museum colleagues call memory maps), then on Sunday we discuss what has been learned. I have found it much easier to undertake this kind of work in cooperation with the Corrymeela partners. I have listened and learned from them, just as they have become vested in the notion that understanding the past—and the past that is further back than the Troubles—has merit in the present and the future. Indicative of that commitment and recognition was the way that Corrymeela showcased the project during the 2015 visit of Prince Charles, which was explicitly about forgiveness (McCleary 2015).

Figure 10.2. Audrey Horning and a community group exploring the complicated history of Dunluce Castle. Photo with permission of Sean Pettis.
But Does It Work?

As part of the overall process, feedback is solicited to understand if people find the experience to be positive or negative. One respondent expressed a common sentiment: “Bit of both—unsettling as there’s a lot of things need clarified. It will help me look at things differently—question them more and look for the real meaning.” In the discussion that follows, I have chosen to generalize rather than relate the specifics of each group to protect the identities of the participants. Each group was profoundly different, depending on its expectations, background, and composition. Listening to the participants and participating in their discovery processes significantly enhanced my own understanding of the complexities of contemporary Northern Irish society as well pointing me in new directions in terms of research questions about the past.

Going into the first series of programs I harbored my own concerns not just about the efficacy of what we were trying to do but about the likely responses from the participants. I expected some to be more open to new understandings than others, which turned out to be the case. However, I was wrong about which groups were more likely to find the program challenging and threatening, forcing me to confront my own misconceptions. I was dubious about the likely engagement of participants from working-class Loyalist communities, not just because of their experience of Troubles-related violence and ongoing social and economic deprivation but because of the dominant Loyalist and Unionist perspective that the Belfast Agreement that ushered in peace was “little more than a surrender process” to the forces of Republicanism (McAuley 2008:19). Given the importance of the Protestant narrative of the plantation period being one in which hard-working Protestants transformed a savage land in the face of continued opposition, I expected that my archaeological stories about the hap-hazard and incomplete nature of plantation might be unwelcome, as would my tales about Protestant incomers drinking with the numerically dominant Irish, living in Irish houses, and consuming their meals from Irish-made pottery.

I could not have been more wrong. My tales of intercultural drinking sparked recognition, while descriptions of Irish building techniques employed in English plantation villages resonated with those in the building trades. A fragment of Chinese porcelain that made its way around the globe to early seventeenth-century Ulster proved an unexpected item of fascination to people who have long been taught that they live in a backward, marginalized land. A visit to Dunluce Castle, where a Catholic Highland Scot built a plantation village and
funded a Protestant church while facilitating the activities of Scottish Franciscan missionaries (Breen 2012a), evoked knowing laughs about the advantages of “playing both sides.” Evocative sites like Dungiven priory, once the center of the Gaelic O’Cahan lordship but later transformed into a plantation manor (Brannon and Blades 1980), inspired awe and reflection. Our visits include entering the chancel, not usually open to visitors, to see the rare survival of a fifteenth-century effigy tomb. The special viewing opportunity to “touch” the past inevitably provokes discussion of why the resident English planters, Sir Edward Doddington and his wife, Anne, who held the site for decades after her husband’s death, chose not to destroy the O’Cahan tomb, clearly a Catholic Irish symbol. Whatever the explanation, the survival of the tomb forces a rethinking of sectarianism and religious violence in the implementation of plantation, and participants of all backgrounds seek plausible explanations rooted in their own social understandings.

Groups split up to create their memory maps in the evening, which were then shared and discussed in the morning in discussions that were often strikingly honest and reflective. Many struggled with how much responsibility they personally should bear for present-day division: “I had no say in the matter,” said one man, in relation to his ancestors’ decision to settle in Ulster, while another asked, “How long do you have to be in a place before you belong?” One gentleman (again echoing my own students) asked, “Is it better that outsiders deal with this period? Will we ever get over ourselves?” Several freely admitted that they had their doubts about why we were doing these programs and what we might be trying to “feed” them. One man confessed to having Googled some of the historical terms used on the first night, to make sure that they were not loaded with bias. Trust has to be developed, and the process can only just begin in a short weekend program.

In all of our programs, regardless of the community affiliation of the participants, what emerges is that no one knows about the history of the north of Ireland because it has traditionally not been taught in school. Prior to the introduction of a shared history curriculum, if you attended a predominantly Protestant school, you learned more English history. If you attended a Catholic school, you more often read histories from the Republic. Even with the shared history curriculum, teachers are often too nervous or simply lack the confidence to teach it, valuing classroom cohesion over historical knowledge (Kitson 2007; McCully 2012). There remains a vacuum that gets filled with sectarian narratives without any evidentiary basis. And people know that and recognize it, and they want
and deserve something better. But this does not mean that the process of learning should be unidirectional, with experts like myself imparting knowledge to those who seek it. The questions asked by participants, often drawn straight from their own experiences, have given me multiple fruitful new directions for my own research and challenge my own construction of the nature of society in the plantation period. By way of one small example, one man who works with youth offenders was very interested in systems of justice in the seventeenth century and the ways in which they were implemented and understood in Ulster. This has led me to think seriously about the cultural implications of the intersections and disjunctures between two very different systems of law, Gaelic Brehon law and English civil law, and how they were implemented in plantation settlements.

Surprisingly, the biggest challenge to the aim of the program came from cross-community groups, forcing me to ask a fundamental question: What is actually more important: peace-building or correcting understandings about the past? Cross-community groups derive their strength from resolutely looking forward, not backward. Cohesion and friendship are often based on not going there—not going into the reasons and rationales for division, not talking about politics or violence, but instead working together toward a better future. In a follow-up meeting with one such group, it was clear that there were problems. Sean Pettis (2016:9), our Corrymeela facilitator and partner, described it this way: “The content of the programme had made them somewhat ‘wobbly’ with regards to who they are as a group.” I recalled one participant saying that she wanted to believe that the Ulster Plantation was all about Protestants coming and taking away what she smilingly described as Seamus and Roisin’s wee whitewashed cottage. When faced with the reality that Seamus and Roisin in the seventeenth century probably did not live in a whitewashed cottage and that incoming planters did not necessarily evict them from whatever they were living in, it was difficult for her to accommodate that perspective. Nationalist identity is strongly rooted in narratives of dispossession, just as Unionist narratives are founded on a belief in a savage land transformed through hard work and dedication. Stories about the mutual entanglements of planter and Gael are therefore challenging for everyone at a very basic level. Neither narrative was the reality in the past. But what is more important in the present?

Ethically, I don’t feel that I should force the members of such groups, who have become friends often against all odds, to acknowledge the complexities of the past if it means that the peace and goodwill they have developed will be undermined and possibly damaged forever. Yes, I would like for everyone
in the present to know and understand the experiences of those in the past, especially as they are routinely mobilized in the present. However, engaging in an archaeology of listening does not mean only listening—it means actually hearing, and acting accordingly. An archaeological version of the Hippocratic oath may be what is actually required: An archaeology of listening means an archaeology that overtly seeks not to cause harm. Harm in this instance refers to people in the present, but it should equally apply to people in the past. While I will not force any individual or group in the present to accept new historical narratives, I do not wish to do harm to people in the past by shading or overlooking the evidence of their lived experiences. So I will continue to share the evidence from the past, but I will do so in a manner that respects the needs of the present. Deciding on a specific course of action—when to push and when to step back—requires active listening and active hearing.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with a consideration of positionality and pragmatism. Returning to the comments made both by students and participants about the perceived objectivity of outsiders, there is a pragmatic advantage to being perceived as something of a neutral authority, even if as a self-reflexive archaeologist I can’t afford to believe in objectivity (also discussed in Horning 2013a). Following one early program, one anonymous respondent commented about “how by involving archaeologists they can exert such influence” (Causeway Museum Service 2009). In peace negotiations, it is the neutral position of the interlocutor who brokers discourse. I have to think carefully when to employ my identity as a neutral authority and when to be wholly honest about my own positionality. I tend to make that choice based on the most likely outcome, when I want that outcome to be a greater appreciation that people in the past could not predict the future. Here I would take particular inspiration from Mrozowski’s (2014:343) argument for a pragmatic approach that specifically requires practitioners to “explicitly identify the practical outcomes of their research” and recognize that “social science needs to be politically engaged.” Of course, the aim of situating archaeology as political engagement is neither necessarily complementary with nor conducive to true inclusivity in archaeological practice. Yet I believe the two are not incompatible and that the combination, with all its inherent tensions and contradictions, may in fact lead to more meaningful, deeper understandings and potentially new praxis.
Questions of moral obligation and the imperative to respect multiple perspectives are of particular resonance when dealing with contested histories in conflict-ridden and postconflict societies. Archaeology in these contexts carries risks but also the potential for transformative social benefit. Precisely what the future holds for Northern Ireland is not clear, but I have made my own choice, as a citizen, to participate in the forging of that future through the tools I have at hand. Those tools include an empirically grounded understanding of the experiences of people in the past, whose lives have been too often mobilized in the service of violence and conflict in the present. I, too, am mobilizing their lives—but I hope that my training as a professional archaeologist, coupled with my constant questioning of my own motivations and ethical positioning, allows that mobilization to have at least some honest grounding in the lived actualities of their existence. I keep my ear to the ground as well as attuned to the voices around me.

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