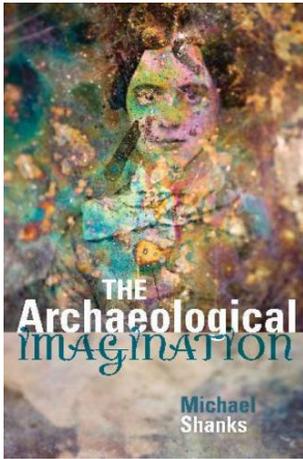


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The Archaeological Imagination

Michael Shanks. 2012. Left Coast Press, 167 pp., 24 Figures, references, index. \$84.95 (hardback), \$27.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Sarah E. Baires, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

This short engaging essay explores the *archaeological imagination*: the recreation of the past in the present as it considers temporality, change, landscape, and memory. Michael Shanks insists that everyone is an archaeologist, that we all experience the past in a myriad of ways and attempt to bring that past into the present through culturally anchored narrative, experience, and memory. At

the core of the work, Shanks is concerned with the history of archaeology, specifically with European Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century and how their paradigms have shaped and continue to shape archaeology as a discipline. He chooses to focus on antiquarians, the men who studied history through artifacts, ruins, relics, and texts making the argument that archaeology—at its heart—is no different than antiquarianism. Shanks ends his introduction to the book with the observation that “Antiquarianism has been massively successful...we just don’t call it by that name anymore”(p. 42). The antiquarian methodology, steeped in art, science, romanticism, and philosophy, has since been institutionalized, Shanks argues, in the academy and museums, where it has become archaeology. At one point, he excitedly declares that “we are all antiquarians!”—leaving the reader to parse the relationship between contemporary archaeologists and 18th/19th-century European collectors and interpreters of antiquarian curiosities.

Shanks’ book does explore a unique and interesting aspect of the history of archaeology, along with multiple underlying themes of landscape, memory, and narrative (Who owns the past? Whose history is this?). The exploration of these themes is useful to the contemporary archaeologist because they provide a look at the *agency* of history, especially as it is embedded in things, places, and landscapes. However, the author seems to overlook the political ramifications of drawing linear correlations between contemporary archaeologists (and their archaeological imaginations) and male European antiquarians. He alludes to our collective archaeological consciousness but never explicitly unpacks it, leaving the reader to wonder if the book intentionally advocates returning to a world where European men controlled the knowledge of our human past.

Shanks divides his book into four relatively short chapters, and presents the meat of his argument in Chapter 2: “Debatable Lands.” This chapter is divided into nine vignettes, each of which explore the antiquarian reconstruction of histories along the border between Scotland and England during the transference of power from Edinburgh to London and during the Scottish Enlightenment as illustrated by thinkers like David Hume, Walter Scott, and Adam Smith. This section of the book takes us on a tour of English and Scottish antiquarians, showcasing their works and attempting to bridge the gap from their archaeological

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imaginings to ours. Shanks consistently portrays works from Walter Scott and William Gell (for example) as creative history, where the origins of the past in the present must be explained, curated, and collected. Of particular relevance to contemporary scholars are questions raised by the vignettes of (1) who owns the past, (2) where is the past located, and (3) how we (antiquarian/archaeologist) recreate/tell that past in the present using various mediums (photography, mapping, narrative). Again, these themes are critical to an archaeology that is conscious of its “positionality” (i.e., its cultural or social point of view), where histories have agency and can (and do) inform nationalities and identities. Shanks explicitly acknowledges the fact that historical interpretations were informed by the nationality and social identity of antiquarian scholars, arguing through his examples that the point of antiquarian studies was to get hold of history, to recreate it from ruin, and to tell it (through narrative) to the community.

The problem lies with Shanks unwillingness to address what was essentially an elite antiquarian perspective. He seemingly champions these Enlightenment thinkers for their ability to present a past in the present (the archaeological imagination) while considering things like memory, temporality, and landscape studies, but he does not adequately challenge the essentially white, male perspective that permeated antiquarian works. The reader has to wait until the last page of the last chapter for Shanks to address this issue at all—and there he simply states that: “The archaeological imagination is far from innocent” (p. 149). He does not directly address the co-opting of indigenous histories and the manipulation of those histories by antiquarian scholars to support their insular preconceived notions. We must not forget that the antiquarian “archaeological imagination” was aimed at a select group of people; it was not intended for mass consumption. Relics and artifacts were curated in private homes (e.g. Scott’s Abbotsford) and narratives were only distributed amongst a select group. I would ask that readers of Shanks’ book reconsider his assertion that “we are all antiquarians,” and instead think critically about our place as creators of history.