Archaeologists as Authors and the Stories of Sites: A Defense of Fiction in Archaeological Site Reporting

Allison Jane Mickel

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Archaeologists as Authors and the Stories of Sites:
A Defense of Fiction in Archaeological Site Reporting

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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IA. Purpose of Paper.

My reasons for this thesis are many and layered. On a pragmatic level, it is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts at the College of William and Mary. It serves as the capstone component of completing a major in anthropology.

This paper is also meant to contribute to contemporary archaeological dialogue which reflects upon the products of archaeological knowledge. It offers a suggestion to archaeologists, that making use of the writing techniques involved in fictional narrative writing could contribute in an important way specifically to site reporting and, more generally, archaeological discourse. After an introductory section in which I make clear the theoretical framework from which I structure my argument, I review the existing archaeological literature that has forayed into experimentation with the fictional narrative form. I then proceed through a discussion of a series of benefits intrinsic to writing fictional narrative which are relevant to current concerns in archaeology and moreover, which are vital to responsible archaeological practice. I have also applied my abstract defense of fiction by creating a site report focusing on the 2010 summer field season at Bir Madhkur, a Roman-period site in the Wadi Araba of Jordan. Without including this case study, I fear that my argument will remain in the realm of highbrow but inaccessible philosophizing; instead, I hope to concretize the theoretical benefits of fictional writing for archaeologists in this tangible form.

I intend, with this paper, to participate in a wider movement in archaeology calling for critical self-examination with regard to the processes underlying the way archaeologists construct and disseminate archaeological knowledge. Fictional narrative represents a mode of representation that is more relevant, transparent, and responsible in
light of contemporary epistemological understandings about archaeology as a discipline. The chapters that follow detail why.

**IB. A Brief History of Relevant Themes in Archaeology.**

Dissatisfaction with the established forms of archaeological writing has a history rooted in the theoretical movements in archaeology of the past half-century especially. The greatest degree of experimentation in academic archaeological literature can perhaps be seen in publications from the late 1980’s and 1990’s, during which time postmodernism had a dramatic impact on anthropology. This is especially true in North America, where archaeology is generally conceived of as a subdiscipline of anthropology, although archaeologists with training outside of the United States (most notably Ian Hodder, along with Barbara Bender and Mark Edmonds, among others) have also examined problems with traditional archaeological writing.

For all archaeologists, the commentary on and styles of archaeological writing that proliferate reflect larger theoretical discussions going on in their academic and regional communities (Joyce 2006, 48; Robertshaw 2004). Therefore, it is crucial to contextualize the ongoing academic discourse surrounding early forays into narrative by archaeological writers. During the mid-20th century, many scholars of the humanities began to express doubt about the possibility of representing objective truth in writing—and, moreover, about the existence of objective truth at all. Perhaps the most recognizable and widely influential of these scholars include Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Their questioning of established sources of authority, and of some of the most essential categories in Western thinking, gathered traction with humanists in a multitude of disciplines, coalescing in a general movement of
scholars whose diverse approaches share a common strain of critical thought broadly termed as postmodern.

Postmodernism’s impact on anthropology can be seen to become most forceful beginning in the 1980’s. James Clifford and George Marcus’s *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, published in 1986, features essays by many cultural anthropologists struggling with the implications of reconceiving ‘truthful’ representation as a myth. Ethnographies published in the 1990’s often feature experimentation with language and normative prose, responding both to a newfound freedom from the strict rules of scientific discourse—and, moreover, the implied responsibility to challenge these rules and their undeserved authority.

The influence of postmodernism on the subfield of archaeology is perhaps less immediately conspicuous when reviewing archaeological writing. Contemporaneously with the advancement of postmodern thought, many archaeologists began to identify themselves as ‘postprocessual’ archaeologists. Postprocessualism is predicated on many of the same tenets as postmodernism; key among these are the discrediting of neutrality in hermeneutics and an attack on essentialism, as well as a discomfort with established, confining disciplinary boundaries (Johnson 2010; Mithen 2001). Tangibly, the postprocessual school of thought encouraged eliciting and actively collaborating with historically marginalized viewpoints, as well as critical inquiry into archaeological perspectives on concepts like gender, race, and individual experience. Postprocessualism encourages a proliferation of archaeologies, rather than hailing a singular approach as epistemologically hegemonic. It values Socratic self-questioning, and is more inclined to trust analysis presented by archaeologists who engage in reflecting upon their own
perspectives and methodology. Within this framework, an exploration of the potential of fictional narrative (as defined in section ID) for archaeological representation is both valid and welcome.

Still, despite postprocessualism’s development as a reaction to processualism, the latter school of thought has not been entirely eclipsed or replaced. Known in its early iterations as the New Archaeology, processualism prides itself on bringing the methodology of natural science to archaeology (Johnson 2010). Freedom from bias, processualism advises, is not only possible but should be every archaeologist’s goal. Data is neutral, empirical archaeological reasoning is feasible, and the aim of archaeology should be to make claims about the cultural processes of human history. This commitment to positivism characterizes the ‘technical reports’ that are published about many or even most archaeological excavations; they are frequently structured like the lab reports of natural scientists—separating methodology from results from discussion. The implication of these publications is that theory and data can be separated, and that the event of analysis proceeds subsequently to the objective collection of data.

Within processualism, the concept of utilizing fictional narrative to write archaeology is not only unnecessary, but even unproductive to the point of absurdity. The fundamentals of postprocessualism—specifically, the encouragement of multiple, diverse approaches and methods as well as the value of traversing disciplinary boundaries—must be understood and accepted for a defense of unusual writing technique to have any salience. Therefore, in the following section, I elaborate on the motivation for rejecting with natural science as a singular structuring paradigm for archaeological
research, as it is the persisting legacy of choosing positivism as archaeology’s guiding metaphor which I combat in this defense.

IC. Problems with Positivism.

A useful avenue into considering the evolution of forceful and sophisticated critiques of positivist thought in archaeology can be found by briefly examining the changing rhetoric of historical archaeologist James Deetz in commenting on the possibility of objective archaeological accounts. In 1988, Deetz writes, “archaeologists are increasingly expressing concern over the positivist view that objectivity can be achieved in the more impoverished record of archaeology” (Deetz 1988, 16). He characterizes “pure unqualified objectivity” as “beyond our reach,” referring to scholars of both the human past and present (Deetz 1988, 15). While Deetz clearly communicates here his doubt that objectivity is a possibility for archaeologists, ten years later he sharpens his misgivings, saying “Qualification of our statements to avoid criticism of being ‘subjective’ does not make them any more objective, and indeed they are not, being the construction of the persons writing a report on their findings” (Deetz 1998, 95).

The greater aggressiveness in the language used by Deetz across the decade is emblematic of the emergence of voices in archaeology speaking out critically against positivism. Paul Courbin, in 1988, states that archaeology is very far “from a really ‘scientific’ procedure and from conclusions that are above all suspicion” (Courbin 1988, 80). His expression of skepticism sounds extremely timid in comparison to Adrian Praetzellis’s remarks in 1998 describing “throwing positivism out the window” as “liberating” and Deetz’s comments in the same journal that antipositivism can provide insight into the “questions that count” (Praetzellis 1998, 1: Deetz 1998, 95). While
Courbin asserts that archaeology is not yet a scientific discipline, Praetzelis and Deetz agree that it should not or perhaps even cannot be one.

When the archaeological rhetoric denouncing objectivity as either out-of-reach or, more to the point, a fantasy, had reached this point of direct but abstract condemnation, positivism’s detractors advanced to highlighting tangible and specific problems associated with believing in the possibility of objectivity. Ian Hodder, for example, has pointed out how dominant groups can use claims to unitary, unquestionable science and logic in order to marginalize groups with less interest in or access to objectivist research programs (Hodder 2003, 46). Claims to positivist truth have frequently been used to legitimate the ethos behind controversial claims; Hodder rejects positivism as this natural and hegemonic source of authority (Hodder 2000). Instead, archaeologists must negotiate and argue for their special, even privileged position from which they make claims about the past (Flemming 2006, 57; Hodder 2000; Kosso 2006).

Others have questioned the basis of positivism for similarly concrete reasons. Steven Yearley has pointed out the incongruity in the way scientific research presents itself as insulated from passing historical concerns despite its functional dependence on various sources of funding and labor which are deeply entangled in sociopolitical milieu (Yearley 1990). Furthermore, the division of power and responsibilities that occurs on research projects reflects understandings about skill level conditioned by wider society (Yearley 1990, 338). Meanwhile, the foci of these research projects are influenced by the particular interests of the investors who support them (Yearley 1990, 338). The “free cognitive ‘market,’” Yearley makes clear, is a myth (Yearley 1990, 338).
Following a similar line of reasoning, Hodder has highlighted the central role of human judgment in archaeological research methodology, and has traced the impact of these subjective decisions (Hodder 1999; Hodder 2000). For example, he examines a choice as fundamental as choosing what soil to consider a single layer, which is usually made on the basis of visual evidence: when the appearance of soil changes (Hodder 1999, 111). He then challenges the perfection and objectivity of this decision by bringing up not only the way that soil can change color and consistency depending on the time of day and its exposure to sunlight, as well as the preponderance of other methods for measuring soil change, such as with ultraviolet analysis or by examining its thermal properties (Hodder 1999, 111). A seasoned field archaeologist might argue instead that one has to ‘feel’ the soil and ‘hear’ the soil to distinguish between layers. This battery of possible tests at the disposal of archaeologists, paired with the pragmatic reality of needing to make these distinctions moment-by-moment as digging proceeds, exposes stratigraphy—one of the most fundamental principles of archaeology—as an imprecise, subjective mode of inquiry where the rules of pure positivism and empiricism have little to offer.

Hodder has traced the impact of these minor methodological decisions to their major final effect. Dramatically, he asserts that deciding whether to float, what to keep, and what vocabulary to use effects what objects exist at a particular site (Hodder 1999, 16). Calling a particular vessel a “juglet” instead of perhaps, a beaker or an unguentarium means that only juglets, and not beakers or unguentaria will be found at that site (Hodder 1999, 16). The problem is compounded when archaeologists document their assemblages by relying on the apparent impartiality of coded databases that seldom prove compatible across sites (Courbin 1988, 144). For this reason, the devotion to
universal method seen in positivist archaeology is inappropriate; rather than quixotically attempting to create a vocabulary and decision-making process that applies unproblematically to all research projects, archaeologists should focus their attention on contextualizing their methodology, making choices about terminology and procedure that can be rationally defended in the unique situation in which they find themselves (Hodder 2000, 3).

Other antipositivists have emphasized the researcher’s constructive role as precluding any possibility for distilling objective conclusions from empirical data, especially in archaeology (Barrett 2001; Bastide 1990; Gero 1996; Joyce 2002; Lamarque 1990; Tibbetts 1990). John Barrett perhaps, states this perspective most clearly, saying, “study involves not the revelation of the world as it is, but rather the building of an understanding which is achieved from a particular perspective” (Barrett 2001, 147). Rosemary Joyce highlights in particular the way that any meaning assigned an artifact or assemblage is immediately placed in a complex net of relations with all previous meanings assigned to it, while Francoise Bastide and Paul Tibbetts place emphasis on the impossibility of neutral representation of objects (Bastide 1990; Tibbetts 1990). Bastide calls the process of choosing how to present an object—even when doing so with a medium as supposedly free from the equivocal nature of language as photography—doing “work on reality” (Bastide 1990, 207). All of these perspectives share in common the positing of the scientist as creator, and a recognition of the inability to fulfill this role with perfect impartiality.

Joan Gero’s views resonate strongly with this viewpoint. She criticizes the body of scientific work that she refers to as “formal accounts,” including final site reports in
this category, accusing them of “deliberately obscuring the practical organization of
tnowledge construction” (Gero 1996, 257). The impersonal and distant nature of these
publications, and the passive role in which they cast the human agents conducting the
research contrasts sharply with the social and unpredictable nature of research, especially
archaeological fieldwork (Gero 1996). The absence of active, human thought processing
and decision-making from these reports serves to bolster the impression that “anyone
would have come to the same conclusions,” even if there is relatively little evidence to
ensure that this is the case (Gero 1996, 257). Joyce has raised a similar critique of
traditional archaeological writing; she cites the phrase “the figurine cache suggests…” as
representative of an accepted but problematic trope in archaeological writing whereby
archaeologists attribute their own voice and interpretations to the artifacts themselves
(Joyce 2002, 117). In fact, she reminds her audience, “no set of objects speaks except
through a voice we provide” (Joyce 2002, 117). Meanwhile, Janet Spector has focused
on the emotional import of formal archaeological writing, maintaining that despite its
purported emotionless, scientific form, it conveys as much sentiment as writing which
intentionally sets out to capture feelings (Spector 1993, 33). The difference is that,
instead of drama and passion, the scientific writer imparts an atmosphere of detached
boredom and dullness to the objects he or she describes—which the reader cannot help
but attribute to the human society under study (Spector 1993, 33). This is undeniably
problematic in itself, but the danger is compounded when the impact on perceptions of
descendant communities is considered.

Established scientific writing style is further misleading in the way it seems to be
‘natural.’ All of the information given is stated in a way that seems both straightforward
and uncontroversial. However, as Peter Lamarque has made clear, “all writing involves some degree of artifice” (Lamarque 1990, 137). He predicates this declaration on the complex and varied meanings of words, and the diverse purposes for which particular language is deployed (Lamarque 1990). Hayden White focuses more on the ordering of events, asserting that chronological order is a culture-specific convention—and, moreover, the decision of what to include in a chronology is informed both by paradigmatic expectations and individual concerns (White 1987, 176). Any writer reporting upon a series of events—including archaeological excavation—cannot help but take into account his or her current interrelated and circumstantial motives, making a goal of positivist writing entirely futile, especially in archaeology and other social sciences.

This is especially true given the necessity of citation in academic writing. Joyce identifies citation as an inherently judgmental and interpersonal act, “engaging a previous source to reject or affirm it” (Joyce 2002, 33). Reference to the perspectives given in past publications—and responding to them—meaningfully situates the academic author in a wider network of approaches and theoretical standpoints, with all of the attendant political and philosophical consequences that come as a corollary of this. Meanwhile, whether out of a conscious attempt to mitigate this self-positioning within the nuanced heterogeneity of academic discourse, or simply due to a comfort with passive construction, scientists frequently use the third-person plural ‘we’ to explain their methodological decisions and interpretive conclusions (Joyce 2002, 53). Joyce maintains that this pronoun traps the reader—or any other interlocutor—and prevents the addressee from ascribing any legitimacy to a conflicting position (Joyce 2002, 53). It is a doctrinal move to maintain the pretense of positivism; however, it relies on narrative-based
understandings of the relationship between reader and author to be successful (Joyce 2002, 53).

In fact, Mikhail Bakhtin states that “scientific articles are nothing but narratives” (Bakhtin 1981, 262). His position has been echoed by others, such as Misia Landau, who claims that the most influential theorists of human evolution were guided in constructing their texts as much by material evidence as by the drive to follow a traditional narrative framework (Landau 1991, x). Yearley has even gone so far as to identify scientific papers as “fictionalised history of the investigation” (Yearley 1990, 343).

What these authors are all alluding to is that positivist scientists, whether they recognize it or not, already make use of narrative writing structure. The way they do so, however, is inherently problematic; positivist narrative obscures the voice of the author, discriminates against many audiences, and downplays the human, agentive aspects of research in favor of depicting a natural process free from subjective judgments and manipulation (Bakhtin 1981, 262-3; Gero 1996, 276). Not only is the underlying, constitutive faith in objectivity untenable, but there is an irony in utilizing narrative structure while refusing to acknowledge the researcher’s subjectivity. More disturbingly, this deceptive writing technique, whether intentional or not, can become exclusionary and even dangerous (Gero 1996, 276).

The problem now becomes that, if positivists are already making use of a narrative—even fictionalized—writing structure, advocating for the use of fictional narrative begins to seem passé and unoriginal. The easy response to this is, of course, that unintentional use of a particular discursive style is very different from active engagement with that technique. More to the point, I am arguing for a confrontation of
the self-effacing positivist narrative by a burgeoning genre of self-aware and self-critical reflexive ones. The difference depends strongly on an understanding of some crucial terms, which I attend to in the section below.

**ID. Important Definitions.**

Having reviewed what I find to be the more salient and relevant critiques of positivism, it becomes necessary to reconnect the concept of positivism to its tangible expression in archaeological writing. Until this point, I have conflated the term ‘traditional site reporting’ with positivist archaeological writing in order to reinforce the notion that objectivist writing is the status quo which I consider problematic. This choice, however, requires some explanation, since truly ‘traditional’ site reporting could refer to the epistolary reports, the letters and diary entries, of archaeology in its earliest days (Hodder 1999; Joyce 2002, 55).

Instead, I am using the term to refer to the kind of site reporting that is ‘traditional’ at this moment in time. It makes use of the ‘traditions’ of the scientific method, which is predicated on the key assumptions of positivism. Namely, traditional site reporting tends to take for granted—whether implicitly or explicitly—that data and theory can be held separate until the moment when the scientist chooses to apply one in explanation of the other (Hodder 1999, 24). It also relies heavily on observation as a source of authority to the exclusion of any other source of support (Hodder 1999, 24). The emphasis on observables is often reified in these reports through the use of tables and charts as self-evident, inarguable models for presenting data, with minimal chance of obfuscation by extrapolative analysis on the part of the scientist.
Still, it is vital to recognize that the problem is not with observation’s role in archaeological research; a report that relied on intuition and emotion alone and refused to acknowledge measurement as a viable form of data would have appallingly little to contribute to archaeological understandings of the past. Instead, the problem with this kind of archaeological writing is the implicit view of data and observation as infallibly objective, rather than, as Ian Hodder defines observations, “theoretically influenced claims about specific situations” (Hodder 1999, 28). Traditional archaeological writing attempts to construct ways of organizing data that, for the archaeologists writing them, seem to require as little interpretive effort as possible—since this is, to positivists, where unverifiability begins. Yet even terms like “typology” have been defined in terms of imposed categories; for Jean-Claude Gardin, a typology is a form of archaeological explanation which “ascribes to the proposed classes a historical meaning which they did not have in the initial Compilation” (Gardin 1980, 64).

In place of objectivist archaeological practice, the kind of writing advocated for in this thesis contributes to effective archaeological research from a “reflexive” framework. This term has been most explored by Hodder in various publications where he expands upon the basic definition over time. Fundamentally, reflexivity is an examination of the effects of archaeological assumptions and actions on the various communities involved in the archaeological process (Hodder 1999, 194; Hodder 2000, 9). It involves a recognition that one’s perspective influences methodology and interpretation of data, along with the fact that archaeological writing has implications in the longterm for stakeholders in archaeological research, and in view of this, that diverse perspectives should be invited to contribute to archaeological practice (Hodder 2003, 6). Furthermore, the constant critical
evaluation of one’s own assumptions leads to a flexible, dynamic research procedure that adapts to changing contexts, analysis, and revelations (Hodder 2003, 64). It is this recognition of the intertwined nature of theory, method, and data that blurs the distinction between ‘site reporting’ and analysis of the archaeological record, allowing a study of archaeological writing like this one to address both genres simultaneously. Still, perhaps the most significant implication of reflexivity for a serious discussion of archaeological writing, is that reflexivity aids in retroactively making sense of archaeological fieldwork after excavations have ended (Hodder 1999, 31).

Reflexivity is a major component of postprocessual archaeology, which can be seen to be influenced significantly by the key postulates of the postmodern movement in the humanities and social sciences. Importantly, one of these central concerns is a re-commitment to narrative as a uniquely communicative medium (White 1987, xi). In light of this, it is necessary to define precisely what narrative is.

Mark Pluciennik defines narrative as a form of writing characterized by three fundamental constituent parts: characters, events, and plots (Pluciennik 1999). He makes clear that it is not a requirement of narrative to place events in linear chronological order for them to have a plot (Pluciennik 1999, 654). The reason for this is that the narrative voice endows a group of events with a greater sense of coherence and collective meaning than these events would have had otherwise (Joyce 2002, 12; Lamarque 1990, 131; Landau 1991, ix; Pluciennik 1999, 656). A succinct working definition of narrative, then, is a writing approach that features characters, events, plots, and a narrative voice that creates a larger framework with which to make sense of the significance of the selection and ordering of events in the story.
The role of the narrative voice as the creator of an overarching framework is significant. It exemplifies the imaginative effort required to construct narrative in a way that resonates with ideas of fiction as an artistically creative endeavor. Indeed, if the etymology of the word ‘fiction’ is traced, one finds the word’s Old French ancestor *ficcion*, meaning ‘something invented,’ and its even older Latin source *fictio*, meaning ‘a fashioning or feigning.’ For someone who takes word origins as gospel, this would be enough to make a case that all narrative—even all writing—is fictive, since any writing is the clearly constructed work of a particular author (Clifford 1986a, 6; Lamarque 1990, 137, 149).

However, the shortcomings of this argument are immediately evident; by describing everything, ‘fiction’ describes nothing and is thus rendered meaningless (Clifford 1986a, 6; Lamarque 1990, 132; White 1987, 180). Therefore, it is necessary to draw upon the current, vernacular meaning of fiction as something invented, imagined, or even ‘made-up’ (Clifford 1986a, 6; Deetz 1988, 16; Lamarque 1990, 132; Pluciennik 1999, 666). The trap to avoid in this exercise is to begin asking endless philosophical questions about metaphysical external referents and the ability of any human to refer to an existing ‘real world’ (Lamarque 1990, 137). Fiction can, in fact, refer both to works that are entirely make-believe in which the author has no intention of communicating past events as well as to accounts of real people and actual occurrences (Lamarque 1990, 147; Pluciennik 1999, 666; Tringham 1991, 93; White 1987, 180). It is essential to disentangle a commitment to reality from the definition of ‘fiction,’ especially given views like those of Cornelius Holtorf, that the value and future of archaeology lies in its
appeal to diverse contemporary audiences, rather than how perfectly archaeologists reconstruct events in the past or in their research procedures (Holtorf 2007, 23, 31).

For my purposes, what sets apart fiction as a discrete entity from nonfiction is the existence of three integral characteristics: first, the possibility of creating a narrative voice that diverges from the author’s real perspective (Joyce 2002, 12; Lamarque 1990, 148). Second, fiction implies an invitation to thematic interpretation, and to a critical examination of the conditions impacting the construction of a narrative (Deetz 1988, 16; Lamarque 1990, 148; Pluciennik 1999, 656). Finally, fiction entails an engagement with readers that transcends direct and straightforward communication, relying additionally on evoking emotive and visceral reaction in particular (Lamarque 1990, 148; White 1987, 180).

Having established clear concepts for how I define both fiction and narrative, I am now able to investigate the potential for writing that employs these approaches in archaeological discourse. This examination culminates in a case study—my own fictional narrative reporting on excavations at Bir Madhkur during the summer field season of 2010. However, it is first necessary to discuss why this writing approach it has not been as successful or prevalent as many (including myself) believe it could be. This is the analysis I engage in below, beginning with a functionally-organized review of the ways in which fictional narrative has been used in various ways to write about archaeology, before moving into a targeted argument for why more archaeologists should utilize the advantageous tropes and enormous potential of fictional narrative writing.
IIA. Popular Fiction.

In 2008, Harrison Ford’s election to the Governing Board of the Archaeological Institute of America reified the importance of fictional archaeologists to the practice of archaeology. His role as Indiana Jones, many felt, helped support the work of professional archaeologists by encouraging public interest in archaeology. Following this reasoning, popular novelists who depict archaeologists are integral to the discipline; while their involvement appears peripheral, they spark much-needed enthusiasm and admiration for archaeological research (Holtorf 2007).

At the same time, however, these portrayals of archaeology in popular fiction can be destructive. Plots center on antiquities which are almost exclusively exotic, shiny and valuable; crucial archaeological realities like stratigraphic context and documentation become entirely irrelevant (Holtorf 2007). The public support for archaeology built in this way is constructed on a fundamental misunderstanding, leading not only to obvious problems such as looting, but also to more subtle issues, like the implied justification for the imperialist and expansionist aspects of scientific inquiry, as well as the widening of the rent between academia and the public (Holtorf 2007).

It seems that popular novels that implicate archaeology or archaeological findings can prove either beneficial or destructive for archaeologists. For this reason, I am proposing that archaeologists make use of the fictional medium in order to capitalize on its advantages while steering it away from its potential faults. This applies equally to portrayals of archaeologist action heroes as to popular fiction that draws upon archaeological evidence to tell stories about past peoples. Both are useful in the way they help to garner support for archaeological research; nevertheless, they also tend to produce
problematic misunderstandings about archaeological practice and the kind of conclusions archaeologists are prepared to investigate.

As the problems associated with romanticizing the practice of archaeology have been widely discussed (e.g. Joyce 2008; Silberman 2008; *Economist* 2002; Mallouf 1996; Alexander 1990), especially in light of the recent release of the fourth *Indiana Jones* movie, it is more pressing to present the pluses and pitfalls illustrated by works of popular fiction that make use of archaeological evidence in order to construct an imagined story of the past. Jean Auel’s *The Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980) serves as an exemplar of the risk involved with specialists allowing amateurs to be the sole communicators of archaeological evidence to the public, as well as the potential advantages for archaeologists in writing fictional narrative.

Auel uses archaeological and ethnoarchaeological data to craft a story about Ayla, a *Homo sapien sapien* girl who is orphaned during the time of the Würm glaciation in Europe, and finds her way into a Neanderthal clan. In the book’s acknowledgements section, Auel expresses gratitude to several people for having taught her about topics including wilderness survival, flintknapping, and the physiology of Neanderthals. Specifically, she thanks the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry and mentions the importance of Ralph Solecki’s work at Shanidar Cave to her novel. Moreover, Christopher Evans (1983) has said that Auel should be “applauded” for the depth and extent of her research.

Auel’s technical knowledge is apparent; she slips jargon into her prose with diction like “occipital bun,” “supraorbital ridges,” and “discoidal nucleus” (10, 12, 213). The particular facets of Neanderthal life she chooses to portray follow along classic lines
of inquiry in anthropology and archaeology: foodways, kinship, gendered division of labor, structured organization of space, usewear, and even taphonomy. Auel features, as well, detailed descriptions of material culture.

Moreover, the fictional narrative style allows her to depict artifacts in realistically conceivable contexts—in what could be considered a literary version of Boas’s original Hall of Northwest Coast Indians at the American Museum of Natural History, where exhibits presented artifacts as these objects would have originally been used, featuring plaster mannequins and all. But Auel’s characters one-up Boas’s plaster mannequins in that they have the ability to directly communicate thoughts and feelings. Auel is thus able to create a total world which frames and molds the archaeological evidence that underpins it. Furthermore, she engages in analysis that proceeds on multiple time scales, finding ways to discuss both long-term evolutionary and geologic processes as well as highly detailed accounts of the original appearance and purpose of various objects in Neanderthal culture. The dynamic, agentive roles of these material objects in the setting and plot of Clan of the Cave Bear impel Auel to take into account many considerations regarding their form and function—giving her narrativized assertions about Neanderthal artifacts and culture a sense of realism, concreteness, and authenticity lacking from thin, technical, typologically-oriented reports.

When paired with her apparent command of scholarly jargon, Auel’s convincingly realistic and detailed description lends authority to her conception of this prehistoric society—a unique kind of authority on which professional archaeologists have the ability to capitalize (Flemming 2006, 55). And indeed, they should, as creators of popular fiction can (albeit often unwittingly) wield this authority to deceive the reader
into thinking that various elements in their stories are substantiated by evidence in the archaeological record. Consider the following passage from Auel’s *Clan of the Cave Bear* (1980), regarding Neanderthal capabilities:

“And their memory made them extraordinary. In them, the unconscious knowledge of ancestral behavior called instinct had evolved. Stored in the back of their large brains were not just their own memories, but the memories of their forebears. They could recall knowledge learned by their ancestors, and, under special circumstances, they could go a step beyond. They could recall their racial memory, their own evolution. And when they reached back far enough, they could merge that memory that was identical for all and join their minds, telepathically.” (Auel 1980, 28-9)

Initially, it might seem absurd to claim that any person interested in taking on a near-500-page novel about Pleistocene Europe would be gullible enough to believe that Neanderthal ESP is attested archaeologically. But Auel is cited in works as academic as Matthew Johnson’s introduction to archaeological theory (Johnson 2010, 140), where she is praised for her innovative contributions to an archaeology of disability. Furthermore, there are several points in the book where Auel narrates a Neanderthal character using this unparalleled memory in ways that border on the supernatural while using neuroscience buzzwords, hearkening back to the identity of a scholarly authority which she has skillfully crafted for herself—a technique common in pseudoarchaeological writing (Flemming 2006, 56). Indeed, the passage above from *Clan of the Cave Bear* is immediately preceded by the following:

“All those primitive people, with almost no frontal lobes, and speech limited by undeveloped vocal organs, but with huge brains—larger than any race of man then living or future generations yet unborn—were unique. They were the culmination of a branch of mankind whose brain was developed in the back of their heads, in the occipital and the parietal regions that control vision and bodily sensation and store memory.” (Auel 1980, 28)
Clan of the Cave Bear as a case study reveals the enormous potential awaiting archaeologists if they choose to embrace the style of popular fiction as well as the risk involved with leaving the genre entirely to nonacademes. It shows the possibility for a comprehensive, anthropological, and intellectual presentation of evidence and analysis, but also the ease with which an overly imaginative author can appear authoritative and thereby mislead her readership. While I don’t suggest that archaeologists taking on elements of a popular fictive writing style will completely replace or eliminate sensationalized accounts of the past, it certainly seems worthwhile to provide an educated, engaging alternative to make-believe fiction that implicates archaeology.

This argument applies not only to presenting archaeological evidence, but also to writing about excavation procedure and archaeological practice. Romanticized treatments of this topic should concern archaeologists as much as misapplications of their findings. The style of popular fiction has the ability to contribute to a genre of site reporting that counteracts misunderstandings of archaeological method. As an illustration, Auel’s Clan of the Cave Bear indicates the breadth of issues that can be examined anthropologically through the vehicle of popular fiction; this has significant implications regarding the degree of reflexivity enabled by fictionalizing archaeological site reports and turning this contextualizing, anthropological eye onto narratives of our own excavations.

Popular fiction that makes use of archaeological research—both the knowledge created and the procedure—represents a genre of writing which has a great deal to offer archaeologists, as well as one which can prove problematic if left untouched by academics (Allen and Joyce 2010, 271; Flemming 2006). Fortunately, some
archaeologists have recognized this, leading to experiments with the idea of portraying realistic—but fictional—dialogues focusing on theoretical and methodological as well as data-oriented questions. In the section which follows, I analyze some of these kinds of publications to see which attributes of popular fiction writing are retained, which ones are not, and to identify both the benefits and drawbacks of this kind of writing.

IIB. Fictive Dialogues.

As discussed in section IB, postmodernism left the confines of literary theory during the 1980’s and 1990’s, radically permeating the discipline of anthropology and especially impacting ethnographic writing. Archaeology was not exempt from the influence of postmodernism, and the body of archaeological writing produced during this time shows increasing concern with issues of representation and multivocality. Many archaeologists recognized the impossibility of telling a single, complete truth, as well as the importance of making transparent their hermeneutic processes.

One of the ways in which authors of archaeology grappled with these realizations was by crafting dialogues where conversants would discuss and assess ideas—rather than authoritatively giving a single straightforward conclusion. The conversants in these dialogues were sometimes real, sometimes imagined, and frequently allegorical.

Barbara Bender’s volume Stonehenge: Making Space (1998) represents a collection of these kinds of dialogues. With the exception of one, all of the conversations that appear in her book actually happened. Nevertheless, as Rosemary Joyce (2002, 61) has asserted, the clearly significant degree to which Bender has edited these dialogues—along with the context with which she surrounds them and the way in which she orders them—means that she is the indisputable author of the work and even of the dialogues
themselves. In this way, these dialogues, despite being recreations of actual events, are fictive; they are constructed by Bender in her purposive attempt to compose a book about Stonehenge that privileges the presentation of multiple voices to a diverse readership. Indeed, Bender states, “this book is an acknowledgement that what I write is subjective” (Bender 1998, 5).

Some of the dialogues in Bender’s book exhibit her authorial manipulation more than others. Naturally, her own contributions to each discussion are a function of her particular intent and vision for the final product. Still, her active authorship of all of the textualized exchanges is evident. Even the conversations that seem to be verbatim transcriptions feature inserted parenthetical citations of referenced publications and footnotes when a concept needs further explanation. She makes ample use of ellipses to convey both omissions she has decided to make as well as vocal modulations such as trailing off or pausing. This dual purpose forces the reader to accept that he may not know what every ellipse means in each context; indeed, it does not matter, since the text he is reading is fundamentally a product of Bender’s perspective and authorship.

In the email conversations that appear in Stonehenge: Making Space, Bender’s crafting is even more apparent. She tells the reader the source of each line of dialogue, saying from which email in a conversation every contribution came. From this information, it is evident that she carefully selected, reordered, and restitched excerpts of these emails in a way that made sense for her objective. In the chapter 7 dialogue with Ian Hodder, for example, she makes use of only two emails from herself and two emails from him. Passages lifted from these emails appear out of order and out of context, put
together by Bender in a way that makes sense but surely with a different meaning than they originally carried.

Chapter 7 also contains “the dialogue that never happened,” in which Bender invents a conversation in order to talk about various ways of presenting the past. This imagined discussion is presented amid many dialogues shaped from real-life discussions, and is given equal importance within the publication. With this invented conversation, Bender further highlights the extent to which she has crafted *Stonehenge: Making Space*, deemphasizing the importance of how faithfully the dialogues repeat actual conversations and instead focusing the reader’s attention on Bender’s message and the effectiveness of dialogues as a medium. Bender’s book is therefore ‘fictionalizing,’ in the way that she reinterprets real events, making her particular subjective viewpoint primary in the reader’s experience, blurring the distinction between the invented and the real—and even reducing the importance of this distinction.

Ruth Tringham conducts a similar kind of fictive endeavor in *Households with Faces: the Challenge of Gender in Prehistoric Architectural Remains* (1991), chapter four in *Engendering Archaeology: Women in Prehistory*. The chapter is unusual; it includes several different styles of writing within less than 40 pages. Among these, Tringham includes an imaginary dialogue between four (real) archaeologists—Marija Gimbutas, Ian Hodder, Andrew Sherratt, and herself. They each present their interpretation of the archaeological evidence at Opovo to respond to questions posed by an invented Interviewer.

According to Tringham, her purpose in creating this “Radio Story,” as she calls it, is “to show that they [these divergent interpretive models] should be treated as a
plurality” (Tringham 1991, 113), asserting that they should all be considered and valued for their contribution to knowledge about prehistory. The reader should critically analyze these paradigms—not only by assessing each one in isolation, but also by examining how the models can complement and converse with each other. Tringham’s straightforward statement of her purpose in writing the dialogue functions dually to tell her audience how to read the Radio Story and also to underscore her role as author. Despite presenting these perspectives as divergent from her own and belonging to others, she is still the creator of the arguments as they are made here (especially considering two of the others have never even published on the Opovo data).

Moreover, Tringham’s response to the Interviewer’s questions almost always comes fourth—after (Tringham’s version of) the other archaeologists’ answers. This gives Tringham the advantage of the proverbial ‘last word,’ which she capitalizes on, taking on the role of a mediator or synthesizer of sorts. Her answers are diplomatic; one even begins “I don’t know; I can’t say; I presume…” (Tringham 1991, 113), triply reminding the reader about the conjectural nature of archaeological conclusions about gender, in a way that precludes myopic acceptance of any single interpretation in the dialogue.

By reserving her position as the final voice in the Radio Story—both as imagined interviewee and author—Tringham reconciles the dilemma of fostering multivocality without striving to achieve some kind of unobtainable objectivity. She is still the undisputed author of the dialogue; like Bender, she manipulates real-world referents and their attendant meanings to create fictionalized conversation.
Tringham’s chapter tends more toward the make-believe than most of Bender’s dialogues, as Bender adapts the real words of the contributors to her volume, whereas Tringham adapts only their generalized intellectual standpoints. Others who have written in dialogues have even invented personalities for personas that they put into conversation. Often, these personas can be stand-ins for abstract entities as exemplified by the proliferation of debates between the ‘Inward Voice’ and ‘Outward Voice’ of archaeologists that appeared during the 1990’s (Joyce 2002, 58).

An illustration of this latter kind of writing can be seen in Ian Bapty’s theatrical *The agony and the ecstasy; The emotions of writing the past, a tragedy in one act for three voices* (1990). In it, he invokes the Inward Voice, the Outward Voice, and the Past—although the Past does not ever appear onstage and has no lines in the piece. The setting is specific, and corresponds to a time and place in the real world: 3:10 pm on December 19th, 1990 at the TAG conference held at Saint David’s University College in Lampeter. The Outward Voice is giving a paper at the conference about the role of emotion in writing about the past. Accordingly, he speaks like a scholar; his word choice is erudite, his syntax rhythmic and complex. Meanwhile, the Inward Voice ruthlessly critiques the Outward Voice’s presentation, gibbering sardonically but apparently unheard by the Outward Voice.

The Inward Voice especially condemns the Outward Voice for his hypocrisy in speaking in such an unemotional, censored way about the relevance of considering emotion when writing history. Says the Inward Voice to the Outward, “You talk of building emotion into the study of the past, and yet you do so in the most unemotional, dead-pan way, you do so in the guise of a text where the rhetorical spectre of orthodox
reason stalks every line” (Bapty 1990, 241). He continues, “Look at me, I’m real, I feel, I’m sad, I’m happy, but may I speak? No, not in this company, not in the past either. Instead I am condemned to chatter on inanely as a silly rhetorical device” (Bapty 1990, 241). In this line, Bapty exploits the Inward Voice’s potential to perform a meta-commentary about the very piece in which it appears as a character. The Inward Voice encourages the audience to consider the influence of the personal—emotional, yes, but in a broader sense, subjective—standpoint of the author in any work. His entreaty, to consider the effect of perspective on how meaning is created, is clearly meant to apply not only to the Outward Voice, but also to Bapty himself and to any writer implicated in the academic discourse.

Bapty uses the performative, dialogic medium as a meta-analysis of archaeological or historical representation. His multivocality is of a different nature than that of Bender and Tringham’s dialogues considered above; he conveys the internal debates that occur within a single scholarly author. Still, these various textual discussions all reflect engagement with the problem of deceptively hegemonic authorship. They show how nuanced the process of knowledge creation is, and how much subjectivity is involved in putting an analysis into text, even when these varied perspectives are included transparently. Moreover, rather than asserting—even implicitly, as most academic writing does—that any argument can be both complete and entirely truthful, these dialogues spotlight the multiplicity of perspectives that become involved in interpretation.

An additional perspective that has been invoked into these kinds of archaeological dialogues is the direct voice of people from the past, as demonstrated in Adrian and Mary
Praetzellis’s *A Connecticut Merchant in Chinadom: A Play in One Act* (1998). Like Bapty’s tragedy, the setting of the Praetzellis’s play is a conference, although this one is for the Society of Historical Archaeology. The play involves an archaeologist presenting at the conference and Josiah Gallup, “a Gold Rush-era merchant and lawyer,” who is also the subject of the archaeologist’s paper (Praetzellis & Praetzellis 1998, 86).

As in Bapty’s work, the archaeologist speaks in a flat monotone using technical language. She is often interrupted by an indignant, belligerent Gallup, whom she ignores for the vast majority of the play. Gallup elicits further explanation of the archaeologist’s jargon but also directly contradicts many of her assertions about the archaeological evidence. In the end, “flushed with success, both figures step down from the stage and go straight to the hotel bar where they are treated to several rounds of drinks by their admirers” (Praetzellis & Praetzellis 1998, 91). Importantly, both Gallup’s contentions and the archaeologist’s interpretation’s are substantiated in an earlier, separate technical report, as well as in the bibliographic essay which accompanies the play in *Historical Archaeology*.

The Praetzellis’s play fits within the larger body of archaeological dialogues in the way that it makes use of actual people, places, and events in order to author a conversation that contrasts disparate understandings and analyses. As with the others, no interpretation is privileged above any of the others; all are presented as worthy of consideration—especially in terms of how these different ideas interact and what they can contribute to each other. Still, although all of these dialogues are based on real-world referents, they all show a clear element of invention, imagination, and purposive authorship. The creators of these dialogues value incorporating a diversity of voices.
while still maintaining their control as authors. Their simultaneous interests are reified extremely literally in the form of these fictive dialogues.

Still, while these conversations succeed in incorporating multiple viewpoints and in showing how they shape each other, they lack most of the tropes of fictional and narrative writing. By shedding a normative prose format, these authors lose the opportunity to place their dialogues in an elaborated structure, severely limiting the complexity and possibility for subtle and nuanced textual context. They are constrained by the time scale and tone of conversation. While these authored dialogues represent an innovative way to start communicating the dynamic epistemic processes involved in the production of archaeological knowledge, there is even more opportunity to do so if archaeologists make an effort to write more like novelists, with plots, descriptive settings and emotions, and figurative language. Some have begun to do this, as I will discuss in the next section, with regard to their imaginings about the past and the people they study.

IIC. Imagined Pasts.

The subgenre of archaeological writing in which a narrative and expressly fictionalized style has most been explored is in representations of the past. Given the fragmentary nature of archaeological evidence, interpretation naturally requires imagination and creativity and many archaeologists have found it useful to imagine stories involving those living at the sites they excavate. For example, Janet Spector—perhaps one of the most well-known of those who have ventured into narrating invented pasts—wrote What This Awl Means (1993) primarily as an academic exercise rather than an attempt to tap into the market of popular fiction. Moreover, to Spector, it is only natural for an archaeologist to imagine stories about the past, as she demonstrates by
recounting the excavation of a Wahpeton site in Minnesota. She describes how the field team often spent their leisure time conceiving of possible scenarios about the people who produced the remains found at the site (Spector 1993, 89).

A large part of her book is an elaboration of these imagined scenarios. She tells the story behind a particular awl found at the site, depicting its manufacture, use, and loss by a Dakota girl. Spector even uses the Wahpeton language in order to create a genuine period atmosphere. Nevertheless, she maintains her positionality as an academic by including in-text citations that remind the reader exactly how much of the fiction is corroborated by archaeological evidence.

A similar kind of invented story appears at the end of Ruth Tringham’s *Households with faces: the Challenge of Gender in Prehistoric Architectural Remains* (1991). Hers, however, lacks the in-text citations—an approach perhaps warranted by the larger context of the scholarly article in which the narrative is found. The piece shifts from third person to first person perspective, and utilizes purposefully vague references and simplistic, experiential exclamations in order to accomplish the same kind of authentic world which Spector (1993) constructs with her use of indigenous language. Tringham communicates her main character’s feelings toward an unnamed dead man, an equally mysterious woman, and a house-burning event, simply with a succession of simple sentences in the style of a stream of consciousness. “My hair’s scorching. It makes my eyes water. I’m crying!” Tringham writes (1991, 124).

For Tringham, writing this segment of her chapter was a necessary step in formulating a nuanced understanding of prehistoric human life. Insight into the past, she says, necessitates that archaeologists recognize the extent to which prehistoric actors
would have been engaged with economic, political, social, and ideological realities—and in order to do this, they must envisage past people with ‘faces,’ to use Tringham’s term (1991, 94). Mark Edmonds (1999) advocates for a similar benefit conferred upon archaeologists who create stories about individuals negotiating the past worlds these archaeologists attempt to comprehend. For him, this practice allows a more complete image of “the character of life at the time” and even can contribute to explanations about “the reproduction of the social world” (Edmonds 1999, x).

In Ancestral Geographies of the Neolithic (1999), Edmonds intersperses traditional scholarly archaeological writing with invented third-person narratives that take place in Neolithic Europe. Like Spector and Tringham, he attempts to paint a world with sensory language and carefully chosen syntax that creates a particular type of experience for the reader. As an example, in the narration of a funerary ritual, Edmonds refers to the central figure on whom the ritual is focused by saying, “She was between worlds” without further elucidating in familiar terms what this turn of phrase means (Edmonds 1999, 75).

Edmonds’s work is extremely similar to Roderick McIntosh’s Peoples of the Middle Niger (1998), which likewise alternates scholarly discussions of archaeological and historical evidence with chapters of fictional narrative, called “historical imagination” by McIntosh. He states that his motivation for writing in this way is to work through the challenges of imposing a Western vocabulary on the past of the peoples of the Middle Niger, evoking instead “the style and flavour of the oral traditions” in order to capture the constellation of values that have shaped the history of this region (McIntosh 1998, xix-xx). Both McIntosh and Edmonds employ a substantial quantity of
simple sentences as well as vague statements that are phrased so as to generate an emic perspective of the time and place explored; in their fictional narrative sections, they even appear to use the same font! (McIntosh 1998; Edmonds 1999)

Like Tringham, both Edmonds and McIntosh exclude in-text citations from their narrative passages; they rely on the intervening scholarly chapters to motivate the facticity of their imagined fictions. Indeed, McIntosh states outright that his academic chapters are the “meat” of his text (McIntosh 1998, xxi). Edmonds is less dismissive of his own fictional narrative sections, claiming that he chooses to avoid in-text citations because they “weigh down a text, and they can certainly make it too exclusive” (Edmonds 1999, x). The lack of citation, along with a drastic transformation of style and a change of typeface, serves to differentiate the imagined chapters from the traditional and academic chapters in both Edmonds’s and McIntosh’s books, although Ian Hodder (2003, 128) has expressed concern in a review of *Ancestral Geographies of the Neolithic* that the distinction is not made clear enough.

Perhaps this worry stems from the fact that Edmonds’s work—along with that of McIntosh, Tringham, and Spector—represents one of the most dramatic applications of fiction to archaeological evidence by an archaeologist. The idea that a reader might accept these stories as ‘proven’ historical occurrences warrants a degree of trepidation, although the thought should also elicit misgivings that this same reader is accepting more traditional ‘nonfictional’ academic writing as bias-free and completely truthful in its representation of the past.

This concern with substantiation extends especially to fictions like Mary Beaudry’s *Farm Journal: First Person, Four Voices* (1998), where she creates journal
entries from the perspective of four people who actually lived at the Specer-Peirce-Little Farm in Newbury, Massachusetts between 1780 and 1820. In her words:

> “combining clues from a variety of documents, a data-rich archaeological record, and my own imagination, I have discovered fragments of journals of four individuals—Nathaniel and Mary Lee Tracy and Offin and Sarah Tappan Boardman—who lived at the farm in the early years of the American republic” (Beaudry 1998, 20)

Beaudry’s use of the word “discovered” downplays the extent to which she has invented the journal articles that follow. Indeed, her inspiration for writing the journal fragments came from her experience with using a real journal kept by Offin Boardman while researching the history of the site.

While Beaudry employs fictional and narrative writing technique to create these journal fragments, they differ from the narratives of imagined pasts described above in that Beaudry attempts to recreate primary documents. They carry the authority of real names and dates, and the language Beaudry uses is modeled after the diction of existent journals from this time period. A bibliographic essay detailing the process by which Beaudry created these chronicles accompanies the collection of diary passages; however, the medium of the journal entries diminishes the clarity of her role as author.

In the same way, Carmel Schrire employs many of the same tropes that Beaudry does in *Digging through Darkness: Chronicles of an Archaeologist* (1995). She imagines several “testimonies” which could have conceivably been created by historical people involved at Oudepost, the South African site she analyzes in the book. These testimonies, however, are included among real documentary sources that Schrire used for her research; the reader is expected to tell the difference between the found testimonies and the invented ones only by the absence of endnote citations and key phrases in the
introductory passages, such as “imagination textures existence a little further” (Schrire 1995, 157). Diction like this reveals Schrire’s attempt to create a sense of authenticity and legitimacy, which she endeavors to do in the same manner as Beaudry with her journal entries, by appropriating historical media and period language in order to create a sense of authenticity and legitimacy.

These pieces by Beaudry and Schrire represent a divergence from a general body of work where archaeological evidence inspires fictional stories about the pasts written by archaeologists. In all of the endeavors described here, however, archaeologists can be seen capitalizing on their roles as producers of knowledge and, furthermore, recognizing that their positionality has an inescapable influence on their interpretation and analysis. By crafting products that are explicitly imaginary, these authors take control of that inevitability, making controlled, creative use of their unique perspectives in order to generate fuller understandings of the past.

Still, all of these works exhibit an unresolved problem of authenticity—of identifying what in the text is based on tangible evidence and what is invented. The importance of this question, along with the context of the academic publications in which these papers appear, reflect an approach to writing fictional narrative that diverges from popular fiction. By imagining pasts and writing about them in a fictional narrative style, archaeologists position themselves staunchly as author-creators, but still endeavor to lend scholarly support to their visualizations with archaeological evidence. This genre of archaeological writing reveals the extent to which archaeologists grapple with the tension between personal perspective and truthfulness when attempting to redress the problems associated with the products of positivist archaeological epistemology.
IID. Archaeologists as Characters.

The imagination required to be an archaeologist lends itself to extrapolating fictional narratives from archaeological evidence, as indicated by the previous section. Many archaeologists, however, have turned this creative lens upon the field of archaeology, concocting fictional archaeologists who serve as characters in stories meant to provide insight into the discipline.

One of the earliest and most well-known of these stories is Kent Flannery’s *The Golden Marshalltown: A Parable for the Archeology of the 1980s* (1982), where he tells the story of a fictional transnational flight he took and a conversation that occurred between a group of archaeologists on the plane. The characters—or caricatures, rather—receive titles reflective of their personas instead of names because “each considers himself the spokesman for a large group of people” (Flannery 1982, 265). The spokesmen include the Child of the Seventies, the Born-Again Philosopher, and the Old Timer. Flannery himself, as the first person narrator of the tale, serves as a foil to these extreme personalities.

The Child of the Seventies is a discourse cannibal, regurgitating the original ideas of others under his own byline and receiving credit for edited volumes that require little critical thinking of his own. The Born-Again Philosopher conducts no original fieldwork; he publishes research designs, muses on theory, and critiques the epistemology of others. Meanwhile, the Old-Timer is the quintessential old-fashioned dirt archaeologist, “forced into early retirement by his belief in culture” (268). The scene that ensues between them and Flannery conveys Flannery’s nostalgia for a practical
archaeology dependent on well-executed fieldwork and centered on understanding culture.

The allegorical approach utilized in *The Golden Marshalltown* to commentate on the state of the discipline of archaeology can be found in other works by Flannery. In *The Early Mesoamerican Village* (1976), for example, he introduces three characters whom he uses at the outset of each chapter to give a sense of the broader theoretical context surrounding each chapter’s discussion as well as his position within it. For him, this was the most effective way to illustrate—in a critical manner—the problems he saw in the practice and discourse of Mesoamerican archaeology. These representative characters—the Real Mesoamerican Archaeologist, the Great Synthesizer, and the Skeptical Graduate Student—stand in for the internal, contesting voices with which each archaeologist must mentally contend (Flannery 1976, 4). The character’s personalities and perspectives also correspond to those of real, external interlocutors whose opinions and responses impact an archaeologist’s final interpretation (Joyce 2002, 56).

Other instances where archaeologists write characters to be exaggerated symbols of broader theoretical and methodological standpoints diverge from Flannery’s work mainly in purpose. His parables cater to an academic audience, functioning as synecdochic theoretical analyses of the state of the discipline, as well as convenient ways to subtly critique easily recognizable personality types. By contrast, archaeologist-characters like those that appear in Adrian Praetzellis’s *Death by Theory* (2003) and *Dug to Death* (2000) make abstract and elusive concepts more accessible to a diverse readership.
In these novels, aside from the moderate protagonist Dr. Hannah Green, each character is an embellished version of one of the various personalities encountered in the field and in the academic world. *Death by Theory*, for example, showcases individuals including Alasdair Crisp, the stuck-up graduate student who preaches materialism as archaeological gospel, Terry Jones, the leftist proponent of Marxism as a method of both historical interpretation and social reform, and ‘Big Dave,’ the stoic postmodernist who refuses to castigate any one of his ostentatious and opinionated companions. The way the various fieldworkers debate and interact is meant to mirror the way these schools of thought respond to and shape each other—both historically and in contemporary discourse.

Praetzellis’s second book, *Dug to Death*, focuses on method rather than theory, and accordingly, its characters serve a different purpose than living out the discussions occurring in academic literature. Instead, they help to impart a feeling of what it’s like to be on an excavation project. Praetzellis furthers this endeavor by letting the reader in on oft-repeated archaeologist jokes (like the threat of finding a skeleton on the last day of excavation) as well as several ubiquitous social realities of archaeological research—such as “the neophyte’s humiliation ritual” and, of course, dig romance (Praetzellis 2003, 2). The medium of a murder mystery is therefore extremely valuable for Praetzellis. He confesses outright (2003, 205) that field archaeology is fun; a proper understanding of it is therefore impossible if it is explained in a dry, uninteresting manner.

In fact, in his preface, Praetzellis directly addresses why he chose to create a murder mystery as a teaching text for archaeological method and communicating the fun of archaeology is one of the advantages he names (Praetzellis 2003, xi). He also
describes how being able to manipulate relations between the multiple characters in the book more accurately mimics the process of interaction and discussion that ultimately produces archaeological knowledge (Praetzellis 2003, xi). This is extremely similar to the way in which Flannery utilized his representative characters; for both authors, inventing allegorical personalities allowed them to represent and comment on the debates they saw within archaeology, and even to incorporate common, identifiable personality traits that were important to depicting these debates as thoroughly as possible, but without attacking specific real-life individuals by name.

The characters and storylines written by Praetzellis and Flannery, however, are entirely invented. While they may have been inspired by actual events, they are not meant to follow any real series of occurrences precisely. In this way they differ from some of the other works that portray actual archaeologists as characters in emplotted stories, such as C.W. Ceram’s *Gods, Graves, and Scholars*, originally written in the 1950’s as the story of archaeology’s development and targeted toward a public audience. Ceram admits that he authored his text “without scholarly pretensions,” his goal being “to portray the dramatic qualities of archaeology, its human side” (Ceram 1967, ix). He develops the personalities of the archaeologists he describes, and the intimate details involved in the stories of their achievements (Ceram 1967). And while Ceram calls his story a “nonfiction or documentary novel,” he expresses a residual discomfort with this term (Ceram 1967, x). He asks, in his foreword: “which preponderates, the factual element or the literary?” and describes his biographical narrative of Heinrich Schliemann as a “fairy tale” (Ceram 1967, xi; 26). In the end, he explains that “the literary effect is derived from the factual ‘arrangement,’ those in which fact is consistently of prime
concern;” significantly, the act of arranging facts and events is primarily what Hayden White and Peter Lamarque have more recently used to define fictive narrative as a genre (White 1987; Lamarque 1990).

More contemporary works show an increasingly explicit and critical engagement with using fictional narrative to portray real archaeologists, with one prime example being Carmel Schrire’s memoir *Digging through Darkness: Chronicles of an Archaeologist* (1995). As Schrire states regarding her memoir: “These chronicles are all in large part true, but at the same time all of them raise the question of what is true?” (Schrire 1995, 10). She goes so far as to call the book a collection of “fictions,” and attaches a bibliography that makes clear what parts she has invented and what parts can be corroborated by other sources—although, for Schrire, “in some respects the distinction is of little consequence” (Schrire 1995, 10). This attitude is reflected in her indiscriminate combination of real documentary sources and invented testimonies to motivate her claims about Oudepost, as described in the preceding section. Schrire, moreover, applies the same archaeological hermeneutics to reporting the account of the Oudepost excavation as she does to her own self-positioning as an archaeologist and an author, viewing her own memories as “artifacts” themselves (Schrire 1995, 11).

This mindset is exemplified in Schrire’s willingness to present both traditionally ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ realities and to include details that would appear in traditional scholarly writing as well as those more informal, personal details that would be included in cocktail-party anecdotes. For example, she repeats Deetz’s onsite advice verbatim: “Dig the sucker out!” (Schrire 1995, 88) and inserts glimpses into his personality—and how it affected their research process—throughout the book. She describes other team
members’ idiosyncracies and appearances; Schrire’s depiction of Jane Klose is particularly unrestrained, portraying her as a “jolly-looking woman” with a “pure London” accent (Schrire 1995, 81).

The stories that make up the excavation report component of Schrire’s book are almost entirely exempt from endnote citations. Certainly, this is in large part due to the fact that they rest upon her first-person authority of having been there, earning the trust of the reader in much the same way as ethnography does. However, the result is that Schrire’s recollection of the project appears in the same format as her invented historical documents—at least in terms of citation and evidentiary support. Both are original creations, have a transparent purpose, and are evident works of fiction.

Schrire’s choice to include selective endnotes within her text creates a clear distinction between that which is or can be cited, and which isn’t or cannot be cited. This distinction is effaced from The Goddess and the Bull (2005), the biography of Çatalhöyük written by Michael Balter. The book features miniature biographies of the different fieldworkers at Çatalhöyük, along with narrations about their interactions across the field seasons and even entertaining anecdotes about social interactions at the site. Balter provides sources that corroborate most of his report—but he does so with a notes section at the end of the book that uses quoted passages to refer back to the text, rather than superscripted numbers or symbols. This eliminates the need for any in-text markers that might disrupt the flow of reading or which, moreover, might remind the reader of the need to verify the text.

Instead, any reader lacking the motivation to continually refer to the back of the book takes for granted that the tales Balter relates are true, a trust warranted by the way
Balter explains how he collected the information found in the volume. He spent time on the site over multiple field seasons, and combined his observations with personal interviews conducted with the people involved. His site biography carries the same authority as most biographies or ethnographies; the reader is meant to believe that his interpretations of what he has seen or been told about are credible. For this reason, it can be seen as fictive in the same basic way as most ethnographies—in terms of the intended relationship between author, text, and reader.

This assertion is further legitimized by the fact that much of the information presented by Balter, by its nature, can’t be confirmed. He describes, for example, his own perceptions of people and their personality traits, linking these judgments to people’s behavior and decisions. He vividly describes their feelings and thought processes, extrapolating from what they’ve told him as well as his firsthand experience of meeting them. Balter essentially takes a third person omniscient narrative voice, and creates characters out of the real people who work at Çatalhöyük, imagining and synthesizing the internal sentiments and concerns of these characters so that the storyline is coherent. In this way, Balter downplays the importance of whether or not he captures all of the complex emotions felt by the fieldworkers, as well as the overall accuracy of his characterization. Rather than taking on the quixotic mission of creating an objectively correct psychological profile for each person, Balter embraces the reality of his incomplete and teleological view of how the Çatalhöyük team came together and interacted. He circumvents these limitations by making use of his ability as an author to foreshadow, to draw the reader’s attention to particular moments which only appear significant when viewed from the present. Balter takes ownership of the control he
wields over his text, crafting characters in a way that privileges creating a cohesive narrative and message over an impossibly elusive ‘true’ depiction of people and events.

An alternative to the inherently teleological viewpoint of narrating the progression of archaeological research projects is suggested by Barbara Bender, Sue Hamilton, and Chris Tilley’s Stone Worlds, Alternative Narratives, Nested Landscapes (1997) in which they present the work conducted as part of the Leskernick project. They combine more traditional and straightforward scholarly writing with fragments from their diaries kept during the excavation, hoping to “create methodologies and ways of writing that more truthfully reflect the process of discovery, uncovery, intuition, and interpretation” (Bender et al. 1997) The journal excerpts insert authorial perspective from an ephemeral moment in time that has now passed. In this way, Bender, Hamilton, and Tilley break free of the inevitable teleology that comes with reflecting and writing on past events.

In some ways, however, this style is problematic. First of all, it is evidently clumsy; between the sections of diary and those of standard site reporting, transitions are nonexistent. The journal entries are used as a simultaneous, interspersed—but separate—line of evidence regarding the work at Leskernick, rather than an element that corroborates or contextualizes the claims made in the more traditionally-written passages. The connections between the points furthered by each source are tenuous at best; the reader is left struggling to understand the associations between the two, undermining the communicative potential of this archaeographical format.

Moreover, the expectation that some connection should exist is important. It reflects the fact that although the diaries were written as the fieldwork was being undertaken, the entries are reread, reinterpreted, and edited from a perspective looking
back on those events and feelings. The reader knows that the authors are deciding what is important enough to include in the final product, and that they have viewpoints different from when they created the diaries. In the process of choosing what of their original thoughts and feelings to incorporate and what to leave out, Bender, Hamilton, and Tilley craft personas for themselves, much like Balter and Schrire. Although their attempt reveals less desire for cohesion than Balter’s biography, they still appear as constructed characters in their own text, speaking from a past moment in time.

The works reviewed in these passages represent extremely diverse but related ways of engaging with the fictive effort of creating characters in archaeological writing. Moreover, the authors here create archaeologist-characters, which is different from placing characters into their imaginings of the historical periods they study; it requires a recognition that not only are archaeologists’ interpretations of the archaeological record extremely subjective, but also their views of themselves and each other. Flannery and Praetzellis exemplify this by creating allegorical, stereotypical stand-ins that recombine recognizable traits in real archaeologists. They put these extremes into dialogue that mimics the overarching archaeological discourse and thereby situate themselves and other archaeologists at some moderate point on the spectrum. While Flannery and Praetzellis address different audiences, they both make it clear that archaeologists have subjective agendas and particular perspectives—often to the point of being comic—and their standpoint is as important to consider as their words.

In other publications, the characters have real-life referents, corresponding to archaeologists in the real world. In the papers reviewed here, their personalities and emotions are considered important—a view unusual among scholarly writers. To discuss
these topics, however, the authors must recognize the impossibility of capturing their total complexity. They can then proceed to take command of their role as creators of these texts in order to highlight certain behavioral traits and thought processes. These writers thereby actively shape and create characters that closely resemble—but are not be identical to—real-life archaeologists.

Still, the archaeologists writing about real life excavations and projects maintain a firm distinction from those writing about entirely imagined ones. They still attempt to create a depiction of reality that approximates their memories and perceptions of reality as closely as possible. However, I wish to explore the possible advantages conferred by departing from this goal to an extent. After a summary of this literature review in the next section, I will address the potential benefits from utilizing fictional narrative writing tropes, arguing that these advantages can be seen as alternative goals which should be a higher priority than the pursuit of pure accuracy in archaeological writing.

IIE. Summary and Discussion.

The trends in archaeological writing described in the sections above do not represent stages in a linear development toward some as-yet-unrealized ideal of embracing the potential of fiction in archaeological writing. Rather, they are each very different ways of responding to problems with representation of archaeological knowledge. Examining each genre in turn reveals its particular various advantages; however, it remains important to synthesize what should be retained as narrativization and fictionalization expands in archaeological writing—and where these media fall short.

Within the realm of popular fiction, shortcomings are immediately evident. First, academia tends to have a viscerally disparaging reaction to archaeologists’ attempts to
create texts that are accessible and interesting to the public (Ceram 1967, ix; B. Fagan 2006; Flemming 2006, 52; Holtorf 2007). The result is that those living outside of the ivory tower can only familiarize themselves with archaeological practice and analysis based on sensationalized depictions by compelling writers who share a lack of experience with the discipline. Even when popular authors have done substantial research—as with Jean Auel, as well as Agatha Christie and others—they are not bound by the same concerns that plague archaeologists. They are free to depict archaeology as treasure-hunting, to present single truths—and even incorrect facts—as complete truths, and to ultimately mislead the reader about what archaeologists do, should do, and can do.

Nevertheless, the way to combat this problem is not to continue to dismiss novels that implicate archaeology as trivial and unimportant. They have a significant impact on the public’s impression of archaeology—which in turn influences how much and what kind of archaeology can be done. Fantastical versions of archaeology also contribute to the encouragement of looting and ‘amateur archaeology.’ Simply allowing these dramatized portrayals of archaeology to exist without attempting to confront them creates problems for archaeologists and in fact thwarts any imagined, misguided mission of keeping archaeology safely academic.

Instead, it makes more sense to capitalize on the appeals of popular fiction, for archaeologists to write in ways that are both engaging and understandable to the public. One of the techniques utilized to approach this goal is to make archaeological writing more conversational—less jargon-laden and unwarrantedly authoritative. The fictive dialogues described in section IIB attempt to accomplish this aim. They correspond to real conversations in varying degrees, from nearly-verbatim transcriptions to an
apparition from the past contesting the interpretations of an equally make-believe archaeologist. These dialogues reflect more aptly the way archaeological knowledge is constructed—not in solitude, but through a process of debate and discussion. The discussion format also forces authors to restate their assertions several times in different vernacular terms as each conversational participant elicits clarity, critique, and further elucidation from the other.

These conversations are certainly more accessible than technical reports and scholarly journal articles. Still, the degree to which they draw upon the benefits of fictional narrative is limited; they make use only of the opportunity for character interaction. Expanding the non-verbal contextual factors impacting these conversations would result in a more nuanced, effective, and appropriate method of taking advantage of the benefits attending fictional narratives.

Archaeologists have experimented with this kind of expansion a great deal when recreating historical pasts based on archaeological evidence. They frequently focus on telling the stories of nameless individuals, placing constructed characters into their educated constructions of past worlds. These writers’ freedom to create full settings, events, and thoughts—along with the liberty of utilizing language in order to engender an authentic experience for the reader—can be seen as useful. This is particularly true when they corroborate their imaginings with tangible evidence and scholarly support, although the format itself diminishes the fissure between interpretation and fact. Indeed, inventing stories of deposition and site formation is nearly inevitable in the process of archaeological interpretation, rendering this kind of fictional narrativization of the past hermeneutically appropriate.
Many historical archaeologists have attempted to construct an even fuller experience of the past by crafting documents that resemble primary documents of the period. These texts serve to blur even more completely any distinction between subjective analysis and scientific proof. The approach they take, however, accomplishes this by simultaneously reducing the authorial voice while trying to mimic only the original voices of historical actors. Despite subverting and making use of the inevitability of fictionalizing in archaeological writing, these works generate a problem of veracity. It becomes extremely difficult to return to the source that substantiates the claims being made, and epistemological transparency is rendered impossible.

These particular problems are avoided when archaeologists turn innovative writing techniques—not on the historical evidence—but on those interpreting the evidence: archaeologists themselves. Some have created fictional archaeologists in order to stage parables that serve as critical commentaries on the state of archaeological theory. Others have told stories of actual events while problematizing the idea that they could ever be able to portray real people with whom they have engaged in a complete and objectively truthful way. In these latter texts, real archaeologists are deployed as characters in fictive stories—they are described in detail, with their personas and roles being crafted by the author of the text.

Nevertheless, fictions that center on archaeologists tend toward the opposite problem as the ones that illustrate embellished pasts. Instead of abandoning responsibility to motivate one’s claims in evidence, writing about archaeologists generally attempts to adhere as closely to a universally accurate depiction of reality as possible. Although they include the views, thoughts, and feelings of multiple
stakeholders, these stories—like the stories of imagined pasts—subvert their own mission of responsibly engaging polyphony by downplaying the authorial voice. While the writers admit that a total, objective account is impossible, they still seem to try to banish their perspective’s overt influence from the text.

In the sections that follow, I advocate for the advantages associated with giving up on this attempt—as well as the potential that comes with embracing other elements of fictional narrative writing style. The works discussed above are extremely important as they show how the archaeological academic discourse has begun to recognize many of these advantages. Still, they each have their own shortcomings from which an archaeological writer should learn if she is interested in a reflexive, multivocalic, responsible, and effective method of writing archaeology. The attributes and benefits of this method—an ultimately fictive endeavor—are expanded upon below.

III.A. The Necessity for Creative Thought.

As described in the introductory section of this thesis, the etymology of the word fiction has been used repeatedly to motivate the case for a recognition of the arbitrary nature of the popular definitions of ‘fiction’ and ‘nonfiction.’ The word can be traced to the Old French word ficcion, meaning ‘something invented,’ and even further to the Latin fictio, meaning ‘a fashioning or feigning.’ This etymological genealogy reinforces that all texts are ‘fashioned,’ since there must be an author making the decisions about what to write and how to write it (Lamarque 1990, 132; Clifford 1986a, 6).

Despite its prevalence in the discourse, however, the above argument has not had a revolutionary impact on the field of archaeology. Its weakness lies in its dependence on
a prescriptive, purist approach to vocabulary. Instead, it is much more persuasive to define terms by making use of their common, contemporary and dynamic meanings.

At the moment of writing, the primary definition of fiction on the Internet is “a literary work based on the imagination and not necessarily on fact.” Starting from this definition, it is important to identify what has been preserved from the term’s etymological roots. At its core, fiction is about invention and imagination; this it has in common with archaeology.

Adrian Praetzellis (1998, 1), in fact, has used the term “archaeological imagination” to refer to the kind of thinking required to combine historical evidence and interpretation in order to craft a total, textured understanding that is much greater than the objects that make up an assemblage. Meanwhile, Ruth Tringham (1991, 94) takes it as a noncontroversial assumption that the job of an archaeologist is to “imagine societies.” Mark Edmonds (1999, x) would certainly agree with her standpoint, as he says “the study of the past is an act of the imagination, bound by convention and by evidence, but creative nonetheless.”

His use of the word “creative” brings up an additional significant etymological discussion. Based on its morphemes, “creative” should mean something like “having the quality of creating.” In colloquial speech, however, it usually means something more like “imaginative” or “innovative.” Many academic theorists have put forward varying definitions of the term. For Ian Hodder (1996, 63), “creativity is about making links between bits of information rather than creating new bits or nodes” in order to “find new solutions which resonate with changing data and changing perspectives” (Hodder 1999, 71). He also asserts that because of its inherent uncertainty, the act of interpretation
necessarily involves creativity (Hodder 1999, 71). Similarly, Steven Yearley (1990, 354) claims that creativity is an integral element of the open-ended nature of any kind of scientific research. Margaret Boden (1998, 22) has summarized how scientists generally define creativity, saying that they describe it as “novel combinations of old ideas.” She adds her own qualification, stipulating that creativity entails not only novelty but value; a creative concept is not only new but noteworthy.

Despite the lack of consensus regarding how to define creativity, there is agreement that it is fundamental to scientific research and, more specifically, archaeological practice. This necessity applies equally to writing analysis as it does to the process of forging interpretation. Creative thought—both in the sense of forging and making, as well as in the sense of originality—is crucial to the constructive process of producing archaeological knowledge. And fictionalized narrative writing inherently evokes this kind of thought process. This is illustrated by W. Michael and Kathleen O’Neal Gears’ recollections of writing *The Morning River* (1996); they explain how having to account for their characters’ resources changed the way they thought about the site they were excavating, and in turn, their methodology (Gear and Gear 2003, 26).

Creativity and imagination, therefore, are valuable elements of any kind of research—but in specific, archaeological research. There is a potential for these ideas to become more apparent and generative in the final products of archaeological knowledge, if the makers of these products begin to incorporate the method and tropes of fictional narrative writing. The concepts of ‘creativity’ and ‘fiction’ both carry double meanings; on one hand, both terms can be defined as constructive processes. They each, however, also signify the deployment of the human imagination, of invention and innovation. Both
of these meanings are important when defending the case for a proliferation of creative, fictive writing in the archaeological discourse. In the following two sections, I will explore two possibilities allowed by fiction writing that invite creativity—in both definitions of the terms.

III Ai. Multiscalar Analysis.

For archaeologists—maybe more than any other specialists—time scales are fluid concepts, subject to reinterpretation and remaking over the course of producing knowledge. While in the field, hypotheses about what time periods are represented by particular strata must be continually reexamined as the information not only from artifacts, but also from labwork and interpretation, challenges assumptions and expectations. Later, during the process of writing analysis, choices must be made about what eras in a site’s history or what aspects of excavation procedure to focus on—and even which to include at all. By selecting what details to include, archaeological authors construct time scales on which they mount their accounts.

Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson (2003, 154) have advanced this perspective, saying that “no time scale is universally valid,” and furthermore that “people create their own sense of time through the specific rhythms of daily life and their particular understanding of past, present, and future.” Keeping in mind that authors are actively choosing the level on which their investigations proceed, Hodder advocates for inquiry that focuses on the small scale, especially on the level of the individual (Hodder and Hutson 2003; Hodder 1999; Hodder 2003). Indeed, the project he directs at Çatalhöyük is well-known for its commitment to researching even the most microscopic aspects of the site (Conolly 2000, 51).
Others, too, have expressed their support for archaeological writing that addresses individual experience, rather than gradual processes at the macroscale. Mark Edmonds has lamented how the sense that sites are formed over the course of human lifetimes is lacking from most archaeological discussions (Edmonds 1999, x; Bender 1998, 71). Human events shaped the objects and features that archaeologists uncover; yet when the evidence is subjected to interpretation, it is placed into typologies and analytical constructs that allow for the site to be understood within the context of the region or time period. Ruth Tringham (1991, 101) asserts that the ‘household scale of analysis’ can serve as a remedy for this. Since this is the “minimal level of social reproduction,” the structures governing society on all planes are reified at the household scale (Tringham 1991, 101). A focused examination of human experience, for Tringham, provides insight into wider societal composition, but not the other way around.

Similarly, Colin Renfrew (2001, 122) has voiced his support for archaeological writing that has a more “existential flavor” that considers “human perception, experience, and thought.” Like Hodder and Hutson (2003, 134), Renfrew does not consider it a futile goal to understand the perspectives of others. Rather than being thwarted by some defeatist conception of Cartesian philosophy as applied to writing archaeology, it is worthwhile to pursue an understanding of the past experiential realities of people.

I follow Hodder (2003, 91) in his stance that narrative is a necessity for exploring the smaller scale elements of the past. However, narrative is more beneficial than this; rather than being an equally extreme antidote to the limiting nature of traditional writing in archaeology which forces archaeologists to tell their stories on a uniform scale of time, the structure and style of narrative enables the writer to address both the scale of
individual experience and long-term change (Hodder 1999, 56; Pluciennik 1999, 65; White 1987; 157). Indeed, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 21) maintains that discussing the will and thoughts of the individual by default requires a broader polyphonic context invoking the wills and thoughts of multiple invested perspectives. This can be seen in the realm of fictional narrative in Jean Auel’s *Clan of the Cave Bear*, where she portrays not only the moment-to-moment concerns of each character, but also global climatic changes and ultimate evolutionary fates. The freedom that accompanies fiction and narrative, of constructing multiple different timelines, makes multiscalar analysis possible. Furthermore, this renders writing archaeology into a creative endeavor, both in the sense of its purposive crafting and the imaginative thought that is required.

Lauding multiscalar analysis—and even explaining how fiction and narrative facilitate it—clearly has significant precedent in the literature with regard to archaeological inquiry into the past. The same reasoning, however, should be applied to the way archaeologists report about their excavation procedure. Just as site formation processes can be reduced to the actions and perceptions of individuals, so too can the processes of recovery and interpretation. There is virtually no difference in the way that singular decisions by historical actors versus those by fieldworkers have a dialectical relationship with broader-level events and practices (Conolly 2000, 52). For both, larger scale considerations impact individual thought and experience, which in turn generate widely-felt guiding concerns, and approaching a more existential understanding of this exchange is beneficial both for imagining pasts and for understanding the work of archaeologists in the modern day.
Narrative and fictive writing offers a way to capture these simultaneously occurring and mutually impactful levels of events and experience that interact during fieldwork. By adopting this style in archaeological writing, both fleeting ephemeral considerations as well as overarching goals of research can be expressed, and a discussion of the relationship between the two would be possible. Creativity, and more specifically, the fictive endeavor of considering, imagining, and constructing multiple time scales in texts, would be extremely beneficial to making site reporting more effective at communicating the complexity of excavation processes.

IIIAii. Shifting Perspectives and Creating Worlds.

An additional way that writers of archaeology can make use of the advantages of creativity in their texts is with the fictive effort of transposing the audience into an unusual perspective. Authors of fiction can describe their account from the viewpoint of someone or something other than themselves, and can do so in a vivid way that enables the reader to sensorially experience the narrative. In this way, writers of archaeology can create total worlds that better approximate the texture of the past—both with regard to imaginings of past peoples and the processes of excavations.

The value of unfamiliar perspectives has been promoted in anthropological writing by Misia Landau in particular. She aligns herself with an outlook that she traces to the writing of evolutionary theorist Thomas Henry Huxley—that is, to study humankind, “to see ourselves as we are… we must be something other than human” (Landau 1991, 23). Her position is relevant to archaeological discourse, and has even been enacted with various publications. Janet Spector’s (1993) *What This Awl Means* verges on this kind of approach, following a single awl through its creation and loss by a
Dakota girl. Her story is similar to other life histories of artifacts which present the progress of excavation through focusing on the transformations of particular objects over time (e.g. Holtorf 2002; Shanks 1998).

One of the guiding purposes behind shifting the reader’s perspective in this way is to evoke new understandings, sensations, and sentiments about the event being described. This endeavor, known as a “proxy experience” has been explained and promoted by Mark Pluciennik (1999, 667). He considers it a productive effort to provide an alternate, dynamic experience for those reading archaeological publications, beyond technical, straightforward prose. As further support, Mark Edmonds illustrates the value of this approach by pointing to how we describe performative rituals versus mundane habits. The language of the former, he says, is marked by “subtle vocabularies,” and the latter by “impoverished language” (Edmonds 1999, 161). He uses storytelling as a way “to enrich that language, by recreating a sense of intimate moments, even gestures, that are, nonetheless, caught up in the broader flow of things” (Edmonds 1999, 161).

Edmonds’s goal of enriching the language with which we narrate our accounts of the past is echoed by Naomi Hamilton, who has explored the complex nature of terms—even names for objects, like “kitchen”—which carry connotations associated with gender and other social dynamics (Hamilton 2000, 98). Stories, like those in Edmonds’s work, make use of the felt significances that attend terms which might otherwise appear to be simple. Rather than making a clumsy attempt to explicate the vocabulary one is hoping to employ, stripping words of their intricacies and feeling, fiction enables its writer to surround terms with vividly described context, making use of the complexity of language (Schrire 1995, 3). The author’s role as the creator of fiction allows her to deploy terms
along with their implications, which can be problematic for texts that avoid the creative maneuver of constructing total worlds.

Once again the dual meaning of creativity becomes important. In the common sense of the term, creativity entails the originality, imagination, and innovation associated with presenting a reader with an alternative viewpoint of events—as well as with building a clear and almost visceral context for these events, enabling the reader to understand the experience of the events described. In its more morphological meaning, creativity requires the author to actively and carefully craft these diverse perspectives and thoroughly depicted worlds.

Site reporting stands to benefit especially from both of these ultimately fictive choices. The diversity of views and voices implicated on an archaeological excavation motivates the rationale for an exploration of perspectives different from the authorial one. Moreover, much like humans can only be understood from the viewpoint of something that isn’t human, in order to forge an understanding of the author’s positioning—something essential for an effective reflexive practice—the author must be seen from a viewpoint that isn’t her own. Fictional work provides the opportunity to construct an alternate lens.

Furthermore, the creative making of a total, experiential world for the reader permits clearer writing in many ways. Rather than getting lost amid the coded references to contexts and features, readers can place themselves within the landscape of the excavation. They can also get a sense for the pace and feeling of the project, which influences the way any excavation proceeds as much as the initial fundamental research questions driving it. And for public consumers, this kind of full description of the
experience of being on an archaeological dig counters the sensationalized depictions of archaeologists that lead to widespread and problematic misunderstanding of the discipline.

The ability to insert a reader into a total, vivid experience is unique to fiction; it requires both the desire to carefully fashion and craft a text as well as a degree of imaginative freedom. By introducing it into archaeological accounts of excavations, archaeologists can more closely approximate the full sensory and emotive context within which their evidence was collected and subsequently analyzed. Given that these nonprocedural factors impact excavation processes profoundly, it seems apparent that this kind of creative activity, wherein perspectives are shifted and worlds are created, could prove extremely beneficial to the genre of site reporting in archaeology.

IIIB. Paralleling Archaeological Epistemology.

Archaeologists—wherever they position themselves on the spectrum of ‘science’—share a difficulty that distinguishes the field of archaeology from laboratory sciences: that experiments are nonrepeatable. To echo countless instructors of innumerable introductory archaeology courses, archaeologists destroy their data through excavation, removing artifacts from their soil matrix and erasing their physical context forever. They document their findings as completely as possible, but debate and discussion about archaeological analysis rests on data which has already been interpreted and represented (Gero 1996, 252). The archaeological ‘experiment’ cannot be repeated; different, contesting results cannot be empirically found. The closest archaeologists can come to firsthand recreation of sites is reference to the coded forms used to describe strata and features, as well as the contents found therein. However, even these sheets
tend to be clumsy, inflexible models for documenting the process of excavation, and they distill findings to a formulaic paradigm so simplified that they border on inaccurate (Hodder 1999; Wilkinson 2007).

Context forms and technical excavation reports fail to capture the interpretive process that occurs at all levels of excavation—from the identification of a site to its publication (Bender 1998; Bender, Hamilton, and Tilley 1997; Hodder 2000; Hodder 1999; Wilkinson 2007). Many archaeologists have reflected on this procedure by which understanding is gradually forged over the duration of an excavation, asserting that the development depends integrally on the construction of narratives (Joyce 2002; Hodder 2003; Hodder 1999; Spector 1993). The idea that archaeologists—or anyone studying the material past—naturally craft narratives to comprehend a historical world is a longstanding argument in the philosophy of social science (Hodder 2003; White 1987). For Hayden White (1987, 60), “narration is both the way in which a historical interpretation is achieved and the mode of discourse in which a successful understanding of matters historical is represented.” With specific regard to archaeology, Rosemary Joyce (2002, 2) argues that the narratives conceived of by archaeologists, and the discussions held in the field about them, influence formal publications, appearing as “echoed voices,” whose basic assumptions are translated into persuasive scholarly language.

It is essential to recognize in Joyce’s argument the rhetorical emphasis on orality. Along with the idea of the necessity of creating narratives for the production of archaeological knowledge, there is wide agreement in the literature that dialogue is essential to generate understanding—for sciences in general but especially archaeology,
given its inherent dependence on teamwork and communality (Amann and Knorr Cetina 1990; Landau 1991; Leonard 2001; Tibbetts 1990; White 1987). It is through contesting each other’s assertions and locating convergences in analyses that the interpretative archaeological product is forged. Ruth Tringham (1991, 112) goes so far as to state that, by interpreting evidence through an unavoidable personal subjectivity, each archaeologist creates a different archaeological record. Still, these diverse approaches can—and must be—considered together as a cumulative intellectual effort (Hodder 1999, 108; Leonard 2001, 93; Yentsch and Beaudry 2001).

How is this to be done when such divergent theoretical standpoints are at play? Misia Landau (1991) offers a solution in her review of many seminal theories on human evolution. She suggests making use of the way that anthropologists automatically narrativize the material past, looking at the literary tropes they employ in their writing. This, she argues, is more useful than foraying into discussions of semantics—which frequently happens when terms are used and understood in subtly different ways by members of the epistemic process (Joyce 2002; Hodder 1999; Landau 1991). Instead, to interpret academic discourse about the past, one should identify and compare recognizable characteristics of the emplotted narrative across publications (Clifford 1986b; Landau 1991). The way in which archaeological authors utilize characters and archetypal plot devices in their writing can offer a more appropriate standard by which texts can be put into conversation with each other, rather than attempting to do so under the unjustifiable assumption that the authors are using their evidence and terminology in the same way. Therefore, the tropes of fiction and narrative that authors employ should
be more evident in archaeological writing, instead of masked under the style and language of a falsely common and objective academic form.

Not only does narrative enable more productive conversation about how varying interpretations can contribute to each other, it also helps to bring together diverse lines of evidence into a single discussion. White (1987, 9) defines plot as “a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole.” By its nature, plot is inherently fictive. It is imposed upon the chaotic events that it brings together; the author creates the connection between these events and, in so doing, implies a significance to this linearity and unity. This makes fictive narrative especially useful for reporting excavations, since archaeological fieldwork involves many various activities which coalesce and impact each other in a multiplicity of ways (Hodder 2003; Hodder 1999; Joyce 2002; Tringham and Stevanovic 2000; Yearley 1990; Yentsch and Beaudry 2001). The relationships between these activities can be established differently for particular purposes (Yearley 1990). The flexibility and fullness possible with a creative, fictional narrative enables the simultaneous pursuit of many of these purposes within a single text (Clifford 1986b).

Part of the reason why this is possible rests on an author’s ability to give his or her first-person experience of the accounts he or she describes. In ethnography, the authority derived from descriptive personal narratives is immediately evident, since fieldwork traditionally consists of face-to-face encounters with the people and culture being written (Clifford 1986b; Pratt 1986, 32). Nevertheless, given the inherently unsatisfying nature of documentation of archaeological fieldwork, the first-person experience of archaeological researchers is incredibly important. The authority made
possible by having been at an excavation, having seen the transformation of the site, and having made decisions accordingly has been overlooked in archaeological reports, which have instead tended to draw their authority from being scientific and therefore inarguably accurate. However, the degree to which archaeological research relies on firsthand observation and other immeasurable techniques cannot be overstated. Even supposed discipline-wide standards such as Munsell numbers depend on individual judgment. For this reason, reports of archaeological excavations that diminish the voice of first-person experience are problematic in the way they obscure this fundamental element of the archaeological epistemic process.

Furthermore, in these technical reports, the presentation of data—which usually precedes the analysis and conclusions—is constructed in a way that sets up for a convincing discussion of the conclusions (Gardin 1980). What authors choose to leave out, what they choose to include, and how they choose to address the information they include, is shaped by the arguments they attempt to further later in the text (Gardin 1980; Hodder 1999). This blurring between evidence and conclusions is unavoidable and therefore impossible to criticize. Instead, what is problematic is the way in which the traditional ordering of technical reports convolutes the progression of the reasoning that results in the particular way that data is presented. It is clear that analysis and data collection proceed simultaneously and continuously from the identification of a site to publication (Amann and Knorr Cetina 1990; Bender 1998; Joyce 2002; Hodder 2003; Hodder 1999; Spector 1993; Tringham and Stevanovic 2000; Wilkinson 2007). Archaeological methodology, data, and interpretation are intertwined, and it is possible for archaeological writing to more closely approximate the complicated chronology of
this process, by taking advantage of fiction and narrative’s manipulable timelines (Lamarque 1990, 133).

In Janet Spector’s *What This Awl Means* (1993), for example, she leads her readers through her interpretive approach, discussing how her analysis and her findings informed each other as her research progressed. She lays bare the succession of problems she considered over the course of the project. The result is that her presentation of the data and her understanding of it appear together. The context provided by Spector eliminates the possibility of her description of the results seeming, deceptively, to be impartially written without regard to the analysis in which they are implicated.

If writing is the product of the epistemic process of creating archaeological knowledge, traditional technical forms show little correlation to this process. The way in which archaeologists analyze evidence remains enigmatic in their writing, implying that their conclusions rest on inarguable, natural, and scientific authority. This is an untenable situation when one considers that the appeal of archaeology (or any research, in general) to both scholarly and public audiences resides primarily in understanding more than well-supported factoids, but more importantly, the journey by which the researchers involved have come to their current interpretations. Therefore, the unavoidable storymaking that occurs as archaeologists attempt to make sense of their findings can be made useful if archaeological writing makes greater use of the narrative format. This style can also invoke a multitude of perspectives and lines of evidence, both of which are integral features of generating archaeological understandings of the past. Moreover, the fictive effort of vividly relating one’s firsthand experience conducting fieldwork frees archaeological writing from deriving its authority from the neutrality of science, instead
invoking as well the weight of personal experience. Fictional narrative is also liberated in terms of temporality, allowing authors to more closely approximate the sequence and conditions under which their conclusions were created and therefore a clearer and even more persuasive text. This means that fictional narrative confers advantages not only upon those who value self-positioning and reflexivity in archaeological practice and writing, but also offers benefits entirely pragmatic to the basic goal of any archaeological publication: to stage a convincing argument.

III C. Addressing Imperfections and Interactions.

If it is important to render transparent the reasoning by which archaeologists come to their conclusions, it is equally—if not more—vital to explain the mistakes made in the process of research and analysis. As anyone who has participated in an archaeological excavation can attest, digs involve almost constant missteps and errors, some of which are nominal. A photograph not taken here, a rock mistaken for pottery there. The nature of excavation makes these mistakes unavoidable, even unproblematic in the context of the wider imprecision of archaeological research methods. The original boundaries of individual units, initially measured to millimeter accuracy, become increasingly difficult to discern as the fieldworker digs deeper and must use his best judgment to proceed exactly vertically. Different excavators observe and document in different ways, creating very different archaeological records. And one must frequently declare what a feature is before it is fully revealed, before being able to see it clearly, in order to decide how to continue excavating. Ian Hodder (1999) gives an example of this, telling the story of the 1981 researchers at Haddenham, who felt confident that they had found a causewayed
enclosure belonging to a Neolithic segmented society—even bringing in experts who affirmed their identification—but who turned out to be entirely wrong.

Traditional technical reports that relate the accounts of archaeological excavations seldom include any reference to these mistakes (Hodder 1999, 39; Schrire 1995, 91). Instead, the research process is made to seem smooth and natural—even fated, almost—so that the conclusion finally reached is bolstered by this appearance of an unhalting research method (Bastide 1990). However, this technique is flawed, and results in an unsatisfying final product. In ethnography, this approach to writing analysis wherein the path from observation to conclusion is portrayed as linear and flowing has been critiqued by anthropologists such as Renato Rosaldo (1986), who maintain that rather than destabilizing the writer’s claims, description of moments of indecision or revision increases the writer’s ethos, making him or her seem more reliable as a fieldworker. At Çatalhöyük, the research team attempts to document the errors that occur over the course of a field season by implementing a “confessional”—a computer terminal wherein excavators are encouraged to record their personal feelings and frustrations (Hodder 2003). Ultimately, this is meant to advance a close and ethical oversight of the archaeological research process, as well as provide insight into the hermeneutic and epistemological processes involved (Hodder 2003). Still, this doesn’t address the problem of discussing these flaws in the archaeological literature.

Kent Flannery, with The Early Mesoamerican Village (1976) offers a preliminary way of narrating mistakes—and more importantly, the significance of these mistakes. He critiques many of the characters and perspectives that have been influential in Mesoamerican archaeology up to the time in which he writes, but without placing
specific blame on named individuals. Instead, he displaces his criticism to invented characters who are based on real individuals, but in a way that makes them unrecognizable, “for the sake of hurting no one’s feelings” (Flannery 1976, 2). He even gives anecdotes that highlight methodological problems in Mesoamerican archaeology, such as the Real Mesoamerican Archaeologist’s commitment to regimental grid-based sampling that leads to his (incorrect) conclusion that no houses have been preserved on a site (Flannery 1976, 50).

Beyond masking the identities of any potential ‘culprits’ in the narration of mistakes, it is essential to make clear what caused the problems and what further implications they have for developing archaeological understanding of the past. Situating errors in an emplotted time scale necessarily involves drawing linkages and causations between events that—at the time that the transgression occurred—would have been entirely unknowable. This is unproblematic with a narrative structure, particularly if the author’s role as a creator of fiction is embraced. In order to explore the impact of missteps, archaeologists must make use of their ability as writers to “will backward as well as forward in time” by arranging and connecting events that at one time may have seemed chaotically disparate but with present knowledge can be understood as associated (White 1987, 150). This act entails constructing characters who act with fewer options than their real counterparts, but who, perhaps, can avail themselves of a more enlightened perspective on the gamut of reasons for and consequences of their actions (White 1987, 174). Archaeologists reporting on site activity have the benefit of hindsight; this advantage should be capitalized upon in order to thoroughly reflect on the cause and
impact of mistakes—rather than used to wash over these problematic incidents (Bender 1998, 156; White 1987, 174).

In a similar attempt to smooth entangled, complex moments in retelling the accounts of excavations, authors tend to avoid describing how interactive and cooperative the fieldwork experience is. Their reports are impersonal, making it impossible to convey any sense of how important the social and interpersonal aspects of archaeological research are for drawing conclusions about the past (Gero 1996, 257; Hodder 2003, 45; Joyce 2002, 23; Schrire 1995, 91). Yet this propensity to ignore the social dynamics of fieldwork glares as illogical, given the amount of scholarship that throws into relief the significant influence that on-site interaction has on excavations. Joan Gero (1996) has examined how gender impacts performance and method in the field, along with level of knowledge, affability, and even appearance. Carmel Schrire (1995) and Janet Spector (1993) have both provided insight into the emotion that fieldworkers experience—both towards each other and towards their work—and how this affects the archaeological record that is created and written. Meanwhile, many who have worked at Çatalhöyük—the ‘type site,’ perhaps, for reflexive methodology—have analyzed the extent of the impact of the site’s demographic makeup and interpersonal relationships on physical excavation methods as well as on interpretation and on published results (Balter 2005; Farid et. al 2000; Hamilton 2000; Hodder 2003).

In order to begin incorporating this decidedly significant information into archaeological literature, Gero advocates for a re-conceptualization of how archaeologists view and represent the collaborative nature of archaeological fieldwork; rather than seeing onsite social organization and politics as an obscuring haze which menaces to
distort our perception of facts, archaeologists should recognize how their data are the product of an interactive and negotiative research methodology (Gero 1996, 255-7). As Schrire (1995, 91) has said, the “essence” of archaeological research “is the details, the decisions, the mistakes, and the insights, even the personal issues that journals don’t want to publish.” By making use of integral tropes of writing fictional narrative—like the creation of character, setting, and plot—archaeologists can express all of this impactful context as well as its influence on producing data. In this way, instead of presenting the social dynamics of fieldwork as a separate annoyance from the scientific research procedure, archaeologists could generate literature more appropriate to James Deetz’s conceptualization of archaeologists as both “the students and the studied” (1988, 51).

The archaeological literature that has begun to draw upon fictional narrative writing techniques provides examples of vividly depicting the interpersonal elements of archaeological research as contextually integral to the ultimate goal of forging archaeological knowledge. In Death by Theory, Adrian Praetzellis expressly uses the term “the dig’s politics” (Praetzellis 2000, 86). Additionally, Flannery’s Early Mesoamerican Village relates an anecdote of a methodological compromise between the Real Mesoamerican Archaeologist and the Skeptical Graduate Student, which entirely changes the kinds of questions the researchers can ask about the site’s history (Flannery 1976, 14). On a fundamental level, novels and narrative are undeniably useful ways for describing, examining, and commenting on social reality (Barrett 2001, 146; Girdwood 1984, 37; White 1987). Hayden White (1987) argues that this is because of the centrality of human agents in stories, making interpersonal processes rather than impersonal processes the driving force behind the events that take place. Stories, then, are
particularly appropriate for archaeologists, since, as David Wilkinson has said, “we—archaeologists, visitors, developers, contractors—are the characters that inhabit the site” (Wilkinson 2007, 19).

Fictional narrative writing offers the opportunity to discuss many aspects of archaeological research that normally go unrecorded in traditional site reports. Both the errors that occur and the social dynamics of the project have significant impacts on the research process, from the initial recovery of artifacts to the final publication of the findings and their meaning. Yet these aspects of fieldwork are widely regarded as inconvenient and extraneous to a productive and valid pursuit of archaeology, rather than integral processes that help determine how archaeologists collect and try to understand the material record of the past. In order to capture the import of mistakes made and interactive moments, archaeologists have the ability to capitalize on the storymaking techniques that characterize fictional narrative writing, thereby making a better attempt to approximate the complexity that marks archaeological research.

IIID. Positionality.

Discussing issues of subjectivity and objectivity regarding archaeological writing is often problematic for many reasons. The debate is an old one, with little hope for resolution. It rests on many issues relevant to various subdisciplines of philosophy, and it becomes easy to lose oneself in sorting out these questions. Still, it is useful for advancing the case of fiction in archaeological writing to briefly visit some of the more forceful and pertinent arguments on the topic.

As one of the most vocal writers on the question of perspective in authorship, Mikhail Bakhtin stated clearly that divorcing from one’s unique perspective should not be
a goal for authors writing about the past—and not only this, but that this kind of omniscient objectivity is entirely unachievable (Bakhtin 1984, xix). For him, this is part of the nature of creating a text; the voice of the author is impossible to hide. Hayden White has echoed this sentiment; for White, the author’s perspective is immutable from the writing he or she produces. In the very act of joining disparate words, sentences, and ideas together conceptually, an author formulates him or herself as a ‘subject’ that gives the different moments and images a sense of commonality and coherence (White 1987, 16). In fact, White even asserts that authors inject their work with a specific “moral authority” in their pursuit of conveying meaning (White 1987, 21). With this statement, White characterizes all writing as more than just reflective of an author’s particular purpose and perspective, but moreover, inherently value-laden. In the view of Peter Lamarque, writing necessarily entails taking a “fictive stance” (Lamarque 1990, 148). The procedure of carefully choosing what to discuss, what medium to utilize, what diction to employ, results in a narrative voice—an authorial identity—that is different from the writer’s casual, quotidian thought process and speech (Lamarque 1990, 148).

For Bakhtin, White, and Lamarque, along with many others, describing external observations is impossible to do without simultaneously constructing a ‘self,’ a narrating voice with a specific persona. This view of writing permeated cultural anthropology in the 1980’s, and led to initial experimentation followed by a pragmatic approach to conveying authorial positionality in ethnography (Clifford 1986a; Pratt 1986; Rabinow 1986). Some archaeologists, such as Rosemary Joyce, have referenced this movement in cultural anthropology, advocating for “the acknowledgement in the text of the situated
position of the archaeologist-writer commenting on past human subjects.” (Joyce 2006, 50).

Certainly, Joyce is speaking about the past subjects whose discarded objects and former landscapes archaeologists seek to understand. However, her position can be applied to site reporting as well. Indeed, part of her argument for this kind of reflexivity is that an author should establish her own unique voice in order to differentiate from other voices she might include (Joyce 2006, 55). This would offer much in the way of conveying the collaborative and social nature of archaeological fieldwork discussed in the previous section. Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson (2003, 161) have set a similar goal for archaeologists, saying that in order to make the most sense of the motivations of the people whom they write about, archaeological authors should not attempt to describe the perceptions of others independently of the authorial perspective. Instead, the writer’s voice serves to render the actions and viewpoints of these others much more relatable and rational (Hodder and Hutson 2003, 161).

Hodder and Hutson further this argument by reiterating the stance of many contemporary archaeological researchers: that an archaeologist’s job when writing is to reconstruct the past in a way that constructs coherence between events and observations where there previously was none (Barrett 2001, 147; Hodder and Hutson 2003, 148). Barbara Bender’s commentary on her volume of dialogues serves as an illustration of this point. Even though some of the conversations she includes are near-verbatim transcriptions of actual interactions, Bender avows that her role as editor of the dialogues essentially correlates to a subjective authorship of the book (Bender 1998, 11). By streamlining and contextualizing the discussions, she creates an authorial (or perhaps
editorial) voice and perspective that links the various points made, giving the publication a sense of unity despite the numerous characters and disconnected events involved.

While Bender’s choice to assert explicitly her position as creator would be commendable to many archaeologists concerned with positionality in writing, some archaeologists would be more satisfied if she had chosen a different medium altogether—specifically, archaeological narrative. The act of constructing a story necessarily involves making use of one’s subjectivity, taking responsibility for the words that are chosen and strung together (Hodder 2003, 4; Joyce 2002; Morson and Emerson 1990, 70; Pluciennik 1999, 669). Authors who distance themselves from their work frequently attempt to argue their case in a way that is impersonal, and as a corollary, universally—and perhaps, even naturally—logical. Instead, they deprive themselves of inviting dialogue about their arguments; because the points are made to seem independently evident, there is no feeling that any elaboration or improvement could come from additional, diverse authorial perspectives to add their view on the matter (Hodder 2003, 4; Morson and Emerson 1990, 70).

Within the realm of cultural anthropology, Mary Louise Pratt suggests personal narrative as a solution to avoiding the total self-effacement established as customary in traditional formal ethnography (Pratt 1986, 33). Personal narrative appears in some archaeological texts; an early example is in An Archaeological Perspective, Lewis Binford features autobiographical introductions to several sections in the book. In reviewing the effect of these passages, Paul Courbin broke from his generally disparaging opinion of Binford to commend him for providing the insight necessary to make his attitude and perspectives understandable (Courbin 1988, 91).
Fictional narrative provides the opportunity to create and communicate a clear subjective authorial perspective, something which is vital to a responsible and interactive practice of archaeology. Instead of refusing to acknowledge the subjective voice that is created by using impersonal, scientific jargon, archaeologists can consciously craft an authorial voice by making use of emotive language and capitalizing on the advantages of the unique insight that their perspective allows. The purposive transparency involved in this endeavor necessarily entails invoking fictive writing techniques, since alternate perspectives that are then presented in a text and put into dialogue must be invented by the author and expressed in terms of the narrator’s perspective.

Furthermore, it is the nature of archaeological fieldwork that an archaeologist’s interests and motives are entirely dynamic (Hodder 1999). In a single excavation season, research questions can shift drastically as more evidence becomes available (Hodder 1999, 51). The traditional method of site reporting, which relates a smooth, teleological research process, is at odds with this reality. It involves an imposed synchrony, failing to capture the complex development of an excavation over time (Deetz 1988, 16).

One of the corollaries of this feigned synchrony is it also insinuates that the methods and conclusions described are universally valid when read from any past, present, or future moment in time (Deetz 1988, 15). Effacing the changing nature of archaeological interests over any time scale paints archaeologists’ work as methodologically correct, and their analysis objectively true, bereft of any sense that both method and interpretation are the product of the contemporary milieu (Deetz 1988, 15). The production of archaeological knowledge, however, is enormously guided by the pressing concerns of the day—both within academia and in the world at large (Bender
Both Bender and Courbin, writing a decade apart, promote positioning oneself as an author in a way that enhances one’s ability to speak to current problems and questions (Bender 1998, 5; Courbin 1988, 157).

Still, the task of archaeological writing and site reporting requires dealing with more complex time scales than simply making a commentary on the present (Deetz 1988, 16; Spector 1993, 79). An archaeologist engages in analysis of the distant past (the site’s original inhabitants) and narration of the recent past (the excavation) as well as relevant contributions to present discourse. Putting these different scales of time together necessitates a dynamic medium of reporting. Joyce (2002, 55) nostalgically discusses the potential that epistolary archaeological reports preceding the twentieth century held for conveying the complexities of these varying time-scales.

Still, she does not suggest a romantic return to the letters and diaries that characterize archaeological documentation of the past. Instead, she promotes making use of “chronotopes”—Bakhtin’s term for linguistic methods of conjuring particular spaces at specific moments in time (Joyce 2002, 34; Bakhtin 1984, xxvi). Chronotopes are deployed in the narrative act; particularly in novels that rely on them for vivid, convincing descriptions of setting (Bakhtin 1984, xxvi; Joyce 2006, 55).

While Joyce and Bakhtin emphasize how diction can evoke particular images and feelings associated with specific places in time, White maintains that the act of sequencing events into a plot helps writers to cope with difficult understandings of time. He cites Paul Ricoeur, concurring with Ricoeur’s conception of fictional narrative as providing a deeper, more effective insight into how humans experience and negotiate the
phenomenon of time. In order to combine Joyce and Bakhtin’s argument for evocative chronotypical language with White’s advocacy for emplotment as a method for more effectively writing about complex time scales, one must make use of a fictional narrative approach to textualizing the total process of archaeological knowledge creation.

Personal, fictional narratives that tell the story of archaeological excavations offer a solution not only to problems with conveying the multiple scales of time that come into play while generating archaeological knowledge, but also to abandoning pretenses of an objective, impersonal narrator. Instead, authors writing fictional narrative construct clear, human perspectives from which they deliver their recollections, describing their memories, analysis, and conclusions in a way that communicates the dynamic time scales at which these various hermeneutic processes operate.

Still, it is essential to briefly qualify my enthusiasm for forefronting the narrator’s perspective in archaeological writing. While this device offers much in the way of engaging readers, Cornelius Holtorf has reviewed some of the problems that result when archaeologists become personalities, caricatures, or celebrities (Holtorf 2007). He discusses perceptions of archaeology in Germany and Sweden, where the discipline is associated especially with recognizable faces; in Sweden, for example, Goren Burenhult is a household name, known for the archaeological stereotypes he plays into during his appearances on television (Holtorf 2007, 40). Holtorf also analyzes the impact of the British hit television show Time Team, whose hosts have all become minor celebrities in Europe, and who encourage recreational archaeology among their viewership (Holtorf 2007, 40). Importantly, Holtorf cites a review of the program, which “has all the elements of a good novel” (Holtorf 2007, 40).
The opportunity for intimate and personal positionality conferred by fictional narrative in archaeological writing can make it tempting to overindulge in creating personality and ethos, to the point of eclipsing the ethical with the exciting. This, arguably, is the misstep committed by the archaeologists reviewed by Holtorf, and generates misunderstandings about what archaeologists do (Holtorf 2007).

Perhaps the alternative is to emphasize one’s scholarly positionality. This, too, has proven engaging for public audiences; Mortimer Wheeler and Glyn Daniel discussed archaeology on television in the 1950’s, playing up their personas as stereotypical stodgy university experts and won awards for TV Personalities of the Year in 1954 and 1955 (Holtorf 2007, 40). There exist other examples of the lovable academe in popular culture: Professor Henry Jones (Indiana Jones’s father), for example, Daniel Jackson from Stargate, and even Jean-Luc Picard of Star Trek fame. However, real archaeologists who portray themselves as living embodiments of this archetype run the risk of alienating readers by implying that a wealth of scholarly knowledge gives the archaeologist access to the single profound truth that can be read from archaeological evidence, since this is invariably the stereotypical scholar’s role in popular storylines (G. Fagan 2006, 32; Flemming 2006; Holtorf 2007, 83; Reece 2006).

In light of Holtorf’s work, the archaeologist as intrepid adventurer is a problematic way to approach creating a narrative voice and thus creating a sense of authorial positionality; the archaeologist as impossibly well-read pedant is equally so. In fact, privileging the personality of the author sets up for a more general risk of silencing the voice of others involved in excavation, of the past occupants of sites, and of the reader as well (Pluciennik 1999, 668). Still, I follow Holtorf in his assertion that the
personality of archaeologists is an enormously untapped resource for both engaging with diverse public audiences, and for understanding the epistemological processes of archaeological research (Holtorf 2007). The possible benefits associated with a dynamic narrative voice, especially with regard to transparent positionality and reflexive archaeological practice, therefore outweigh the potential dangers of self-indulgence and continued branding of archaeology. This is especially true if, as argued in the following section, archaeologist-authors choose to capitalize on the opportunity to engage with a multitude of diverse voices and perspectives which is inherent in the genre of fictional narrative writing.

III.E. Multivocality.

“Reflexivity involves recognizing the value of multiple positions, and multivocality” (Hodder 2003, 6). If we continue to take for granted that a reflexive practice of archaeology is a desirable one (and we have done so until this point in the paper—it only makes sense to press on), then we must also call for a method of producing and packaging archaeological knowledge that engages with the concept of multivocality, defined by Rosemary Joyce as the archaeological practice whose goal it is to achieve polyphony, or the representation of multiple distinct languages with equal integrity (Joyce 2002, 11).

In order to understand the idea, and precisely why it is important, it is necessary to return to the question of archaeology’s position outside of academia, briefly addressed in section IIA with regard to popular fiction. Many archaeologists now realize the degree to which the discipline must engage with non-academic people and perspectives; because the success of the field is so dependent on the support of the public, and of stakeholder
communities, archaeologists need to take into account the potential contributions represented by the views of those outside the academy (Gear and Gear 2003; Hodder 2003; Hodder 1999; Robertshaw 2004).

Inherently, the incomplete and enigmatic nature of the archaeological record invites interpretive imagining that is guaranteed to yield diverse conclusions (Hodder 1999; Hodder and Hutson 2003). Many archaeologists encourage this creative effort from a wide audience, although the degree to which they do so varies. For some, “any metaphor that proves informative and can throw light on human relationships with the material world deserves consideration, and there is no reason that one is a better metaphor than the other” (Yentsch and Beaudry 2001, 233). This kind of relativism depends on a recognition that presenting any singular interpretation as definitive is a failure in neglecting to consider the benefits of any other view (Gardin 1980). To illustrate how disastrously flawed many find this narrow-minded approach to be, one might refer to Paul Courbin’s work, where he has condemned this brand of analytic myopia as “suicidal” (Courbin 1988, 118).

Despite agreeing with the need to seek value in other imaginings of the past, others have been more discerning about the kinds of ideas that should be given serious evaluation. Robert Leonard, an evolutionary archaeologist, is an example of one of these more reserved theorists. For him, not every possible idea is useful; in fact, it is an essential aspect of generating archaeological knowledge that interpretations can be appraised by some very basic criteria (Leonard 2001, 93). Because different people have similar ideas about the past, based on similar evidence and conforming to many of the same expectations, people can enter into meaningful dialogue about their ideas,
ultimately building upon each other’s understandings so that archaeological knowledge is communal in nature (Hodder 1999; Leonard 2001; Salzman 2002, 812; Tibbetts 1990, 77).

The interactions and conversations that are essential to archaeologists’ ability to speak confidently about the past are almost completely absent from archaeological literature (Joyce 2002, 3). Calls to rectify this incongruity have appeared—not only in the realm of cultural anthropology (Rabinow 1986, 253)—but also in the work of many archaeologists (Bender 1998, 11; Joyce 2002, 3, Salzman 2002, 812). In the most direct responses to these appeals, the fictive dialogues reviewed in section IIB literally put multiple voices into text. Barbara Bender’s *Stonehenge: Making Space* is especially significant because she does not restrict herself to presenting conversations had between established archaeologists in university positions. One of her chapters is a discussion between herself and several free festivalers with whom she collaborated to create an exhibit on Stonehenge. Reading the edited transcription reinforces the multiplicity of stakeholder communities that become implicated as archaeology does a better job of making evocative assertions about the past.

Recognizing diversity in stakeholder communities requires respect for perspectives frequently summarized as “indigenous views.” As Ian Hodder has pointed out, it is naïve to pretend that presenting the opinion of one descendant community member equates to capturing the indigenous view of the past (Hodder 1999). Therefore, while it is undeniably important to collaborate with stakeholder communities, it is equally important to do so with the recognition that no one individual can effectively voice the sentiments and interpretations of the group of which he or she is a part; multiple
indigenous voices exist and should not be distilled into a perfunctory, essentialized aboriginal perspective (Hodder 1999, 73; Hodder and Hutson 2003, 197). Hodder, along with Peter Robertshaw, have also discussed the problematic nature of being satisfied with engaging members of descendant communities in the interpretive process—then representing this dialogic process in traditional academic format which tends to reify existing power relationships between the scholar and the non-specialist (Hodder 2003, 24; Robertshaw 2004, 385). This endeavor merely serves to impose the structure of accepted academic thought onto the underrepresented, rather than engaging and encouraging their active, agentive participation in the construction of data and analysis. Innovative, divergent forms of representation must be explored and developed.

Moreover, a tension exists between the battle-cry in archaeological discourse for archaeologists to recognize how vital the conversations they share are to the production of archaeological knowledge—versus the degree to which fieldworkers are segregated from the interpretive endeavor ongoing at the sites they excavate (Gero 1996, 253; Hodder 2003; Wilkinson 2007, 18). At many—even most—sites, the project directors and ‘principal investigators’ have a monopoly on the right and responsibility to analyze the archaeological evidence, while the team members essentially act as trained trowels (Gero 1996, 253; Hodder 2003; Wilkinson 2007, 18). At Çatalhöyük, the recording process was altered so as to “democratize the excavation process,” encouraging continual interpretation by fieldworkers and documenting their developing hypotheses (Hodder 2000; Hodder 1999, 94). The records created as a result of this procedure are all available online on the Çatalhöyük website.
Still, the plenitude of original recording sheets and diary entries can be overwhelming and difficult to consume (Hodder 2003, 47; Pluciennik 1999, 674). The most easily comprehensible accounts of the findings at Çatalhöyük continue to be created by the project leaders. In my view, this is unavoidable, and in many ways, desirable; the role of ‘supervisor’ provides one with a unique, inclusive vantage point that allows consideration of many microcosmic research processes at once. This role, however, is attended by a duty to incorporate multiple distinct languages into writing the more digestible reports of excavations and analysis (Joyce 2002, 11).

In talking about polyphony, Stephen Tyler uses ostensibly political and power-based terms, saying it is not “a guilty excess of democracy” (Tyler 1986, 127). Instead, he finds it an important way to cope with the power dialectic of the relationship between a person representing and a person represented (Tyler 1986, 127). Indeed, this is the power dialectic created when one person attempts to narrate the account of an excavation. For Tyler—and Joyce—the most effective way to proceed is not to efface the individual roles that each fieldworker played at a site, but instead to attempt to create polyphony in archaeological research reports (Joyce 2002).

Mikhail Bakhtin discusses a medium suitable for this effort. For Bakhtin, “the only conceptual device we have that can do justice... to the essential, irreducible multi-centeredness, or ‘polyphony,’ of human life” is fiction (Bakhtin 1984, xx). In fiction, the combination, negotiation, and outcome of the meeting of several individual wills can be expressed and explored (Bakhtin 1984, 21). Like archaeological research, the thrust of fictionalized narrative—the forceful ideas and intended messages—are conveyed via a collaborative and dialogic story (Bakhtin 1984; Joyce 2002, 6).
Fictional narrative necessitates a reified interaction between multiple perspectives; more to the point, it requires voices that can be differentiated from the real author’s (Joyce 2002, 59; Lamarque 19990, 148). To turn once more to Bakhtin, for his faith in fictional narrative’s position as the sole appropriate medium for this kind of writing, “only ‘the novel,’ with its supreme realization of the potentialities inherent in prose, offers the possibility of doing justice to voices other than the author’s own, and only the novel invites us to do so” (Bakhtin 1984, xxii). In fact, Robertshaw has made a case for the integration of linguistic research with archaeological storytelling, in order to capture the idiomatic and symbolic understandings of the world engendered by other languages, and to make use of them in the uniquely polyphonic format of fictional narrative (Robertshaw 2004, 388). Others have voiced similar praise for the genre of the novel as the single avenue to incorporating multiple approaches to constructing meaning in a way that makes them build upon and comment on each other (Morson and Emerson 1990, White 1987).

The repeated use of the word ‘novel’ is interesting and exciting. A novel is by definition fictional and narrative; while for most novels, this means that the events and characters are entirely imagined, the benefits of narrative with regard to engaging multivocality and polyphony can be commandeered for the project of representing the actual collaborative nature of the real events on archaeological excavations. The understandability of the novel, along with the inevitability of constructing a multitude of perspectives and views different from the author’s own, can be applied to site reporting. The result will be a genre dependent on both narrative and fiction—but most importantly,
It will be an integral element of a responsible archaeological practice that aims toward multivocality.

IIIF. Accessibility to Public.

In the spirit of reflexivity, it is worth reflecting for a moment on the circumstances surrounding this text. It is an honors thesis, written at the close of a 4-year pursuit of anthropology at the undergraduate level, fulfilling a ‘capstone’ requirement of the major, which is a condition for graduation. I intend it as a serious commentary. However, while having done this work will likely impact my future direction and research interests in the field, neither its relative success nor its content will be likely to significantly impact any career I hope to pursue at the university level.

Still, the general condition within archaeological literature is to disparage writing for wider, popular audiences (B. Fagan 2006; Flemming 2006, 52; Holtorf 2007). I feel free to advance the position that I maintain here, being uninhibited by the fear of peer review or competition for tenure. For those more advanced in their engagement with the archaeological discourse, however, it is fine to philosophize loftily about educating the public about archaeology and archaeological knowledge; it is contemptibly pedestrian to do so by writing fiction. Evidence for this can be seen in the way that fictional novels by respected academes, like Gordon Randolph Willey’s Selena, are viewed simply as leisurely diversions from their more serious careers.

This environment is unacceptable in light of the entanglement of academia within wider society (Bender 1998; Deetz 1998; Gero 1996; Hodder 1999; Holtorf 2007; Joyce 2002). The current ‘Crisis of the Humanities’ broadcasts how dependent the success of academia is on the support and engagement of a wider body politic (Fish 2010). Rather
than passively assuming that the value of archaeology is self-evident, archaeologists must engage themselves in the issues important to the public and particular interest groups (Holtorf 2007); moreover, they must go beyond simply responding to these involved parties and proactively solicit their further discursive participation (Bender 1998, 171).

This recognition can only remain in the realm of abstract theorizing unless archaeologists examine ways in which to accomplish this aim. Rosemary Joyce critiques the way archaeologists have refused to invoke emotion, values, and personal experience into their scholarly reasoning and publication (Joyce 2002, 116). Excising these sources of analogy is both ironic and unproductive, given that for many—even most—of the people interested in constructing the past, it is only because of emotions, values, and personal experience that the past matters (Hodder 1999, 127; Holtorf 2007, 23; Joyce 2002, 116).

In some ways, it seems as though archaeologists’ sustained rejection of these lines of reasoning is used to demarcate and emphasize the boundary between the professional and the amateur interpretation of the past (Joyce 2002). It is a way to assert control and authority over historical analysis (Joyce 2002). This insecurity, however, is unwarranted; the role of ‘archaeologist,’ and the kind of unique discussions archaeologists hold, evoke a sense of knowledge and reliability that translates to authority (Gero 1996; Joyce 2002). In other words, they don’t have to try so hard.

W. Michael and Kathleen O’Neil Gear have had only positive feedback from the public after delving into the realm of popular fiction (Gear and Gear 2003). As evidence, they state that about 90% of the Native Americans who read their books are in favor of the content and form (Gear and Geer 2003, 25). Even more telling, perhaps, is the story
of one of their readers, a woman from Tennessee, who motivated a community into saving a mound about to be bulldozed by developers of a shopping center parking lot (Gear and Gear 2003, 25).

The potential of mobilizing an audience towards communal welfare, and towards protecting its cultural and historic resources is significant. If this is a possibility, then it is hard to see why it should not also become an objective of archaeological practice. The notion of archaeological responsibility has been discussed in many spheres, with varying definitions, but interestingly, both James Deetz and Ian Hodder have asserted that ethical archaeology involves storytelling and the construction of narratives (Deetz 1998, 94; Hodder 2003, 91; Hodder 1999, 56). Responsible archaeology necessitates a consideration, not only of the power archaeologists have to incite social action, but also of the medium by which it is most possible to do so.

This is related to the fact that audiences respond not only to the content of the material they read, but also the style and form of it (Hodder 1999, 61; Holtorf 2007; Tyler 1986). The complexity of rhetoric and the dependence of meaning on format implies that we should aim toward vivid, ‘transcendent’ language that holds communicative weight for—ideally—a universal audience (Holtorf 2007; Tyler 1986).

Furthermore, accomplishing this widely appealing and comprehensible dialogic system is an eminently achievable task; it does not entail a revolutionary departure from the skills vital for scholarly writing. Good academic writing requires descriptive language, active tenses, and clarity—all equally essential in more popularized writing (Fagan 2006, 26; Gear and Gear 2003, 26). The styles also share the goal of avoiding jargon as much as possible (Courbin 1988, 94; Fagan 2006, 26; Gear and Gear 2003, 26).
In fact, one of Paul Courbin’s central criticisms of the New Archaeology is its apparent delight in the alienation created by liberal use of jargon (Courbin 1988, 94).

Additionally, narrative structure is inherently communicative (Hodder 1999; White 1987). The vital importance of the storyline implies an audience, someone for whom the author is constructing a clear, coherent progression of ideas and events—rather than a self-indulgent exercise in impenetrable description (Hodder 1999, 56). And indeed, the consumers of archaeological knowledge comprise a substantial audience; moreover, this audience is diverse to an extent seldom recognized by the writer (Hodder 1999, 19; Joyce 2002, 2). One method of trying to cope with this wide range of addressees by turning to hypertext and the internet, but many have realized that disparities in computer access, skill level, and interest renders this avenue of communication potentially alienating (Hodder 2003, 47; Pluciennik 1999, 674). Instead, they recommend the simultaneous creation of various products that cater to different audiences (Allen and Joyce 2010, 280; Hodder 1999, 19; Robertshaw 2004, 385). Mitchell Allen and Rosemary Joyce give the example of publishing in *American Antiquity* and also a local newspaper, creating a handout for the local historical society, and uploading a short documentary to YouTube (Allen and Joyce 2010, 280).

Still, it seems that fictional narrative’s potential as a way to communicate with diverse audiences has not been fully realized. Indeed, Hayden White envisions narrative as the ultimate conduit for generating meaning on a universal human level, rather than the plane of the culturally particular (White 1987). Peter Robertshaw has echoed this sentiment, promoting the use of storytelling in African archaeology especially as a way to involve African communities who may be limited in their literacy (Robertshaw 2004,
Narrative is flexible enough to be effective at creating a sense of current relevance, as Misia Landau makes clear in her consideration of Sir Grafton Elliot-Smith’s narrative of human evolution (Landau 1991). Elliot-Smith applies his story of human evolution to the Great War of 1914-18, fictionalizing the narrative in a way that does not detract from its scholarly authority or import—but does imbue it with a newly created temporal resonance (Landau 1991, 140).

Writing about archaeology and the past in an appealing way will happen with or without the participation of archaeologists (Allen and Joyce 2010; Holtorf 2007). The subject matter that archaeology discusses—and even the powerfully transformative act of discovering antiquities and rescuing them from earthy obscurity—inspires creativity and imagination. This characteristic of archaeological practice, succinctly summarized perhaps as the ‘thrill’ of archaeological research, is not felt exclusively by amateur collectors and historians. It is, in fact, what many professional archaeologists frequently identify as their original reason for becoming interested in archaeology. Fittingly, many of the experiments with fictional narrative in archaeology have found readership both outside and inside of academia (Allen and Joyce 2010, 275; Joyce 2002, 121). The medium lends itself to being informative, authoritative, and engaging; it simply requires archaeologists to be better writers and storytellers (Allen and Joyce 2010, 280). In doing so, archaeologists will make progress toward the incontrovertible goal of becoming more ethical and valued discursive participants.

IV. Conclusion.

While it would be impossible to craft a flawlessly comprehensive argument that anticipates all possible questions and critiques, there are a few questions which I may
preempt given already-present arguments in scientific and archaeological discourse. Some of these criticisms could stem from a belief that there are other, more effective ways to accomplish the same ends I have laid out in this defense. Particularly, the methodology at Çatalhöyük might serve as an example of a truly reflexive practice that negates the need for different, innovative writing tactics by presenting all of the excavation material—from data sheets to diary entries—on a free, publicly accessible website (Farid et al. 2000, 25; Hamilton 2000, 123; Pluciennik 1999, 674).

However, Naomi Hamilton, in reviewing the impact of instituting the database at Çatalhöyük, is less than adoring of the system (Hamilton 2000). She describes how participants on the site felt too much pressure to consult the database constantly and narrates the technological glitches involved in establishing the database—ultimately resulting in the marginalization of the database as an element of reflexive procedure in the 1996 season (Hamilton 2000, 123). Moreover, Mark Pluciennik has expressed a concern that simply putting all archaeological documentation in a supposedly ‘raw’ form on the internet might permit archaeologists to elude their responsibility to interpret, and to take political ownership of the narratives they construct (Pluciennik 1999, 674). Fictional narrative can capture more effectively and organically the ongoing reasoning involved in archaeological excavation than can a database, even one which is constantly being altered and revisited. Furthermore, the style of fictional narrative forces the archaeologist to take command of the stories he or she tells about excavation procedure as well as the archaeological record in general.

Other criticisms might be mounted against some of the most basic foundations of this thesis—for example, the value of reflexivity. Those who categorically oppose
reflexive practice as a defensible goal for archaeology will certainly never be convinced of the importance of exploring the uses of fictional narrative in archaeology. Those who remain skeptical, but see reflexivity as conferring benefits in very specific contexts, however, could conceivably be persuaded of the potential benefits of fictional narrative if I offer qualifications for these tropes in archaeological writing that parallel the perceived value of reflexivity in these particular contexts.

Michael Lynch is one of the vocal cynics about the advantages of reflexivity, having said that reflexive analysis is not particularly useful “unless something provocative, interesting, or revealing comes from it” (Lynch 2000, 42). It should be clear by now how fictional narrative in archaeological writing can be both interesting and revealing, appealing as it does to a diverse audience and allowing a discussion of hermeneutic paths and practical errors. Moreover, the strength of fictional narrative as an alternative means of expression is just that: that it exists alongside more formal and scholarly modes of communication. The archaeologists who have so far explored storytelling as a means of expression in archaeology have been quick to emphasize that they do not call for a total and revolutionary overhaul of all writing in archaeology (Deetz 1998, 94; Praetzellis 1998, 2). In fact, Mikhail Bakhtin has stated that new genres cannot ever entirely supplant preexisting ones (Bakhtin 1984, 271). Instead, adding new genres to a particular discourse enters into a mutual feedback system with older ones, forcing both genres to examine and improve upon their respective shortcomings (Bakhtin 1984, 271; Pluciennik 1999, 666; White 1987, 42).

Such a conception of presenting archaeological knowledge seems contradictory to the basic tenets of scientific method; rather than a systematic method for evaluating the
accuracy of allegations made, there is a continual effort to reconsider how these allegations are being made and what these hermeneutic processes contribute, what they imply. This is deeply contradictory to those who would consider archaeology a science that aims to capture historical fact (G. Fagan 2006; Hodder and Hutson 2003, 146-7, Kosso 2006, 5; Pluciennik 1999, 666; Salzman 2002, 811; White 1987, 26). Still, making greater use of a fictional format in site reporting does not preclude rational evaluation of archaeological reasoning (Hodder and Hutson 2003, 146-7; Kosso 2006).

In order to defend this statement more fully, it is first necessary to recognize that capturing objective truth in writing—and more to the point, in any single language—is categorically impossible (Kosso 2006, 4; Lynch 2000, 39; Pluciennik 1999, 667). This idea has frequently been distilled by its critics into an assertion that all scientific knowledge is constructed, and by extension, has no bearing on reality and therefore no use (Lynch 2000, 39). Instead, it is merely a recognition that the act of writing is a careful, purposive one that involves an editing of the totality of reality; moreover, when writing about the past, one constructs a perspective that has never existed before.

Yet simply because each archaeologist is creating his or her own conception of an excavation and of the past does not mean that each conception is equally valid. Some ways of giving the accounts of research projects are more correct than others. Similar viewpoints have been voiced as qualifications by those advocating for reflexivity and greater relativism in basic archaeological methodology (Hodder 1999, 19; Kosso 2006, 3; Praetzellis 1998, 1), ethnography (Clifford 1986a, 24; Clifford 1986b, 120), and interpretation (Flemming 2006, 58; Hodder 2000, 11; Kosso 2006, 3; Spector 1993, 125). As an example of how imaginative narratives can be carried ad ridiculum, Spector gives
an inane and ridiculous counter-interpretation of the Dakota site she analyzes (Spector 1993, 125). In this alternative story, she abandons all concept of *terminus post quem*, whimsically spinning a tale of a woman making use of material culture across all centuries represented at the site, including ones which haven’t been invented during this imagined woman’s lifetime (Spector 1993, 125).

With regard to fictionalized site reporting, it is both necessary and possible to differentiate between the more and less valid forms of writing. The more valid forms of writing will follow the mandate of Adrian Praetzellis and others who characterize archaeologist’s commitment to rooting their work to external referents as an ethical obligation (Hodder 1999, 23; Praetzellis 2003, xii). Fictional narrative in site reports does not force or even encourage irresponsible departures from reality wherever an archaeologist-writer might find it convenient; the archaeologist is still bound to his or her ethical duty to assemble and interpret information with rigor (G. Fagan 2006, 27-8; Praetzellis 2003, xii; Praetzellis 1998, 1). Instead, it frees the archaeologist to carefully position oneself in a way that he or she might explicitly pursue the questions most relevant to contemporary concerns (Bender 1998, 5). Indeed, if one asserts that fiction—by nature—has no way of speaking meaningfully about the real world, this implies that literature and poetry, which frequently make no attempt to ground themselves in external reality, have nothing useful to teach (White 1987, 44).

Instead, I argue that these alternative media, and expressly fictional narrative, have an untapped and potentially enormous amount to teach; furthermore, fictional narrative is a pedagogical form more effective for communicating to diverse audiences. It is also a genre dynamic enough to incorporate multiple collaborative voices, while still
retaining an unparalleled sense of individual authorship. The fictionalized form allows for a discussion of topics and elements central to conducting archaeological research, but which challenge the scientific authority on which traditional site reporting depends. Fictional narrative allows archaeologist-writers to claim a different sense of authority, one dependent on contemporaneity and relevance, as well as the tracing of a transparent epistemological approach. Instead of implying a scientifically acceptable hermeneutic circle, archaeologists who employ the style of fictional narratives are forced to lay bare the means by which they come to their interpretations; at the same time, they are free to make use of a wider array of evidence in order to motivate their case. The endeavor requires a greater degree of creativity than the status quo of traditional formal site reporting, which the archaeological literature appears to consider a positive development.

It seems to contradict those whose work has most greatly inspired this exploration and defense by ending with a final and totalizing ‘conclusion’ (Pluciennik 1999). Having reviewed the myriad advantages which I attribute to the fictional mode of writing, it is perhaps more appropriate to conclude with a statement more preliminary in nature, such as an invitation. A greater engagement with fictional narrative and a more conscious manipulation of the benefits it confers is requested of archaeologists, in order to push archaeology more forcefully to make good on promises heralded by the ideal conception of a reflexive methodology.

Indeed, this appeal rings empty without an accompanying attempt on my own part. Therefore, I end not only with this invitation, but also with an introduction. The next—and final—section offers a preliminary example of the unbridled exploitation of the fictional narrative site reporting for which I have so far advocated. I hope that it will
prompt a wide range of others to respond and engage with the archaeological record it creates.

V. Transformations at a Roman Bathhouse.

In the summer of 2010, I participated in a research excavation at Bir Madhkur in the Wadi Araba in Jordan. The site contains a fort and supporting industrial complex dating to the Late Roman period, along with a bathhouse-caravanserai predating these structures. We also carried out an excavation of an Early Roman caravan station some distance away, called Khirbet es-Faysif.

It feels strange to drop these terms—“bathhouse-caravanserai,” “industrial complex”—so simply. They are such simple, categorical labels for the enormous and enigmatic collapsed structures that I dug into this past summer. It is especially strange given the fact that before excavating at Bir Madhkur, I would have been entirely unable to give any kind of concise definition for these terms. Of course, I had an inkling that a bathhouse would have entailed bathing, and that a caravan station would be some kind of waypoint on the trade routes between settlements in the area. I probably would have even been able to guess that a caravanserai would have a purpose related in some way to a ‘caravan station,’ without being able to articulate exactly what these uses would be.

Given what I first expected to do at Bir Madhkur—which was simply to observe and journal about the course of the excavation in order to create a fictionalized site report when I came back—I might have returned from this summer without a much better understanding of this terminology than when my plane took off from O’Hare airport. But an archaeologist is in the paradoxical business of anticipating surprises, and during the field season, I was unexpectedly appointed to the position of supervising excavations
both at Khirbet es-Faysif—the Early Roman caravan station—and the bathhouse-caravanserai in the main area of the site. This meant that I was going to be writing weekly technical reports where I summarized what we had excavated during the week—and then analyzed the findings. I had to master these labels so I could use them in a convincing way without betraying how unfamiliar they were to me.

Fortunately, I discovered that I wasn’t alone in finding the definitions of these terms somewhat elusive. Our project director explained to me that their primary usefulness is for archaeologists conducting large-scale surveys of Roman Arabia who need efficient ways of referring to the structures they find. Since these surveys barely involve any collection or analysis of artifacts, it is nearly impossible for archaeologists to determine from these surveys alone what the exact function and significance of each structure is. So instead, they look primarily at the size of each structure to determine what it is. They consider also the shape, and evidence for internal division of rooms, but the size of the building is the major factor in deciding whether a rectangular mass of blocks is considered a castellum or a caravanserai.

The collapsed complexes then receive these Latin names, lifted from the writing of Roman historians, which carry a sense of authenticity and imply that the role of these buildings in Roman life has been determined. This actually makes some sense, considering archaeologists’ longstanding love affair with attempting to sort and classify their findings into widely applicable categories. In sharp contrast to the concerns of the world’s favorite World War II-era archaeologist (“Why’d it have to be snakes?”), debates in archaeology during the mid-twentieth century centered rather on whether ‘cultures’ could be broken down into lists of visible attributes seen in the remains of tools and
houses. Instead of watching with rapt attention as men in rural India pulled still-beating hearts out of each other’s chests, archaeologists during the 1940’s and 1950’s were fascinated by whether or not they could use the principles of ‘species’ in biology to understand the relationships between different objects left by human societies in the past. They offered up highly specific definitions of artifact *types* versus artifact *modes*, they diagrammed schematics that seemed either to oversimplify or overcomplicate the way artifacts could be classified, and they struggled to come up with long lists of features that could be used as a checklist to determine which label should be applied to the objects and, by extension, the people who left these materials behind.

This endeavor left something to be desired.

 Mostly, it didn’t say anything about what human life was like for these people in the past. Many of the labels and lists of traits that were generated by early scholarly archaeologists have largely proven too static, too lifeless, and too limiting for archaeologists working today. Some, however, have been applied productively, and the legacy of this part of archaeology’s past is still felt today. It is almost impossible to imagine, for example, that early humans’ experience with the world centered on the shapes of their stone tools; yet, archaeologists still talk about “Clovis culture,” where Clovis refers both to a particular kind of stone spear point named after the first city where an example was found and to once-living groups of Paleoindian people.

 It seems simultaneously strange and useful to use Latin names for buildings we find through preliminary archaeological surveys. These names are taken from the writings of Roman authors, and it seems ridiculous to ignore this information which is so readily available to us. However, when these names are assigned before any excavation
has been conducted to determine the purpose of these various buildings, they imply that archaeologists have some sort of x-ray vision into the ground or perhaps time-traveling technology so that they can walk amid a collapsed pile of limestone blocks and immediately know what the building looked like and what people did there so many centuries ago. Clearly, this is not the case.

Moreover, many of these ruins have modern names given to them by the people currently living in the area, frequently groups of Bedouin families. Khirbet es-Faysif, which we excavated, is an example of this. And in archaeological scholarly literature, the name “Khirbet es-Faysif” can be—and is—used interchangeably with its designation as an “Early Roman caravan station.” What’s funny about this is that those Bedouins who named the location Khirbet es-Faysif would be unlikely to ever think of it as an “Early Roman caravan station”—nor, for that matter, a caravanserai. Referring to these places only by non-Bedouin names erases the importance of these places to living groups of people who have maintained a claim to the land through so many centuries. When we hear the word caravanserai, we might think of the album cover of Santana’s Caravanserai from 1972, with camels traipsing across a dusky desert landscape; if we Wikipedia the word, we find an excerpt from Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian. But both the album cover and the writing of Herodotus fit into a mass of imposed stereotypes about the Middle East known as “Orientalism,” a general way of thinking of indigenous Middle Eastern people as exotic, as opposed to the Greeks and Romans who are the recognizable ancestors of Western civilization. Orientalism leads us to ignore the complicated interactions between these groups of people in ancient history and the contemporary importance that Middle Eastern peoples have to ancient places.
Caravanserai, bathhouse-caravan station, Bir Madhkur—these various and competing terms for the site, which differ in their implications about the purpose of the place and even the languages they come from, seemed completely synonymous in March and April when I was doing the required reading assigned by our project director before leaving for Bir Madhkur. But once I became an excavation supervisor, and had to work these terms into my own writing, I became intensely aware of their associated meanings and the bizarre incongruity of using these English, Latin, and Bedouin Arabic names interchangeably.

At the same time, all of these labels are incredibly important for understanding Bir Madhkur and the archaeology that intervened there in the summer of 2010. The voices of English-speaking excavation team members, the voices of past Roman military personnel residing at this fort, and the voices of the Bedouin villagers living around the site conversed constantly to shape the way we dug, recorded, and interpreted. The site itself, especially the bathhouse complex, revealed a history of repeated modification and adaptation of the buildings over time. All of these languages are necessary for discussing excavations at Bir Madhkur because of the different nuanced connotations they carry and because of the way they compete and conflict with each other.

In what follows, I attempt to reconstruct our excavation procedure of the bathhouse complex, including our findings and interpretations that evolved over the course of the summer. It is now about seven months since we left Jordan, and my recollections of the season come from my memory and from a detailed journal that I kept while I was there, with the intention of creating this fictionalized site report.
It is vital to explain what I mean by ‘fictionalized’ here. I do not mean that any of the events or characters are invented. All of the occurrences and people described in this account are recreations of real-world referents. However, I present them as I experienced them, caught up in my feelings and thoughts towards the people involved and their actions. I attempt to weave evocative themes throughout the piece in order to more fully approximate our procedure and interpretations over the season.

Moreover, none of the names in this piece are actual; in fact, while the characters are real, they do not match exactly to specific individuals who worked on the project. In order to protect the concerns and identities of the people mentioned herein, I have found it useful to craft characters who play consistent functional roles. It is important to remember that, at any moment, anyone who has participated in archaeological excavation has spent time as the hapless neophyte, or the know-it-all, or the social outcast. In this report, it is less necessary to determine who at each moment played what role, and instead to focus more on how these roles impacted our procedure and therefore the archaeological record that we created.

This is what I mean by ‘fictionalized.’ I have placed my creative role as author at the forefront of the text, asserting transparently that this is my encounter and experience with the field season at Bir Madhkur, and that I have consciously chosen what to include here—as well as how to include it—for specific reasons. Centrally, this is meant to be a case study in this method of reporting sites. Towards that end, I try to communicate how the complex and often-ignored aspects of archaeological fieldwork contribute to what others might attempt to segregate as empirical data. I try to convey the ‘feeling’ of being on site, the social dynamics, our theoretical engagement, as well as the tangible objects
we recovered and the conclusions we drew, since all of these processes were inextricably entangled. And, admittedly, I attempt to do so in a way that makes clear that the medium of fictional narrative is an effective approach to discussing these elements of archaeological research.

Therefore, I find it useful to begin the story—once upon a time—in a place that requires little imaginative exertion on the part of the reader: I am writing, in an apartment in Amman, Jordan, hours before I am scheduled to depart the country where I have spent the past two months participating in an archaeological excavation. I am frantically copying and pasting sections of site reports from the past weeks. Carbonation and caffeine are the ghost writers of these descriptions of archaeological findings and accompanying interpretations, as I summarize seemingly endless lists of loci and put these summaries into neat charts.

I reflect for a moment on the simultaneous absurdity and appropriateness of this endeavor. The locus—this elusive term for referring to any demarcation of space—has been a contested concept over the past two months, and now I am attempting to synthesize the idea into a static, structured two-column chart with straight, thin black borders.

A locus at Bir Madhkur could refer to anything from an animal burrow to a wall to a doorway. The term corresponded to how volunteers were supposed to document what they found as we dug: with “locus sheets” that we would fill out, where we would check off what kind of locus we were describing—a soil layer, perhaps, or a pit of ashes—and systematically record our observations as directed by these forms. But the size, shape, and idea of what loci could be was impossibly flexible and dynamic—and a
lot of the time, it was only clear what should be considered a separate locus once its contents had been completely dug, sifted, and dumped.

On our first day at the site, the concept of the locus was deceptively clear. The thirty project members, along with about fifteen paid Bedouin workers, would be excavating a number of “trenches”—squares measuring 5 m x 5 m—and at the outset, each square was an uninterrupted expanse of rubble and sand. The first recorded locus for every trench was a layer of yellowish brown sand covering the entire trench. Each of us, in every square, called this layer “Locus 000.”

Still, even at this early stage, there were moments we all recognized as omens of impending confusion. Almost all of these instances were embodied by the actions and reactions of Heidi, a first-time excavator placed in charge of an entire 5 m x 5 m trench.

She was not the only person new to excavation placed in this kind of position—we were split into partnerships, with one member making decisions regarding how excavation would proceed in the trench, as well as recording observations, while the other volunteer assisted. The trenches were grouped into “areas” containing four or five trenches, and a graduate student was placed in charge of supervising the excavation of each area. This meant that the responsibility of overseeing and documenting entire trenches could be—and was—placed in the hands of many volunteers who had never been on an archaeological research project before. But Heidi was the only volunteer who didn’t bring a hat to the site on the first day, where the temperature easily rose to 120 degrees Fahrenheit by 11:00 am and the sun broadcast promises to relentless sear and scorch the always bleached and dry earth. Heidi also didn’t bring a handheld broom, the tool of choice for efficiently removing the loose sandy dust of locus 000, and owned a
tape measure that only marked feet and inches—an impressive feat, given that Heidi was Canadian.

“Fortunately,” joked Heidi, “I also didn’t bring a pen… So at least I don’t have to take notes!”

The area supervisor, Amber, handed her a pen.

These early signs of disorder in Heidi’s methods portended the notorious moment a few weeks later when Heidi dug through the floor of her trench. She had excavated—albeit with difficulty—through changing soil layers, recognizing new loci as the sandy dust turned to a sandy clay loam and struggling to describe and interpret them. Focusing on a single room, Heidi dug down, hoping to reach the surface dating to the late Roman period, the floor on which people would have stood and walked during the 4th century, dropping the material leftovers of their various activities for archaeologists to find hundreds of years later. We didn’t know exactly what this surface would look like, but drawing upon the expectations established by the systematic practice of archaeology over the past century (those early archaeologists, for all of their misguided and tedious searching for historical universals across archaeological sites, taught us this at least!), we knew to expect a sharp increase in artifact density immediately above a hardened surface of some kind—whether paved flagstone or trampled earth. So we would never have expected Heidi to spend a full day doggedly chipping her trowel through the entire compacted gravel surface preserved in her trench.

The reactions on the part of the team were diverse: some felt relieved that they had not been the one to make this egregious mistake, others were flabbergasted at the
amount of effort Heidi must have put forward in order to dig through the floor before starting to wonder if something was wrong. Amber felt a crippling sense of responsibility for failing to notice her supervisee’s mistake in time. Having been trained according to the mantra that archaeologists destroy what they research, and therefore lack the luxury of revisiting their data, we all wondered how we were going to proceed. Some archaeological damage control was definitely in order.

Amber and our project director conferred, and decided that they would call Heidi’s oversight a “probe,” as if she had dug through the floor as part of a deliberate research procedure—perhaps to determine whether the packed gravel layer really was the floor, after all. Heidi wrote in her field notes about how the flatness and compaction of the gravel suggested a surface, but maintained that the lack of intentionally placed floor materials warranted further systematic investigation. As she characterized the event in this way, putting it in this language of purposive research procedure, Heidi was doing more than whitewashing her archaeological misstep. She was changing excavation procedure by signaling to the rest of the team that we should study the remaining evidence of the floor in order to recognize it in our own trenches. We all examined the traces of gravel at the base of the stone walls in Heidi’s trench, and listened attentively to her recollections of what it had looked like, felt like, sounded like as she dug into it—as she sank this probe. When we continue working in our own trenches, we know in advance that we can stop digging once we uncover this flat, tamped-down layer of gravel caused by the constant trampling of feet walking across a working space. We found this gravel floor underneath grindstones and millstones, at the bottom of storerooms in the
caravan station we excavated, and at first assumed we would find it at the base of the trenches we opened much later in the season at the Bir Madhkur bathhouse.

A month later, in our project director’s Amman apartment, I reflect on this assumption, which rings so absurd when I think about the functions of the places with this gravel floor, versus the purpose of the rooms at the bathhouse—which was anything but utilitarian or expediently-constructed. This is what I will have to convey in my report. I begin by explaining the setting of the trenches we opened at the bathhouse.

I start by using the language of metric measurement and cardinal directions, which is standard in archaeological site reporting and helps to compare results between sites. But this excludes the larger landscape surrounding these four segregated 5 m x 5 m squares. I’m not the first to have this difficulty; archaeologists like Chris Tilley have written creative sensory descriptions of the experience of being at the sites they excavate. For people like Chris Tilley and me, trying to understand what we’ve dug involves visualizing the journey to get there:

I envision the familiar motions we go through each morning, opening the gates that lead to the driveway of our government-sponsored building. One by one, four pickup trucks sleepily crawl onto the main highway. They turn left past the police station.

They drive past dunes, an irrigated farm. In the distance, a rest stop—The Bir Madhkur Café—becomes visible. The trucks approach a bus stop, but turn right before they pass it.

By now, the sunless sky is beginning to glow with the pre-dawn light that heralds daytime, the contradictory radiance that is bright enough to see by but never turns out
right in photographs. In this light, the Bedouin village of Bir Madhkur is beginning to wake up. The four trucks of archaeologists zip through the residential streets, stopping occasionally to pick up some of the Bedouin men who will be working at the site that day. Abruptly, they reach the last Bedouin house—the one with the pen full of goats—and shift into fourth gear.

They speed across the pillowy hills of sand, defying the paths laid by tread marks of past vehicles that malevolently conspire to catch ahold of tires and bury them. The trucks aim generally for a telephone pole in the distance. They seem, amid the empty landscape of sand, to be lost wanderers, but with purpose and direction and speed.

The first truck reaches the exposed pipe that delivers water to the Bedouin tents located away from the village. The driver carefully downshifts to first gear, and proceeds over the pipe, one wheel at a time. So much depends on our relationship with the Bedouin, so much depends on each inch of tire that crosses the pipe without damaging it. As the last wheel eases over the tube, the truck immediately resumes racing the rays of sunlight that have begun to appear over the surrounding mountains.

Eventually, we pull up to a small group of stucco houses. They are clearly new, with straight geometric architecture and—if one peers into the windows, plumbing. However, peering into the windows is as close as we can get to these houses; they were constructed as part of the Hashemite Kingdom’s effort to invest in the site as a destination for ecotourism. Getting close to the houses, one feels like a timorous intruder; we’re not allowed to stay in this brand new complex of homes yawning for the tourists who will transform them into a resort.
Walking through these structures, it is easy to imagine adventurous couples arriving here, setting up camp, going on daily camel rides, taking midday naps, drinking chai. But the vividness of these imaginings begins to fade when one comes upon the ruins of the castellum, the fort, of Bir Madhkur.

Aerial photographs make the structure’s shape and size hard to miss. On the ground, however, the evidence of 20th century bulldozing efforts is clear. The site looks like a mound of torn-up rock. The occasional, regular, limestone building block peeks from beneath the rubble, but it is difficult to imagine wealthy Americans and Europeans returning from their trips to Bir Madhkur, clicking through digital slideshows of this landscape, saying to their friends, “You won’t believe what we woke up to see each morning!”

Stepping onto the slope of boulders, these imaginings of tourists become even more absurd and incongruous. I kick away a rusted, empty tuna fish can, it scuttles away and hits a decaying goat leg. What was once a stalwart, imposing defensive structure for the Romans is now dotted with the ashy campfire remnants from nomadic people crossing the desert. To the east is a carefully planned cemetery for the Muslim men and women from the nearby village. The site is actively being used and transformed, even though it initially appears destitute. It is difficult to see how upscale ecotourists could fit into the scene.

This is, in fact, why Andrew is so concerned about the success of this season. If the Kingdom is dissatisfied with our work in some way, they have every reason to hire a contract archaeology firm to dig through the site without the same kind of meticulous attention to academically-significant detail that we hope to recover. If this happened, we
would not be the only ones unwelcome at the Bir Madhkur fort; the landscape would be stripped of its empty shotgun shells and cast-off rubber shoe soles, and the situation would become incredibly complicated and tense with the local Bedouin looking to bury their relatives in accordance with Muslim stricture.

Next to the fort is a high *jebel*, a hill or a mountain—but the sharp, steep, angular, rocky kind in the Wadi Araba. On the first day, we climbed the path up the side, and when we reached the top, we paused inside a building leftover from the mid-twentieth century. The structure exudes the kind of tired emptiness that betrays a former usefulness, instead of the optimistic hope of future function that marks the tourist huts below. Andrew talked about his vision for this place: a site museum that overlooks the ruins below. From here, being able to see the entirety of Bir Madhkur—including the Bedouin village of the same name some distance away—one could imagine, for once, a plausible future. Andrew spoke about the Bedouins playing an important role in capitalizing on the historical resources of the location, beginning with their work on archaeological field projects like ours. We talked excitedly about implementing quarter-operated telescopic lens, such a staple of American tourist sites. From this vantage point, on top of the jebel, continued coalescence seemed feasible—but the situation becomes much more complicated on the ground at the bathhouse.

We have even more interlocutors to contend with—more ideas to consider as we decide where and how to dig, and attempt to interpret our findings. In 2008, several trenches were excavated in the bathhouse area. Unfortunately, the grid used two years ago does not correspond perfectly to the grid we are using now, and two of our trenches overlap with a backfilled square from 2008. The sunken surface of this square, filled
with sifted sand and bearing the mark of previous probing, reminds us that this year is not
the first time these layers of sand have been systematically scrutinized.

As a further reminder of this, I carry with me at all times the site report from
2008. The hefty packet contains pages of prose, maps, and copies of locus sheets filled
out in unfamiliar handwriting, signed at the top with meaningless names. The
descriptions contained therein—the checked boxes, the schematic drawings, the
preliminary interpretations—silently pressure us to find evidence to corroborate them
beneath the parched, shattered rocks covering our trenches as we begin to dig.

Our camp is in al-Risha, Jordan, where we are living in a three-story government-
owned building encircled by a six-foot high concrete fence. During the day, freshly
hand-laundered clothes, hung on clotheslines set up on the roof, are battered by the
ruthless winds of the wadi. They flap audibly around a Jordanian flag being equally
brutalized by the air. A Bedouin tent on the ground below threatens to collapse, but
clothes, tent, and flag all persevere—emblematic—despite the relentless beatings of the
wind.

The nights are still, thick with the heavy heat of desert air. On the melting asphalt
roof, two girls wear headlamps and look out toward the village lights a few miles away.
They write in journals, putting stories, descriptions, theories, frustrations, and jokes into
textual memory. A group of Americans—friends from the West Coast—sit, looking
toward the barren landscape of the south, discussing their shared experience in this place
so far from California. Beneath the waving Jordanian flag sit a man and a woman, who
haven’t moved for hours, watching the moon glow increasingly brighter and feeling more
and more at ease in each other’s company. Another man sits, sipping a drink alone. The
warm air of the wadi feels as comfortable as these nightly traditions do, the rooftop serving as a map of the diverse and the social at the Bir Madhkur project.

When determining who will excavate where, the staff attempts to remake this map onto the landscape of the site—pairing friends and placing potential romantic couplings in the same 5 m x 5 m trench to keep everyone excited to work each day as the rising, blazing sun broils moisture from their every pore. In some cases, however, we try to invert the rooftop social landscape to encourage productivity. We want to split up the married couple Alex and Sam; like Heidi and Ashley, they’ll talk too much if they are placed in the same square. No more first-time excavators can be in charge of their own trench since the incident of Heidi digging through the floor. Bud, the living stereotype of the fundie conservative, has mentioned how uncomfortable he feels around the playfully flirtatious jokes made by some of the extroverted gay men on our excavation team, so we do our best to separate him from them.

After playing through this elaborate game of strategy, we settle on trench assignments that we think will work. At the bathhouse complex, we have one trench placed at the entrance to what may have once been an attached caravan station. We place Ashley in charge of this trench, with Gabe to help her, since they’ve been spending late nights together, smoking and taking in the al-Risha landscape from chairs atop our building after dark. Katie—who is new to archaeology—will supervise excavations in one of the trenches that overlaps the 2008 square, with the expectation that an experienced team member will join her to help soon. Sam (one half of the married couple) will work with Matt, a graduate student, in the other trench that overlaps the backfilled, documented one, kitty corner from Katie’s square.
There is another, fourth, trench: the ash pit. The first day we came to the site, we joked about excavating it, imagining the black stains that would never wash out of clothes and envisioning a complete lack of any discernible stratigraphy or interesting artifacts.

I struggle, when writing my final site report, to justify why we chose to excavate the ash pit, why we selected Michael to supervise excavations there. There are simply no terms appropriate for a scholarly audience or the Jordanian Department of Antiquities to tell the story of our first weekend away from camp, even though it had such persistent tremors throughout the rest of our excavation season. After a week of early nights and the constant threat of dehydration, we were taking some time off in Aqaba—an absolute oasis relative to the Wadi, by comparison flowing with both water and alcohol. We couldn’t wait to enjoy it.

Some of us began to enjoy it earlier—and in greater quantities—than others. The first night, Amber and Michael emptied endless bottles until 6 am, when they fell asleep. After waking up at noon they began drinking again next to the pool. Beside blue water, drinks in hand, wearing bathing suits, it seemed like we had crossed not only space, but time, to reach this place so opposite of everything in al-Risha.

Hours later, we were on a rooftop bar in the center of Aqaba, waiting for the World Cup soccer game to end so we could sing Madonna hits to bad MIDI approximations of the melodies. While the rest of the group sat around a table, flipping through a songbook, debating the relative merits of belting Journey versus crooning Neil Diamond, Amber and Michael sat on stools, leaning closer and closer together, until the subtle but explosive instant when Amber slid onto Michael’s lap. Other bar patrons
noticed, whispering uncomfortably and suddenly our feelings of liberation, of being so far from the restrictive conservatism of al-Risha, were gone. We were in a Muslim country, and this behavior was unacceptable.

Our project administrator took Michael aside and told him to go home. The two men, both tall and broad, tried to intimidate each other. They stood close, chest to chest, with Michael steadfastly refusing to leave the bar and our administrator being unwilling to compromise. Finally, Michael broke away and defiantly began to walk back towards Abbey. The project administrator swiftly strode to the front of the bar, seized the karaoke mic, and informed everyone that the party was over and that Bir Madhkur team members had to go back to the hotel. So we did.

The next morning involved fallout for everyone. Some nursed daylong hangovers on the bumpy bus ride home, others simply tried to cope with the regret of singing ‘Barbie Girl’ in public. For Amber and Michael, however, the consequences were much worse. Our project director decided that Amber would now share her position as area supervisor. The events of the past weekend, paired with her role in incidents such as the day when Heidi dug through the floor, had made him question her capacity to handle the responsibility of overseeing excavation in four simultaneous trenches.

Michael, meanwhile, would dig in the ash pit at the bathhouse complex.

In my final site report, I write—truthfully, if incompletely—that we began excavation in the ash pit “to recover small objects and organic remains that would have been disposed of as this area was used as a midden over time.” I open another Diet Coke, and begin to summarize the loci of each of the trenches in turn.

I start with the trench we have named B.06, the one at the entrance of the
expected caravanserai, the one intended to be the setting for a summer romance between Ashley and Gabe. Opening the binder for the trench, I have a visceral scornful reaction when I see Ashley’s round scrawl. It is the kind of corpulent print where one expects to see saccharine hearts over the lowercase i’s. Fortunately, I only have to decipher its superficial overexuberance for the first few pages.

The first locus sheet, with its numerous corrections and minimal description, is the product of the first days when Ashley was digging in the trench with Gabe. The joyful, bubbly letters reflect their intimate daylong conversations as they began to uncover the crests of the topmost stones of the caravan station’s exterior walls.

At the same time, the innocent, rotund characters of Ashley’s handwriting betray her lack of experience, made manifest by her inability to excavate in a systematic way. Since soil containing older artifacts are found under those containing more recent ones, it is a sacred tenet of archaeology that the bottoms of archaeological trenches are kept flat, so it is easy to see when a new layer of soil is uncovered. Where the bottom of Ashley’s trench should have been even and level, it was slanted and irregular, and I constantly had to stop her from continuing to dig in the deepest part of her square.

The first weekend after she became the trench supervisor of B.06, I collected her notebook to review it and make sure that missing information was recorded. When I gave it back to her on Sunday morning, she started listing the reasons why she hadn’t taken down the measurements and data left blank. I told her it was fine, and that we would just make those elements a priority today.

“I know it’s fine,” she told me. “I just think it’s funny that you went to all this trouble when the notebook was so obviously incomplete.”
I ignored the comment, attributing it to the pre-dawn, pre-nicotine time. But later that day, when I saw she was digging a deep hole in the corner of her trench, uncovering some soil of a new color and texture in that corner, I suggested she move to a higher area to determine where that new soil extended. I referred to the hallowed principles of soil layers, explained so clearly by Dr. Edward Harris and repeated like incantations in introductory archaeology courses—that older soil is buried beneath more recent soil—so we would need to remove the overlying layer before we could touch the newly uncovered layer in the deep hole where Ashley was digging.

I didn’t explain the laws of stratigraphy to Ashley, but the undertones of pedagogy must have been perceptible in my suggestion that she change her digging strategy. Suddenly Ashley was on her feet, throwing her trowel blade-first into the soil, telling me I was being condescending. She indignantly informed me she knew what to document and what not to document, and that I needed to “chill out.” Gabe played the reluctant mediator, calmly but forcefully asking her if she could please just come work in the high corner of the trench.

Ashley’s gaze locked on Gabe, her eyes burning with betrayal, and she left the trench. She didn’t come back until after our midmorning second breakfast.

The project director accompanied her on her walk back to the trench. He determined, by looking at the soil layers visible in the side of the trench, that the soil had already changed noticeably enough that we had uncovered a new soil layer without realizing it, effectively rendering moot our argument over the deep hole in the corner of the trench. Ashley filled out a new locus sheet for this initially undetected soil layer, locus 005.
But for me, at the end of the season, attempting to craft the formal, scientific summary of our loci, the boundary between locus 004 and 005 is blurred. The most meaningful distinction between them is in terms of the time before Ashley stormed away and the time after our project director intervened, especially since neither of these layers contained in situ artifacts from the Roman era. I try desperately to describe the soil layer comprising locus 005 in a way that makes clear why it has a different code name than locus 004, a decision for me impossibly entangled in memories of the dig’s social politics. “Locus 005 has a greater clay makeup than locus 004.” True enough.

After the locus sheet for 005, Ashley’s handwriting changes. It becomes more sporadic than in the earliest locus sheets. I can read in it her bitterness and anger, her reaction to our decision to remove Gabe from her trench. Both Gabe and our project director agreed that incidents like Ashley’s furious abandonment of her trench stemmed from a hormonal territoriality that might be reduced if Gabe was relocated to work elsewhere on the site.

Instead, Ashley’s animosity switched from violent and explosive to an unrelenting electric tension straining our every interaction. It was exhausting, and made me a less vigilant supervisor. I was less likely to check on excavations at her trench and less aware of what she was finding there. It made her anxious and irritable, more likely to make mistakes, like accidentally mixing pottery from different contexts during the washing process. For this reason, we were unable to tell apart the ceramics from two soil layers, and therefore unable to assign them preliminary separate dates; the date estimates for locus 005 and locus 006 are the same, and span half a millennium. Ashley’s feelings towards me also made her less likely to tell me when these mistakes occurred. Instead, I
would find out through the other area supervisors, and was forced to solve problems through the same circuitous lines of communication.

At this point, I had spent several weeks supervising Michael as he came home every day from the site with his shirt, pants, face, beard, kofiyah covered in soot. His notes had been clear and complete, he’d dug through half a meter of ash, sifting every single bucket of charred sand lifted from his trench—and perhaps most importantly given the reason for his banishment, he’d been respectful. Over a month had passed since the first weekend and the karaoke bar, a transgression that hadn’t offended me in any personal way. Particularly in comparison to Ashley’s antagonism, Michael seemed the paragon of the perfect fieldworker.

The project director and I agreed that Michael should take over the documentation for trench B.06. When I asked for Ashley’s notebook that night so I could go over it with Michael and begin the coup de trench, Ashley’s snappish, defensive questions washed over me. I knew they were some of the last she would have.

At this point in the B.06 notebook, the handwriting changes to a miscegenation of Michael’s scrawl and my own familiar lettering. Whether because of the change in leadership, or because we finally reached the buried occupation layers from the Roman period of the site’s history, the trench suddenly became an inspiring place, yielding evocative objects and enigmatic features. Both Michael and I covered the structured locus sheets with our interpretations of the findings, overflowing the preprinted available lines and eagerly annotating each other’s assessments.

Locus 010 was a layer of soil containing a remarkably large amount of iron and copper fragments—especially given that we found no metal in any of the layers above it.
Below locus 010, we uncovered a partially-preserved plaster floor in the northwest corner of the trench. It was broken by large boulders matching the size and shape of those in the portions of the exterior walls that have remained in place over the centuries. Michael and I told each other—along with the anonymous future readers of the B.06 notebook—violent stories of the wall collapsing and shattering the white plaster floor. We imagined earthquakes, desert storms, powerful forces responsible for causing the massive boulders in the wall to tumble with their crushing weight onto and into the floor below.

But we continued to dig, at the suggestion of our project director. The next locus was one of uncertainty; we called it ‘tumble’—rather than a soil layer—since it was composed entirely of the boulders and smashed fragments of boulders from the ruined walls that had fallen. Our project director felt certain that there was another floor or surface below the wrecked plaster one we had already identified. The locus sheet describing this layer of tumble ends exuberantly—“The wall continues!”

Until we found the foundation stones of the caravan station’s exterior wall, we wouldn’t be able to claim that we had excavated the trench completely. We continued to find more layers of soil. The sandy clay’s color and texture changed, barely perceptibly, as we dug, causing us to name new loci. On each locus sheet, “the wall continues past this level.” The pottery we found was older and older—exclusively from the Late Roman period and earlier—until we found a beaten-earth surface. And still the wall continued.

Below this beaten-earth surface, we found only pottery from the Early to Late Roman periods. And here the wall ended, with clear foundation stones. It seemed like this area was occupied before the construction of the walls—but we had to close the site for the season the next day, and we didn’t want to undermine the stability of the walls by
digging out their foundations. Besides, we were interested in understanding the structure, and we had recovered the artifacts from the beginning of the construction of the walls to the time when they crashed down. We had the information we needed, and it was time to refill the trench with soft, sifted sand.

Still, to really understand the meaning of these stacked living surfaces and the walls and the objects found inside them, it is vital to understand the simultaneous excavation proceeding in other trenches in the same complex. I am sitting at a table, a box of dates open in front of me. The sporadic sounds of cars driving and groups of people walking remind me that I am not the only one awake in Amman right now. I open the notebook containing all of the locus sheets from trench B.04, a square located about ten meters from B.06, and begin to translate into standard, formal language the very different story of excavation that proceeded there.

I know that, in my formal report, I will be leaving out everything about Katie’s personality. Katie was young, a freshman at a Midwestern university, planning to declare an archaeology major when she got back to school. She was excited to be excavating, but had only arrived at Bir Madhkur for the second half of the excavation season and had never held a trowel before. We had put her in charge of trench B.04, anticipating that someone with more experience would eventually be able to come over and help—but that never ended up happening.

There are several types of first-time excavators. Some are Gleefully Overzealous, digging quickly and messily, often failing to notice stratigraphic subtleties. Others are Easily Fatigued; they come to an excavation without anticipating the long hours of hard manual work in hot weather they will be expected endure. But Katie was a Social
Chatter. She dug slowly, pausing often to tell a story or to start a conversation. For me, the first-time supervisor, I wasn’t sure how to help her stay focused. When I came over to her trench, Katie took it as an invitation to start a friendly discussion. But if I tried to leave her to dig, she would find ways to talk to the fieldworkers in the nearby B.05 trench, or to play drawing games in the sand with the Bedouin workers, or would simply let her attention drift.

It didn’t help that her trench consisted almost entirely of the wreckage of previously standing walls. Tumbled, shattered boulders covered the 5 m x 5 m square, indiscernible from each other and offering nothing in the way of forensic clues as to the shape and orientation of the walls they once came from. We couldn’t see what’s going on, Katie was losing interest—we got aggressive with the blocks of stone.

With the blessing of our project director, we directed the Bedouin working with us to take large pickaxes to the stones. They carried the removed stones in wheelbarrows to other areas of the site to add to a growing miniature fenceline intended to guide hordes of imagined future tourists through the highlights of the ruins. Encouraged by the prospect of seeing underneath the indecipherable tumble, but tempered by the recognition that every rock we extracted from among the rubble could never be put back, we held our breath through each swing of the pickaxe. We inspected the damage as the dislodged irregular, angular blocks were cleared. Anticlimactically, beneath each boulder we continued to find the rough and jagged surfaces of more fallen boulders.

Until suddenly we spotted a conspicuously different stone protruding from the corner of the square. It jutted into the trench by only a few centimeters, but there was a visible right angle; the stone was the corner of a wall that teased with the promise of
entering Katie’s trench, but turned coquettishly to the south, leaving only the obvious ridge of a manmade rectangular boulder, which we called locus B.04:004—“Ashlar fit wall.” Tracing its perfect corner, the voices of past architectural designers spoke loudly into our fingertips.

More rocks were freed from their resting places, pried from where they had been wedged for centuries. Something curious emerged. It didn’t cry out, screaming with intentionality and the mark of the manmade like our shapely B.04:004, but it squeaked and rasped, conspicuously different from the natural wreckage surrounding it. Thin, flat stones the shape and size of coffee-table books were balanced on top of each other—but in a precarious way, as if the books were being made to stand on their bindings. Next to this and unstable hint of an attempted wall, there was a row of poorly-preserved foundation stones.

The broad, flat foundation stones seemed to sidle up to the teetering quasi-wall next to them. But what we noticed right away was that no stones bridged the boundary between the solid foundation blocks and the tall, precarious stack of slim stones like so many others littering the desert landscape. Drawing upon knowledge gleaned from the clumsy hands of childhood, fumbling with Lego bloks and Lincoln logs, we felt immediate visceral discomfort, the instant sensation of a lack of structural integrity. The mini-wall, already handicapped by the materials used to construct it, was surely doomed to fall if it could not draw upon the stability of the hefty wall next to it.

Trying to determine how it had stayed standing through the destructive events that created the field of broken stones around us, we looked closer at the stones of the runt
wall. Even the ones at the bottom looked nothing like the enormous, rectangular, pitted and worn foundation stones snug against them.

This sense of juxtaposed incongruity, and the attempt to forge unity out of pieces taken from disparate locations in space and time, was entirely familiar. Katie and I working together was in fact a living embodiment of it. I had arrived to Bir Madhkur at the beginning of the season, had worked in several trenches. I had experienced the messy process of smoothing out unforeseen complications in our excavation procedure and camp life. I was there for the creation of the chore list, for the realization that all of our visas were going to expire before we were supposed to leave the country. I was there as the roof transformed into a meditative space for the dig’s staff members, and as I took on greater responsibility, graduating from trench supervisor to area supervisor, my lungs swelled and expelled deep breaths of apple-flavored hookah on that rooftop as I thought, “We need to have more staff meetings.”

I said goodbye to so many of our original team members who left, having signed up only for the first four weeks of the seven-week field season. I was in one of the trucks that took them to the Amman airport, and I returned to al-Risha in the darkness to find an equal number of newcomers, including Katie, introducing themselves to each other on the roof. Without enough chairs to accommodate all of them, many of them stood in a large circle, offering digestible tidbits and factoids about their lives to faces barely distinguishable by moonlight.

What was for us quotidian and routine was for this second wave of volunteers a new experience every moment. They experienced wonder at sights which had become home for us. We forgot that we needed to explain things like chores and packing the
midmorning second breakfast to eat at the site—activities which had become mechanical muscle memory for us, but were foreign to the newcomers.

Their personalities, naturally, were different than the personalities of those who underwent the initiation process of arriving at Bir Madhkur for the first time with the rest of us. But what really impacted the last three weeks of the field season was simply the very different journey the newcomers had taken to get there. The difference between attempting to fit themselves into a preexisting milieu, rather than being one of the original progenitors of the Bir Madhkur culture both onsite and at home, created a boundary that would never be transversed. For the last three weeks of the season, the full-time team members and the three-weekers would be amiable and social with each other, but there would always be the unshakable sense that the three-weekers had ‘just arrived.’ They bonded over their shared experience of confronting the unfamiliar; we had already settled into comfortable patterns of speaking to and relating to each other by the time they joined the project—and the contrast between these experiences was never erased.

When Katie and I together contemplated these two separate walls, made of such disparate kinds of stone, pressed tightly to each other, it was easy to imagine that the walls were originally meant to function as a single one. It was also immediately clear that the skinny, unstable half was added later. But to try and understand why these stones of such different—and, to be honest, shoddier—quality would have been tacked on to the presumably imposing structure already standing, we would need to peer into the trench whose northeast corner kissed the southwest corner of Katie’s trench. There, we would find more than a few centimeters of B.04:004, the ashlar fit wall, as well as a possible
coherent explanation for these yoked walls, along with the multiple living surfaces found in Michael’s trench.

And so I turn to the final binder of locus sheets—the one that contains all of the documents from trench B.06. Over the course of creating this final technical report, I have seen the sun set and now it is rising again. Compulsively, I check my flight time on my preprinted boarding passes again. It is a deadline, and it is drawing nearer. And I have our most complicated trench—B.05—to describe.

Matt was the trench supervisor for trench B.05. He was a graduate student in art history from the Islamic period, with an interest in architecture especially. Trench B.05—although it was located in a bathhouse complex from well before the Islamic period—promised to satisfy his architectural interests. From the initial photographs of the trench, one could see three visible walls. One ran through the middle of the trench, extending north to south. One—along the south edge of the trench—emerged from the west side and another from the east, these two walls separated by an apparent doorway.

Excavating with Matt was Sam, who had come with zir spouse Alex to the project as an adventurous vacation from the corporate world. Neither Matt nor Sam had any excavation experience. Between the three of us, we had little background or special interest in Roman history. But as we began digging, it was impossible to avoid feeling the building excitement as the trench yielded artifacts no one had found anywhere else on the site yet. Thick chunks of ceramic—fragments of pipes and tiles—provided support for the initial hypothesis that we were excavating a bathhouse, and the char marks on many of these pieces implied that the water had been heated, making the theory even more compelling and convincing. Every singed, thick, sherd of pipe we found
represented reason to celebrate the apparent prescience of deciding to call the structure a bathhouse two years before—a choice which had been made based only on the size and shape of the ruins.

We kept finding more walls, seemingly every day. We located the one that barely entered Katie’s trench. The wall we had thought ran straight across the center of the trench, from north to south, turned out to be two separate walls with tumbled boulders in the doorway between them. We started uncovering what we referred ledges, although to conform with the checkboxes on the locus sheet we called them “walls.” They were really extensions from larger walls jutting out only about five inches. At the highest parts of all of the walls, where they had been the longest exposed to desert weather, pieces of plaster were peeling off easily, despite our careful attempts to excavate as cautiously as possible near the walls, and we could easily identify multiple layers of plaster within these chunks. The walls had been retreated several times, resonating with the multiple floors in Michael’s trench and the reworked wall in Katie’s trench. The bathhouse complex was fraught with these archaeological ritornellos that played to a wider theme of reuse and readaptation over time.

We should have drawn lessons for our own practice from the Romans’ commitment to flexibility and modification when Sam and Alex announced at dinner one night that they would be leaving the project. Sam had received a major promotion in New York City that would require immediate relocation from their current home in Denmark. They would be spending the weekend with us, would be buying us goodbye beers at the Movenpick in Aqaba, and would be leaving the country on Sunday morning.
We tried to compensate for the loss of Sam by assigning more Bedouin workers to help Matt. But Matt didn’t speak Arabic, and felt timid about communicating with the Bedouin. Moreover, in comparison to the rest of the men on our field team, Matt had a slighter build and effeminate mannerisms, which didn’t help him take an authoritative role in directing operations at his trench.

The Bedouin wanted to dig, they were good at digging, and they recognized that Matt was an inexperienced digger. If he left his trowel unattended, Ahmed or Mussa would almost certainly pick it up and start excavating speedily and expertly. They would fill buckets of earth almost immediately, then—with the sheepish, sly expressions of men testing their limits—they would put the buckets in Matt’s path so that he would have to be the one to empty them into the wheelbarrow, then cart the wheelbarrow away and dump the excavated soil. Minutes later, panting and soaking with sweat, Matt would call me over and frantically ask me to tell them to stop digging, to give him back his trowel, and to run the wheelbarrows.

Sometimes they would blatantly refuse. Our project director would fire them in response. For a few days, a family member—a brother, perhaps, or a father—would come in his place until they felt enough time had passed that the original worker could return. The line between hired and fired was a mutually determined one guided by the currents and channels of familial relationships and blood relations.

Significantly, it was during one of Matt’s most poignant moments of difficulty that we found the floor of the bathhouse in his trench. Two Bedouin were digging in the square, leaving Matt the hectic job of racing back and forth with our flat-tired wheelbarrow, discarding the sterile soil Ahmed and Mussa were removing with
efficiency and skill. By this point, my reaction when I saw this beginning was automatic; I walked over to Matt’s trench, expecting a breathless and helpless anecdote of how this happened today and formulating my directive in Arabic to give Matt back his trowel and let him dig.

As I opened my mouth, Ahmed swept aside some soil that revealed a flat stone beneath it. He continued to delicately brush away the gritty earth to reveal a flat, paved surface of square flagstone tiles and the telltale sheets of what was once a thin plaster coating over them. With broad, gentle sweeps, Ahmed cleared the perfectly preserved floor, leaving him standing in the middle of an expanse of geometric patterns created by the carefully chosen, treated, placed flat stones from 1600 years ago.

Mussa, meanwhile, was crouching in a section of the trench partitioned by a miniature wall that made it look like a modern-day bathtub. As Ahmed brushed away the sand to reveal the paved tiles, Mussa uncovered a square plaster block—a step into the small area he was digging in. Suddenly, his trowel hit a flat, hard surface. But there was no tiled floor, no perfect tangrammed flagstone tiles in this small area, bounded on three sides by tall walls and on one, by a shorter ledge. Instead, there was just unbroken plaster, smoothed over the stepping stone and into the basin where Mussa was kneeling. It extended up onto the walls, clean and white despite having been filled with dirt for so many centuries. Our heads were filled with images of this as a pool, filled with warm water licking the top of the gleaming stepping stone.

Seeing all of this intact plaster, knowing that behind it were so many previously applied layers of hypocaust cement and plaster and recognizing the amount of effort put into building and perfecting this place, the other trenches made perfect sense. The
preserved room in B.05, with its exquisite floor and flawless walls, corresponded in date to the plaster floor found in B.06, Michael’s trench—and made the state of devastation of that plaster floor even more tragic.

But Michael’s trench made it clear that this area had been lived in and adapted before this room was ever built. There were people living here and making use of the space in the Early to Late Roman period—people whose treading made packed earth surfaces and, judging by the pottery found in Katie’s trench, the original thick wall we found in her trench that was now reduced only to foundation stones. The entire location was remade and reworked in the Late Roman to Early Byzantine period, adapted to new purposes. As new, impressive walls went up, the old wall in Katie’s trench didn’t follow quite the right lines to be incorporated seamlessly into the bathhouse structure, so some stones were added to shift the course of the wall, creating the illusion that this wall was a planned element of the new complex. People would have continued to adjust the structure to fit their needs, applying new layers of hypocaust cement and plaster to the walls.

Imagining this, I immediately thought of countless case studies used in anthropology classes, examples of buildings that require significant upkeep and maintenance by the community. These examples are often used to advance arguments about the structure of power in societies. The idea is that in order to command the labor force required to repair these structures, someone or some group of people must have been in charge—someone either organized, respected, or feared enough that they could control a massive labor force. This is easy to imagine at a bathhouse sidled up next to a Roman fort, which would have encased so many men whose duties and authority
corresponded to a strict hierarchical ranking. On the other side of the fort was the supporting industrial complex, where we had found so many millstones and grindstones and other tools implicated in a productive mode of life. All of these structures would have created an experience for those Roman soldiers living at the site that centered on an extremely rigid chain of command and a culture promoting industriousness. This would make any anthropologist excited; we expect and hope to identify both of these circumstances at sites, around the world and through history, where people are involved in constant, organized maintenance of buildings.

Anthropologists and archaeologists also love these instances of groups of people actively remaking buildings important to them because of what they say about how humans experience the world around them. In these cases, people put time and energy into making the places we live look the same and serve the same purposes, instead of letting them fall apart or tearing them down in order to construct updated and improved buildings. In some ways, this is perhaps pragmatic and economical; it is efficient to make use of preexisting materials and structures as much as possible. But it also speaks to ideas presented by archaeologists like Paul Taçon, who claim that there are some fundamental aspects of landscape that are universally experienced in a particular way by all humans, and which shape the way we use the environment around us.

Maybe these concepts are useful at the Bir Madhkur bathhouse. I wondered if there was a reason why, when the bathhouse complex was being built, the Romans chose not to demolish the preexisting caravan station architecture, but simply to rework the walls that were there. I think about what archaeologists like Christopher Tilley or Tim Ingold, who examine the sensory experiences of people as they move through places,
might suggest. Maybe the experience of stopping at the caravan station, which would have involved stopping midway through a long journey and socializing with other wayfarers, was something which felt relevant to the experience of the bathhouse. The people passing through these trade routes would have used the caravan station as a midpoint on their journey from one intense economic interaction to another. The caravan station would have served in this trip as a waystation, rather than a destination in itself. Washing, perhaps, would have felt just as liminal and transformative as stopping for a night or two before continuing on a slow journey across the desert. The time one spent in the bathhouse would have been characterized by being between dirty and clean, similar to the caravan station interlocutors who would have been between significant trading centers. Both the caravan station and the bathhouse, too, would have been social locations, where people would have interacted with each other, sharing these moments of being mid-journey.

Thinking about it this way, it makes sense why the Romans would have tried so hard to preserve the original walls of the caravan station when building their bathhouse complex. Whether consciously or not, they were building continuity between their past experiences with the structure and their future ones. Of course, eventually, the complex would fall into disuse, filling with sand over time and accepting the crushing weight as the boulders of the walls crashed violently down.

I am sitting at a table in an apartment in Amman, Jordan, where I have finished my final site report. I am packing up my things before anyone else is awake, overwhelmed with a sense of incompleteness, of a lack of closure. Perhaps this stems from the fact that I am leaving without the normal, drawn-out goodbyes shared between people
who have spent months together. Or maybe, some elements in my final site report nag at me, begging for further discussion. After all, Michael essentially abandoned his ash pit trench to take over from Ashley, leaving little data and fewer interpretations about what he found.

But even though we’ve left the site—taken our final photographs, filled our excavated trenches with sifted sand to preserve them—the archaeology is still ongoing. There are a significant number of results we’re waiting on: analysis of the bones we recovered from the trenches, conservation efforts on the numerous coins and the possibility of reading the words and pictures on them. Matt has promised to create a three-dimensional rendering of the incredible, perfectly preserved bathhouse room in his trench. This photographic, virtual reconstruction is archaeology beyond the soil.

Other site reports need to be written. There are more field seasons of excavation to come. The site is alive and inhabited; it is an ongoing project for the Hashemite Kingdom and their dreams of an economy of ecotourists. It is an imposing, established landmark in the landscape of tents and camels, an unmoving and ancient structure that murmurs back and forth with the Bedouin village about a mile away. The transformation of the Bir Madhkur bathhouse is still ongoing. My site report describes the journeys it has undergone in the past; submitting the report to the Jordanian Department of Antiquities will impacted its present as well as influence its future. And so I save my formal, technical site report onto our project director’s thumb drive, leave it on the table, lock the door of the apartment behind me, and get into the car waiting to take me to Queen Alia International airport so I can return home.
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