



## Exploring Interpretive Trails

Sonya Atalay

To cite this article: Sonya Atalay (2015) Exploring Interpretive Trails, Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage, 2:2, 85-88, DOI: [10.1179/2051819615Z.00000000030](https://doi.org/10.1179/2051819615Z.00000000030)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1179/2051819615Z.00000000030>



© W. S. Maney & Son Ltd 2015



Published online: 18 May 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1765



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

GUEST EDITORIAL

# Exploring Interpretive Trails

SONYA ATALAY

*University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA*

Interpretive trails provide a point of intersection where archaeology, public anthropology, critical heritage studies, cultural preservation, and management all intersect and inform each other in important ways. As connective landscapes, interpretive trails share similarities with distinct archaeological sites and places, but trails are also remarkably different from single sites in important ways. Heritage trails pose their own sets of challenges and raise important questions that are of interest to scholars in diverse fields, governments at multiple levels, and a range of community members who live in, nearby, or who care about/for the places where trails pass through or connect.

To explore the issues presented in developing and studying interpretive trails, in the fall semester of 2013 I taught a graduate anthropology seminar on the topic. In developing the course I met a stumbling block — the academic literature on interpretive trails is sorely lacking. Critical and in-depth examinations of museums, heritage sites, public and community-based archaeology, memory, and commemoration are all well addressed in the literature, but little scholarly work exists that focuses on trails, either historic or contemporary, as spaces of public interpretation. I found it was difficult to put together a comprehensive set of readings for the course.

In response, I felt that graduate students in the Interpretive Trails course might best address this lack of scholarly work by conducting original research of their own related to trails. After all, each of the students in the class had a keen interest in trails and, as I soon found out, many had a specific trail in mind that they were hoping to conduct research around. Over a period of one year (September 2013–August 2014), I led a group of University of Massachusetts Anthropology graduate students in developing and carrying out interpretive trail research projects in locations around the globe – their research focuses on trails in China, British Columbia (Canada), Israel, and Massachusetts (USA). This special issue of *Journal of Community Archaeology and Heritage* focused on Interpretive Trails contains the research carried out within those four distinct graduate student research projects.

I designed the interpretive trails course to provide students with training and experience developing and conducting research. This included ensuring that they engaged with ethics review training and submission of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol for all research projects. Working as a team, students in the course utilized Google docs to collaboratively draft the IRB protocol for their projects.

The protocol went through IRB review and students collaboratively addressed routine queries from the Board and submitted a revised protocol that was approved.

Research on each trail project continued after our semester-long course ended, and our group continued to meet regularly to share updates, support each other's writing progress, and assist with any challenges that co-collaborators were facing. As research on the projects progressed, we considered various publishing venues, including an edited book volume or a website with blog posts reporting on each of the projects. In the end, we made the decision to publish this set of articles as a special edition of the *Journal of Community Archaeology and Heritage (JCAH)* because, like the *JCAH*, we all hold a strong commitment to reaching both academic and public audiences. Furthermore, all of us sincerely value both critical and practical forms of knowledge. This is something you see reflected in the articles of this special edition and in the pages of the *JCAH* more broadly.

What we found with regards to interpretive trails is that the literature that exists tends to be focused on the practical, day-to-day work surrounding trails – how physically to make trails without damaging cultural materials or best to develop signage accessible to public audiences, etc. In our Interpretive Trails seminar and throughout our discussions about trails over the course of the year in conducting this research at trail locations in various places across the globe, I consistently saw the benefits that a critical heritage scholarship and community-based research brings to both the study of trails and to the practical side of planning and managing trails. The research the contributors to this volume have conducted on trails is aimed at a wide audience and engages with trails in theoretical, critical, and practical ways.

While each article provides unique and important details and insights for the trail of focus, there are also multiple themes that repeat and weave through the articles. Each author considers how interpretive trails engage diverse communities, and the authors all consider ways that community-based research could improve existing trails or be used to plan and develop new trails. Several authors address the complexities of contested or 'dark' heritage, sustainable tourism, and nationalism. Engagement of diverse communities with archaeology professionals, state, local, and federal governments are also important points of consideration among nearly all of the articles.

This special issue begins with Erica Kowsz's article focused on research in southern British Columbia. Kowsz examines the establishment and use of public non-vehicle recreation trails, addressing questions of authority and social positioning. Access is a central question of concern here as Kowsz considers who has access to discourse and resources, who is able to participate, and who has a dominant voice and who is silenced in the process. Kowsz draws on theoretical concepts of dominant culture and historical epistemology in Canada as theorization of heritage as practice. She explores in British Columbia a question that is a central theme of many of the other papers: how do heritage trails serve as a site of continuing colonial subordination that give voice to some while simultaneously silencing others.

Themes of power, silencing, and giving voice are also central to Evan Taylor's article, which examines an interpretive trail in the City of David archaeological park – a trail which is managed by an Israeli settler group and exists, in part, in a Palestinian village in East Jerusalem. Taylor demonstrates how sites become marked with singular notions of place and belonging and considers how alternative trails and digital interventions are

offering visitors, or would-be visitors, dissonant views from critiques based both in local communities and the academy. The experience of resistance with respect to interpretive trails offers useful insights to groups facing similar challenges on how to effectively engage with trail visitors.

The theme of marginalized and under-examined pasts is central in Elena Sesma's article, in which she examines how the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association in Deerfield, Massachusetts has incorporated African American experiences into the historical interpretation of the town's house museums through the development of the African American Historic Sites Map & Guide. Sesma examines the difficulties of incorporating marginalized histories into existing museum practices and she considers how walking tours in Deerfield, and one map and guide in particular, have brought attention to slavery's role in the eighteenth century to the Connecticut River Valley.

Finally, with an emphasis on indigenous peoples in China, Ying Li's article explores how small-scale traditional trails of the Gyalrong people in Sichuan are being modified and transformed under the nation-state power. Li looks to the increased interest in 'minority' communities in China since 1990 and considers the ways such interest is impacting local development and tourism among the Gyalrong people – a Tibetan group that has long been isolated with limited outside contact. Li considers how the interaction between local Gyalrong people and nation-state government is unfolding and poses challenging questions about the future relationships of tourism among indigenous communities in China, particularly within the context of eco-museums. Her article proposes suggestions for working with diverse parties during the construction of trails and development of heritage tourism, with particular focus on the conflicts between heritage conservation and economic profit.

Also included in this special edition are two 'From the Field' pieces, both written by University of Massachusetts Amherst graduate students who were not in the Interpretive Trails course but who are involved in local community-based research projects involving trails. These 'From the Field' pieces (Elizabeth Usherwood and Virginia McLaurin) provide a glimpse into current research that is very much 'in progress', offering insights into the planning phase of trails research projects and some of the challenges, rewards, and community benefits that can result in such work.

Usherwood's piece centers on the closed mental health institution in Belchertown, Massachusetts – a town that is only a short 10-minute drive from the UMass campus. Usherwood details some of the roadblocks and bumps she and her community partners are facing on the path to 'memorializing' the closed mental institution. We see in her piece considerations of developers, the town's economic board, and budgets as they work together on a unique heritage project that aims to contribute to economic development in the town.

McLaurin provides an overview of a virtual, online trail developed in partnership with Native American communities in Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism. Her piece highlights the work involved in coordinating efforts by multiple tribal communities, each of whom have different goals and wish to highlight different aspects of their cultural heritage. A key highlight in this piece is the ongoing effort to give full control and autonomy to each Native American community while at the same time providing a cohesive online venue for the virtual trail.

As a capstone, we have also included a 'Reflection' contribution from Susan Petoskey, a community collaborator on a project which had inspired me to develop the graduate

course on interpretive trails at UMass. In 2007, I was invited to partner with the Sullivan County American Indian Council (SCAIC) in southwestern Indiana, as they worked to protect a local mound site on private property in their county. Our research together informed my work on community-based archaeology and heritage field and research methods (Atalay 2012). Because the Sullivan County project was an inspiring spark, it seemed fitting that a key member of SCAIC would have a voice in this special edition. I invited Susan Petoskey, one of the SCAIC leaders, to share her thoughts on the Waapaahsiki Siipiiwi Mound Historical Park trail their community developed and cares for. As Petoskey notes, the work of their inter-tribal community is ongoing as they now care for a 30-acre heritage park that they've developed on land leased to them from the Indiana-Michigan Power Company. The site is fully in community care (though still in private ownership) and serves as an important educational resource for Native American history and provides notable presence of Native Peoples in a region where indigenous communities were largely removed and still face forms of silencing and erasure.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue highlight the ways that critical heritage impacts contemporary heritage landscapes. They demonstrate that concerns related to critical heritage and the need for and methods of community-based research are as relevant in trails as they are in single sites. Furthermore, the articles demonstrate some interesting and exciting ways that the large-scale and multi-purposed reality of trails provide useful lessons in their own right, but they also give insights that prove to be applicable for single-location heritage sites as well. Most of the trails discussed in this special issue are contemporary creations, and provide us with interesting views into the politics and promise of heritage tourism and development. As physical trails are planned and constructed, they offer windows through which we can see, sometimes clearly, but often a bit smudged, the complex ways that archaeology erupts into the present landscape of heritage, tourism, and economic development. We can see along these trails the opportunities and careful roles that archaeologists and multiple public and civic audiences can play in their physical construction, and in the powerful messages they are meant to provide to those who build, visit, and walk along them.

## Reference

Atalay, Sonya. 2012. *Community-based Archaeology: Research with, by, and for Indigenous and Local Communities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

## Notes on contributor

Sonya Atalay is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Commonwealth Honors College, University of Massachusetts Amherst. She is also the author of *Community-Based Archaeology: Research with, by and for Indigenous and Local Communities* (2012, University of California Press) and the just-released co-edited volume *Transforming Archaeology: Activist Practices and Prospects* (Left Coast Press, 2014), co-edited with Lee Rains Clauss, Randall H. McGuire, and John R. Welch.

Correspondence to: Sonya Atalay. Email: [satalay@anthro.umass.edu](mailto:satalay@anthro.umass.edu)