

## SIFTING THROUGH THE EVIDENCE: CREATING A MULTI-VOCAL PAST

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*This paper explores the issue of presenting multiple views of the past on the Kashaya Pomo Interpretative Trail at Fort Ross in Sonoma County, California. In this exploration the paper will utilize historic, archaeological, ethnohistoric, and oral history sources. The result will be a "layered" presentation of the diverse populations that interacted at Colony Ross (1812-1841).*

Actively engaging with the public through interpretative programs is rapidly building momentum within archaeology. This momentum has for its roots, discussions of disciplinary reflexivity and multi-vocality (Hodder 1991, 1997, 1999; Preucel and Hodder 1996), the exploration of ethical responsibilities to diverse stakeholders (Watkins 2000, 2001), and even theories of practice currently add to the discourse (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979). One particular locus for discussing public interpretation is open-air museums such as Cahokia, Plymouth Plantation, Williamsburg, and Fort Ross. Currently, three issues seem to be at the fore: (1) making the past accessible to a diverse audience; (2) presenting multiple points of view; and (3) utilizing a variety of media sources to engage the public (Davis 1997).

In this paper I will first present a description of a "layered" approach. Secondly, I will briefly discuss the theoretical skeleton on which the layered approach is built. Thirdly, I will use the proposed Kashaya Pomo Interpretative Trail at Fort Ross State Historic Park in Sonoma County, California as a case study for implementing the layered approach, discussing the theoretical framework, and addressing the three issues I see as central to the interpretative programs debate. Ultimately, the goal is to present a method of interpretation that will illuminate multiple narratives, and in this case, foreground Kashaya Pomo experiences at the Ross settlement (Lightfoot et al. 1991, 1998). Unlike many alternative presentations however, I will not juxtapose Native and non-Native accounts. Rather, I will attempt to embrace the complexity of entangled lives at Fort Ross. At once a single narrative will be highlighted, a story of the Kashaya Pomo at Fort Ross, and yet others such as Russian perspectives will not be forgotten. The lives of Native Alaskan, Native Californian, and Russian people at the Ross settlement were enmeshed with one another during the 29 years the Ross settlement functioned, and the effects of those encounters are felt even today. Ignoring this would do

injustice to the diversity of experiences the fort embodies.

In order to accommodate multiple lines of evidence, as well as the multiple dimensions of space, place, and time in the presentation of Kashaya perspectives at the Ross settlement, it is first necessary to illustrate what I mean by a layered approach. The layered approach will present a methodology for actively engaging the public while demonstrating the dynamics of interpretation and most importantly, offering a robust and engaging image of life beyond the walls of Fort Ross. A layered approach for interpreting the past for contemporary audiences is firstly a way to acknowledge long- and short-term past action, how the past is a construction of the present, and the social construction of place (Basso 1996; Connerton 1989).

The first piece to the layered approach is the establishment of a location that acts as the backdrop to subsequent interpretation, in this case Fort Ross and the surrounding landscape. Second is an understanding of the various actors and groups of actors that engaged with each other as well as with the surrounding landscape. Thirdly, the ability to separate the discrete parts of this past is necessary.

Visually, the layered approach can be illustrated through multiple transparent screens, each with its own particular image and text. As one screen is added to the backdrop, or overlaid to the next, the picture changes. The initial screen is not lost in this process; on the contrary, it is foundational to the entire course of creating a robust image.

Separating out, then reintegrating the discrete components of a narrative on each separate screen carries the visitors progressively through a multifaceted story, exposing them to the complexity of the historical narrative being told as well as to the process of interpretation that created that narrative. Additionally,

the layered approach would build and build upon a visitor's cumulative experiences at the fort, progressively adding to their overall understanding of the place as they move through a landscape outside the stockade walls at Fort Ross. Presenting information in this way is not new; conceptually it is very similar to the transparencies we find in a *Gray's Anatomy* textbook. Nevertheless, I think this mode of visual representation for an interpretative trail is particularly applicable. It allows for both bias and complexity in archaeological interpretation to be presented to the public while at the same time offering these complexities and biases as integral pieces of the narrative.

A specific goal of this approach at Fort Ross is to move the visitors outside the fort walls so that they may experience the fort in an entirely different way. An effective technique for doing this will be the creation of an interpretative trail that moves the visitors around the exterior of the fort and into the surrounding landscape. The layered approach will rely heavily upon the landscape for visual queues to stimulate the visitors and their understanding of the material presented.

Indeed, the "landscape" will provide a visual but also theoretical underpinning to creating an interpretative trail at Ross. Landscape should be thought of as more than mere geography. Rather, it is a particular way to convey messages about the relationship between people and space. Tim Ingold provides an instructive example: "The landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves" (Ingold 1993:152). Having accepted the idea of landscape as existing only through human action, Keith Basso takes "landscape" one step further when he articulates a "place world" (Basso 1996:6) as locations "where-in portions of the past are brought into being," thus, "landscape" for Ingold and "sense of place" for Basso, "is not just something people know and feel, it is something people do" (Basso 1996:143). In other words, landscape "is – a story" (Ingold 1993:152) that exists precisely because of human action. It is this relationship that greatly influences and informs the layered approach.

Mary Kwas reminds us that "good interpretation inspires and excites people, opening minds to new experiences and new ideas. Good archaeological interpretation helps living people relate to the lives of people from the past" (Kwas 2000:344). For this interpretative trail to do its job, to tell the Native story at the Fort Ross settlement, the story must be tied to land, because so many Kashaya stories are created around and are signaled by the landscape. Walking

around Fort Ross with this conception of landscape in mind and the multiple histories it signals, it is clear that:

a place in the landscape is not "cut out" from the whole, either on the plane of ideas or on that of material substance. Rather, each place embodies the whole at a particular nexus within it, and in this respect is different from every other. A place owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there – to sights, sounds and indeed smells that constitute its specific ambience [Ingold 1993:155].

The goal then is to help visitors see the space that surrounds Fort Ross not as barren marine terrace or wooded lots cut through by modern roads and bounded by contemporary geopolitical lines, but as a permeable and viable entity that lives because it is remembered.

Taking this idea of landscape and the notion of a layered approach into account, interpretation along the trail will begin with a series of distinct narratives that will later be integrated to create a whole. I will briefly present these narratives, ordering them from past to present, roughly from the ground up. The first part will be an historical account, followed by an archaeological account. Thirdly, I will present ethnohistoric perspectives. Additionally, the visitor will be experiencing this narrative not from inside the fort, but standing near the end of the promontory that extends to the west of the fort.

Taking into account that the settlement of Fort Ross was established as a provisioning location, not a defensive one, passages of the text on the interpretative trail should reflect this. Von Kotzebue, a visitor to the fort in 1824, makes this clear when he refers to "Indians, who repair in considerable numbers, to the fortress, and work as day-laborers, for wages. At night, they usually remain outside the palisades" (Parkman 1997:360). This benign presentation of Russian-Native Californian interaction does not stand alone; it is contrasted with a statement from José Figueroa, who visited a nearby and associated ranch in 1834. Figueroa states, "at the time, they [the Russians] were harvesting...and they were using, for labor, besides the settlers, some Indians from the villages whom they brought usually by force" (Parkman 1997:361). Albeit brief, the point is to contrast and compare a view from within the fort with a view from without.

An archaeological perspective changes the narrative dramatically. As Lightfoot and others make explicit, the daily practices of Native people living at and around Fort Ross were highly variable, complex, and reflective of both cultural change and persistence. Lightfoot et al. (1998: 216) state, "The process of culture change appears to have been very directed as

residents created cultural innovations that ‘fit’ largely within their perceptions of what constituted proper ‘Kashaya’ or ‘Alutiiq’ behavior in the new social context.” Indeed, archaeological excavations illustrated that Kashaya and Native Alaskan peoples incorporated some aspects of the Russian worldview into their lives and excluded others. They demonstrate that the traditional and overly simplistic cultural categories cannot be maintained with any kind of certainty, and they de-center Eurocentric observations and assumptions about Indian people at Fort Ross. Culture contact, between indigenous people – broadly defined – and Russians, as well as between different groups of indigenous people, produced a multitude of responses.

The last piece to this puzzle is ethnohistorical oral traditions. In this section, visual and auditory queues are necessary. Oral traditions can and should be taken from sources such as Robert Oswalt’s *Kashaya Texts* (1964) and contemporary elders – recording oral traditions from current Kashaya elders is the focus of this season’s field school. Presenting oral traditions visually is tricky. In the case of Fort Ross, we are lucky enough to have photographs of the people who are telling the stories. Therefore, presenting the two – story and visual aid – concurrently is essential, incredibly instructive, and enlivening to the entire process of walking the interpretative trail.

Having a variety of perspectives on a single subject or site is well and good, but it still does not allow for a physical representation of these narratives. There are a number of ways to present multiple stories on an interpretative trail. The most popular is signage where the narratives are placed side by side, perhaps with historic and contemporary photographs or paintings. This is essentially an extension of what the visitor probably experienced in the preceding museum exhibit. The layered approach, on the other hand, rejects this linear presentation. Without exploring all the possibilities of modern technology, one of the most financially efficient ways to present this data in a new way is to have a kiosk, located along the trail. Within the kiosk, and facing the fort, the visitors would encounter a series of large and movable Plexiglass panels. Each panel would have an image that represents one of the pieces of the narrative being presented. The visitors, using the fort as a backdrop would be able to slide a panel so that the picture paired with the fort in both perspective and size. As the visitors looked through the panel at the fort they would also see a piece of the puzzle. And as the panel slid into place, this motion would queue an audio dialogue. Once the narration was complete the visitors have the option of leaving the first panel in place and adding a new one to

it, or sliding it out of view and replacing it with another single panel. If the former is done, one narrative is told that incorporates both panels. If the latter is done, a narrative that explains that particular panel is heard. This type of data presentation gives the visitor the opportunity to explore on his or her own, different interpretations of the fort. In this way, visitors are exposed to the variety and ambiguity that accompany historic site interpretation, and they learn that the museum is not comprised of facts or singular narratives, but multiple ones. They will better understand the complexity and labyrinth of interpretations and hopefully leave with a better, more vivid understanding of the human landscape at Fort Ross.

The goal of this paper was to present a layered approach to presenting a wide array of information at the Fort Ross State Historic Park. We might ask if the layered approach is novel or innovative. The answer is, not really. Nevertheless, it is important to connect with the public in ways that are both meaningful and exciting. As scholars creating this interpretative trail we should try not to bore our audience with particulars we might find interesting. What is important is to convey a sense of complexity, interconnectedness, and emotion. Furthermore, using a combined layered and landscape approach does not limit to the types of presentations or even organization I have offered.

For some, the past only exists in the past. For others, the past survives in the present. The utility of this essay then becomes placing these various points of view on equal footings and at the same time having them build upon each other. More importantly, the different ways of knowing inform the previous and subsequent. They are all interrelated. The interpretative trail will illustrate this process by moving visitors outside the “protective confines” of the fort. In the same way that the visitor leaves the boundedness of the walls of Fort Ross and steps into a more expansive landscape, the multiple perspectives encountered along the trail will provide yet another image of life at Fort Ross.

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