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Beyond Biological Reductionism, Ethnicity, and Vulgar Anti-Essentialism: Critical Perspectives on Race and the Practice of African-American Archaeology

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I am accepting Carol McDavid's invitation to write the inaugural "Progression" column for African-American Archaeology with a fair measure of trepidation for two reasons. First, although I believe I can recognize and appreciate a genuinely community-based African-American archaeology program when I see one (Epperson 1999), I am not currently involved in any such projects. This theory/praxis disjuncture raises the specter that any insights I might offer will be interpreted as either sanctimonious sermonizing or ad hominem attacks. That is certainly not my intention. The second source of trepidation is the current nature of A-A A . As I peruse the list of editorial staff and recent contributors, I am troubled by the extent to which this publication has become a conversation between Euro Americans about African-American Archaeology. I have no monumental new discoveries to report, and I am quite reluctant to contribute to this conversation unless I can help challenge and redefine the existing bounds of discourse.

Drawing upon the insights of the emerging field of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, et al. 1995), I would like to discuss an absolutely fundamental dilemma in the theory and practice of African Diaspora archaeology. On one hand, the bio-genetic conception of race is a demonstrable fiction, a social construction wrought under conditions of domination and resistance. On the other hand, race was, and continues to be, quite real in its social effects, both as a means of domination and as a locus of identity and resistance. Race obliviousness and naive assertions of color blindness, coupled with the continuing failure to challenge the apparent "naturalness" of whiteness, merely serve to perpetuate racism and demean the legitimate cultural and political concerns of minority descendant communities. This is the same dilemma addressed by Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutman (1996) in their recent book Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race. I submit that we need an archaeology that explicitly foregrounds the issue of race (Orser 1998, 1999; Perry 1997, 1998), challenges racism (McGhee 1998a, 1998b), acknowledges and respects the concerns of descendant minority communities (Blakey 1998a, 1998b), and addresses Maria Franklin's (1997) question "Why are there so few Black American archaeologists?".

I am in total agreement with Charles Orser's (1999:662) statement that "The failure of American historical archaeologists to address race and racism in any substantive way has served to maintain the field's tacit political conservatism" At least three related strategies have been consciously or unconsciously employed by practitioners of African-American archaeology to finesse the issue of race. The first strategy can be characterized as "biological reductionism," the tendency to view race as a static bio-genetic category, an a priori thing that explains human variation or patterning in the archaeological record (Armelagos and Goodman 1998). For example, I have previously examined how an essentialist, bio-genetic conception of "race" was deployed by the Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team (MFAT) during the earliest stages of analysis at the African Burial Ground excavations in New York City (Epperson 1996). Since race was seen as a merely bio-genetic category-separated from history, culture, and political

struggle-the descendant community had no standing to challenge the research. In fact, MFAT asserted that they were best qualified to perform the osteological research because they had the best "scientific" methodology for "racing" the recovered skeletons (Dibennardo and Taylor 1983; GSA 1993:n.p.). Fortunately, under intense community pressure, this paradigm was supplanted by a more historically and culturally sensitive approach directed by Michael Blakey of Howard University (LaRoche and Blakey 1997).

The second, and related, avoidance strategy is to depoliticize race by reducing it to "ethnicity" in a manner that equates centuries of imposed racial identity with a category such as "Italian-American identity." As Orser (1999:662) notes, "This facile understanding of race has made it possible for historical archaeologists to downplay or sidestep racism as a means of creating and upholding the social inequalities that characterize American society." According to Manning Marable (1995:186), the reduction of "race" to "ethnicity" is facilitated by the simultaneous centrality and invisibility of "whiteness" within the dominant national identity.

The third, and most insidious avoidance strategy can be characterized as vulgar anti-essentialism or race obliviousness. The most trenchant critiques of this strategy are provided by the emerging field of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw 1995:xxvi; see also Fuss 1989 and McRobbie 1997). As an outgrowth of the Critical Legal Studies movement, CRT acknowledges, analyzes, and challenges the fundamental role of the law in the construction of racial difference and the perpetuation of racial oppression in American society. As a movement comprised primarily, but not exclusively, of scholars and activists of color, Critical Race Theorists, known as "race-crits" to distinguish them from the "crits" and the "fem-crits," also believe that personal experiences of racial prejudice inform and strengthen theoretical analyses. They are therefore particularly interested in fostering and supporting the distinctive work and voices of minority scholars and insist-quite reasonably-that the victims of racial oppression should play a fundamental role in the analysis of that oppression. Some prominent race-crits include Derrick Bell (1987, 1996), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995), Lani Guinier (1994) Ian Haney López (1994, 1996), Cheryl Harris (1995), Gary Peller (1985, 1995), Marta Rose (1996), and Patricia Williams (1991, 1995). (see also Delgado and Stefanic 1993; and MacFarquhar 1996.)

The introduction of the 1995 anthology Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement explains the initial disjuncture between the Critical Legal Studies movement and the race-crits:

To be sure, these crits positioned themselves in a discourse far removed from liberalism-a certain postmodern critique of identity. Yet the upshot of their position seemed to be the same: an abiding skepticism, if not outright disdain, toward any theoretical or political project organized around the concept of race. Where classical liberalism argued that race was irrelevant to public policy, these crits argued that race simply didn't exist. The position is one that [critical race theorists] have come to call "vulgar anti-essentialism." By this we seek to capture the claims made by some critical theorists that since racial categories are not "real" or "natural" but instead socially constructed, it is theoretically and politically absurd to center race as a category of analysis or as a basis for political action. (Crenshaw, et al. 1995:xxvi).

While most race-crits emphatically reject the concept of biologically distinct races and embrace the premise that race is, indeed, socially constructed, they nonetheless argue that race is "real" "in the sense that there is a dimension and weight to the experience of being 'raced' in American society, a materiality sustained by law" (Crenshaw, et al. 1995:xxvi; see also Mukhopadhyay and Moses 1997; Harrison 1999).

The analysis of vulgar anti-essentialism is complemented by Marta Rose's (1996) analysis of "race obliviousness" in the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision that invalidated the minority-majority Eleventh Congressional District in Georgia [Miller v. Johnson, 115 Supreme Court 2475 (1995)]. Drawing upon the work of Harlon Dalton (1995), Rose views race obliviousness as a natural consequence of white privilege and notes that the "erasure of race, the invisibility of whiteness, makes a great deal of sense to those whose race privileges them in the social, political, and economic realms." (1996:1596). For most Euro-Americans, whiteness is taken as the unquestioned norm; therefore, race is either invisible or is thought to be synonymous with ethnicity. In the Miller decision, the Court majority appropriated the rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement to advance a construction of race that is antithetical to the experiences and interests of most Black Americans. While recognizing that "respect for communities defined by actual shared interests" can be a legitimate concern in Congressional redistricting, the Court asserted that "race" can never serve as "an actual shared interest" for African Americans. In the Court's construction, race is entirely discrete from "political, social, and economic interests;" therefore, the idea that Blacks might organize politically around race is "an offensive and demeaning assumption" which "embod[ies] stereotypes that treat individuals as the product of their race" (Rose 1996:1566). While African Americans have certainly been in the forefront of struggles to create a political system where race is not an impediment, the Court appropriates the moral force of the Civil Rights Movement to advance the proposition that "if race should not matter in our ideal world, then it cannot matter now." (Rose 1996:1567).

Within historical archaeology, a recent example that is relevant to the discussion of vulgar anti-essentialism and race obliviousness is provided by M. Drake Patten's paper on the politics surrounding excavation of the Foster Homesite in Charlottesville, Virginia. I am somewhat sympathetic with her position; I agree historical archaeologists need to do a better job "in our public education about race and gender as cultural constructions." On more than one occasion I have also tried to explain (somewhat unconvincingly) that "Race may not be real, but racism is." (1997:138). However, I part company with Patten when she deploys a social constructionist analysis to defuse criticism regarding the initial excavation and analysis of the site by an all-white crew. Catherine Foster, who purchased the property in 1833 and died in 1863, was enumerated as a "mulatto" on census forms. Following the Civil War the neighborhood that developed on and around the Foster property was known as "Canada," probably in reference to the haven for escaped slaves. In describing the controversy arising from excavation of the site, Patten challenges the present-day definition of Foster as an "African American" and decries the manner in which Catherine Foster was "utterly appropriated by the local community, however they might be characterized." Patten also regrets the use of the tee-shirt slogan "Ask me about African American archaeology in Charlottesville" (1977:135). However, as Theresa Singleton (1997:149) has noted, someone identified on 19th-century census forms as "mulatto" would probably self-identify today as "African American" or "multi-racial." Contrary to Patten's implication, the fact that Foster's living descendants are identified as "white" negates neither the

concerns of the African descent community nor importance of this site for African American archaeology.

One of the fundamental tenets of Critical Race Theory is the insistence that we, collectively, must allow ourselves "to know what we know" (Matsuda 1989). A common example is the issue of hate speech. We know that a white person's use of that most vicious of racist epithets is not the equivalent of a black person yelling "stupid cracker." This knowledge of social reality should be admitted and reflected in legal analysis. Therefore, a seemingly neutral law or campus code that punishes the use of all racial epithets equally, regardless of context, will, in fact, be inherently biased because it refuses to acknowledge the structural inequalities arising from racism. Therefore, it is particularly problematic when Patten asserts an equivalency between the racial identities ascribed to her and to Catherine Foster:

When the [Washington] Post condemned our project, the focus was not on the questions it raised, nor even on Catherine, but n me, on my racial identity as white. There is a certain irony to this: both Catherine Foster and I had become subject to the same external application of a category, even as our lives were temporally separated. (1997:137).

Although it was a temporary inconvenience in the context of the project, Patten's identity as a "white" person is one that confers status, privilege and power. The same cannot be said for the categories "Mulatto" or "African American."

In a chapter entitled "Beyond Racial Identity Politics: Toward a Liberation Theory for Multiracial Democracy," Manning Marable (1995:187) states that "'Race' is first and foremost an unequal relationship between social aggregates, characterized by dominant and subordinate forms of social interaction, and reinforced by intricate patterns of public discourse, power, ownership and privilege within the economic, social and political institutions of society." However, in addition to being an imposed identity, "race" can also serve as "the basis of a historical consciousness-a group's recognition of what it has witnessed and what it can anticipate in the near future." The ongoing struggle over the African Burial Ground project in New York City epitomizes these dual senses of "race."

As noted above, the African American community in New York City was able to mobilize against the original Burial Ground research paradigm, forcing a halt to the excavations in 1992 and the transferal of the primary research responsibility to Howard University. Because of the community intervention, the original racialist, a-historical, model of human variation was supplanted by a model that emphasizes genetic affinities between the burial ground population and populations of origin within Africa. While addressing the descendant community's interest in establishing ancestral origins, this maneuver has also resulted in indisputably better science. In a small-scale, University-funded pilot project, the Howard University team has been able to use DNA research to link 32 individuals in the burial ground population with cultural groups currently living in Ghana, Nigeria, Niger, Senegal, and Benin (Blakey 1998b).

Although the excavations were halted nearly seven years ago, struggle over the research, memorialization, and reinterment continue unabated. Amazingly, African-American Archaeology has taken little or no note of these struggles. The latest phase centers upon the

efforts of the descendant community to force the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) to honor the spirit and letter of the memorandum of agreement (MOA). On January 14, 1999 the World Archaeological Congress, meeting in Cape Town, South Africa, passed a resolution of concern calling upon GSA fund the full scope of research, noting that the federal government is "ethically bound to fulfill its previous agreements in keeping with the desires of the descendant community for the disposition of the site, cemetery, and study of human remains." On January 23 and April 17, 1999 the newly-formed "Friends of the African Burial Ground" convened public meetings at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City in an effort to force GSA's compliance with commitments set forth in the MOA (Harrington 1999).

One of the primary concerns is GSA's apparent unwillingness to fund the full range of genetic research set forth in the original research design and agreed to in the 1989 MOA (as amended in 1991). The connection between the scientific research and the site's cultural and spiritual significance is quite evident to the project's community supporters. For example, in the Winter, 1999 issue of Update: Newsletter of the African Burial Ground & Five Points Archaeological Projects, Barbara Muniz, Founder and President of the Black American Roots Society, writes: "I recall there were many of us who stressed the spiritual significance of this Project, only to be told how important the scientific part of this Project would be in determining genetic heredity. Now let's not change in the middle of the stream." Similarly, Brother Sayeed Samad, an African Burial Ground volunteer and community activist, writes: "One of the patterns that I've noticed over time, is that the more important an organization is to me and my 'family,' the more barriers there are to a stable budget, the more fragile the organization becomes and the more prone it is destruction." Finally, In a chapter entitled: "Reclaiming Culture: The Dialectics of Identity," Leith Mullings (1997:190) notes that "the dominant group's power to represent the history and culture of subaltern groups is an important tool in achieving and maintaining domination. Thus, the recent struggle around the African Burial Ground in New York City was based on the knowledge that those who control the interpretation of the past also have a major role in charting the future." As this article is being completed, the conflict between the GSA and the descendant community is far from resolved.

I would like to close with a plea that we be wary of the dangers of race obliviousness and naive assertions of colorblindness. Although it is valid and important, the analysis of race as a social construction should not be deployed to deny the "reality" of race, particularly for the victims of racism, nor should it be used to belittle the concerns of minority descendant communities. In conclusion, as we face the new millenium, the challenge posed by Critical Race Theorists can be stated quite simply: we must construct an African Diaspora archaeology that is simultaneously race-conscious and anti-essentialist. The way will not be easy, but the task is crucial.

Note

A subscription to "Update: Newsletter of the African Burial Ground & Five Points Archaeological Projects" can be obtained at no cost by contacting:

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