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## "Counterpunch the Devil with the Word": African American Daily Life at Alma and Riverlake Plantations, Louisiana, 1870-1940

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**Dissertation Abstract:  
"Counterpunch the Devil with the Word":  
African American Daily Life at  
Alma and Riverlake Plantations, Louisiana, 1870-1940**

**By David T. Palmer**

**Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.  
Committee chair: Laurie A. Wilkie. December 2005.**

**Abstract:**

**This dissertation is a study of the lives of African American sugar plantation workers at Alma and Riverlake plantations of Pointe Coupée Parish, Louisiana during the late 19th through early 20th century. Guided by practice theory and the contextual approach in historical archaeology, the author used evidence from archaeology, oral history and documentary history to investigate the assertion and maintenance of dignity by Alma and Riverlakes' African American employee-residents in their daily lives. These strategies have roots in the era of enslavement, and were also influenced by contemporary racial uplift programs, such as that of Booker T. Washington.**

**Evidence of strategies used were found by the author. These strategies included working odd jobs to bring in extra cash, mutual assistance of friends and relatives in need, and efforts to save money through limiting store purchases. The changes found were a decrease in the consumption of purchased canned foods and an increase in home preservation of food in canning jars. Changes in the ceramic assemblages after 1910 are also evidence of this ideology and strategy, and are a material correlate of reduced acceptance of white planter paternalism by African Americans. Another part of the daily strategy for increasing independence and making the most of constraining circumstances was producing or procuring food through gardening, animal husbandry, hunting and fishing. As evidenced in the archaeological record, and through oral history interviews, African American employee-residents of Alma and Riverlake plantations consumed a wide variety of wild and domestic plants and animals. Home production also included clothes making and mending and manufacturing toys.**

**Dignity was also asserted and maintained through other means. These included attention to personal appearance, pursuing any available educational opportunities, practicing religion, and defending life and property from assaults by whites or others.**

**The dissertation is also a study in applied methodology, in this case the need for complementary methods and data sources to research historically under- (and mis-) documented populations. The author's research design took into account the biases and silences of each of the data sources used, and the tensions between the sources.**

**Additional information is available from the author at [dpalmer@berkeley.edu](mailto:dpalmer@berkeley.edu).**

