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(dis) Owning The Emperor's Robe

Abdul-Karim Mustapha

University of Maryland-College Park

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The recent upsurge of sites across the country and the extraordinary visibility (both public and academic) of African-American Archaeology incites cause for celebration and suspicion. This year's SHA provided a desperately needed forum for queries to be heard, speculations to be made, theories to be imagined, and prospects to be declared. However, I came away with the feeling that there was no conversation.

The first words of our supposed conversation were uttered over thirty years ago, just at the height of the Black Arts Movement and many other efforts to rearrange the boundaries of intellectual objectivity and social solidarity. During those years the point of the archaeological conversation was to find things and connect them to a larger national and social conversation about the roots and contributions of Black America. The Plantation, the immediate domain of slave culture, quickly became the site of many investigations and the context for the flow of culture.

Although it is not often acknowledged, the spirit of that conversation grew out of Melville Herskovits work, for example Myth Of The Negro Past. And the crux of the influence was to restore and maintain racial dignity while (dis)owning the robe of cultural inferiority. Since then, many people have raised questions about what other people ate, what they built, how they built and used things, and the greater connections to Africa.

Somewhere between thirty years ago and 1985, we lost some sense of the point of the conversation. It was Theresa Singleton who restored the value and the need for a point to the conversation. She more or less said that an archaeologically informed study of the African-American past should include the diaspora and have multiple perspectives. African America was by and large not only an influence of a truncated colonial encounter, but a representation of the creative efforts to sustain a moral and coherent universe that was still entrenched in some sense of Africa.

Today, ten years later, we have all this behind us and Leland Ferguson to think about. The point, I think, he introduced to the conversation was to say let us talk about how America was and continues to be "Afro-canized." The point is let us not only look at how African peoples have survived the Americas, but where, when, what and how Anglo-Americans were "Afro-canized".

Shamelessly, though, the conversation is very dry. We are still caught up in the culture of poverty, conspicuous consumption and similar ill-informed interpretations. For now, the point of the conversation is can we see clearly how the emperor's robe was (dis)owned, thus leaving him naked. It may be that we have to ask, "Why isn't Mount Vernon or Monticello a piece of African American material culture?"; After all, "we helped dig the first foundation."