Some Thoughts on the Past, Present, and Future of the Archaeology of the African Diaspora

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I've felt the need to write about the future of archaeological research on African-American life for a long time, and so I welcomed the opportunity to put together this paper. Of course we should all be thinking about the future of our research, no matter what the topic we are dealing with -- it is always useful to consider the sources of our scholarship, the present state of it, and the directions it should take in order to answer the questions that remain.

Twenty years ago historical archaeology embraced the study of ethnicity. A number of researchers, including John Otto, Bob Schuyler, Leland Ferguson, Charles Fairbanks, and Jim Deetz, recommended exploration of the idea that different ethnic groups left "visible" signatures in the archaeological record. The accepted view became that searching out these signs of cultural distinction was very much in keeping with one of the basic principles of the discipline: that archaeological research on the recent past can reveal information on people otherwise ignored and even dishonored by the usual written sources of history. I feel very lucky to have been exposed to these exciting ideas as a student back in the 1970s. Of course, my excitement was mixed with a wide streak of naivete.

The goal of a lot of the field work generated from linking ethnicity and archaeology was to dig up clear material evidence of distinctive cultural traditions -- what a lot of us used to refer to as "ethnic markers."

The ground, however, has proved to be less cooperative than we expected. Even when particularly exotic items were recovered, such as Chinese stoneware storage vessels on western mining camp sites or cowrie shells at African-American habitation sites in the slave South, the resulting interpretations seem little more than a restatements of the obvious. These finds also seem trivial and irrelevant in relation to the broader context of such sites, and the important questions that we should be asking. Not only has the excavated evidence turned out to be something different than most of us expected, the contemporary world -- especially in terms of the audience for our work -- has turned out to be a very complicated place as well. Those of us studying the African-American past have come to see that there is no such thing as scholarship isolated from the world at large. In fact, this research has undergone what I see as a thorough transformation away from internally-focused issues of method and theory concerning ethnic visibility toward what Michael Blakey has defined as "a new archaeology of public engagement." Professor Blakey contends that in carrying out excavations at sites associated with African Americans, we are not just gathering new data and adding to our knowledge about the past, we are also engaged in the ongoing social discourse about the relations between European Americans and African Americans in the present. Some seek to avoid such involvement; some of
us embrace it willingly and with true enthusiasm; we all need to accept that this is where we stand, and where we should be standing.

But I also think in acknowledging this reorientation to public engagement, we also need to keep in mind the very real advances we have made in gathering and interpreting evidence. Over the past decade the field has reached a kind of critical mass in terms of the number of practitioners, the number of sites that have been, and are being, excavated, and the public visibility of the results. Many major historical attractions with an African-American presence make use of archaeological research, either directly or indirectly, and the savvy traveler has come to expect to see excavations or the results of excavation in visiting these sites. The New York African Burial Ground project served to turn up the heat in a variety of ways, especially in terms of expanding public consciousness and reminding the nation that slavery had a long history throughout the nation, not just within the plantation South.

The archaeological study of the African-American experience has fulfilled quite a bit of its early exciting promise, but I would call this fulfillment far from complete. The biggest, most frustrating shortcoming is that archaeological interpretations have had little or no impact within traditional scholarship on the African-American past. At best, there is a little bemused acknowledgement here and there, often literally in footnotes, of "intriguing finds." Has our work really been that much out on the fringe? Or is this more due to a difference in who reads, and who cites, what, and in related issues of academic turf disputes and differences in professional cultures? It is also obviously a question of how very different our sources -- essentially garbage and ruins -- are from the written record. It is hard to match up even the most interesting house lot assemblage with the power and eloquence of something like the writings of Frederick Douglass. The challenge here is first and foremost to carry through our research to completion, and to take on the task of producing effective translations of what others without Douglass' talents or opportunities left behind to inform us about their lives.

Despite the work that remains to be done, there is no need to sell our accomplishments short. What's emerged from the last quarter century of archaeological research is a view of African-American life under slavery and freedom which emphasizes active efforts by these people to control their own lives rather than to be controlled. This idea of action rather than passivity can be seen in every category in the archaeological record, revealing subtle and direct transformations of plantation housing, diet, and clothing. Dramatic discoveries of traces of African spirituality from New York City to Annapolis to Tennessee to the Gulf Coast of Texas all point to the ways that African descendents, both enslaved and free, worked to maintain and draw strength from their cultural traditions. These examples from the material record are the solid remnants of what must have been a constant set of defensive and offensive stances set against the pressures on slaves to submit, conform, and accept their legal status. This emphasis on African-American action rather than passivity is of course the same message that has come out of the last several decades of traditional historical scholarship on slavery and African-American life. It is hard to sort out whether archaeologists would be coming to these same conclusions without attention to and absorption of the work of scholars working with non-archaeological sources. I'm not sure this is even a question worth considering -- research in one field won't get very far without constant interdisciplinary communication. I do feel the archaeological record speaks loudly about the struggles for freedom and autonomy in any and all
forms possible under the vicious constraints of slavery. I also think our evidence provides ways to add nuances to the interpretation of African-American resistance, for instance in considerations of how artifacts produced by the dominate culture were appropriated and given new meaning by people of African descent.

Archaeologists have come to accept "resistance" as the key social mechanism through which African Americans in varied oppressive situations achieved some level of autonomy and some level of control over many of the details of their lives. The idea of resistance, that individuals and groups in subordinate positions were seldom if ever going to accept what was dished out to them without struggle, is one of those deceptively simple ideas that gains considerable explanatory power as one begins to explore its implications. The "official" version of history and the continued rationale for racist thought and policies is that Africans brought to the New World were savage and childlike, incapable and unworthy of full participation in of European civilization. This kind of justification, of course, masks what was really going on in terms of the constant struggle between groups contending for social power.

The concept of resistance covers a lot of territory, from outright insurrection to everyday forms of petty rebellion, ranging from direct insolence and sabotage; to "playing dumb" and working at a slow pace; to maintaining traditions and a cultural identity consciously distinct from that of those who surrounded and sought to dominate the African-American population. Resistance offers a solid and satisfying framework on which to build explanations for archaeological evidence in such basic categories as food, architecture and clothing. This framework is usually very visible with in the stories archaeologists build in studying the African-American past -- that slaves found ways to circumvent the agendas of their owners, that much energy was directed to putting something over, in big and small ways, on those supposedly in control, and that this effort served to subvert and bring about changes in the strategies and "management programs" of those supposedly with all the power and might to direct the lives of those at the low end of the social spectrum. Seeing African Americans in the past not as passive victims, but as clever adversaries always ready to explore new means to undermine their captor's plans also provides a somewhat heroic subtext to the situation. For a lot of us, this not only serves as an important interpretive stance, it also serves as a buffer easing some of the appalling emotions we encounter in studying the generations of misery associated with the African diaspora. It is a story of evil and degradation as well as perseverance, redemption, and hard-fought success, and the idea of resistance links all of the segments of the story together.

What are we going to do with what we have found and found out? Archaeology's contributions to the new evidence and new interpretations of slave life will mean little if it is not put into play within the world at large. The emerging archaeological goal of public engagement offers the best way to spread the news, and to accomplish the goal of getting the information into the hands of those who can use it in the present. The push toward public engagement is in synch with the high level of broad public interest in African-American history, an interest made manifest as well as encouraged by such popular cultural phenomena as Alex Haley's Roots, Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize, Steven Speilberg's latest blockbuster, and even Addy, the African-American entry in the phenomenally popular American Girl Dolls line of products. Addy is presented in her accompanying story books as a member of a family that escaped together from slavery to the
North. Her basic accessory kit includes a cowrie shell necklace, a silver dime (not pierced) tied up in her kerchief, a small gourd water bottle, and a banded yellowware bowl.

Why is this interest in the African-American history and culture so evident, and why does it seem to be growing stronger? From a broad point of view, it can be linked to a widespread acceptance over the last three decades of a thoroughly transformed orientation and understanding of what went on in the American past. The metaphor of the nation as a melting pot, grounded in smooth cultural assimilation, has been rejected. Only over the last generation has there been reluctant acknowledgement of the key role of social tension and conflict in our history, as opposed to the false notion of unified consensus. With this comes an equally reluctant acceptance that America will always be a multi-racial, multi-ethnic society.

To move from the sociological to the more humanistic, I also see the interest in the African-American past as linked to a growing embracing of the African diaspora as one of the Great Stories of the American nation, ranking with the Westward Expansion and Migration, for example. It is an undeniably epic story, driven by elements of human evil, racism, frailty, and all our triumphant qualities as well. What also compels us to focus on this story is that it is not at its end; we are still all immersed in it; and its conclusion, tragic or uplifting, has yet to be written.

Archaeology's role in reconstructing the story of the African diaspora is in keeping with the discipline of archaeology's well established place in the minds of the public. Our audience sees the function of archaeology to be the recovery of lost and hidden evidence about the human past, the rescue of cultural treasures, and answering, or at least attempting to answer, nagging questions about what really went on in the past. The process here is simple: the people we are interested in left behind things that we can dig up and use in talking about and writing about their lives. Each step in this process is of course incredibly complex, but it is probably the last step, a usually unstated one, that should concern us most in considering new directions in studying the African-American diaspora. Who is it that we are talking to and writing for? Who is our audience? What is the best way to conduct our exchanges with the public? How much should we follow their lead in what we research and present, how much should we seek to direct public interest along new paths, and how can we effectively navigate the middle ground between these two different approaches?

Considering these questions about how best to conduct public engagement inevitably leads to a discussion of politics. All who are involved in research on African American topics without fail become embroiled in these discussions at one level or another. There is tension and even on occasion harsh feelings in this discussion, but I have come to realize that this edginess can be a good and useful thing to the research as a whole. It makes one consider the import of every word used, and the implications of every avenue of interpretation that one chooses to explore. We do have to resist the urge to make the arguments over politics and scholarly authority the main thing, the primary reason for doing the research. The recent issue of Historical Archaeology, edited by Carol McDavid and David Babson, provides some admirable extended discussions of how to avoid this trap, and how best to balance the present with the past. The volume's contributors all demonstrate the belief that the research has direct applications to the present, and all share a commitment to direct engagement with the general public. This recognition and active promotion of the obvious strong links between past and present is certainly one of the hallmarks
of archaeological research on African-American life, and one of the reasons that so many of us have been drawn to the topic.

Among archaeologists dedicated to the study of the African-American past there remains some strong debate about where data collection and analysis ends and where public engagement begins. Research strategies, methodology, interpretations, and presentation are all ultimately of one piece. The questions we ask are defined, directly and indirectly, by the world at large, and the world at large is informed and gets its understanding of the past from researchers looking to answer these questions. The more open and circulating this process is, the better it works. Within the archaeological study of the African-American past, the process continues to evolve, with some obvious points of contention about scholarly autonomy, who has the right to control the research, and whose ethnocentric biases are the most damaging to the research's end product.

There is some obvious and heavy irony in arguing about whose voice -- the descendent community's, or the researchers -- should predominate in decisions about what to study and what to say about project results. After all, for years one of the prime allegories used in promoting and justifying archaeological work on African-American sites is that it gives voice to a people in the past who were always denied a chance to say much for themselves. There have been some notably successful projects based on intensive and ongoing community involvement from start to finish. Certainly the New York African Burial Ground, one of the most important excavations ever undertaken by historical archaeologists, would have probably gone all but unnoticed, one more thick report gathering dust on the shelf, if the local African-American community had not stepped-up and assumed a commanding role in the conduct of the project. There are other projects, also effective and successful, in which archaeologists have taken a more distanced stance in regard to community engagement. I would certainly include my own work in this category.

Let me suggest a metaphor that might be useful in considering these different styles of audience-researcher interaction -- the process by which a standing tree becomes a fine piece of furniture. Some extremely committed craftsmen do start at the very beginning, selecting specific trees to use in their work, but most leave the steps involved in harvesting, transporting, and milling raw wood into useable lumber to others. Competency and even commitment to excellence are necessary at every step of the way to achieve the desired result: a high quality final product. I want to stress that in my conception, the final product of archaeological research is not a completed site report, or even a well-scripted public slide show or museum display -- it is when the evidence and the interpretations get into general circulation, and make some contribution to the public's consciousness and wisdom about the past. In applying this arboreal metaphor to archaeology, is the researcher just the lumberjack, or does our job continue through the mill and perhaps even to the craftsman's workbench? Different situations, different institutions, and different personalities will define our duties, and define how much overlap there is between one set of hands and the next.

Like all metaphors, this trees-to-furniture scheme strips a lot of complexity away. Hopefully it doesn't trivialize the links between archaeologists and members of the public who are interested in using the past in making sense of the present. There is no reason to choose one single route, one and only one way for the various kinds of archaeologists to connect with the various
segments of the general populace who are interested in our work. It is hard to imagine an obviously significant and sensitive site like a cemetery being excavated without guidance from the local descendent community right from the start; it is also hard to imagine attracting similar interest and support for the excavation of less spectacular sites like black tenant farmers' homesteads. The latter case, if done right, has the potential to produce results as significant and intriguing as the study of a burial ground. Part of the job in studying such a site should be to package these results in ways that convey this significance to the general public.

One of the values of the distanced or "autonomous research" approach is that it encourages connections with a variety of public groupings in a variety of ways. There are lots of different segments of society who have an interest, casual or fervently engaged, in the process and results of archaeological research on sites associated with African-American history. In their recent article on the New York African Burial Ground, Cheryl LaRoche and Michael Blakey include scholars, researchers, cultural resource managers, politicians, religious leaders, community activists, and school children among the players in that great drama.

On a more general level, those involved in the conversations we seek to foster about African-American life would include the institutions that employ us, which might be museums, colleges, and government agencies, our archaeological colleagues; colleagues in other disciplines; and finally the general public in all its myriad groupings and subgroupings -- students at many different levels, descendent groups, avocationalists, tourists who come across excavations or museum exhibits in their travels, and casual readers or viewers who come across a feature in a Sunday supplement or a TV program while channel surfing. We need to cast the widest net possible in responding to the many different publics interested in our work, and we need to be ready to respond and encourage their interest to the fullest extent possible. Some of those making use of the products of our research are going to have a casual approach, perhaps only desiring a little enlightenment about the past; for others it will serve to define a vital part of their identity and the way they understand their place in the world. We should feel fulfilled in getting our work noticed and used at any level.

Continued and expanded public engagement is the one assured element of the future of archaeological research on African-American history. Much else about the course we will follow remains to be determined. One thing we should be working on is to pull together excavated evidence in comparative, integrated formats. Work throughout the western hemisphere over the last quarter century has produced massive artifact assemblages. Particularly spectacular finds are reported, through journal and newsletter publication, through meetings presentations, through the popular media, and even through word of mouth. There have been a few intensive studies of ceramics or faunal remains or reports on the biological evidence from skeletal populations, but these have been too scarce. We need to put more emphasis on bringing together research within specific site assemblages and producing more inter-site work, comparing finds, investigating overall similarities and distinctions, and even looking for, once again, the patterns evident from one evidence base to the next. It is exciting and significant to find cultural treasures -- beads, pierced coins, quartz crystals, charms, and all the rest, but we should be equally excited about putting these dazzlers into the context of everyday life, and spreading the word about the resulting broadened perspective on the lives of African Americans.
Working toward bringing together archaeological evidence within integrative frameworks should also help to overcome what Theresa Singleton and Mark Bograd have characterized as the "data rich, theory poor" state of affairs in our research. We don't need a new round of processualism, with searches for overarching explanatory laws of behavior. What we do need from theorizing is a redoubled effort at interpretations based on broad perspectives and intersecting sources that bring order and make some sense out of the evidence that we have accumulated.

I don't think we have accumulated all the evidence necessary to answer the ever-widening set of questions we seek to answer. One obvious need is to expand the types of sites being studied. Imagine for a minute a coordinated international effort, not directed by what a museum's mission statement or operating budget can support, or what site a particular federally-funded project is going to destroy. There are many times and places associated with the African-American past which have not received much sustained archaeological attention -- Central America during the Spanish Colonial period; sites occupied by runaway or maroons on the North American continent; sites in the western half of North America dating to after emancipation, sites occupied by free blacks during the antebellum years, and northern urban neighborhoods which developed during the rural to urban migrations of the early twentieth century. Sites associated with plantation slavery have always received a lot of attention, but there are some critical gaps in the coverage of this category as well. The Mississippi Delta region is practically unexplored territory, despite its central place in the story of the plantation South in the decades just preceding the Civil War. Smaller holdings, in places like East Tennessee and the colonial Northeast, would also be fertile ground for recovering perspectives on slavery away from the social and economic influence of full-scale plantations.

Developing such a list of future excavation projects may not be a practical, reality-based guide for what we should be pursuing, but it does serve a couple of other purposes. It expands our view on what we are really studying -- it is the total experience of the forced African migration to the New World and the subsequent centuries of social transformations, a process and set of events best categorized by the term "African Diaspora." We will all be better and more effective scholars if we occasionally look up from our small excavation units and think about what we are doing and discovering in light of the overall experience of African descendents across the world and throughout the last five centuries. As Charles Orser has suggested, we need to think globally, while digging locally. Slavery is an important part of the story, but it was just one step in the journey.

Beyond my musings about the globally-coordinated research effort, I have no set plan to recommend. I don't trust such overarching strategies, and I'm more at ease and trusting of the idea of the "invisible hand" of scholarly progress, the serendipitous result of a wide variety of individual researchers working on a wide variety of individual projects.

We also have to trust the enormous potential of public engagement and the public style of archaeological research. The popular interest in archaeology is one real advantage we have over traditional history. After all, few would go out of their way to peer over the shoulder of someone sitting at a microfilm reader. Archaeologists need to seize the opportunity offered by the twin public interests in archaeology and in the African-American past, and make the best use of these entry points to get out the word on what we can contribute in telling the story.
We need to stay grounded, literally, and focused on the evidence. The work is the thing -- digging has a kind of magic to it, and this is what keeps us all coming back for more. This magic is of course related to the most basic goal of archaeology -- finding neat things. There is no need to downplay this core, defining characteristic of our work. Of course we can't rely on just the spectacular finds, since true success depends on sustained effort. Fulfillment of our own goals, and fulfillment of the public's expectations of our work will come from building up the evidence, and coming up with not just interesting things, but interesting things to say about what we dig up.