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June 2008 Newsletter

African Atlantic Archaeology and Africana Studies: A Programmatic Agenda

By Akin Ogundiran¹

I. Introduction

In January 2008, Indiana University Press officially published *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora*, a 20-chapter book edited by Toyin Falola and me. The book examines aspects of African experience and the shaping of “African character” both in the spotlight and in the shadow of the Atlantic commercial revolution and its political economy from about 1500 to the 1800s. Privileging the transcripts of material evidence, as well as textual and performative sources, the book underscores the articulation of agencies/subjectivities of African-descended populations with the Atlantic economy and its sociopolitical ramifications from Africa to the Americas, Senegambia to the Swahili Coast, New England to the Southern Cone. The book is conceived as a contribution to both Historical Archaeology and Africana Studies. It benefits from the previous anthologies that have provided discrete though informative regional perspectives on the archaeology of African-descended populations in the US, West Africa, and the Caribbean (DeCorse 2001a; Havisser 1999; Singleton 1999) during the Atlantic Age. My interest here is not to summarize the book or to make a case for its scholarly merits, but to illustrate the broad intellectual agenda that *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora* belongs to. In specific terms, the book is a contribution to African Atlantic Archaeology, a specialty that is devoted to understanding cultural formations by continental

Africans and the Africans in the Diaspora during the Atlantic Age. The potential contribution of African Atlantic Archaeology to the intellectual project of Africana Studies is the subject of this essay.²

There has been a sustained interest in establishing transatlantic dialogues between archaeologists of Africa and those of the African Diaspora to explore, broadly speaking, the extent of cultural continuities and influences between Africa and the Americas (Agorsah 1996; DeCorse 1999; Goucher 1999; Posnansky 1984, 1999; Singleton 2001a). The stimulation for the possibilities of a transatlantic African archaeology has come, to a large extent, from the historical archaeologists in the Americas who are interested in interpreting the material records of the enslaved and free Africa Diaspora, and their cultural transcripts, with reference to the African cultural contexts. Africanist and Americanist archaeologists, notably Posnansky (1999) and Singleton (2001a), have identified the possibilities, problems, and challenges involved in making these connections. Christopher DeCorse (1999: 133) has addressed “the paucity of comparative data from many of the relevant parts of Africa,” perhaps prompting Kelly (2004: 220) to warn that “it is imperative to know something about the Africa that was contemporary to the populations contributing to the African Diaspora” if we hope to be able to accurately explain the formation processes and characteristics of the African Diaspora culture and its contributions to the cultures of the Americas. The dialogue has been rather one-sided, with a narrow focus on how the African heritage “shaped the material lives of Diaspora communities” (Singleton 2001a: 183). African Atlantic Archaeology seeks to broaden this dialogue through a comparative dialogic approach that links the archaeologies of Atlantic African and the Americas’ African Diaspora, and through emphasis on multi-sited transatlantic investigations on Africana cultural formations in the Atlantic Age. In socio-cultural anthropology, Melville Herskovits spearheaded

this comparative, multi-sited research approach about sixty years before George Marcus (1986, 1998) made the concept and methodology popular in the social sciences. A number of students from the UCLA-Historical Archaeology program, directed by Merrick Posnansky for many years, have designed and executed archaeological research projects that are truly transatlantic and multi-sited in research problem and objective. Such few archaeological studies have aimed, for example, to understand the continuities between Africa and its Diaspora in the matters of settlement patterns and metal technology (e.g., Agorsah 1999; Goucher 1999).

II. Africana Studies

African Atlantic Archaeology is based on the familiar, though variously contested premise: that not only do we have historical continuity between Atlantic Africa and African Diaspora but that both regions should be integrated into a unit of analysis. This idea was the mainstay of the conceptual framework proposed by African-centered scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Arthur Schomburg, and Melville Herskovits in the early twentieth century (Woodson 1936; DuBois 1939). Those foundations were later consolidated in the 1960s in the US with several African Diaspora scholar- and student-activists insisting (1) that the experience of Black peoples must be integrated into the historical narratives of the origins and development of the respective nation states in the Americas; (2) that African metaphysics, epistemology, and history must be at the center and the beginning of the study, analysis, theorizing, and interpretation of Black experience; and (3) that African Diaspora history is an integral part of continental African history (Alkalimat 2007; Holloway 1990: 16; Rojas 2007). We have since witnessed the institutionalization of Black Studies as an academic discipline in the U.S. It is estimated that there are now over 300 academic programs across the US offering undergraduate major and minor degrees, 30 of them offer MA degrees and about eight award

PhDs (Alkalimat 2007). With its origins in the US academy as Black or African-American Studies, the field has broadened and has sometimes witnessed re-christening as African and African American Studies, Africology, and African Diaspora Studies. Africana Studies is however increasingly becoming the consensus name as most programs seek to embrace the multi-faceted experience of peoples of African descent globally.

Africana or Black Studies developed as a response to two imperatives: (1) to account for the agencies and contributions of Africa-descendant populations – in existential, empirical, and theoretical terms - in the history of world civilizations; and (2) to provide intellectual framework for political and cultural movements that seek to build pan-African solidarity that will better equip Black peoples around the world for socioeconomic and political empowerment, self-affirmation, repudiation of racism and social injustice, and prevention of marginalization in the nation state and global affairs. Africana Studies is therefore the academic arm of pan-Africanism, a political and cultural phenomenon that focuses on forging solidarity and promoting unity among peoples of African descent globally (Esebebe 1982). The field is founded on the principal observation that peoples of African descent share similar challenges and often vastly related interests as agents in and products of the modern world – characterized by the processes of enslavement, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and globalization. Although most Africana Studies programs generally claim the global Africana communities as their subject, in actual epistemological practice and operational logistics, they have been far more concerned with the comprehensive study of the African-descended populations on the continent itself, North America, Caribbean, Latin America, and to a lesser extent Europe (e.g., Blakely 2001). The emphasis has also been on the impacts of the advent of the modern world on the experiences of peoples of African descent in the Atlantic world and vice versa. In recent years however,

research programs have paid attention to the experiences of Black peoples around the Indian Ocean and in the Arab World (Alpers 2000; Harris 2003).

History, Literature, and Cultural Studies (a mix of literary analysis and cultural anthropology) have dominated the production of knowledge and the discourse in Africana Studies. Currently, archaeology is at the margins of Africana Studies and has not in any significant way informed the theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical directions of the field. Instead, it has largely been receptive to the theoretical formulations coming from Cultural Anthropology and Cultural/Literary Studies. The implication is that the theoretical musings of Cultural Studies with its presentist tendencies, its rigor in close textual reading, and its seeming casual interest in empirical and evidentiary-based research are not only entrenched in Africana Studies but often serve as the basis for interpretative framework in archaeology, especially for those who subscribe to the various parlances of hybridity and constructs of creolization – concepts that are intended and have served, wrongly I believe, to stand in opposition to Africanism. The conflation of transnational analysis with Diaspora studies these days, and the poorly defined or lack of chronological frame of reference when the two concepts are used interchangeably, have also muddled our analytical categories (Clarke and Thomas 2006).

Conceptual categories that are aimed at understanding contemporary and postcolonial migrations, cultural interactions, and multicultural programs are not necessarily amenable to analyzing cultural production that came out of forced migration, bondage, enslavement, racism, and pre-industrial capitalism in the early modern period. It is true that these historical experiences are linked, after all they were all products of an evolving modernity. However, it is far fetched to graft a concept such as hybridity that, according to Pieterse (2001), denotes a “wide register of multiple identity, cross-over, pick-’n’-mix, boundary-crossing . . . matching a

world of growing migration and diaspora lives . . . everyday multiculturalism and erosion of boundaries” onto the enslaved and free Africans in North, Central and Southern Americas during the seventeenth through the third quarter of the nineteenth centuries. A theoretical formulation that is concerned with cultural mixture at the edge of a contact point produced by colonization, “where the diasporized meets the host (colonizer) in the scene of migration” is very weak in capturing those moments when the migration in question was via enslavement and the cultural mixture was mediated by unequal power relations and acute institutional racial segregation. One recognizes that the concept of hybridity, like its antecedents- syncretism, creolization, and *métissage*, has indeed served as an assault on the cultural and racial essentialist claims of all colonial /imperial protagonists. Its appeal to interculturalism and the interdependence of the colonizer and the colonized, the enslaver and the enslaved, in cultural production to create what Homi Bhabha (1995) calls the ‘Third Space of Enunciation’ offers a theoretically elegant and rhetorically nuanced perspective for the postcolony (see Mbembe 2001). But its disbelief in tradition, its lack of interest in cultural provenance, its elevation of discourse over the subject, and its insensitivity to chronologies of Black cultural production makes this postcolonial mode of representation and theorizing an epistemological cul-de-sac in Africana Studies and African Atlantic Archaeology.

As a project in transatlantic dialogue, although privileging material culture perspectives, African Atlantic Archaeology returns us to the original conception of the Black Atlantic by Robert Farris Thompson (1984). This is not merely a countercultural or Diasporic formulation, according to the truncated version found these days in most cultural studies, literary criticism, and postmodern cultural anthropology, but an Atlantic unit of analysis that illuminates the art, philosophy, and human conditions connecting Africa with the other black Atlantic worlds. It

seeks to account for the infusion of African aesthetics, traditions, and philosophy into the mainstream Americana sensibilities, and aspires to make African-descendant experience and knowledge systems the core of theorizing and explicating Africana subjectivities “as an integral part of the formation of the modern world as we know it” (Patterson and Kelly 2000: 13). In this framework, Africa is not limited to a bounded landmass or a racial category, but is a living cultural expression, a concrete idea, and an historical spirit that link through the Middle Passage, the continental Africa to the Americas.

Empirically sound results from historical research not only allow us to comprehend the continuity of African culture and politics in the Americas (e.g., Hall 2005; Heywood 2002; Holloway 2005; Lovejoy 1997; Thornton 1999) but have given us the firm ground to conceptualize and understand not only the historical origins and character of African Diaspora cultural formation but also the “africanization of the Americas” (Ogundiran and Falola 2007: 19; Philips 2005). The latter offers a superior framework for explaining the making of the Americas’ white and even Native American cultures/identities/communities in the Atlantic Age, moving us from the Creole paradigm that emphasizes the influence of European institutions on the African Diaspora to a more robust paradigm of Africana Studies. This paradigmatic view accepts European and Native American influences on African-descended populations as historical fact, while at the same time directs our attention to how aspects of African cultural ideas and ideals have permeated Euro-American culture in its very foundation (Philips 1990: 229), particularly how they “have deeply influenced art, religion, politics, philosophy, and social relations in the West” (Patterson and Kelly 31, 2001).

For sure, African-centered perspective recognizes Africa as the original homeland of the African Diaspora peoples and cultures but it does not reify or assume that Africa is the ultimate

homeland of return; it affirms an African root of African Diaspora cultures but also recognizes other roots – European and Native American – and different colonial regimes: Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, etc., in the making of African Diaspora world; and it discounts singularity in favor of diversity of African and African Diaspora cultures. It also eschews cultural authenticity and in its place affirms culture as a historical process, a work-in-progress, a moving target, and as both a contingent creation and a tradition. In this perspective, Atlantic Africa emerges not as a timeless frozen ethnography whose usefulness in the archaeology of the Diaspora lies as a supplier of ethnographic analogy to interpret African Diaspora cultures but as a place of history, that is history of modernity that can be studied jointly and comparatively with the Diaspora experience. In this sense, it is the epistemological boundaries between tradition and modernity, between Africa and African Diaspora that African Atlantic Archaeology and Africana Studies seek to erase.

The claim that Africa must be the starting point in the study of the African Diaspora is not a regression into essentialism or racial absolutism (consider the differences between Gomez 2006 and Gilroy 1993, for example). In fact, no racial absolutism is intended on the part of most scholars – white and black, men and women – who seek to place the subjectivities of peoples of African descent at the core of explicating, theorizing and understanding Africana experiences on both sides of the Atlantic. The raciality or racialization that the invocation of Africa might imply is the product, in the first instance, of a Euro-centered intellectual paradigm that invented and mobilized the instrument of race and racial purity to dominate the modern world. The goal of Africana Studies is to transcend this raciality, and to arrest its denigrating and exclusionary consequences for African and the African Diaspora cultures/knowledges/bodies. It is no wonder that its early success provided the blueprint for the intellectualization of the experiences of other

historically marginalized groups leading, for example, to the establishment of Women Studies, Native American Studies, Chicano Studies, among others, as academic units.

III. Theoretical Perspective

Africana Studies is a superior social science because of its global, comparative, eclectic, and explicit reflective approaches to humanistic and social inquiry. And, like other subfields of historical archaeology, African Atlantic Archaeology defies theoretical and methodological singularity, and shares with Africana Studies a quintessential interdisciplinarity that demands that the definition of research problems, collection of data, and interpretation must draw from an array of methodological and theoretical approaches. In fact, of all the cognate disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities, African Atlantic Archaeology may be the one closest to fulfilling the promise of Africana Studies in terms of versatility and agility to cross disciplinary boundaries. Like other branches of Historical Archaeology, it occupies the interstices between history and anthropology, and at the same time subsumes both. It is an archaeological project directed at making contributions to the historiography and to the behavioral science of Africana Studies. This, arguably, makes cultural history the most rewarding framework for conceptualizing the archaeology of transatlantic Africana archaeology; a framework in which political, economic, and social relations are seen as fields of cultural practice, not determinants of culture (Hunt 1989). In addition, it demands that we use our evidentiary base – material culture, textual sources (oral and written), and performative genres (e.g., gestures, festivals) – to explore the long- and short-term sociopolitical interests, invention and representation of social differences, as well as the values and thoughts of our subjects. As an illustration, the excavations of African burial grounds and graves throughout the Americas offer rich opportunities to explore

African burial practices, funerary rites, and the beliefs associated with death, afterlife, and the spirit world (Jamieson 1995). However, we cannot stop there. We also have to investigate how burial practices and beliefs about death, living, and afterlife were organized, especially in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to shape quintessential African, enslaved moral idioms that challenged and transcended the dominant mores of the planters and colonial society. As archaeological excavations all over the Americas have shown, it was the material vestiges of sacrificial rites that defined the character of African burial practices in the seventeenth through the nineteenth century. It is here that archaeologists may hope to learn more about the moral and political discourses that these sacrifices of foodstuff, animals, beads, mirrors, pipes, cowries, coins, etc., articulated vis-à-vis the material conditions of enslaved Africans in Colonial America.

What theories are amenable to African Atlantic Archaeology? This is the central question that underlies a discussion forum on African Diaspora Archaeology organized by Christopher Fennell at the 2007 Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) conference in Colonial Williamsburg. The forum, titled *Research Designs for Atlantic Africa and African Diaspora Archaeologies*, sought to determine the level and forms of consensus and difference among archaeologists on theoretical constructs and interpretative frameworks for comparative studies of African Diaspora sites and the Atlantic Age sites in Africa. Participants at the forum – archaeologists of Africa and those of the Diaspora – differ on the definition and scope of terminologies and concepts – colonialism, modernity, empire, etc. – that are often used in the two parts of the world, and they were well aware of the challenges for bridging those differences before meaningful transatlantic dialogues could be undertaken. Whereas a very small minority implies that such differences are insurmountable, it appears that most were optimistic that we

have already begun closing the gaps. The majority of the participants at the forum (including myself) proposed that collaborative work such as pioneered by the UCLA Historical Archaeology program in Coastal West Africa and the Caribbean need to be expanded to include West and Central African hinterlands where the majority of enslaved Africans originated from, and that archaeologists on both sides of the Atlantic should ask relevant questions of each other's data. There also appears to be a consensus that we must jettison theoretical fads that seek to discover one-size-fits-all approach to theorizing in Atlantic Africa/African Diaspora archaeology. Different combinations of practice theory, feminist theory, critical theory, neo-Marxist theories, theories of ethnicity and racialization, critical race theory, resistance, double-consciousness, ethnogenesis, world systems, etc., may be relevant to uncovering the past dynamics of Atlantic African and African Diaspora cultural history, but they are not sufficient. We must immerse ourselves, as scholars, in the historical and cultural experience of African subjects, and rethink and unpack the Western social science epistemology with its often violent terminologies that reduce African social organizations to tribes and its cultural innovations to creolization (see Wallerstein 2001).

The 2007 SHA forum was part of the expanding, multi-centered networks of African Atlantic Archaeology initiative. This initiative demands that the metanarratives of social sciences be infused with African systems of thought, idioms, self reflection, praxis, and historical sensibilities in order to achieve a contextual understanding of the Africana cultural meanings, agency, and subjectivities. It calls for inter-cultural and cross-cultural interpretations that derive from the internal logic and meanings of the subject communities so that we can have a robust understanding of those moments, contexts, and processes, be it burial practices, domestic space, landscape, middens, shrines, foodways, or workshops where Africanness was engaged in the

homeland and in the new land to forge social relations, family, identities, race, class, gender, power, hierarchies, consumption, resistance, and aesthetics.

A contextual approach that seeks to uncover how the material world is embodied in everyday practices, and that integrate practice with political economy is likely better placed to illuminate how the cultural capital of the everyday material world – ceramics, bottles, buttons, cowries, beads, cloth, metal, and the landscape - not only served as symbolic and practical resources for accessing power, harnessing authority, producing meanings, constructing social differences, and engaging in social reproduction but also as resources for social contestation within and across different fields of social action. The contextual approach, with its potentials for “communicative understanding of social action” (Ulin 2001: 19), also gives us the framework to access both the discursive and non-discursive elements of Africanity that permeates the intergenerational cultural heritage of the Diaspora, and that are transcribed on and embodied in material culture and the social spaces of Atlantic African communities, the enslaved populations, and the colonial landscape.

In order to access these discursive and non-discursive dimensions of Africana experiences, the descendant communities have important roles to play on both sides of the Atlantic (LaRoche and Blakey 1997; McDavid 1997). This has to be pursued beyond oral information serving as background to archaeological research, as a haphazard afterthought, or as a political correct thing to do. Integrating the knowledge espoused by these communities into the design of research methods, formulation of research questions and interpretation will go a long way in the intellectual nourishment of archaeological programs. This involves developing a cultural historical methodology that helps us, in the words of Bassey Andah (1990: 2), “descend into the burrow of Africa’s (and African Diaspora’s) invisible silent times, persons, places, and

things . . . where one can truly examine African(a) relationships with history in *all* its textual manifestation.” The message of this quest for an Africana vernacular mode of knowledge is: while it is true that we need different methodologies to analyze pottery and poetry, we do not need different intellectual spaces to do so.

Let me give an example. In my archaeological investigations at the abandoned seventeenth century settlement of Osogbo which is now the most sacred site worldwide of Osun, patron deity of Osogbo and a Yoruba goddess of femininity, motherhood and wealth, it would have been unwise to approach the settlement and cultural history of early Osogbo based on stratigraphic excavations and analysis of artifacts alone. The rituals and mythologies associated with Osun have been invaluable to my investigation, not as secondary sources to the primary archaeological data but as an integral part of the conceptualization of research problems and interpretations. We now know that this small 17th century settlement of Osogbo was born in the shadow of the Atlantic Age; and that Osun, this truly transatlantic deity, developed around the same period as part of the ruptures that engulfed Yoruba hinterland as a result of the region’s entanglement in the Atlantic Commercial Revolutions (Ogundiran 2008). Those ruptures significantly transformed concepts of wealth, gender, personhood, and cosmology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and are now the subject of ongoing investigations (Ogundiran 2007).

It may be a cumbersome task for one person to master the intricate cultural landscape of a sacred grove, the mythologies and biographies of the gods and goddesses who reside in its inner recesses, the rituals and festivals associated with these deities, the arts, the archaeology of the settlement-turned-grove (the pottery, bones, imports, settlement geography etc.), the Yoruba Ifa literary corpus with its densely rich metaphysics, the oral traditions, and even written texts.

These eclectic bodies of knowledge and methodologies do not fit into one discipline but mastering most, if not all, of these must be the prerequisite for studying the cultural history of a people, a community, or even a civilization – especially of African descent anywhere – once written off as people without history. It is then that we stand a better chance of situating our materialist evidence in the more accurate way of life, values, anxieties, and the processes of self representation and interior meanings articulated/intended by our subjects. This would help fill the gap between “what history is supposed to represent and its distance from such representation” (Goyal 2003: 28), and thereby create alternative histories that empower historically marginalized groups on both sides of the Atlantic (LaRoche and Blakey 1997; McDavid 1997; Schmidt and Patterson 1995). Only then would we be able to move African Atlantic Archaeology within the vision of Africana Studies and develop an historical archaeology that is emancipatory and truly sensitive to the global Africana experience.

IV. African Atlantic Archaeology as an African-Atlantic Dialogue: A Comparative Framework

African Atlantic Archaeology is ultimately an exercise in comparative study, but this is an exercise that seeks to transcend the epistemologies of disciplinary, intellectual, and political boundaries. It is also one that seeks to connect units of African subjectivities at the regional, circum-Atlantic, and transatlantic levels, to examine their differences and similarities, as well as their transcultural relations in order to better explain the subject-formation processes of African-descended populations on both sides of the Atlantic since the early modern period. Several archaeological studies in recent years have intensified efforts in “atlanticizing” the archaeology of Atlantic Age Africa (especially in West, Central, Southern, and Eastern parts of the continents) by framing research questions in ways that explore how a particular context,

community, or phenomenon was being affected by the broader socioeconomic dynamics of the period (e.g., DeCorse 2001a, 2001b; Monroe 2003; Stahl 2001, to cite few examples from a rich body of scholarship in West Africa alone). These studies focus on the impacts of Atlantic economy on the shaping of African quotidian lives with emphasis on consumption and production nexus, slavery institutions, household formation, settlement patterns, cultural practices, defensive mechanisms, and sociopolitical organizations. Longitudinal approaches in the archaeology of states and societies from Senegambia to the Swahili states reveal the nature of culture change and sociopolitical transformations, the intersections of African societies in pre-Atlantic world systems through the trans-Saharan and the Indian Ocean commercial networks, how the Atlantic encounters were mediated by these pre-existing world economic systems and how the cultural production from the sixteenth or seventeenth century onward was impacted by the Atlantic economy.

The study of African Diaspora in general, and archaeological approaches to the understanding of African Diaspora cultural formation and sociopolitical trajectories in particular, are foundationally influenced by the ways scholars perceive, construct, or interpret the formation of the African Diaspora identities in the Americas. The archaeological approaches to the understanding of African Diaspora identities have for the most part focused narrowly on the supposed continuity of African stylistic and affective cultural elements, equivalent to Leland Ferguson's (1992) cultural lexicon (formal properties of artifacts and cultural contexts: e.g., ceramic and architectural decorations/forms) and grammar (e.g., the social use of ceramics and social space). Further, the study of African Diaspora identities is generally taken to be synonymous with ethnic formation and the formation of distinct African Diaspora cultures. This perspective tends to be predicated on the extent that African ethnic/racial markers are perceived

or calculated to have been retained in the stylistic (lexicon) and affective (grammar) aspects of the material culture. In addition, the level of such retention is often measured against the degree and pattern of interaction between Africans (usually the enslaved) and the other populations in the New World – European, Indian, etc. Based on this calculation, the extent to which the material records deviate from the reified African-based artifacts and motifs is used to assess the degree to which the African population is creolized (e.g., Ferguson 1992). With this scheme, it is not surprising that the second generation Africans in the Americas are usually described *a priori* in the literature as Creole and therefore un-African as if to say their birthplace outside of Africa, the passing of time, and the use of European goods and adoption of aspects of other cultural practices effectively erased/diminished some kind of static African cultural, symbolic, and technological knowledge brought from Africa.

If we were to follow the rationale of Creolization to its logical end, the eighteenth-century Western Africans (especially on the Coast) who used imported European ceramics to eat pounded yam; spoke and wrote European languages and their variants; sometimes lived in European-imported brick houses; smoked tobacco pipes imported from the Netherlands, England, and Scotland; sometimes adorned their bodies with European attires; and even received baptism and self-identified as Christians, would all be un-Africans (for examples on the cultural production that ensued from African-European interactions in Western Africa, see Northrup 2002). Or they were all Creoles! Thankfully, Africanist archaeologists working in the contact zones of West Africa have effectively refuted any characterization that would suggest that those Western Africans “lost” their Africanity for engaging in one of the most creative inter-cultural translations in the Atlantic Basin (e.g., DeCorse 2001b). We have long learnt that the spirit of “innovation, adaptation, reinterpretation, and conservatism” (Kelly 2001: 88) that characterized

the cultural production and living experience of African populations in the Americas also defined the cultural history in Atlantic Africa. In fact, those social actors in Atlantic Africa ontologically viewed tradition as a process, as a product of adaptability to and manipulation of the ever-shifting social relations and material conditions. Archaeology, travel accounts, ship logs, and social memory tell us that Atlantic Africans soaked up new lexicons not only to express old cultural grammar but also to create new grammars. It may be enlightening to us now that the post-modern scholar has discovered that identity and culture are fluid relations across multiple interacting planes (Seigel 2005: 62). However, those ancestors, whether in Africa or in the Americas, never thought or lived otherwise. They were never tired of using the diversity of the world to define the African self, community, and tradition.

It is for this reason that African Atlantic Archaeology should avoid the well-trodden and too familiar paths of debates about the African-ness or unAfrican-ness of particular classes or types of artifacts in Colonial Americas be they colonoware or tobacco pipes. Instead, it should focus on the character of the presence of African populations (Perry and Paynter 1999: 300). In addition, it should emphasize the contexts in which enslaved and free Africans enacted history and acted out their subjectivities in religion, beliefs, rituals, technology, work, domestic sphere, plantation system, political struggle, resistance, rebellion, and the quest for citizenship among others. African Atlantic Archaeology shares in the view that we need to develop a framework for studying the formation of African Diaspora cultures and identities that considers the various critical factors – racialization, racism, class, plantation systems, colonial regime, master-slave interactions, the degree of autonomy and conditions of freedom and bondage, among others.

The book that inspired this essay, *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the Africa Diaspora*, engages some of the themes or topics that are relevant to African Atlantic comparisons:

- Africa's entanglement in the Atlantic economy and impacts on the transformations of identities and cultural practices in Atlantic Africa; as well as the construction of African identities and cultures in the Diaspora.
- The construction of social differences based on race, racism, class, ethnicity, gender.
- Technology, exchange, and market economy as sites of cultural negotiation between Africans and Europeans in Atlantic Africa and in the Americas.
- The transplantation of core African cultures, and the interactions among those African cultures in the making of African Diaspora identities and social discourses, such as the contribution of the private, *instrumental* symbolism and the public, *emblematic* symbolism of BaKongo religious beliefs to the formation of African Diaspora cultures in North America, the Caribbean, and South America between the late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.
- The rituals, symbolism, beliefs, and knowledge systems embedded in the everyday material world on both sides of the Atlantic.
- The inter-group and inter-cultural relations born out of new contacts, movements, and institutions facilitated by the incidence of the Atlantic Age commercial revolutions.
- The construction of colonial subjectivities and the struggle for freedom and citizenship in the African Atlantic world.
- The impacts of Industrial Revolution and massive/global circulation of commodities of common origins on cultural production at the local levels.

- The strategies, goals, and embodied discourses of resistance against enslavement, slavery, and colonization through rebellion, maroonage, and direct confrontation.
- The parallels and convergences in the African (e.g., Old Oyo and Asante) and European (e.g., English and Portuguese) models of imperialism and political systems in the Atlantic Basin.
- The royalist and republican models of governance that African political entrepreneurs, freedom fighters, and maroons developed in Atlantic Africa and the Diaspora to cope with, take control of, or to transcend the political economic conditions of the Atlantic Age.
- The place of knowledge, skills, gender, and age in the construction of authority and how one or a combination of two or more of these prefigured the formation and institutionalization of social hierarchies within the Atlantic African and the African Diaspora communities.
- How ports and ‘port cities’ served as the crucible for developing African-centered modernities in the Atlantic Age and the role they played in the formation of new political entrepreneurs, classes, identities, consumption patterns, sociopolitical visions, ideas of personhood, community, and self-realization.
- The social practice of archaeology of African-descended population as a study of living traditions, and with a commitment to public education and inclusiveness of Africana communities in research design and interpretation.

There are challenges to realizing the comparative, transatlantic, and pan-African objectives of African Atlantic Archaeology but these are not insurmountable. It is true that different political and intellectual priorities have, for the most part, underwritten (and continue to

underwrite) African archaeology and the African Diaspora archaeology. Likewise, the nature of archaeological data in many parts of the African Atlantic World is uneven: between the coastal and the far hinterlands, and between the US/Anglo-Caribbean and the rest of the Americas. Despite the importance of Haiti to the formation of African Diaspora Studies, the archaeology of slavery, revolution, and of the travails and triumph of post-revolution in that first truly free nation in the Western Hemisphere is almost non-existent. And, the archaeology of the African Diaspora in Cuba is at a nascent stage (Singleton 2001b), although Cuba has a lively African cultural presence that has been the subject of several outstanding books on Afro-Cuban religious expressions and innovations, and their sociopolitical and political economic implications for modern Cuba and the Western hemisphere. The near absence of Haiti, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, among others, in the archaeology of African Diaspora reflects the marginalization of archaeology in the national intellectual enterprise of those countries, and also the political economy of ambivalent relations between the US and some of its southern neighbors. Across Africa, archaeology is for the most part reliant on the intellectual and material resources of the Global North. For this reason, the research agenda of African Atlantic Archaeology may not always be compatible with the prevailing mode and priorities of archaeological inquiry in those countries who invest in the production of archaeological knowledge on the continent. Despite all of these, several archaeological investigations in West Africa and Southern Africa especially are increasingly sensitive to issues of Atlantic entanglements of African societies since ca. 1500s, and comparative analysis of African Diaspora sites and material culture is increasingly being undertaken.

The archaeology of African Atlantic broadens the commitment of historical archaeology to the study of the modern world. In the spirit of Africana Studies, it challenges the

epistemological practice of separating African history from the history of its Diaspora, and highlights the potentials of collaboration among archaeologists across the Atlantic in the onerous task of understanding the place of Africa-descendant populations in the development of the modern world. Moreover, the comparative dynamics of the archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora is a departure from the fragmented and discontinuous narratives that compete for attention these days in cultural studies, and segments of Africana Studies and anthropology. The investment of some branches of those fields in theorizing contemporary race and racialization, identity, power, gender, and class in postcolonial globalized communities could find the rich insights and longer-term perspectives of transatlantic archaeology useful in understanding how the peoples of African descent constructed their subjectivities in specific localities and communities in the past 500 years. As determined part of the global and modern, the African Atlantic subjectivities have been shaped by the rising tides of globalization – circulation of peoples and goods, consumption and production, imperialism and colonization, production of racism and racialized order, slavery and other forms of labor exploitation before postcolonial and its transnational explosion (Clarke and Thomas 2006; Lao-Montes 2007). Drawing from the pan-African epistemology and metaphysics of Africana Studies, African Atlantic Archaeology is well positioned to ground our understanding of this new phase of globalization and the increasing assertiveness of global Africanity in long-term history, preferably in cultural history.

Notes

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2. More elaborate discussion of some of the topics covered here will be found in *Archaeology of Atlantic Africa and the African Diaspora* (Indiana University Press, 2007). Friends and colleagues, Toyin Falola, Neil Norman, Lea K. Ogundiran, and Paula Saunders offered helpful comments on the earlier drafts of this essay, but the usual disclaimer applies: I alone bear responsibility for its contents.

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