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## Seizing Intellectual Power: The Dialogue at the New York African Burial Ground

### ABSTRACT

The New York African Burial Ground Project embodies the problems, concerns, and goals of contemporary African-American and urban archaeology. The project at once has informed and has been informed by the ever-watchful African Americans and New York public. It is a public that understands that the hypothetical and theoretical constructs that guide research are not value-free and are often, in fact, politically charged. An ongoing dialogue between the concerned community, the federal steering committee, the federal government, and the archaeological community has proved difficult but ultimately productive. The project has an Office of Public Education and Interpretation which informs the public through a newsletter, educators' conferences, and laboratory tours. The public, largely students, attends laboratory tours which often provide initial exposure to archaeology and physical anthropology. Much of this public involvement, however, was driven by angry public reaction to the excavation of a site of both historical prominence and spiritual significance.

### Introduction

Excavation of the New York African Burial Ground has brought scholars, academicians, researchers, cultural resource managers, politicians, religious leaders, community activists, school children, and the general public together in a complex and often contentious philosophical and ideological relationship. The dynamics of the relationship and the shape of the project have been determined to a large extent by the relentless determination of the African-American descendant community to exercise control over the handling and disposition of the physical remains and artifacts of their ancestors. This relentless determination also ensured that the spiritual aspects of the site would not be lost in the face of scientific inquiry (Laura 1992; S&S Reporting 1993). Excavation of the African Burial Ground has global and universal implications which tran-

scend urban archaeology, physical anthropology, or the concerns of any one group.

### Background

When the United States General Services Administration (GSA) contracted for the construction of a 34-story office building at Broadway, Duane, Elk, and Reade streets, New York City, on a site that historical maps indicated had been an 18th-century "Negroes Burying Ground" (Figure 1), it did not anticipate the storm of controversy that lay buried and moribund beneath nearly 30 ft. of fill. The cemetery, which was renamed the African Burial Ground in 1993 (Figure 2; Landmarks 1992), dates from before 1712 until 1794 (Howard University and John Milner Associates [HJUMA] 1993), and as the nation's earliest and largest African burial ground, holds great interest for anthropologists and historians as well as for the descendant communities. Although historians had long known of the African Burial Ground, the rediscovery was a revelation that struck a deep chord among many people of African descent in New York (Harrington 1993:33).



FIGURE 1. Detail of "A Plan of the City of New York from an Actual Survey," by Maerschalck, 1755. This is one of the few historic maps which specifically delineates the Burial Ground although the ravine and pertinent topography are absent. The palisades and the blockhouses for cannons are also shown. (Courtesy of the New York Historical Society, New York.)

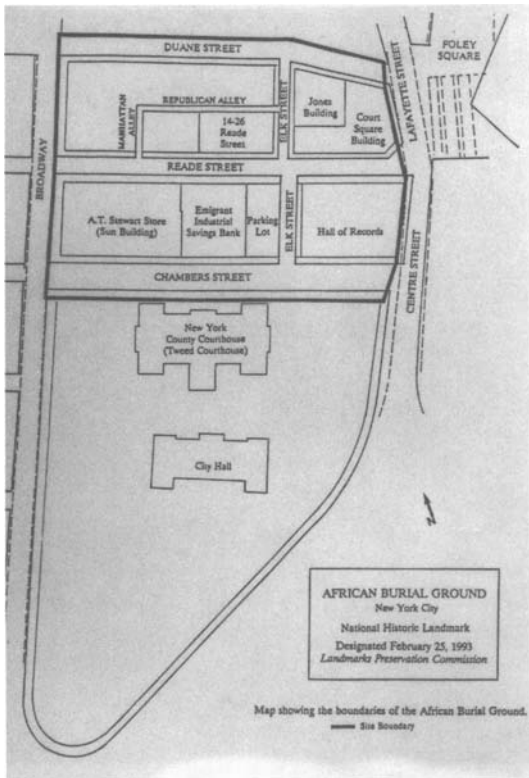


FIGURE 2. Map of lower Manhattan, outlining the original five- to six-acre boundaries of the African Burial Ground. (Reprinted with permission from National Historic Landmark Designation for the African Burial Ground, New York, February 1993.)

Excavations of the African Burial Ground began in the summer of 1991 and continued through July 1992. Early projections indicated that 50 burials would be recovered from an undisturbed area beneath Manhattan and Republican Alleys (Rutsch 1992:12). More than 400 burials were eventually disinterred from what was once the six-acre burial ground before a collaborative effort among influential and determined African Americans, and others, combined to halt excavation, take moral responsibility, and seize intellectual power.

#### Activism and the African Burial Ground

As chairperson of the Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, Congressman Gus

Savage brought the influence and power of the U.S. Congress to challenge the GSA. Allocation of building funds for the federal government was controlled by this subcommittee, and it was Congressman Savage's gavel that signaled the end of the excavation (Finder 1992). New York City Mayor David Dinkins combined with Congressman Savage to bring considerable political weight to bear upon the project. New York State Senator David Paterson, 29th District Member, used his influence to form the Task Force for the Oversight of the African Burial Ground (Committee on Public Works and Transportation [CPWT] 1992; Paterson 1995). This task force, many members of which later served on the federal steering committee, was originally composed of concerned citizens who monitored pertinent activities and events that surrounded the site. Peggy King Jorde, Mayor Dinkins's Liaison for the Foley Square Project, and the New York City Landmarks Commission contributed municipal power and were largely responsible for alerting and updating the public about the burial ground (CPWT 1992; Jorde et al. 1993:6).

Other African Americans were also uniquely positioned for a collaborative "power play" that changed the course and direction of the project. Journalists brought the power of the press. The late jazz violinist Noel Pointer led an organization of artists. Local New York clergy members led a committee of religious leaders. Architects, lawyers, and scores of concerned citizens, many of whom represented institutions which were dedicated to taking responsibility for the spiritual, physical, and intellectual control of the site, contributed a community activism that forced the GSA to stop the excavations, alter building plans, and change the composition and direction of the professional leadership of the project (Harrington 1993:30). In the end, power was also wrested from the government by individual elderly African Americans, who understood, through life experience, the false hope of rhetoric and the emptiness of promises (Figure 3).

A team led by Michael Blakey of Howard University brought the final necessary component, intellectual power and technical expertise (HUJMA 1993). The research team based at

Howard University began presenting its proposal to direct the site's analysis in April 1992 (Blakey 1992a, 1992b). By that time, it was apparent that no contract had been let for analysis and that the research design developed by Historic Conservation and Interpretation, Inc. (HCI), the original cultural resource management firm hired to excavate the site, (revised in March of 1992) had been rejected by review agencies. The original research design of approximately 12 pages (Rutsch 1992) had devoted two pages to the site's African or African-American bioarchaeology, and it gave virtually no substantive discussion of New York's black history. The limited approach of the initial research design underestimated the enormous analytic value of the cemetery site.

In June 1992, negotiations were taking place between Blakey as Howard University's representative and Daniel G. Roberts of John Milner Associates (JMA). JMA was in the initial phases of replacing HCI, which was having difficulty administering a project of this magnitude (Cook 1993). By submitting a more appropriate research design Howard University and JMA simultaneously shared with the community and GSA the potential value of anthropological research which could at least be known, and, at best, might be retrieved.

By July 1992, after a constant barrage of petitions, angry rhetoric and community dissension, congressional hearings, professional meetings, lobbying, and political action, leadership and control of the entire project was eventually awarded to more sympathetic institutions with greater experience and which were better developed for research of this kind. The ancestral remains were subsequently sent to the Cobb Biological Anthropology Laboratory, Howard University, Washington, DC (Figure 4), and placed under the care and direction of Michael Blakey as scientific director.

Howard University has engaged a national and international team of Africanist and African-Americanist scholars for archaeological and historical analysis. JMA established an office in



FIGURE 3. Protestors gathered for one of the many rallies concerning the excavation of the African Burial Ground. The \$3 million refers to monies allocated by Congress for memorialization. (Photo by Richard Brown.)

New York City and is assisting Howard University with laboratory processing and conservation of artifacts. JMA, Blakey, and Lesley Rankin-Hill had worked together on the First African Baptist Church Cemetery project in Philadelphia, in which they had facilitated reburial of 140 skeletons of African Americans (Angel et al. 1987; Parrington and Roberts 1990; Rankin-Hill 1990; Blakey et al. 1994). Each had experience in public archaeology and community consultation. Furthermore, within the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and the World Archaeological Congress, Blakey had been deeply involved in the development of position statements on repatriation issues of indigenous peoples. For several previous years he had been working with an AAA panel that would propose an anthropology of "public engagement" (Foreman 1994).

### Research Questions

The research design (HJMA 1993) specifies three major research questions about the people buried at the site: what are the origins of the population, what was their physical quality of life, and what can the site reveal about the biological and cultural transition from African to African-American identities? In 1995, the

project's specialists added the examination of "modes of resistance" as a fourth major question. The methods employed to answer these questions are both anthropological and multidisciplinary. Molecular genetics, bone chemistry, skeletal biology, history and archaeology (American and African), ethnology, conservation, and African art history represent the range of fields within which this work, now underway, is concerned.

The African presence in colonial New York is approached from an African diasporic perspective, taking into account the African societies from which most of the population is derived and placing New York within the context of the broader American diaspora. The scientific approach is also biocultural and biohistorical. It examines the historical interactions of biology and culture such that data on each inform the other and, most importantly, such that human biology is interpreted within historically-specific sociocultural contexts.

The significance of the site, according to the research design, should be understood in relation to the "vindicationist" effort (Schomburg 1929) and the critical intellectual, educational, and political concerns of the African-American community. This comprehensive research plan therefore integrates the most contemporary scientific approaches and African-American intellectual traditions. The design was developed in systematic consultation with representatives of the descendant community and the anthropological community, following the African-American tradition of scholar activism as well as recent anthropological approaches to "public engagement." By acting on an interpretation of the AAA Statement on Ethics and Professional Responsibility and in consistence with the World Archaeological Congress's First Code of Ethics, the project's new leadership adhered to the right of the descendant community to accept, modify, or reject the research design. The design was approved by the federal steering committee, with some modification, and was subsequently accepted by the General Services Administration in 1993.

## Professional Issues and Background

An adequate understanding of the scholarly and public concerns relating to the African Burial Ground must be informed by an awareness of long-standing debates about the politics of the past among African Americans. These debates intersect development in American anthropology and history. The theoretical precepts that guide the fields of physical anthropology, history, and archaeology converged at the African Burial Ground. But these are three areas of study which, historically and to varying degrees, have been used to either systematically victimize or alternately ignore (Fredrickson 1971:71-96;

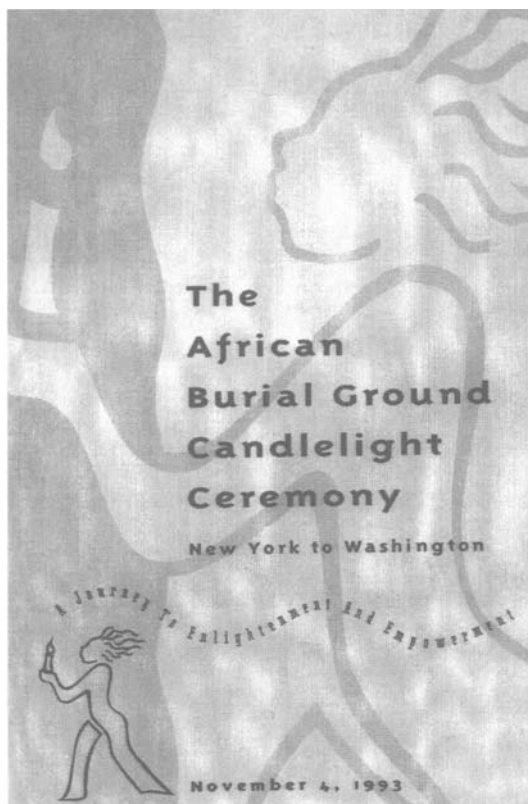


FIGURE 4. Program from the welcoming ceremony at Howard University commemorating the transfer of the ancestral remains from New York City to the Cobb Laboratory, Howard University.

Fraser and Butler 1986; Potter 1991:95; Deloria 1995; Fountain 1995) the population which scholars were now so eager to study.

### *Academic Anthropology and History*

The skeletal population excavated from the African Burial Ground represents the remains of some of the first Africans brought to North America. These ancestral remains were of great interest to the New York Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team (MFAT), the original physical anthropologists working with HCI. MFAT was greatly concerned with the morphometric data (Cook 1993:26–27; GSA 1993) this baseline population contained for the development of “racing” methods. This emphasis on the application of methods of racial identification coupled with a paucity of previous African and African-American studies research characterized the approaches of the archaeologists and physical anthropologists who had excavated the site.

The potential for stereotypical, sterile, and denigrating interpretations of the site based on morphometric analysis became increasingly apparent to the African-American community. The primacy of this interest, coupled with a perceived disrespect on the part of the physical anthropologists and the GSA for the wishes of the descendant community, led to much of the conflict that has surrounded the African Burial Ground Project (CPWT 1992:34; Scarupa 1994).

Distortions of the African and African-American past by anthropologists and historians have been a prominent concern of African Americans for nearly 150 years. As early as 1854 Frederick Douglass pointed to the works of the first American physical anthropologists and Egyptologists as an effort to show blacks to be uncivilized and subhuman for the purpose of legitimating the institution of slavery (Douglass 1950[1854]). Aleš Hrdlička, the first curator of physical anthropology at the United States National Museum, Smithsonian, stated that physical anthropology was intended to have practical ap-

plication through racial eugenics (Hrdlička 1918), while much of physical anthropology was being used to justify racial segregation laws which institutionalized discrimination against blacks.

Members of MFAT seemed keen on demonstrating to the public their technical knowledge by showing the cranial and post-cranial traits they used to classify the race of skeletons. Members of the New York descendant community often identified these explanations of facial and pelvic traits as troubling. Why should a grandmother have been disturbed at such demonstrations to her granddaughter? Why should an architect have asked, perplexed, how it could be possible for a femur to represent her ancestry? What has caused these negative reactions to simple biological approaches to racing? We have no certain answers to these questions, as indeed those who expressed these concerns seemed unable to explain them.

The intellectual background to the issues of racial determination may shed some light, however. There are historical precedents for objections to anthropological studies of race in the African-American community, and the Smithsonian's early racial research is representative of broader trends to which objections were made (Blakey 1987, 1996). In 1916, Hrdlička (1928) had great difficulty in obtaining cooperation from African Americans, particularly women, for his study of “The Full-Blood American Negro,” whom he described as “suspicious.” African Americans were generally aware of the demeaning uses of such data, which were generally used to show their inferiority and social distance, while “elite” Euroamericans clamored to be included in such research, which was generally used to demonstrate their superiority and social position. Hrdlička had a preconceived notion of full-bloods as the objective unit of biological analysis, yet most African Americans were not included in that type which he sought to measure and characterize. For African Americans today, “racing” has been associated with arguments in support of black inferiority, social

and biological distance, and stereotypical images that reflected little of the range of variation that they knew of themselves.

The similarities between this historical example and the forensic approaches initially proposed for the African Burial Ground can be very informative. Forensic approaches assume the existence of a real racial biological type. While a broader range of African Americans can be captured within the black, or Negroid, classification used today, the assumption persists that there are some discrete traits that represent the features of a pure type (for example, nasal “guttering,” extreme prognathism, large teeth). Morphological assessment in which MFAT was immediately involved during excavation focused on such discrete, stereotypical traits or their absence. These were the features that were being described to the public.

Furthermore, the use of inadequately tested post-cranial measurements for determining race raised both scholarly and public questioning. The MFAT method involved measures of the bones of the thigh and hip. The accuracy of this method has not been demonstrated on populations other than the Americans of the Terry Collection at the Smithsonian, with which the method had been developed (DiBennardo and Taylor 1983). The tautological nature of that test was questioned at the time of the original study. Moreover, even the more reliable cranial methods of racing that are based on African-American populations have been shown to be wholly inadequate for the study of West African populations, which are morphologically different from African Americans, different from other African populations, as well as regionally diverse. To reduce the biological identity of the African Burial Ground population to these narrow typologies was to assume, if applied, to construct a stereotype of the ancestral population. This is not far from Hrdlička’s limitations at the turn of this century.

Biological race—Negroids, Caucasoids, Mongoloids—was viewed by forensics experts as the most objective or scientific means of classifica-

tion. The methodologically constructed black or “Negroid,” however, is dissociated from any particular culture and history. Racing thus constructs an identity that is culture-less, history-less, and biologically shallow. Here, racing was being proposed by anthropologists who had engaged, as the community and scholars soon became aware, in very little study of Africana history and culture.

The proposed alternative combined morphological, morphometric, and molecular genetic data to assess specific breeding population affiliations (Blakey 1992a, 1992b; HJMA 1993). Historical, archaeological, and stable isotope data would be used to interpret the cultural and ecological characteristics of the places of origin. The result should produce information about affiliated populations that have culture histories such as the Ashanti, Yoruba, Dutch, Lenape, English, and other potential origins of the people buried in the African Burial Ground. The descendant community’s reaction to this biocultural approach was far more favorable than to forensic classification. Many physical anthropologists, however, objected to the rejection of MFAT’s racing methods (Cook 1993; GSA 1993; Epperson 1997). In our case, it was the descendant community that would ultimately choose.

Embedded in the context of the New York African Burial Ground phenomenon is a sophisticated awareness on the part of the general African-American public regarding the demeaning abuses of anthropology and history by Euroamericans. The descendant community immediately understood the parallels between the mishandling of the bones and the racial reality of their lives (Wright and Brown 1992; Davila et al. 1994). If race follows the African descendant population beyond the grave, then racism, by definition, follows as well.

#### *Public Engagement Through History*

During the excavation phase of the project, the public was kept informed through a “grassroots,” community-based newsletter, *Ground Truth*, by

word of mouth, and by contacting the GSA directly for information. As leadership of the project changed, public education became a major component of the African Burial Ground project.

Sherrill D. Wilson was named director of the Office of Public Education and Interpretation (OPEI), formerly known as the Liaison Office. Prior to her work on this project, Wilson had developed an effective approach to public history through her African-American historic sites tours of New York City, "Reclaim the Memories." Her business, which she had been operating for five years, reflected the fact that African-American scholars were developing compatible resources and approaches that were informed by common understandings of the relationship of anthropology and history to the needs of their community. Her focus on public history was consistent with public engagement initiatives. The African Burial Ground Project would ultimately benefit from that preparation.

By focusing on the need to fill the gaps of omission left by Eurocentric public history in New York City, Wilson was participating in the long tradition of what St. Claire Drake termed "vindicationism." Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, African-American and African scholars could usually be characterized as "vindicationists" because the most persistent thread running through their work was the attempt to correct the demeaning distortions of the culture, biology, and history of the Africana world (Schomburg 1929; Drake 1980). See also Rankin-Hill and Blakey (1994) for histories of anthropological contributions to the vindicationist effort; Diop (1974[1967]) and Van Sertima (1986) treat recent vindicationist efforts relating to archaeology, linguistic, and classical studies that are currently broadly read among the African and African-American public.

Eurocentric distortions of Africana history have been viewed not as accidental flaws of individual researchers but as politically motivated and systemic means of social, intellectual, and cultural control. While seminal historical works have contributed to correcting this legacy, Euroamericans rarely have had an understanding of the depth and dimension of African-American intellectual life (Hine 1986):

In virtually every area where evidence from the past is needed to support the validity of a given proposition, a historian can be found who will provide the evidence that is needed. Historians have usually been prepared to provide facile and quick explanations for the subordinate place of African Americans in American life. From the time Africans were brought as indentured servants to the mainland of English America in 1619, the enormous task of rationalizing and justifying the forced labor of peoples on the basis of racial differences was begun; and even after legal slavery was ended, the notion of racial differences persisted as a basis for maintaining segregation and discrimination (Franklin 1989[1965]:132).

Carter G. Woodson, perhaps the most important single African-American historian, founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915 and published the *Journal of Negro History* as the first outlet for the dissemination of black history. His efforts led to the formation of Negro History Week in 1926, which was later to become Black History Month. His most prominent book, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Woodson 1933), speaks directly to the historiographic influences of the ideology of white supremacy.

Throughout the civil rights and black nationalist movements of the 1950s, '60s, and early '70s, "Black Studies" programs were fought for by African Americans and established at many universities (Hine 1986). During the 1980s and 1990s, an Afrocentric educational movement emerged in the black community in response to the distorted global and American history African-American children are continually taught. That history frequently presents a romantic view of European and Euroamerican identity and an omitted African and African-American presence in important societal developments, of which they were an integral part.

Indeed, New York's African Burial Ground was a vivid example of the omission of the colonial Africans' presence and contribution to the building of the city and the nation. The African-American public could at once turn to the abundant and tangible physical remains of the people omitted from the city's deficient school curricula. By omission, northern slavery and racism were denied.

The African-American public interested in the African Burial Ground was usually quite aware

of bodies of “vindicationist,” Africana studies and Afrocentric literature which held greater intellectual relevancy, while exposing the biases of “mainstream” or Eurocentric historiography and anthropology. Many among the New York public were influenced by extensive travel to various African countries, some of which was done with Afrocentric organizations. To quote Miriam Francis, one of the most active members of the federal steering committee, “If it was an African find, we wanted to make sure that it was interpreted from an African point of view” (Harrington 1993:34).

When vindicationist motivations were explained as part of the site’s significance for the African-American community, Euroamericans, including members of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation, expressed fears and objections, characterizing the approach as ethnocentric bias. Yet the vindicationist tradition was posed as a corrective for persistent Eurocentric bias and misrepresentation, and as a search for truth and accuracy.

#### *Archaeology and Cultural Resource Management*

Although the impetus for the project was cultural resource management, the implications have been broad and complex. New Yorkers sought and still seek authority, defined by Kertzer (1988:110) as the right to exercise influence over behavior, with African and African-American archaeologists and anthropologists directing the research. As previously stated, there were concerns that the guiding methodologies, theories, and ideologies that govern the primary research disciplines (e.g., Hodder 1986, 1992; Leone and Potter 1988; Trigger 1989; Blakey 1990:38; Yoffee and Sherratt 1993; deMaret 1994:183; Leone and Potter 1994; Orser 1996) would be misapplied in studying the skeletal and artifactual remains from this site (Harrington 1993:36; Foster 1994:4). This concern certainly extended to archaeological theory and practices, particularly since problems that potentially have contributed to the loss of data occurred as a result of rapid excavation and inadequate stabilization of re-

mains. Although never explicitly stated, the sentiment among the descendant community was that the importance, particularly the spiritual importance that the site held, was too great to allow field excavation techniques to be the sole criterion of competence (Harrington 1993:33). The question was not whether these individuals were qualified scientists, but whether they would be qualified to direct research on an important African-American bioarchaeological site.

#### *African Americans in and Through Archaeology*

For approximately the first 75 years of the history of American archaeology, until 1946, African Americans as well as other groups without an independent income were largely excluded from the profession. During the depression it was discovered that archaeology could usefully employ large numbers of individuals to move earth. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects of the 1930s, and later the GI Bill, allowed a broader segment of America’s social classes exposure to archaeology. Most of the first archaeologists without independent wealth were World War II veterans who benefited from the GI Bill (Barbour 1994). During the 1960s and 1970s, the Ford Foundation and other funding sources established fellowships to correct the underrepresentation of African-American scholars, which led to an increase in African-American anthropologists (Drake 1980), the vast majority of whom were cultural anthropologists.

The development of Cultural Resource Management (CRM) has fostered the growth of African-American archaeology since the 1960s (Ferguson 1992; Barbour 1996), particularly in the South. Until the excavations of the African Burial Ground, African-American archaeology in the North had concentrated on finds that reflected the interests of individual archaeologists and were largely of local interest (Barbour 1996).

Some of the early work in the North included Robert Schuyler’s (1972) study of oyster fisherfolk of Sandy Ground, Staten Island; Bert Salwen’s (Bridges and Salwen 1980) study at



Weeksville; James Deetz's study of black households in Massachusetts including Parting Ways (Deetz 1977) and Black Lucy's Garden (Bullen and Bullen 1945; Baker 1980); and Mark Leone's (1984) public archaeology program at Annapolis. Recently, CRM firms have added significantly to recovery of African-American history, including JMA's excavations at the two First African Baptist Church cemeteries in Philadelphia (Kelley and Angel 1989; Parrington et al. 1989; Crist et al. 1995).

CRM archaeologists have, however, been accountable to governmental and other clients who frequently are not principally interested in anthropological research, a problem which has pointed to the risk of "deskilling" (Paynter 1983) and to oftentimes inadequate resources for careful analysis (Lacy and Hasenstab 1983). The extent to which CRM archaeologists uphold disciplinary standards (Schuldenrein 1995) is also not the same as the extent to which they uphold the standards of African-American studies. The predominantly Euroamerican field of CRM archaeology and the predominantly African-American field of African-American studies remain far apart. Generally, CRM archaeologists need have little academic preparation or interest in African-American research. CRM archaeologists rarely seek academic preparation in African-American studies departments and very few faculty of African-American studies departments have been contracted by archaeologists. Is the view of African-American history and culture so deficient, so simple, that one need have no specialized training to conduct research in that culture area?

### Philosophical Divergence

Philosophical divergence occurs in several areas including methods of analysis and interpretation, semantics, and social interpretation. Each is addressed more fully below.

#### *Analysis and Interpretation*

In the informally segregated United States, archaeology and African-American Studies have

developed as ethnically distinct disciplines, the former mainly white and the latter mainly black, with little interaction. Theresa Singleton, the Smithsonian's leading historical archaeologist, and Ronald Bailey, chair of Northeastern University's African-American Studies Department, attempted to bring the two fields together in Oxford, Mississippi, in 1989. Singleton (1994) and Singleton and Bograd (1995) recognize that the ethnic and black studies movement of the 1960s and '70s spurred initial interest in African-American archaeology, along with historic preservation legislation and bicentennial interests. They find that "the problem [of African-American archaeology] is that the field is theory poor, not data poor" (Singleton and Bograd 1995). Samford (1996:113) has also observed, "In the two decades that archaeologists have been excavating African American slave sites, they have accumulated a substantial body of data. Unfortunately data recovery has outpaced both analysis and the reformulation of research goals."

While several important studies have certainly been done, year after year, archaeologists and physical anthropologists, some with a superficial understanding of African-American history and culture, profit from the conduct of research on archaeological sites that influence how African Americans are defined. This was clearly the case, and a major source of contention, surrounding the original excavation team at the New York African Burial Ground project.

Understandably, New Yorkers feared that the cultural significance often hidden from the boundaries of social contact and daily interaction would be unrecognized and overlooked (McGuire and Paynter 1991) and that obvious interpretations would become problematic in terms of recognition. This is particularly so since far fewer African descendant sites have been excavated or identified in the North as compared to the frequency with which southern plantation sites are excavated. Comparatively little archaeological evidence exists for 17th- and 18th-century New York Africans, suggesting that much groundwork will have to be laid in the study of this population.

Seizing intellectual control has meant that the criteria for competency have been expanded to include an affinity for African-American culture, past and *present*, and comfort with and knowledge of the politics of African descendant populations, their cultures, and their histories (CPWT 1992:34–41; Harrington 1993:33; Wilson 1995:3). As was sometimes the case at the African Burial Ground excavations, there was evidence of discomfort and uneasiness with African Americans among some excavators and archaeologists (McGowan and Brighton 1995, pers. comm.), further contributing to concerns that current racial attitudes would influence interpretations of the historical population being studied.

Furthermore, questions which reflect the general sentiment “should white people study black people?” (Nobile 1993; Wayne 1994:6; Curtin 1995) and an insistence on “racing skeletons” (GSA 1993; Epperson 1997) give the impression that simplistic questions are being asked rather than complex, insightful queries that also acknowledge the entangled philosophical and theoretical dilemmas archaeology must resolve with respect to the demands of descendant communities (Robertshaw 1995).

As Jamieson (1995:39) correctly observes regarding study of the remains from the African Burial Ground: “The developments in New York City . . . have demonstrated that contract archaeologists are required to deal with such remains, and that a solid understanding of the historical and anthropological aspects of African-American mortuary practices is necessary before interpreting them.” In a field where African Americans have been largely invisible and the documentary evidence unresponsive, methodologies that uncover the archaeological visibility of African Americans are sorely needed (Barbour 1996).

According to Hodder (1986:7), “It is only when we make assumptions about the subjective meanings in the minds of people long dead that we can begin to do archaeology.” This view of archaeological interpretation again would have left the New York descendant community dependent upon the largely Euroamerican researchers who would consider themselves qualified for

such an interpretation (Klima 1992:20). As a result, New Yorkers insisted on African-American leadership and involvement in all aspects of this project.

Yet, Larry McKee (1995:4) argues in “Commentary: Is It Futile to Try and Be Useful? Historical Archaeology and the African American Experience” that “studying African-American life from just an African-American perspective would end up one-sided and ultimately sterile.” Presumably, then, the dearth of African-American archaeologists, which he also acknowledges, implies that archaeological interpretation of African-American sites to date must be one-sided and ultimately sterile since primarily Euroamericans interpret these sites. After 125 years of American archaeology as an organized discipline, there are fewer than six African Americans who hold Ph.D.s in the field (Barbour 1994), with an equal number currently in graduate programs around the country.

There was a concern among African Americans that what would be deemed the important avenues of inquiry would be hollow and irrelevant for the African-descendant community (Muhammad et al. 1993:3). Entrenched, long-held philosophical positions of power are not easily relinquished, and new perspectives are often difficult for scholars to develop or embrace without dialogue or outside influence. As the changing archaeological perspective weds archaeological findings with interdisciplinary research and oral history, perhaps scholars and others outside the discipline may begin to access and find relevance in the body of work produced by our efforts. African-American historians, in particular, can be informed by accurate archaeological research and interpretation.

### *Semantics*

Semantics and the use of descriptive language has been a constant theme in New York. Insistence on the use of the word African in the renaming of the “Negroes Burying Ground” demonstrates the descendant community’s understanding of the power and influence of language as well as the need to eschew European descriptive terminology. These African Americans chose to

call the Africans what they chose to call themselves—African Mutual Relief Society, African Free School, African Methodist Episcopal Church, for example (Stuckey 1987:199–200; Wilson 1995:11). The descendant community has insisted that “slaves” not be identified by their condition of servitude but rather by the conditions imposed upon them (S&S Reporting 1993). It is particularly telling that the term slave is never specifically defined in dictionaries to refer to enslaved Africans, although this is the most pervasive use of the word in the United States. The term “enslaved African” is perhaps more accurate than servant, bondspersons, bond chattel laborers, or slave and conveys the involuntary aspect of enslavement.

Not all linguistic restructuring is so easily accomplished, however. In many instances, the English language is limiting when one attempts to accurately convey the African-American experience. The continued use of the term “master” in anthropological (e.g., Blassingame 1972; Stuckey 1987; Meillassoux 1991; Holloway 1991) and historical (e.g., McManus 1966; Johnson 1969; Franklin 1989) writings is a clear example of the romantic use of language which reflects a Eurocentric approach indicative of a reluctance to divest of euphemistic language. The term “master” is defined as “one with the ability or power or authority to control; one who is highly skilled, superior; a victor, a conqueror; to rule or direct; an individual having predominance over another; having all others subordinate to oneself” (*Illustrated Heritage* 1967; *Oxford English Dictionary* 1971; Webster’s 1971, 1991, 1994; *Scribner-Bantam English Dictionary* 1979; *World Book Dictionary* 1984; Merriam-Webster 1994). Jesus Christ is often referred to as “the Master” (Webster’s 1983). Nowhere within the various definitions is the word “master” ever defined to accurately reflect the specific, traditional colloquial usage of the word. Never is “the master” defined as enslaver, or as one who enslaves, principally African descendant populations, or one who deprives Africans of their humanity, or one who coerces the labor and social actions, most specifically of African descendant populations.

Recently, scholars have attempted to avoid the use of the term master by using the term “slave



FIGURE 5. Burial 101 had tack heads arranged on a coffin in a shape that has been interpreted to be either a heart or to represent an Adinkra symbol. (Photo by Dennis Seckler; courtesy of U.S. General Services Administration.)

holder” (cf. Blassingame 1972; Meier and Rudwick 1986; Stuckey 1987; White 1991) or “planter” rather than enslaver as the descriptive which encompasses the slave-owning aspects inherent in the plantation system (e.g., Moore 1985; Singleton 1985; Ferguson 1992; Mintz and Price 1992). This term, however, lacks accuracy or visceral, emotive power and in no way conveys the hideousness of the institution of slavery or the function and actions of its principal perpetrator. Moreover, the term is misleading, since “the planter” might rarely plant. Intellectual empowerment equips African Americans with the ability to confront ideological justifications and rationalizations pertaining to use of traditional language.

Similar to language usage, analysis of material culture within archaeology is also an area that can be subjective and open to interpretation.

The interpreter's specialized knowledge and familiarity with the culture being studied should and does affect analysis in obvious ways. At the African Burial Ground, for example, a pattern of nail heads formed a symbol on a coffin which was widely recognized as a heart (Figure 5). An African-American scientist, while not at all a specialist in African symbolic systems, recognized the ornate heart shape as closely resembling one of the Asanti *Adinkra* symbols whose use was growing in popularity in African-American culture. When a Ghanaian historian of African art looked at this same symbol, he too saw *Sankofa*, one of the *Adinkra* symbols, and could explain the appropriateness of its temporal, cultural, and mortuary context: "The symbol expresses the Akan social thought that espouses the essence of tying the past with the present in order to prepare for the future" (Ofori-Ansa 1995:3).

While it is difficult to interpret or extrapolate meaning from a culturally ambiguous symbol within the archaeological context, *Adinkra* symbolism is more appropriate to the population buried in the African Burial Ground and demonstrates the divergent perspectives which shape interpretation. The introduction of relevant African systems of thought provides evidence of why African and African-American scholars felt compelled to broaden the prospective of this project. Myopic interpretation of the comparatively few diagnostic artifacts excavated from the site would contribute to a superficial understanding of New York's African colonial population.

### *Social Politics of the African Burial Ground*

The African Burial Ground is often seen as an example of whites and blacks perceiving issues so differently as to merely exist together in physical space while operating in very different worlds of thought and action. African Americans succeeded as they did because their critical view of the issues was more accurate, relative to most Euroamericans involved with the project. While some Euroamericans directly involved with the controversy, and who were closely aligned with the African-American community,

did have a fundamental understanding of issues, and while many others empathized with the issue of desecration, most sought only to contain the inconveniences being fostered by black protest, a protest whose justifications they could scarcely have comprehended.

Equally significant for African Americans were the metaphorical and symptomatological meanings of the conflicts in which they were embroiled. Here were the historical and the current, day-to-day problems of racial discrimination being played out on a small scale. Audible racial epithets were not being slung, but that has not been the dominant or accepted mode of racist social relations in the United States for some time now. Instead, the federal government and its previous consultants were seen as pursuing a course of obstruction that reflected a dismissive attitude toward blacks whom they sought to control by denying access to substantive power. Both the consultants and the GSA underestimated the African-American community's resolve to establish authority over the disposition of the site and its analysis. When African-American community leaders and scientists repeatedly asserted those intentions, glaring attempts were made to ignore them or to placate them with shallow offerings.

Most of the Euroamerican government officials and their consultants acted without apparent recognition that blacks understood exactly what was being attempted and had effective strategies for surmounting those obstacles. Exclusion, dismissive attitudes, tokenism, and claims of unfairness and "reverse racism" when African Americans seek full access to resources are commonplace interactions with white Americans. The effectiveness of the sophisticated African-American lobby at the city, state, and national levels demonstrates a lack of realism on their opponents' part. Where in other aspects of daily life individual African-American citizens would be limited in their ability to roundly address such circumstances, here in the important moment and symbolism of their ancestor's dignity, white racism would be addressed in microcosm. The United States government's role as antagonist, along with that of the discipline that defined

racial differences and African culture, could not have been more appropriate foils for African-American empowerment.

Despite the longer track record and established credentials of Howard University's program of research in African-American bioanthropology, members of the original excavation team characterized Howard's efforts as "reverse racism," a characterization that immediately eliminated the multitude of intellectual issues. Many of the whites who had represented anthropological and preservation concerns in New York City and who had supported greater participation by African-American scholars at the site began to object to Howard University's plan to remove the remains from New York City to its Washington laboratory. These New Yorkers thus attempted to stand in the way of African-American intellectual control, in the interests of their own access to a prominent historical resource.

Since New Yorkers can be extremely provincial (Muhammad et al. 1993), the choice on the part of the descendant community to remove what must have been viewed as "their" cultural resource to an environment where their interests could be understood, respected, and empowered is a dramatic indictment of the status quo. The need to place the remains at Howard University also speaks to the dearth of local options and the lack of investment in African-American bioarchaeology in New York City.

### The Federal Steering Committee

In response to provisions set forth in Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (36 CFR 800) requiring the consultation of interested parties, a federal steering committee composed of concerned community activists and various experts and professionals was formed to foster the dialogue between the GSA, archaeologists, and community members (Jorde et al. 1993). The New York descendant community was given an official voice in the project; future archaeological requirements were explained, and the government was seemingly accountable. The wishes of the descendant community could be directly articulated. Unlike their ancestors,

today's African Americans have been able to speak for themselves (Wall 1995).

The federal steering committee meetings were among the most virulent encounters associated with the African Burial Ground project (S&S Reporting 1992–1994; Schomburg Center 1992–1994). Many of the Euroamericans originally in control of the project were unaccustomed to or uncomfortable with emotional displays, and demonstrated a dismissive attitude when unable to contend with the emotionally charged, angry responses of a descendant community whose earlier moderation was met only with betrayal.

More often, however, it was the need for "sensitivity" toward African Americans that whites recognized, but did not understand. While the issue of sensitivity toward the sacred was apparently shared by Euroamericans and African Americans alike, it was unclear whether the meanings of the concept were the same for both. African Americans were insisting on "respect" for the dead and the living. In a society imbued with racist stereotypes of blacks as overly emotional, irrational, and hyperpolitical, however, even liberal white concerns for "sensitivity" easily can be based upon a patronizing attitude whose assumptions are racist, further adding to an atmosphere of mistrust (Kutz 1994). African Americans sought control, not sympathy.

The charter of the federal steering committee was not renewed once the newly constructed federal office building was occupied in November 1994, leaving many with the impression that the federal government's only interest in addressing community concerns was expediency and that clearly no lasting changes had occurred. There are several specific issues which were never resolved by the steering committee. The areas of concern beyond the direction of the research included the establishment of a world-class museum, an appropriate memorial, and reinterment on the site (Jorde et al. 1993). This last issue, reinterment, could prove as onerous as the excavation of the cemetery if the GSA again misjudges the gravity and depth of importance African Americans attach to this final phase (Cohen 1992:21). There are a number of engi-

neering constraints associated with site stabilization that render reburial on-site a major problem, requiring careful planning and strategy, professional expertise, and a timetable.

By disbanding the steering committee, expressed interests of the descendant community and issues which require time to resolve have been left unanswered. These unresolved issues are of continuing concern, although the force with which they are currently being addressed has diminished. Senator Paterson has convened a committee to address the issue of the museum (Paterson 1995), but progress has been slow. Although major concessions have been won on the part of the African descendant community, several unresolved issues such as reburial, memorialization, and the level of funding for scientific and historical research specified in the research design, in conjunction with unfulfilled commitments, leave the question of ultimate success unanswered.

Although the ancestral remains have been moved to Howard University and the federal steering committee is no longer in existence, New Yorkers have not relinquished stewardship of nor their desire to be closely involved in every aspect of the project (Muhammad et al. 1993:3). To quote Senator David Paterson, "The descendant community of African Americans has been left spellbound by the discovery, and impatient for results" (Assael 1993:18). Through ceremonies, symposia, lectures, demonstrations, and meetings, they have been relentless and diligent in their devotion, as have researchers in their commitment to public engagement. This is the scope and magnitude of activism that excavation of this archaeological resource has engendered.

### Current Status

Today, New York no longer has a black mayor (Willen and Moses 1996), Gus Savage is no longer chair of the Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, and Congress is contemplating a decrease in funding and support for CRM (Craib and Johnson 1995). Since the federal steering committee no longer exists, much

of the responsibility for fulfilling the descendant community's mandate now rests in the hands of the researchers and scientists in conjunction with the GSA. The struggle for control of the African Burial Ground site was a struggle to have the voice of the community heeded. Exclusion of direct community involvement as the project progresses removes ethical, moral, spiritual, and social issues and obligations from community control. The work of holding the GSA accountable to previous agreements with the community has been largely assumed by the anthropologists directing the project.

### *The Office of Public Education and Interpretation*

The Office of Public Education and Interpretation (OPEI) opened in March 1993 for the express purpose of informing the New York and national communities about the ongoing status of the African Burial Ground project. Although the future of this office is unclear (Strickland-Abuwi 1996), it has provided information through its monthly reports to more than 40,000 interested persons from around the world (OPEI 1995-1996).

The OPEI conducts on-site and off-site historical slide presentations about the African Burial Ground project and the complementary history of Africans in colonial New York, archaeological laboratory tours, and educators' symposia for teachers, researchers, and other interested persons. The OPEI has trained more than 80 volunteers to help inform local communities of issues and current events relating to the project. The office also accepts high school and college students as semester interns in exchange for academic credit. Howard University also conducts laboratory tours in Washington, DC, and has trained a team of more than 25 volunteers in its efforts to make the research accessible to the public.

The OPEI publishes *Update*, a quarterly newsletter that has a readership of more than 10,000 persons per issue. As a direct result of the excavations, the African Burial Ground project has introduced the topics of archaeology, physical

anthropology, and conservation to scores of children and adults who otherwise would not have been exposed to these disciplines.

The OPEI has supported Richard Brown, former steering committee member, in a community-engineered campaign to have the U.S. Postal Service issue an African Burial Ground commemorative stamp (Devieux 1995). As of August 1997, more than 104,000 signatures had been collected from 40 states and 16 countries (OPEI 1995–1996; Devieux 1997, pers. comm.). The goal of this commemorative stamp campaign was to collect 100,000 signatures for submission to the Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee in April 1996 (OPEI 1995–1996). This petition has been denied for the second time by the committee and will not be eligible for consideration again until late 1997. Such defeats only strengthen the resolve of the New York community and of the stamp campaign workers who understand the political and bureaucratic obstacles as well as the economic concerns of the committee associated with the stamp approval process (McAllister 1996a, 1996b).

### *Media Coverage*

Media coverage of the African Burial Ground project has been extensive in documenting this unique colonial-era archaeological site. *The African Burial Ground: An American Discovery* (Kutz 1994) is an award-winning film produced by GSA; *Unearthing the Slave Trade* aired in 1993 on the Learning Channel; and *Slavery's Buried Past* aired in 1996 on the Public Broadcasting System. More than 500 newspaper and magazine articles have been published in media attempts to fill the historical voids relating to an African presence in colonial New York, and to tell the story of the New York African-American descendant community's struggle to preserve the site and disseminate its history (Citations 1995; Pearce 1995).

The African Burial Ground has also been included in at least two recent historical publications, *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (Jackson 1995) and *The Historical Atlas of New York City* (Homberger 1994). This new inclusion,

however, has not eliminated misinterpretation or misrepresentation. Bucolic depictions of the African Burial Ground in the *New York Times* (Dunlap 1992) and in the *Historical Atlas of New York City* (Homberger 1994:44–45) each misrepresent the visual imagery of the location by depicting a lush, flat pastoral landscape rather than the hilly, ravined location near New York's noxious industries. Situated on undesirable land and originally located outside the city limits, the cemetery was, by mid-18th century, beyond a gated, 14-ft.-high palisades; the hills and deep ravine described in Stokes (1915–1928:591), the National Historic Landmark Designation (Landmarks 1992:5), and other historical documents are not in evidence. Presenting such incorrect images negates the power of the African Burial Ground and the hardships faced by New York's early African community. This type of distortion reinforces the notion that African-American New Yorkers must be relentless in their insistence on accuracy in all aspects pertaining to the site.

The image (Figure 6) from *The Historical Atlas of New York City* (Homberger 1994) was approved by cartographic consultant Alice Hudson, head of the Map Division of the New York Public Library. When the inaccuracies were referenced during a lecture, Hudson stated that this bucolic scene was drawn by modern English artists and that the drawing does indeed look more like the English countryside than 18th-century New York City (Hudson 1995, pers. comm.).

Furthermore, most cartographers of the period also misrepresented the African Burial Ground by eliminating specific identification of the six-acre cemetery from the majority of the historical maps, further contributing to the geographical and topographical misinterpretation that has plagued the site (Edwards and Kelcey 1990,1, 3:147; Jorde et al. 1993:6). Since historical archaeology relies on documentary evidence as well as archaeological data for interpretation of sites, current visual misrepresentations and omissions of the past have implications for the discipline and reveal the continual problems of cultural bias.

### Diversity and Divergence

Intellectual sophistication beyond the narrow limits of customary Eurocentrism requires the participation of people of diverse ethnicities in the practice of anthropology in general (Blakey 1989) and of archaeology and museology in particular (Blakey 1990:45). Thus, the intellectual evolution of the field; non-white participation; anti-Eurocentrism; and community engagement and empowerment are mutually reinforcing. As the situation in New York evolved, the African Burial Ground became apparent as a practical and dramatic case for the development of the theory and practice of inclusion and engagement. In the case of the African Burial Ground, engagement was also powerfully informed by the long tradition of African-American vindicationist critique (Foster 1994), as discussed previously, and by scholarly activism, the latter being a somewhat more assertive version of the engaged scholar or public intellectual. The interests of

the Howard University initiative and those of the African-American public seemed to largely correspond, but these could not be realized until the public took control of the situation.

While spirituality is an issue that was at the core of the African-American struggle for control (S&S Reporting 1993), there are several other issues of concern that African-American New Yorkers brought to this site. Foremost among them is the philosophical divergence among African Americans. Although there is general unity surrounding the major issues, the African descendant community speaks with many voices (*Update* 1993–1996). The Muslim community, for example, is constant in their reminders that Muslims were also enslaved and could have been buried at the cemetery (Hatim 1995).

Various religious communities approach the site from divergent philosophical as well as divergent political perspectives. The political forces active within the African-American community also have been diverse, ranging from



FIGURE 6. Idyllic modern depiction of the African Burial Ground, which was located southwest of the Collect Pond (after Homberger 1994).



black nationalists and Afrocentric organizations to individuals with strong personal beliefs. It is particularly interesting that older African Americans, some of whom have retired from professional and scientific careers, have been among the most persistent. Additionally, divergent religious, political, and scientific perspectives and philosophies in approaching the problems relating to the African Burial Ground have, at times, been the most threatening to the cohesion and resolve of the African-American community.

### Conclusion

For African-American New Yorkers, the excavation of our ancestors has been a cathartic and wrenching experience. The anxiety caused by the excavations and post-excavation project management provoked anger, outrage, and cynicism. The descendant community is still highly pained and deeply offended by the desecration of this ancestral site (Daughtry 1992; Scarupa 1994).

Outraged by the fact that this population, mistreated in life, was continuing to be mistreated beyond death (Dunlap 1992), New York's African Americans were driven by a sense of responsibility for the protection of ancestral heritage and a desire to ensure that the dead were honored and memorialized (Wright and Brown 1992; Jorde et al. 1993; Wilson 1995; Devieux 1995). This sense of responsibility and descendancy rapidly spread to the national African-American communities, and to African communities as well. A royal Ghanaian delegation visited the site and Howard University in 1995, and a briefing was held for the United Nation's Human Rights Commission in Geneva in 1996.

Realization of the global importance and of the overwhelming spiritual, historical, anthropological, and scientific importance of the site has led the African descendant community to take extraordinary measures to seize intellectual control of the project. It sought power and control, not the afterthought of inclusion. With many important issues still unresolved, perhaps the true test of that power is yet to come.

Archaeology is not an end in itself. For many African Americans, it is a conduit, an avenue leading to spiritual rebirth and renewal of our history. Our history is in the bones and in the

artifacts excavated from the African Burial Ground. It is tangible, it is real, and it lives through the dead: "Black people see those remains from the Burial Ground as life and death and as part of the continuum of our experience rather than a data pool to be objectified" (Nelson 1993). According to former Mayor David Dinkins:

Millions of Americans celebrate Ellis Island as the symbol of their communal identity in this land. Others celebrate Plymouth Rock. Until a few years ago, African-American New Yorkers had no site to call our own. There was no place which said, we were here, we contributed, we played a significant role in New York's history right from the beginning . . . . Now we—their descendants—have the symbol of our heritage embodied in lower Manhattan's African Burial Ground. The African Burial Ground is the irrefutable testimony to the contributions and suffering of our ancestors (Dinkins 1994).

Noted historian John Henrik Clarke characterizes the African Burial Ground as a holistic space that touches the lives of African people in this country and might touch the lives of African people all over the world (CPWT 1992:34). The African Burial Ground project has benefited from the participation and interest of people from around the world, from all walks of life, and from many ethnic backgrounds. The project's OPEI and the archaeological and bioanthropology laboratories have been visited by scholars from Japan, East Germany, Korea, the Caribbean, Canada, England, and Ireland, as well as from a multitude of African nations and other countries.

While all African Americans are culturally affiliated, New Yorkers have an immediate and special relationship with the African Burial Ground. No one person or group, however, can speak for the dead. This project and the historical and anthropological resource it represents, can only be enhanced when people with different agendas and ideologies enter into a deeper dialogue as they raise their voices in chorus. The African Burial Ground was designated a National Historic Landmark in February 1993.

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