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Descendants, Decisions, and Power: The Public Interpretation of the Archaeology of the Levi Jordan Plantation

ABSTRACT

Archaeological data from the Levi Jordan plantation in Brazoria County, Texas, indicate that the African Americans who lived on this plantation participated in many activities, several of African origin, that functioned to insure this community's survival in an increasingly oppressive outside world. Ethnographic data indicate that many descendants of the plantation's residents, African American and European American, still live in the Brazoria area, and that these descendants continue to negotiate issues of power and control. Any public interpretation of this archaeology will necessarily deal with diverse understandings of race and history in present-day Brazoria County. This paper will describe the political and organizational strategies being employed by a team of descendants, archaeologists, and other community members to plan and implement public interpretations that are "inclusive" of the various histories and archaeologies of the plantation's ancestors: pre- and post-emancipation African Americans as well as planters.

Introduction

This paper addresses the social character of theory and practice (Tilley 1989:114) when academics and local communities work together to plan the public interpretation of archaeology. In this case, the archaeology is that of the Levi Jordan plantation (Brown and Cooper 1990; Brown 1995). The primary question addressed here is whether or not it is feasible to create a public interpretation of this archaeology in the geographic vicinity of the (still standing) plantation house.

Three small towns—Brazoria, Sweeny, and West Columbia—are near the site, located about 60 mi. south of Houston, Texas. Many of the black and white descendants of the plantation's original black and white residents still live within 13 mi. of the site, either in one of these towns or in the rural area surrounding them. My collaborators in this project include several of these descendants as well as other community members; we are working together to decide how to interpret, publicly, the material culture of slavery, tenancy, and racism. This work is political because it reflects the ways in which contemporary people, descendants of people who owned and were owned by each other, continue to negotiate social and political power. It is also political because it incorporates ways that these people are affected, or feel that they could be affected, by the public presentation of "sensitive" archaeological and historical material.

Organization of the Research

The research for this project, which began after much of the archaeological work was complete, was designed to take place in two phases (McDavid 1994a, 1994b, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1995d, 1996). The goal of the first phase, addressed here, was to determine if it would be feasible to interpret this archaeology to the public. This phase attempted to understand the ways in which local residents understood their own histories, in order to discover the constraints and opportunities, ideological and otherwise (Potter 1994:38) that might effect the public presentation of this archaeology. The second phase of the research was to involve members of the community in planning and implementing the public interpretation, with the particular goal of insuring that both black and white descendants of the original residents participated in the planning process. That phase is still underway and will be touched upon here, but only insofar as participation decisions continue to affect the feasibility question.

My goals were proactive; first, to outline a different, "inclusive" approach and, then, to apply it to the feasibility question in the study area. I conducted interviews, participated in community meetings, and took advantage of ongoing informal encounters to determine what the people in the study area thought of an "inclusive" approach and to find out how they viewed their own histories, and their places in those histories. How were their views of history con-

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stricted? Would a public interpretation of this archaeology exacerbate present-day social divisions, or assist in healing them? How did people who lived in the area surrounding the site of the interpretation deal with each other? How would the archaeology itself, rooted in a historical event that members of the community probably remember differently, affect how the archaeological story could be told?

"Public interpretation," "Public/s," and "Inclusivity"

This paper will use the terms "public interpretation," "public/s," and "inclusivity" throughout. Although they are commonly understood, they need to be clarified for this particular research. First, I refer to "public interpretation" as any museum, display, public talk, site tour, slide show, brochure, educational program, or other activity that attempts to "tell the story" of a site and the people who lived there. Second, "inclusivity" here means "mutual inclusivity"; that is, it refers to a public interpretation that encompasses the perspectives of *both* the plantation owners *and* its pre- and post-emancipation African-American residents.

Third, in using the term "public" or "publics" in Brazoria, Texas, I refer to several "publics": the descendants of Levi Jordan, the descendants of the African Americans who lived on the site, other European American and African-American members of the surrounding region, community leaders, local educators, people interested in history and archaeology, academics who study history and archaeology, and others. Occasionally people who identify with one of these groups also identify with others. Members of all of these groups form the social and political context surrounding the Jordan site, and it is hoped that to one degree or another all will participate and claim a voice in the creation of whatever interpretation takes place.

Some Brazoria "publics" were not invited to express an opinion in determining what happens at this plantation. For example, some interview data revealed a common assumption that white supremacist groups still operate in the area. No attempts were made to solicit opinions from people known to be members of these groups, nor will such attempts be made. However, I suspect that sometimes the people would not meet with me because they just "weren't interested" may have supported some of the ideas associated with white supremacy. Their opinions may surface if plans for a public interpretation progress; they, as well as more benign "publics," are elements of the social and political milieu in which people in Brazoria live.

The implications of reactions from these kinds of groups, as well as the reactions from the plantation's descendants and other community people, go beyond a simple decision about whether or not to publicly interpret these artifacts. The question is whether they can be interpreted *in Brazoria*, and, more specifically, at the site of the original plantation. The daily reality of confronting a physical manifestation of the history of the plantation south, in the form of a museum or whatever, could be uncomfortable for the descendants of the people who lived with the realities of slavery and tenancy. Most of this paper will deal with feedback from those descendants, black and white. However, a public interpretation at this site could also generate negative, potentially harmful reactions from people who may or may not accept the premise that the history of the South is something that should be looked at "inclusively."

Another group that forms a significant "public" for this study is the community of historical archaeologists. Historical archaeologists frequently deal with the archaeologies of disenfranchised peoples whose living descendants continue to negotiate issues of social and economic power. Some of these descendants have begun to realize that their lives can be changed by the ways that other people tell their family histories, and they are, increasingly, demanding a voice in presenting the archaeologies and histories of their ancestors. Although this paper deals with a particular community, and a particular social and political context, the ethical and practical con-

cerns that apply to it could also apply elsewhere: to other archaeologies, histories, and communities.

Moving from Past to Present

Recent historical research (Powers 1994) has shown that the power relationships of 19th-century Brazoria, Texas, continue, in large measure, today. The local communities surrounding the plantation are still dominated by white descendants of 19th-century planters, while the African-American community is largely, though not exclusively, restricted to secondary positions in community leadership and social control. Powers (1994:122) has argued that this current situation springs directly from the particular history of the region and that after the Civil War, the "white power structure acted quickly and decisively to prevent any inversion of the antebellum social order. Southern whites were committed to retaining the status quo." She describes a number of strategies with which whites maintained their domination well into the present historical period, and points out how blacks reacted to this continued domination: they created a strong, insular, cohesive social system that operates largely outside the dominant white social and political system. Powers' analysis is also supported by recent oral history research in the area immediately surrounding the plantation (Wright 1994). According to Powers (1994:304), blacks "withdrew and isolated themselves from the Anglo residents of Brazoria; to some extent the retraction was voluntary, but overall it was in response to the treatment whites dealt them."

The separate, divided nature of present-day social and political Brazoria, rooted in the oppression and domination of the past, could well have an impact on the feasibility of creating a public interpretation of this plantation site. As the data will indicate, many people in the area derive at least part of their historical and social identities from an understanding of how they fit into the history of the region. In addition, I found that there was a great deal of local familiarity with the written histories of the region in the early 20th century, which spoke of slavery mainly in terms of economic loss, such as, "The freeing of the slaves deprived the Southern people of about two thousand million dollars" (Strobel 1926:15). These sources often characterized white supremacist groups, which were comprised of ex-confederate soldiers, as heroes who "stood like a stone wall for White supremacy and preserve and gave us our present civilization, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude that can never be repaid" (Strobel 1926:1). Indeed, it did not take formal research to realize that most of modern Brazoria is racially, socially, and economically segregated; there is a great deal of continuity between past and present power relationships in the area. The question of social and political continuity between the "old" and "new" South has been the subject of considerable debate among historians; Woodward (1951) and Weiner (1978) provide introductions to both sides of the question.

This is not to say that most Brazorians today have exactly the same racial attitudes as their 19th-century ancestors and early 20th-century historians. Some whites have reacted to earlier attitudes by rejecting them altogether, stating that they consciously attempt to avoid being "like" their ancestors. Others carry a burden of guilt, which, in part, drives their actions and decisions. Similarly, many black Brazorians speak of "moving on," and frequently they, too, consciously reject the attitudes of the past. However, the world that present-day Brazorians inhabit derives from a broader historical and social context, and it is likely that their deep-rooted assumptions about power are, in part, shaped by the historical milieu in which they live.

In addition, historical relations between the two main branches of Jordan's descendants, the Martin and the McNeill families, have been strained since the 19th century (Brown 1993, 1995). These strained relationships still form part of the present-day social and historical context of the community. Some members of each branch of the family still regard each other with attitudes ranging from mild mistrust to, in some cases, outright animosity. Complicating this, the archaeological deposit in the former slave and tenant quarters of the Jordan plantation indicates

that the African-American tenants left their homes suddenly, and left in such a manner that they could take very little with them (Brown 1995:98). The site was owned by the Martins at the time of this "abandonment," and historical evidence suggests that the sudden departure of the tenants from the site was provoked by the actions of some of the Martin ancestors. In addition, these same Martins were among the most active in local white supremacist movements of the late 19th century (Powers 1994; Wright 1994). Therefore, "telling the story," in archaeological terms—that is, why the tenants' possessions were abandoned in the first place, entails discussing some rather unsavory behaviors on the part of some of the Martins. Some of their living descendants object to exposing any information about the past that would "rewrite history," as some have put it.

However, the people who support archaeological research at the plantation are also from the Martin side of the family, and they are among the most vocal in demanding that the "whole truth" be publicly told and dealt with, as interview data later in this paper will indicate. Nonetheless, plans for public interpretation have already been constrained by personal and familial agendas, even though some family members approve of an "inclusive" interpretation of the site, extending even to acknowledging and dealing with actions of some of their ancestors.

Theoretical and Ideological Perspectives

The intent here is to develop this research within the broad framework of what is known as a "critical" perspective and to incorporate a mutually inclusive *both/and*, as opposed to *either/or*, point of view.

Critical Theory

The use of critical theory in the public interpretation of history and archaeology has been addressed elsewhere (Wylie 1985; Leone et al. 1987; Handsman and Leone 1989; Potter 1994) and will not be discussed at length here, except to point out how this approach has been useful within the context of this particular project.

Critical theory is concerned with the ways in which the production of knowledge is historically situated, and with understanding how archaeological findings are relevant to particular social and political interests, whether or not the archaeologist attempts to make those findings relevant (Tilley 1989:2; Potter 1994:39–40). Traditional public interpretations of plantation life, which have tended to focus almost exclusively on the lives of planter class, have the effect of reinforcing the idea that planter class values and ideologies were natural and inevitable. Expanding the focus to include the lives of *all* the people who lived on a plantation is one way of deconstructing the dominant planter ideologies. Doing so, and doing so in explicit terms, allows the consumers of archaeological and historical knowledge to see how our understanding of the past is, in part, a function of how it is presented (Tilley 1989:114).

A central element of critical theory is a concern with the particular (Potter 1989). A critical approach, therefore, requires that the social and political constraints (Leone et al. 1987) existing in any particular community be taken into account when deciding whether or not to do a public interpretation within that community. As mentioned previously, the social and political constraints in present-day Brazoria are very much a function of those that existed the past. A "critical" approach attempts to understand the "interests and conflicts" (Leone and Potter 1994) existing within the community of Brazoria, Texas, and to incorporate them into any public interpretations that take place—even if incorporating them means that the public interpretation does not take place on the site itself.

Critical theory also calls for self-reflection by the social analyst and, I would argue, by other participants in the public interpretation process; each social actor is a "part of the societal process analyzed" (Held 1980:191). The approach here has been for each actor (academic, community member, board member, volunteer, and visitor) to recognize how his or her individual bias

influences the knowledge presented about this site, and to consider how this knowledge serves their own, or other, interests (Potter 1994:39, citing Geuss 1981:78). For example, my research method included asking several project participants to become familiar with my academic biases—with critical theory and its application to this project. Without exception, all agreed that a "critical" approach, as described here, was appropriate and useful. However, all also felt that dealing explicitly with the roots of this approach, and its derivation from Marxist and neo-Marxist thinking, would be counterproductive within the conservative context of present-day Brazoria, Texas. In Brazoria, ideas about individualism, family, work, class, race, and power are constructed within modern capitalist frameworks (Handsman and Leone 1989:119), even though they may be differently perceived within black and white segments of the larger community. Although any public interpretation of this site would work toward achieving enlightenment about past and present-day issues of domination and power, it would need to do so within local frames of reference to be accepted by the community in which it takes place.

Unlike some critical archaeologies, which call for a concrete plan of social action and emancipation (Handsman and Leone 1989; Tilley 1989) the purpose of a critical approach here is simply to create a path for a public interpretation that will challenge and expand traditional ways of understanding the history of the plantation South. As such, we are "willing to accept enlightenment as an adequate result" (Potter 1994:38). This is a rather broad view of critical theory, and some may find that this project is not sufficiently "critical," in that it does not deal with issues of "class interests and exploitation" only in terms of economic domination (Blakey 1987:292). While there may be economic ramifications of all forms of oppression, "particular situations of dominance may involve sexual, political, or social exploitation without any direct economic consequence" (Spencer-Wood 1992a:3).

Critical theory also rejects views that privilege the scientific method over other ways of producing knowledge. It does not say that stringent empirical-analytical methods should be rejected (Handsman 1981; Wylie 1985:141–142; Tilley 1989:112), only that by itself positivism produces an inadequate view of the world (Potter 1994:32). The archaeological investigations at this site have used the empirical methods of the "New Archaeology," applied within the contextual, interpretive theoretical frameworks of postprocessual archaeologies (Hodder 1986; Brown 1995). Related research (Wright 1994; Taylor 1996; Hill 1997) has employed interpretive anthropology, oral history, and genealogy to illuminate the same historical period as that addressed by the archaeology. The assumption among all project participants is that science is an important way, but not the only way, to understand the past.

A "both/and" Point of View

Besides critical theory, a *both/and*, rather than *either/or*, approach (Spencer-Wood 1991, 1992a, 1992b, [1993], 1996) has also been useful in this work. Put simply, this approach will attempt to develop ways to talk about *both* black history *and* white history in the plantation South, without doing either at the expense of the other. A *both/and* approach provides a framework to explore, publicly, the interaction of dominant and non-dominant groups, and to explore the many ways that people dealt with societal restraints to form ideologies, identities, and behaviors to empower themselves. It rejects simplistic definitions of non-dominant individuals as "victims who react, negatively motivated by dominance, without any positive viewpoints or ideology of their own" (Spencer-Wood 1992b:4). Similarly, it also rejects definitions of all dominant individuals as oppressors and villains. It is hoped that this approach to public presentation will provide a way for diverse "publics" in Brazoria to be comfortable with the expression of their divided, sometimes contested, histories and that

it will promote an appreciation of the contributions of *all* the people who lived on this plantation.

Method

Several data-gathering procedures were employed during this study: fact-finding trips to other interpretive sites; formal but unstructured interviews with community residents; participation in community meetings and presentations to community organizations; informal encounters with respondents; and active participation in professional associations concerned with the presentation of historical materials. The fact-finding trips took place in the summers of 1992 and 1993 and will not be addressed here, except to say that they affirmed my initial impression that most public interpretations of the history of the plantation South—despite a few well-known exceptions, some of which are included in this volume—tend to focus almost exclusively on the owners' homes, furniture, and wealth. Formal taped interviews began in October 1993 and continued into the fall of 1994. In the fall of 1994 I determined that the formal interview process had ceased to be productive; the reasons for this will be explained later in this narrative. Many informal conversations and meetings took place during the entire time and are, even now, part of an ongoing research process.

I attempted to interview representatives from various "publics" previously described: descendants of Levi Jordan, descendants of the African Americans who lived on the plantation, members of communities surrounding the plantation, persons interested in Texas history and tourism, and community leaders. Selection criteria were based on my perception of family and community influence, such as family elders, community leaders, and people actively involved in historical interpretation, and on the respondent's willingness to participate.

As mentioned previously, part of my method was to state my personal and professional agendas very clearly. Interview transcripts reveal that I sometimes did almost as much talking as my respondents—explaining what I meant by a *both/and* approach, talking about work being done at other sites, explaining what our goals were in terms of community empowerment, and so on. I usually revealed something of my own "baggage" during these interactions—there were many discussions about what it was like to grow up as southerners in a racially polarized culture, our feelings about the Civil Rights movement, how the legacies of slavery affect people in the present, and similar topics. I always made it clear that "we," meaning the core group of people initially involved in this project (the archaeological project director and two white Jordan descendants) wished to see if it would be feasible to create an inclusive, *both/and* public interpretation at this site. I made it clear that the core group would rely on community input to decide whether to support such a public interpretation. If it chose not to support it, then the public interpretation, if any, would take place elsewhere.

These transcripts revealed extremely interactive conversations, not one-sided "objective" question/answer sessions. I wanted my respondents to be able to trust me, but neither they, nor I, could ignore that I was a white, urban, university affiliated outsider—I was, and continue to be, "the other." If I had attempted to position myself as an insider, or to hide behind a mask of objectivity, I would have been seen as less trustworthy, not more. One African-American businessman commented, "Well, I don't want to interview *you*, but I think this has changed you . . . your attitude about things. And I really don't know what they were before, but I sense that since you've been doing this thing you see things differently, you know, as you really search and find out the truth about things . . . and, then, I do sense that you are sensitive, maybe more sensitive, to people since you've done this."

An African-American minister commented, after I asked for his support and told him why I felt that this project was important, that "the only way this will work is if people believe that you have a good heart . . . but I can tell you have a good heart." This kind of comment reassured me that my reflective, proactive ap-

proach had a direct and positive effect on the kind and amount of information I received during my interviews. My willingness to own my otherness—to talk about it openly and to reveal personal reasons for doing this research—led to franker, more open communication than would have been possible otherwise. It was sometimes essential in getting people to talk to me at all.

Data: Interviews, Community Meetings, and Informal Encounters

Data were gathered in several contexts: interviews, community meetings, and informal encounters. Each is discussed further below.

The Interview Process

Most of my early interviews were with Jordan's descendants; they had already been identified through attendance at family reunions and personal introductions. They were usually very eager to provide their ideas, and there was no difficulty in arranging meetings. The same held true for meetings with local community leaders—most were eager to hear about a new source of potential tourist dollars. I knew it might not be as easy to arrange interviews with African-American descendants and other community residents but had confidence that it would occur at some point. I did have some good contacts in the African-American community who had said they would be willing to introduce me to other people.

I have already mentioned that I stopped the formal interview process early in that stage of the research. To explain why, and to contextualize the summary of interview data that follows, I will now describe the legal entity that was formed to direct all public activities deriving from the plantation's archaeology. The formation of this organization was not intended to be a part of the feasibility phase of the research because it was not originally perceived to have much to do with the specific questions I was asking in my interviews—questions about how to talk about slavery and tenancy, how to teach history, and the like. However, the existence of this organization and, more importantly, its composition, had a direct impact on my efforts to obtain candid feedback from the local African-American population.

In 1993 two Jordan descendants, including the site owners' representative, and the archaeology director, Dr. Kenneth L. Brown, set up the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society, a 501(c)3 tax-exempt, non-profit corporation. My role in the organization was to arrange for pro bono legal work, to serve as the organization's secretary, and to function as an unofficial organizer and "expediter." I did not serve on the board of directors because we all agreed that it should be dominated by local individuals; the only "outsider" on the board was the archaeology director. The job of the organization would include, but would not be limited to, planning the public interpretation, if it was determined to be feasible. It would also include house restoration, loaning artifacts to museums, fundraising, and similar activities. We all agreed that no substantive planning would take place—such as writing a mission statement, applying for National Register status, and so on—until the board had learned what it could from my interviews, and, more importantly, until it could expand to include people to represent the plantation's African-American ancestors. At that point we had not identified many of the African-American descendants and had no idea who might be willing and able to be involved; my research was seen as a way to get community input as well as to identify people who might be interested in participating on a formal basis.

So, I began to conduct interviews with people in the African-American community. Some interviews went very well, and the comments they generated were very useful in establishing themes that could guide us later in planning a public interpretation. During these interviews, I usually felt that I had been able to connect, to start forming a basis of mutual understanding and trust, and so on. It proved to be extremely difficult to arrange appointments, however. Only one person ever said "no" to an interview re-

quest, but many had some reason not to meet with me, citing reasons such as not having time, busy schedule, and illness. The people I interviewed were unfailingly polite and gracious, but I kept sensing a wariness, a reluctance to tell me what they really thought. One African-American respondent, who had been active in community affairs and local government, warned me that I would have trouble getting candid opinions from members of his community: "sometimes the people who would have real influence in the black community would be same ones who wouldn't want to be involved . . . you have to realize that people will tell you what they think you want to hear."

During these interviews I sensed that my own ethnicity was only part of the reason for this apparent wariness. When we started talking about racial issues, and about the shared aspects of our experiences as southerners in the late 20th century, my own openness seemed to reassure people that I was sincere and basically trustworthy. I knew there was "something else" besides my being a white, urban outsider that was affecting the success of arranging interviews in the first place.

In the summer of 1994 I finally got a glimpse of why people might have been skeptical when hearing my statements about "involving the African-American community early on." I started to hear, indirectly and never with specific examples, about other history-related community projects in which blacks had been asked to participate after most of the substantive planning had already taken place. One person mentioned a museum that had neglected to include blacks on its board, except in a token fashion, and another mentioned a parade in which blacks participated, but after most plans had already been made. Some also noted that the other local plantation museum had recently attempted to do some programming about African-American history, but that this effort had been restricted to a small display in one outbuilding on the site, and had been poorly funded by the state agency that manages the site. The blacks had been told they were "welcome" to do some kind of display, but it was evident that there was no intent to change the more general planter-class focus of the site.

All of the African Americans who alluded to the history of tokenization in the community were very circumspect about mentioning names and specific events. Only one ever discussed the issue on tape:

> Well, [once] when we had a parade . . . the Negro was never just told "Okay, we want you all in this" . . . We live here . . . this is our home and we want to be a part of it. I told them that at meetings . . . that kind of thing, you know. But the persons who are in leadership . . . they forget about that . . . so for that reason, I think we're left out of whatever there is here to be . . . I think to a marked degree we have not been represented in the organizations as [much as] we should have been.

I started to realize that it was not surprising that my naive requests for interviews and appeals for opinion were regarded with suspicion. It became obvious that interviews were not going to be a productive way of getting input from the African-American community until members of that community were fully empowered to act on any suggestions they might make. One encounter, in particular, clarified this situation. In the fall of 1994 I attempted to make an appointment to speak with an African-American woman who is a retired educator. This individual had obviously come across university researchers before, and stated flatly that she would not meet with me until I had answered, in writing, the following questions: 1) What would I actually do with the results of our interview? Would the community be able to put it to use, or would I just get my thesis written and put the book on a shelf somewhere? 2) What would the university's role be in the process down the line? Would the archaeologist help plan the interpretation, or would he simply pack up his trowel and move on? and 3) What likelihood was there that the project would ever actually happen? Who would benefit from the project — the community or the university?

I finally realized that these kinds of questions must have been on the minds of many of the people I attempted to interview, even if they did

not come right out and ask them. I did respond in writing to this individual, of course, and decided to terminate the formal interview process. I then recommended that the board of directors of the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society concentrate *all* its efforts on recruiting new members before any more planning, or talk of planning, took place. They readily agreed, and now, two years later, the society has a seven-person board that includes African-American descendants as well as other members of the black community.

It is important to point out that the original, three-member board did not identify and select the new members. The first new member was selected by a local African-American service organization whose membership includes several plantation descendants, including the person most active in helping us recruit. The new board member, who happens to be the same person who posed the questions above, then helped us to find additional volunteers.

So, even though the formation and composition of the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society turned out to have little to do with community opinions about archaeology museums and public interpretation, they had a great deal to do with community perceptions of empowerment, voice, and authority. I realized that I could interview as many white descendants, mayors, chamber presidents, and the like as I wanted to, but until African Americans were vested in the process, and empowered to make policy-level decisions, feedback from them would be extremely hard to obtain. Unless power was perceived to be held equally with the white descendants and other residents, I would probably continue to "hear what they thought I wanted to hear," to paraphrase the respondent mentioned earlier.

In spite of that difficulty, however, a number of themes emerged in interviews and other encounters which would have a direct bearing on whatever public interpretation could be created, provided that the issues of power and control discussed above are addressed. The rest of this section will highlight a few of these themes; their implications for the public interpretation of this site, and the implications of the power question, will be addressed in the Conclusion. All names, of course, have been changed.

The Themes

Most respondents, black and white, had a strong sense of family and regional history, although it played out in different ways. One common theme was that geography seemed to play a significant role in how people defined themselves and their histories. The Jordan plantation, and the communities of Brazoria, Sweeny, and West Columbia, are located in western Brazoria County, in an area that was central to the development of early Texas history (Creighton 1975). The Brazos River divides the county into east–west sections; people living there frequently acknowledged themselves as having a "West of the Brazos" identity. There is a "West of the Brazos" phone book, for example, and a strong sense that people are keenly aware of their own history.

There also seems to be as much competition between these three small towns as there is solidarity. All have separate historical societies and separate historical museums, but there is also a museum association for the three museums that meets on a regular basis. People from West Columbia seldom neglect to mention that their town was the first capital of Texas, and people in Brazoria frequently refer, with some degree of resentment, to the time back in the 1930s that the present county seat was "stolen" in the "dead of night" and moved to Angleton (east of the Brazos). As one local resident put it after I made a presentation at a local Chamber of Commerce meeting, "this project would be a good idea — because, after all, "we" are more historical than those towns on the other side of the river."

As mentioned previously, many people I met were very informed about the early history of the county, and much of their pride had to do with the fact that the region was the locus of Stephen F. Austin's first settlement in the 1830s (Creighton 1975). The original white settlers formed what became known in this century as

the "Old 300", and I heard this term many times when speaking with local residents. Once I saw a bumper sticker that declared proudly that the car's driver was "One of the old 300!," and one evening in a local bar/cafe I noticed that there were two mugs emblazoned with Austin's image nestled amongst the beers displayed for sale. The Brazoria County Historical Museum has a permanent exhibition about the original Austin settlement and lists the names of the "old 300" settlers on a prominently featured sign at the exit to the exhibition.

I also had the impression that while all respondents recognized the term "West of the Brazos" and identified themselves with being a part of that area, as opposed to "the other side of the river," the use of the term was regarded by many African Americans as more of a "white" thing, which is not surprising, since it seems to be connected to the "old 300" idea. From Mr. Alexander, a middle-aged African-American businessman: "Well, I think it is something distinctive . . . something their family has done to establish roots in this country . . . they want to say that they were part of the old 300, which I think is prestigious as a family who have developed this country . . . as well as it is for black Americans who have contributed things to this country . . . to have that same amount of prestige and distinction about what they've done . . . and so, that's why I say we have to balance the two."

My research showed that most African Americans in Brazoria were not interested in helping to plan a public interpretation that would perpetuate the stereotypic view that slaves and tenants were passive in their response to oppression and victimization. Some were skeptical when asked whether or not their community would accept a public interpretation that would focus on black history—some asked, "why do you want to stir all that slavery stuff up again?" Some expressed the idea that "just telling the truth" could be "dangerous," and several commented on the need to have interpretations that were, in their words, "non-polarizing." Again from Mr. Alexander: "You have to incorporate the two [points of view] and then go from there . . . because otherwise it would be like all one of this and all one of that . . . you know, and it would polarize people . . . so I think that the only way you are going to really get the essence of the thing is . . . to let them work together . . . and maybe the authority would come from both . . . they can both say things about it, and they'll be more open to say it, and then I think there would be less criticism saying, well, it's all this black or all white."

When I began to talk about using a "*both/and*" approach, and to describe the kinds of inclusive programming underway at other sites, the response to the Jordan project warmed considerably. While most blacks I met frequently commented on the need to avoid emphasizing what they called "the punishments," they also talked about the importance of positive role models, and there was usually great enthusiasm as we explored ideas about incorporating this archaeology into history curricula in local schools. As one local African-American minister put it, when talking about how we might involve young people, "you have to show connections between what's in the ground and what people have accomplished since then." Earlier, Mr. Alexander commented that "I think it [the *both/and* approach] would be the only way it would survive . . . and what we need to focus on is how we're going to make it better . . . that's what I think of how it should work, and I think that's the way it would survive in the long run."

Later, Mr. Alexander and I also discussed how a public interpretation should address the "ugly" parts of history, and he said, "Well, if you did present that, it'd have to be real gentle . . . you know, something where a small kid, say six or seven, would understand it. I don't think it has to be . . . you wouldn't want to overblow that kind of thing, because some people are still sensitive about it . . . I think it would just have to be something gentle." This kind of conversation frequently led to discussions about the importance of black history and Black History Month. Whites sometimes commented that "well, it's OK, but maybe we should also have White His-

tory Month." Blacks, on the other hand, sometimes said "maybe it would be better if black history was studied all year, not just in February." The common thread in both kinds of responses, however, was that a public interpretation at this site could provide a way for students to learn about everyone's history all year long.

While whites did not generally criticize traditional interpretations, they did respond favorably to learning about the inclusive approaches being explored at other sites. Some whites expressed an enthusiasm for "telling the whole truth," although they also sometimes asked, "Is this [project] only going to be about black history"? This question may be especially pertinent to the Jordan descendants, because, as mentioned previously, the archaeological deposit itself suggests that the tenants were forcibly evicted by one of their ancestors, and because many ancestors were active in various white supremacist groups of the postbellum period. While most white descendants were quite willing to acknowledge the roles their ancestors played in the racial turbulence of the past, they also wanted to make sure that the other, "better" stories are told, such as the stories—recounted by both blacks and whites—about the friendships that sometimes developed between black and white plantation residents, and stories about the courage and fortitude of the women in the planter's family.

Most people I met thought that history, and learning about one's ancestors, was important and valuable. Mrs. Moore, a middle-aged African-American businesswoman and church worker commented that "I want my children to know all what happened during slavery . . . . I want them to get out there and know that we did this, we didn't do this, what was done . . . it's good education, and my daughter has grown strong in knowing these things." And Mr. Alexander, in his comments addressing the same issue, alluded to the importance of understanding the complex relationships that frequently existed between the enslaved and their enslavers: "Just the way these people lived . . . most of the things they had, you know, they had to do it in a creative way . . . you know, there were certain things they could do, certain things they couldn't do . . . you know, and they survived. But . . . there were the relationships between the two [groups of people] . . . . I think there's a lot of things that we don't really see about what really went on . . . other than just master and slave . . . it wasn't just all, you know, Afro-American or European American."

Kay, an older college student and white McNeill descendant, was also asked how she felt about publicly interpreting the archaeological materials from the quarters area. She said that "learning about it could be very healing for both sides because I do believe there's a kind of collective guilt that I feel or just sort of a guilt for, you know, things wouldn't be where they were today if they hadn't been the way they were back then."

On the whole, community leaders, such as mayors, chamber of commerce members, and museum directors, liked the idea of a plantation interpretation that would involve all members of the community—one that would increase local appreciation of the African Americans who made the planters' fortunes possible. As one local (white) leader put it, "If planning this kind of project will help us to have better ongoing contact with the leaders of the black community, then that's reason enough to do it." However, I also heard, in non-taped interviews with African Americans, that some of the people who stated their support of an "inclusive" interpretation had exhibited very different attitudes when a local group attempted to build a public swimming pool. Some whites fought the swimming pool project, and the strong perception among blacks was that the whites did not want a pool because that would mean that black children would swim with white children. On the basis of non-taped conversations with some of these individuals, my guess is that this perception was correct.

However, while many whites' support of an "inclusive" interpretation was apparently sincere, there was also awareness of the difficulties that would be involved in creating such an interpretation. Margaret, an elderly white descendant, when asked "what do you think about having the project planned by descendants of both black

and white residents of the plantation?," responded that "I think that's the only approach that you can take to get cooperation from everybody, and I think they're [the black descendants] are going to have to be convinced from the first that they're not token . . . and that's not going to be an easy time."

Discussion and Conclusions: Is a Public Interpretation of This Site Feasible?

On one level of decision-making, interview data and other community input revealed that it would be feasible to create a successful public interpretation of this site if, and only if, it is truly multivocal—inclusive of black, white, Martin, McNeill, diverse "public," and archaeologist viewpoints. There was a great deal of support for an "inclusive" approach to interpreting the archaeology and history of this site, and people I met and interviewed are now more aware of what a "different" kind of plantation interpretation might be like.

However, in the long run, feasibility will have more to do with how issues of power and control are resolved than it will with whether people like the idea of an "inclusive" interpretation. A major result of this work was the realization that, before the answer to the feasibility question can ever be an unqualified "yes," the following questions will need to be addressed: 1) How can the planning group (the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society) continue to find ways to share power in authentic, credible ways? And, no less important, 2) How can it find ways to convince its various "publics" that power and control are genuinely shared?

While my own awareness of the importance of the power issue was one result of this work, an even more important result was the increased awareness and articulation of it within the local planning group, the board of directors of the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society. This is not to say that local members of this group were not aware of how power was vested in their community; obviously they were, and more profoundly than I would ever be. However, knowing something on an intuitive, common-sense level is one thing. Expressing this knowledge in explicit terms, and incorporating it into the infrastructure of an organization, is very different. The collaborative nature of this project gave definition and vocabulary to the power/control issue; project participants now share a common understanding of its importance to the success, or lack of success, of this project. As one African-American descendant put it to me recently, "It's going to be a long journey . . . but at least we've started."

At some point it will be necessary for exhibit designers, including archaeologists, to understand how local people view themselves and their histories, how they think issues like slavery should be addressed, how young people should be taught history, and so on. These themes, which were explored in my interviews—for an in-depth analysis of interview data, see McDavid (1996)—will be useful in creating a public interpretation, but they will only be useful if the power issues can be negotiated successfully. Only in a setting of shared power can sensitive, "ugly" parts of history be dealt with openly and productively—*it is a question of what comes first.* In this case, the public perception and acceptance of shared power must come first, before any public interpretation can be implemented.

For example, some of the artifacts themselves will lead to difficult choices about how to present them publicly. One such artifact is a shackle, still embedded in the brick wall in which it was found. Handling the emotional reaction that this artifact initially provokes will be a difficult challenge for the people implementing a public interpretation. How can one be "multivocal" about a shackle? At first glance the shackle would seem to be a clear-cut, unambiguous testament to white oppression, offering little opportunity for public interpretation other than to acknowledge its painful origins and then move on. However, its presence, and its location *in the quarters area*, could also provide pathways to discuss other, related issues—How did people resist oppression? How were stereotypical attitudes toward blacks responses to strategies of black resistance to white domination?

If this part of the quarters was used at some point to confine people (Kenneth L. Brown 1996, pers. comm.), this artifact could provide an opportunity to discuss how blacks might have dealt with the presence of a "jail" in the midst of their living area, and could also offer opportunities to discuss the difficult, ambiguous roles of slaves and tenants who also functioned as overseers, drivers (Genovese 1976:365–388), and, in this case, possibly jailers. It is perhaps true that these related issues are just as difficult to deal with as the presence of the shackle, but using the shackle as a point of departure could offer possibilities to discuss how the lives of the people on this plantation "overlapped, combined, and changed in different cultural contexts and over time" (Spencer-Wood [1993]). The shackle could also be used to examine the ways in which oppression and domination take many different forms, and how people take individual actions to deal with that oppression and domination (Spencer-Wood 1994).

As previously mentioned, most present-day Brazorians, including descendants of the original slaveholders, do not agree with their ancestors' attitudes towards slavery. Most, though not all, as discussed below, are willing to discuss and acknowledge their ancestors' roles in the slave and tenant system. The common view is that the old attitudes were, simply, wrong, and there is no suggestion here that the viewpoints of oppressors and oppressed should be presented as equally valid. However, presenting "good" and "bad" parts of history in an open-ended, inclusive way, rather than a closed, "this is the way it was" fashion, could help people to see for themselves how much people and attitudes have changed. More importantly, it could also allow them the space to see for themselves, without preaching or polemics, how present-day attitudes are rooted in those of the past, and begin the process of acknowledging their own participation in the perpetuation of racist, classist, and sexist social attitudes (see Blakey's discussion of white denial of racism, this volume).

One historical artifact that has already been painful for local descendants to deal with relates to the manner in which African Americans appear to have left the plantation. The objects they left behind are a positive, compelling testament to the ways that African Americans coped with slavery and tenancy, but their very existence could well bring up questions of ownership. While the legal documents setting up the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society provide that all artifacts will be controlled by the planning group, not by the site's white owners, in the future, descendants of the people who left the artifacts behind could easily wish to contest the legal fact that they still do not own them.

It will also be necessary to deal with the demands of white descendants who have expressed angry reactions to archaeological interpretations that attempt to explain why the deposit exists. For example, one local newspaper, while generally supportive of local historical projects, occasionally tends to emphasize the negative, sensational aspects of the plantation's history—that is, the abandonment episode. A recent story, headlined "Excavation Slowly Uncovers History's Scars," began with the sentence, "The ghosts of former slaves are whispering of an injustice done more than 100 years ago on a plantation near Brazoria" (VanDerSlice 1996). Not surprisingly, several white plantation descendants reacted very angrily to this article; one commented that "just because you found some stuff in the ground doesn't give you the right to destroy [my] family." Most of them did not dispute the relative accuracy of the article—they are quite aware of the roles that their ancestors had in the turbulence of the past. However, they blamed the archaeology director, not the newspaper reporter, for the content and tone of the article, and have begun a campaign to stop plans to publicly interpret the site. The board of directors of the planning group (Figure 1), which, as already mentioned, is composed of both European American and African-American descendants, was also very unhappy about the inflammatory tone of the article, and recognized its potential to further polarize an already segregated community.

The only way that these kinds of situations will have any hope of being resolved is for the planning group to have credibility within the

local communities of *both* African-American *and* European American descendants—for it to be publicly recognized as an organization in which power and control are genuinely shared. Whether this can happen is very much an open question. Its activities have only recently begun to develop this type of positive public recognition, and the damage caused by the recent newspaper article may not be able to be contained. In addition, given the dichotomized manner in which power is still distributed within the community, the public recognition of shared power will probably be only the first, most difficult, step in dealing with these kinds of interpretation issues.

Despite these threats to the process of community empowerment and inclusive history-writing, I will close this paper by emphasizing the positive, productive aspects of the community story, and describe the present structure and work of the board of directors of the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society. It is in the work of this board that the ideas about critical theory and a *both/and* approach have been incorporated into the infrastructure of this project—*theory and practice have merged.*

Facts photo: Robert J. Reed

Historical Society looks to future

Directors of the Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society stand in front of the plantation homestead in Sweeny. Pictured, from left, are Ginny Raska, Hazel J. Austin, Carol McDavid, Dorothy Cotton, Morris Richardson and Julia Mack. The Levi Jordan house was built about 1849 and is one of the few original plantation houses still standing in the county. The group plans a history day for the fall and is formulating plans for a membership drive which will begin Aug. 1. For more information on the plantation or the historical society, call Raska at 798-1628 or Austin at 964-3823.

FIGURE 1. Photograph of some members of the Levi Jordan plantation board of directors, taken in front of the plantation house (after *The Brazosport Facts*, 22 July 1995; reprinted with permission of *The Brazosport Facts*).

Last year the new seven-member board, described earlier, began to work together (Figure 1). Their first job was to write a formal mission statement. This statement was designed to be somewhat global in nature—to allow flexibility while giving an overall direction for the organization. This statement, in particular, embodies the *both/and* approach that I had proposed, and that the board adopted. It is as follows:

> MISSION STATEMENT
> The primary mission of The Levi Jordan Plantation Historical Society is to preserve and interpret the archaeologies and histories of all the people who lived and worked on this plantation after its inception in the mid-19th century.
> The secondary mission of the Society is to preserve and interpret the history of Brazoria County and the surrounding region, to complement the primary purpose and to offer a more thorough understanding of contributions of the people of this plantation and of this region to the history of Texas and the United States.
> The tertiary mission of the Society is to utilize the public interpretation of historical and archaeological research to promote understanding and appreciation of the diverse histories of the people who built this plantation, this region, and this country.

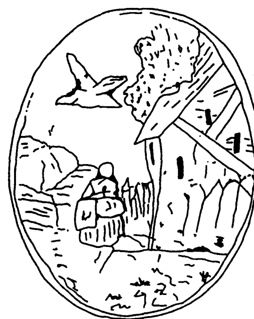
After writing the mission statement, and expanding it into a long range plan with many specific ideas about educational programming, restoring the plantation house, and the like, the group realized that these documents did not state, in explicit terms, the ideas that formed the basis of planning—the ideas embodied in the critical, "*both/and*" approach described earlier. Therefore, the long range plan now includes a section that outlines these ideas; they comprise in effect, an ideological statement in which each member of the group believes. Here is how the idea statement appears in the printed brochures (Figure 2) that are distributed at public meetings and similar occasions:

> OUR MISSION STATEMENT STATES OUR "BIG GOALS," BUT WHAT OTHER IDEAS HAVE GUIDED OUR PROPOSED PLANS TO ACCOMPLISH THAT MISSION?
> That there are many different, but complementary, ways of learning about the past—archaeology, history, genealogy, oral history, literature, and others—and that each offers a different kind of "lens" through which we can "see" the past.
> That what we call "history" was not inevitable: that along the way individuals and groups made choices, and all of those choices affected what we are today.
> That it is important to respect the idea that some objects from the past may have different kinds of spiritual and emotional importance to different people.
> That historical truth may be defined in a variety of ways—what one person or family perceives as important about "what really happened" may be different from what another person or family perceives, and it is possible that these different perceptions may be, in some ways, equally true.
> That people in the past were, in some ways, different from people now–that their decisions, conversations, and social relationships were different from ours today.
> That people in the past were, in some ways, the same as people are now–that they too had work lives, family lives, spiritual lives, creative lives, and intellectual lives, and they made choices about those lives.

The Levi Jordan Plantation
Historical Society

Long Range Plan

Preliminary Draft
for Community Review



BOARD OF DIRECTORS
Hazel J. Austin
Kenneth L. Brown, PhD.
Dorothy D. Cotton
Bruce Gotcher
Julia Mack
Ginny McNeill Raska
Morris Richardson

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FIGURE 2. Cover of mission statement and long range plan document, including line drawing of a carved shell "cameo" found in the slave and tenant quarters of the site.

> That the decisions we make now about how we present history will influence what we know about the past, and that all of our local communities should have a voice in making those decisions.

The people involved in this project hope that the diverse composition of the planning group, along with the mission statement, long range plan, and statement of ideas, will provide a way for people with different perspectives to see the Jordan project as something they can support and appreciate. We hope that public meetings held to present these documents, along with associated slide presentations and conversations, will offer testimony to local "publics" about how power is shared within the planning group, and will counter the negative public response to more divisive elements of the plantation's history. If this occurs, planning the public interpretation of this archaeology could begin to provide the public with "the intellectual means to assess, criticise, define, and redefine" the past (Tilley 1989:114). It could also provide a way to begin positive, meaningful communication between the various community groups who have a stake in the past, present, and future of this plantation and, in the most hopeful sense, could provide one context in which the real renegotiation of community power can finally begin to take place.

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