

COMMENTARY

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Past Is Present: Comments on “In the Realm of Politics: Prospects for Public Participation in African-American Plantation Archaeology”

Discussion

Many of the ideas and experiences expressed throughout this volume are not only intellectually engaging but encouraging with respect to a new archaeology of public engagement. Progress toward new, responsive relationships between archaeologists and the public suggested by these papers emerges from encounters with the problems inherent in current interactions of archaeology and the broader society. Therefore, just as working through these problems offers real promise, those experiences equally imply the disturbing aspects of the current societal and intellectual context in which these authors' experiences take place.

Four areas of concern seem to cover most of the terrain, including the politics of the past, Euroamerican insistence on control, relations between archaeology and African-American scholarship, and the democratization of knowledge. Each of these politicized aspects of the archaeological and interpretive projects discussed here, is affected by racism. Many of the questions and comments that I have about these papers derive from an appreciation of contemporary Euroamerican attitudes and behaviors toward African Americans that are examined, below. My basic contention is that the African-American past being examined by these studies serves to mediate a discourse about the relations between Euroamericans and African Americans in the present. I attempt to raise a mirror to the field, and ask the reader to find the familiar.

Patrice Jeppson's discussion of the politics of South African archaeology is a richly textured analysis of the use of history for the creation of social distance between whites and blacks, as well as South African archaeology's emphasis on essentialized African ethnic/tribal distinctions. What must appear to many Africaaners as an objective appreciation of group traditions also implicates archaeology in a strategy of divide and rule.

I think of the former Kwazulu “Homeland” for the effects of a divide and rule strategy fostered by the National Party, which created political opposition to the African National Congress along “tribal” lines. I am reminded of my South African refugee classmates who, when asked about their ethnicity, would always make a point of identifying themselves as “South African” in a conscious resistance to the divisive use of their ethnic identities in the hands of those who meant them little good.

The “situationalness” or constructed nature of ethnicity, Jeppson claims, is liberating. One can change that which one creates through dialectical, social interaction. This is perhaps akin to the decision even to identify oneself as “South African.” Drake Patten raises similar issues regarding the Foster site in Virginia, stressing the impact of current racial categories on perceptions of historic identities. She too wishes the public to recognize how identity is culturally constructed. Yet who constructs these identities, for whom, and for what purpose are questions that are key to the significance of the identities ultimately constructed.

Carol McDavid also takes the politics of the past head-on as she and her colleagues critically examine and explicate the interests served by the Jordan plantation archaeology, similarly to Leone and his associates in Annapolis (Leone et al. 1987). Jeppson and Christy Matthews point to the importance of breaking bonds of white denial by exposing the racism which structures the lives of people in both settler states—Union of South Africa and the United States of America. Ywone Edwards and McDavid call for intereth-

nic dialogue to rediscover (or discover) the real histories and identities of the peoples comprising the nation. Euroamericans cannot begin to know about themselves until the African-American, and multicultural, story is told, Edwards tells us. Archaeology may assist Euroamericans in transcending the state of denial which fails our common understanding and reconciliation. This state of Euroamerican denial, as it affects other branches of anthropology, has been examined in detail elsewhere (Blakey 1994).

The ideology of white supremacy continues to burden relations among Americans. Discriminatory hiring practices continue *en force* (Turner et al. 1991), as do neighborhood segregation and the resegregation of public education, despite Euroamerican claims to egalitarian ideals (Jaynes and Williams 1989). While the institution of slavery may be a thing of the past upon which to reflect, white racism continues to antagonize the already wounded relationships between European and African Americans. According to the National Research Council's study (Jaynes and Williams 1989), most African Americans acknowledge the continuity of racism, while most Euroamericans deny it. If such denial can exist regarding current practices, what must be the revisionist perceptions of the past?

Perhaps, due to this continuity of slavery's legacy, there are some issues blacks do not yet feel comfortable about sharing with whites. Given the extent of denial and racist thinking, Euroamerican visitors might not be trusted to interpret African-American life and history without the use of stereotypical lenses. Are they likely to laugh or cry in the "wrong" places during colonial reenactments? Are Euroamericans also likely to invoke justifications for the inequities they historically fostered—and continue to benefit from—which protect their own favorably-constructed identity at the expense of an adequate sensibility toward the tragedy and courage embedded in the African-American experience? It would be useful to have actual surveys and interviews meant to elicit racism-related attitudes and other sociological information on the perceptions of colonial interpretations.

Perhaps the degree to which blacks lack interest in, avoid, or reject interpretations, as Matthews shows, relates to the majority presence of Euroamericans in what might be seen as an intimate and painful "family" experience for African Americans. I want to ask, what would be the reactions to these interpretations if brought to the neighboring historically black university, Hampton? Perhaps that would be a more attractive context for black visitors. Yet, African-American denial, too, might undermine their participation there. Another explanation is that the interpretations are themselves uninteresting because African Americans have had too little to say about what interests them at Williamsburg. This is not to suggest that one should segregate archaeological interpretation, but acknowledges the existence of the social and psychological dynamics of ethnic segmentation and antagonism within which these fields of American art and science operate.

Archaeology, therefore, enters the political fray in a difficult effort to bring new knowledge, to reveal ourselves, and to create social change, or, it reinforces the status quo by obfuscating the kinds of issues we all have trouble discussing. Concerns for patrons, clients, and the entertainment value of interpretation as revenue-generating must come into play as interpreters of archaeological material think about the relation between their career security and the stories they can tell. This is the manner in which archaeology is us. It articulates with broader political, economic, and psychological interests and motivations. "Nevertheless," writes Edwards, "some archaeologists still present strong authoritative discourses disguised in a cloak of objectivity and apolitical rhetoric."

By whom, for whom, and for what is archaeology brought to bear on American political life? As a politically loaded endeavor, archaeology needs to take seriously the relevance of values of participatory democracy for its practice, as other anthropologists have begun to do (Forman 1994). If we acknowledge that politics influence us, we, as producers of social knowledge, must also acknowledge that we influence politics. Given these intrinsic relationships, we have an

obligation to decide the kind of political practice in which we are willing to participate.

The traditional position, that archaeologists are equipped as apolitical individuals to discern objective truth, is materially baseless. Such notions may actually be evidence of the field's cultural influences. As Ruth Frankenberg's (Frankenberg 1994) interviews tell so convincingly, even liberal, antiracist white women tend to be imbued with the notion that they have the unique right to be in control, to lead, and to speak in the authoritative and objective voice reserved for "normal" individuals. They define whiteness as acultural, or otherwise express fears of recognizing what Euroamerican cultural identity would represent if it existed, especially considering the critiques of other ethnic groups.

This emic construction of whiteness partly denies that whites are a social group with responsibilities and privileges of membership, while ascribing to them, as individuals, an authoritative voice. This aspect of Euroamerican culture contradicts egalitarian and democratic values, while it is nonetheless deeply influenced by notions of the primacy of the individual to which such rights and freedoms are ascribed. This is, indeed, a fundamental contradiction of American national life, informed by the legacy of the liberal Revolutionary ideals and the white supremacist and classist practices upon which the nation was founded.

Archaeologists, with precious few exceptions, were born and raised as white people, and it is their culture in which archaeology is, therefore, embedded. Or, is focusing on archaeologists as white people unfair? Is it fairer to express what the anthropologist Frankenberg shows to be the emic view, that archaeologists, too, are just ordinary people acting as individuals who seek to be objective scientists? As those who just happen to exert control over the construction of everyone else's history as a result of personal career choices? No self-respecting social scientist would describe any other sociocultural group as so amorphous and culture-free. American archaeology is a 99.9 percent Euroamerican organization, and Euroamericans seem bent on controlling things to an extent that other groups

have not had an opportunity to take for granted, or even to agree with.

In my experience of North American and Maya archaeology, in which I was engaged during the 1960s and '70s; and of bioarchaeology and physical anthropology in the United States, Europe, and Africa ever since, archaeologists are afflicted by the same racist ills as other Americans. One thing comes through the numerous cases of negotiation between African Americans, anthropologists, and museums in which I have been involved: if one is to understand how archaeology articulates with African-American communities, one must consider how Euroamerican racism is expressed by the behaviors of archaeologists.

The way I see it, anthropologists and museologists have often sought to maintain control of cultural, and career, resources in a manner with which African Americans are all too familiar. In fact, I suspect this is where much of Maria Franklin's "push and shove" originates. In our society, there is what might be called the "racist power relations routine," which governs interaction between whites and "the other." It partly governs the relations between African Americans and archaeologists, but can be found in any historically white organization.

The routine begins with thoughtless disregard for "the other's" involvement in what had been a realm of white-controlled decision-making. "The other" had not been involved previously, and little thought is given to current involvement. In the second phase, if "the other" seeks involvement, efforts will be made to exclude them, unless forced by laws or risk of social sanction. Laws governing public comment, affirmative action, discrimination, and repatriation do exist and are used as leverage by "the other" seeking inclusion and empowerment. Persistent efforts for inclusion are then likely to be tolerated by Euroamerican organizations, but only in powerless roles and token numbers if necessary or opportune—or by bringing the "other" into a developing research, interpretive, or other program toward the end in order to validate decisions already made by Euroamericans. In the third phase of the routine, should things progress

to that point, Euroamericans begin to cry “reverse racism” and “unfair” if “the other” claims equal or greater power in decision-making than is held by whites. African Americans with equivalent or greater credentials are often more adamantly obstructed because they are not easily peripheralized. The practices of inclusion and meritocracy thus threaten the deprivileging of whites, a conflict of Revolutionary ideals and white supremacist attitudes.

Each reaction is intensified when African Americans, as “the other,” bring to the table the most potentially confusing and insulting quality for many Euroamericans, that of equal or greater qualifications for the task at hand. What could be more belittling and threatening to the social status or ego of individual Euroamericans, enculturated with notions of white supremacy, than that individual blacks might be equally or more qualified than they? Whatever personal self-questioning of competence one may have entertained must be heightened under those circumstances.

This contradiction may be especially great in a scientific field, given the profound interpenetration among definitions of the “scientist,” “whiteness,” and modern “sapiens” which, interestingly enough, anthropologists served to create for our enculturation. Here I refer to the characteristics of intelligence or objective reasoning, leading to authority or control of natural and human resources (Blakey 1990, 1991). This is part of the culture with which African-American anthropologists must contend in order to work.

Given that these power relations are grounded in notions of white supremacy, it should be no surprise that the African-American public shows little interest in participation when they encounter them. McDavid ran into that brick wall, and I believe it is partly what Linda Derry also experienced. They were proceeding under normative Euroamerican cultural assumptions that drive *the routine*. African Americans ignored or avoided those archaeological and preservation initiatives until they were afforded an adequate share of real decision-making influence. Otherwise, they would simply serve the interests of

white people, albeit *their* interest in African-American history.

Black people do not want to work for white people’s purposes at the expense of their own empowerment, perhaps especially not when it comes to the study and interpretation of themselves. Franklin cautions that archaeologists are not the appropriate ones to determine who among African Americans should represent the views of the descendant community. The tendency to presume such authority relates to Frankenberg’s findings, and the second phase of the “racist power relations routine.” What is so encouraging, however, is that these archaeologists got the message and were secure enough to respond appropriately: they began to share real control.

In the case of the New York African Burial Ground Project, African Americans cared too much to turn away. They would not allow themselves to be defined or to have their ancestry constructed by archaeologists and physical anthropologists who were openly taking them through the “racist power relations routine.” When an African-American research institution became involved, and regarded the descendant as its ethical client, a choice became available that allowed African Americans to redress racism and claim control of their community’s cultural construction (LaRoche and Blakey, this volume).

Some very positive results of community engagement have been shown. The community’s involvement and interest is essential to the significance and even financial support for archaeological projects, as demonstrated by the African Burial Ground. Public interest and pressure can be more persuasive to federal agencies and other funders than are anthropologists alone. John Baker shows, furthermore, like Derry and others, the richness of the database that communities, if interested and empowered, may bring to the table. All of the papers speak compellingly of the promise of engagement, despite its problems.

Furthermore, as Edwards and others point out, there are major African-American cultural and historical institutions that, as I choose to put it, have been interpreting African-American history

since long before American archaeologists were availed of contracts for studying those who previously were of little interest. African Americans have long invested in the study of their own history. Now that archaeologists are so increasingly involved, how odd and telling it is that they rely so little on African-American expertise, curricula, literature, and professional organizations. There is no possibility of viewing "the other" as equal if they cannot also be followed in areas other than sports and entertainment. Certainly, the unusually high participation of African Americans in "In the Realm of Politics" has made for a critical debate of issues that might not otherwise have emerged.

The great divide persisting between African-American cultural institutions and African-American archaeology—or the Euroamerican archaeology of African-American life—continues to give testament to the unbroken legacy of racial segregation within and without the academy. To bridge these fields and the ethnic groups representing them means sharing leadership and power. Can Euroamerican scholars at times choose to follow the intellectual lead of blacks? Is it somehow a racist proposition to suggest that African-American scholars and institutions have accumulated leading insights about their own historical experience? Much obviously remains unknown about their history, but the needed exploration should begin at its most developed point.

For African-American intellectual leadership to be acknowledged and used requires, if not a revolution beyond white supremacist thinking, at least a process of inclusion and empowerment where a difficult conversation can take place between old antagonists. Both public engagement and an increase in the representation of African-American archaeologists and physical anthropologists are essential to that process. That process should transform Euroamerican identity in healthy if painful ways. Perhaps through this process the levels of constructive criticism can be raised and appreciated on all sides.

In search of ethical principles for engagement, Franklin finds that while protection of material

objects remains at the fore, some movement has occurred to include obligations to the living in archaeology. NAGPRA did not accidentally precede these changes. (Physical anthropology has no formal ethical guidelines, and that is possibly for the better). Both fields would be served by attending to the American Anthropological Association's Statement of Ethics, which, while vague, has benefited from the longer exposure of cultural anthropologists to the ethical treatment of living people. One thing is for sure, it does not much matter what one finds as a result of research when the public is disinterested or even opposed to the way in which information is obtained. When Native American representatives compared bioarchaeological research to Nazi medicine, I initially saw little relationship. After some struggle with this, the comparison now seems useful. Should we use inhumanely acquired data?

The sharing of power and, yes, the ability of a people to tell their own story are in and of themselves among the most positive results that an archaeological research program can have on a community. The opposite case, of course, is also true. To deny a people empowerment for self-definition is one of the most harmful results possible from archaeological research imaginable.

I have emphasized one of two fundamental aspects of Euroamerican social relations, that which is guided by the norms and expectations inherent in their albeit underexamined adherence to the ideology of white supremacy. There is, as earlier discussed, another side guided by the values inherent in the nation's Revolutionary egalitarian ideals. This over-examined belief in meritocracy, justice, diversity, and equality sheds but half the light, leaving in shadow that side of archaeological practice, Euroamerica, and the United States that if illuminated would inform an understanding of a conflict and contradiction that better defines Euroamerica. Both sides should be acknowledged, and were it not for the liberal side of things, we would not be having this discussion. My experience with archaeologists has also repeatedly shown the progressive side of American culture to be widespread. Hence, the quandary of Euroamerican liberalism has been

emphasized in my comments because, in their intrinsic conflict, there is hope. Rightists seem beyond the pale, and black students of archaeology are still witness to their overtly racist behavior, just as my black mentors and I had been.

Yet, liberal or rightist, the modern Euroamerican resolution of the American contradiction tends to reside in a belief in human equality under the requisite condition that whites retain privilege and control. African Americans often see the hypocrisy in that posture and fail to recognize the absence of racism among those who insist upon controlling the construction of their heritage. Similar conflicts occur between American archaeologists and national governments or indigenous peoples in other parts of the world where archaeologists work. These nations and ethnic groups increasingly hold in check the vestiges of colonialism that American archaeologists represent, when legal and bureaucratic means are used to employ and empower their own scholarship at the expense of the kind of wholesale discretion over the world's cultural resources that antiquarians and scientists of European descent once enjoyed. This is the context in which African-American, and Native American, archaeological issues need also to be understood. This is the context in which archaeologists-as-Euroamericans might better understand the daily choices they are making about their own roles in the making of tomorrow's history.

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