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A Black feminist-inspired archaeology?

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ABSTRACT

Archaeology has undergone a transition over the past two decades with the emergence of feminist discourses, and the mapping of women onto archaeological pasts. Yet Black feminist theorizing remains largely external to archaeological theory and practice, even though African-descended peoples constitute a considerable portion of the groups currently researched in the US and the Caribbean. It is a wonder that this is so, given the impressive body of literature that Black feminists have produced over the years regarding a range of topics relating to African-American experiences. I believe that Black feminist scholarship provides potential models for framing questions of difference and inequality, and for critiquing the sociopolitics of archaeology, particularly where raced and gendered representations of the past are concerned.

KEYWORDS

Black feminist theory ● gender ● historical archaeology ● race ● sociopolitics

INTRODUCTION

The current proliferation of postprocessual archaeologies (e.g. Leone and Potter, 1999; Orser, in press; Pinsky and Wylie, 1989; Schmidt and Voss, 2000; Shackel, 1993; Shanks and Tilley, 1987) and, most notably, the incremental but growing validation of feminist approaches perhaps now allows space for yet another voice. I speak of the potential for Black feminist-influenced theorizing within archaeology, a proposal that may have seemed unlikely even ten years ago. Black feminist scholarship has existed outside of archaeological thought, even within its global context, but with the rapid succession of African diaspora archaeology over the past 30 years it can no longer remain so. I posit that, while a range of theoretical frameworks within social archaeology, including feminist perspectives (see Claassen and Joyce, 1997; Conkey and Williams, 1991; Gero and Conkey, 1991; Gilchrist, 1991; Joyce, 1992; 1993; Meskell, 1998; 1999; Nelson, 1997; Spector, 1993; Spencer-Wood, 1996; Wright, 1996; Wylie, 1992), have significantly influenced the practice and politics of archaeology, there remains a problematic gap which Black feminist theorizing can potentially help to fill. This holds especially true for historical archaeology within nations where the devastating policies of colonialism and imperialism, including slavery and genocide, shaped societies in the throes of economic, political and social transformation. The legacy of structural hierarchies based upon socially-constructed differences along the lines of gender, race and/or ethnicity continue to plague virtually every country where American historical archaeologists currently practice, including South Africa, Cuba, Barbados, the Bahamas, Brazil, Martinique, Jamaica, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru, Australia, Northern Ireland and, of course, the USA. Black feminist scholarship is relevant here as it exists at the intersection where the analysis of multiple forms of oppression meets with the struggle for recognition and social justice for Black women to start, and for all subjugated groups in the end (Collins, 1991: 37–39; Riggs, 1994: 1–2; Walker, 1982). There is not only a message to be heard here; Black feminists have set an important example that can and should be followed. For while Black feminist theorizing centers on the issues and concerns within Black women's lives (e.g. Brewer, 1993; Guy-Sheftall, 1993; Hull et al., 1982; King, 1988), its critique has implications for all archaeologies that claim a critical space and which advocate a sociopolitical agenda of inclusiveness and empowerment for historically marginalized groups.

My objective is to discuss how US historical archaeologists, taking their cue from a Black feminist paradigm, might alternatively frame their questions and interpretations of the past. Given the influence historical archaeologists have on how the American public conceptualizes the past, I also address the relevance of Black feminism to the issues of the sociopolitics of

archaeology. Although I focus on African-American archaeology, I believe the critiques and issues raised by Black feminists have the potential for much broader applications within archaeology.

THE SUBSTANCE OF BLACK FEMINIST THEORY

> We examined our own lives and found that everything out there was kicking our behinds – race, class, sex, and homophobia. We saw no reason to rank oppressions. (Smith, 1983a: xxxii)

Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith titled their 1982 edited volume, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, referring to the neglect of scholarship on Black women's experiences within both African-American and women's studies due to sexism and racism. This volume of work, along with a number of others published in the 1980s, highlighted the link between Black women's studies and the Black feminist movement, a movement committed to social justice and the liberation of Black women from the oppressive forces of racism, sexism, classism and, for Black lesbians, homophobia (Collins, 1986; Davis, 1981; Higginbotham, 1983; hooks, 1981; 1984; Hull and Smith, 1982; Lorde, 1984; Smith, 1983b). They discovered that an autonomous, Black feminist movement was necessary, for although they were active throughout the period of second-wave feminism (which some would point out is still in full swing; see Meskell, 1999: 53–106), they commonly encountered racism and the refusal to acknowledge and deal with it amongst White feminists, save for a radical few (The Combahee River Collective, 1982; hooks, 1981; 1984; King, 1988: 57–63; Moraga and Anzaldua, 1981; Pence, 1982; Radford-Hill, 2000: ix-xix; Roth, 1999; Smith, 1983a: xxxiii; Thornham, 1999: 32; Wallace, 1982). Although we must speak of Black feminisms, given the diversity among these authors, there does exist a body of core themes which serve to unite Black feminist theorizing (Collins, 1991).

Most US Black feminists, some of whom also refer to themselves as 'womanists' (as defined by Walker, 1983; e.g. Collins, 1991: 37–39; Riggs, 1994; Rodriguez, 1996), still find it necessary to create and maintain a space for their own voices, noting that the feminist movement and feminist scholarship, particularly of the second wave, are largely by and for White, middle-class women who choose to focus on one specific axis of discrimination: that of sexism (Beaulieu, 1999; Hurtado, 1994: 138–139; McKay, 1993; Roth, 1999). In contrast, as anthropologist Cheryl Rodriguez (1996: 6) notes (speaking in global terms), 'a significant aspect of womanist epistemology is understanding the ways in which Black women's lives are affected by many complex interlocking hierarchies', including 'slavery, imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, poverty, racism and apartheid'

(see also Steady, 1993: 97). It is not enough to study gender and sexism, and then to overlap analyses of race, class, age, sexual orientation or ethnicity in an 'additive approach to oppression' (Collins, 1991: 222). Black feminists consider these various forms of oppression as constituting 'one overarching structure of domination' (Collins, 1991: 222) which necessitates a critical analysis in order to elucidate how these various factors relate, and how they serve to justify and perpetuate the subjugation of Black women within all sociohistorical contexts (Brewer, 1993; King, 1988; Riggs, 1994; Weedon, 1999: 152–177).

Although the current third wave of feminism constitutes a 'plurality of feminisms' (Delmar, 1994: 6; Gamble, 1994), Black feminist scholarship and activism have been largely influential (Andermahr et al., 1997: 18–19; Christensen, 1997: 617–619; Friedman, 1995; Heywood and Drake, 1997; Ragone and Twine, 2000; Zavella, 1991). An increasing number of feminists, including archaeologists, have initiated scholarship which analyzes various vectors of difference along with gender and/or sex (e.g. Christensen, 1997; De Lauretis, 1986; Di Leonardo, 1991; Friedman, 1995; Joyce, 2000; Meskell, 1998; 1999, 2000; Moore, 1994; Spencer-Wood, 1992; 1997; Stoler, 1991; Schmidt and Voss, 2000; Weedon, 1999; Wilkie, 1996; in press; Wilkie and Bartoy, 2000). Nonetheless, the work of Black feminists, who speak from their own experiences as a means for working towards their own liberation, continues to offer perspectives relevant to archaeology that are not reproduced in other third-wave feminist scholarship (e.g. Banks, 2000; Collins, 1991; James and Busia, 1993; McClaurin, in press; Radford-Hill, 2000; Slocum, in press; Twine, 1998).

One distinctive dimension of Black women's oppression comes in the form of negative stereotypes and images imposed upon Black womanhood (Banks, 2000; Beaulieu, 1999: 26; Collins, 1991: 7; Freydberg, 1995; Geiger, 1995; hooks, 1981; 1992: 61–77; Radford-Hill, 2000; Rodriguez, 1996: 6; Weedon, 1999: 152–177). The mammy, Jezebel, welfare queen and 'myth of the superwoman' (Wallace, 1978) come to mind as pervasive and damaging stereotypes rooted in the consciousness of American society, and persistent in their ability to render invisible the achievements of Black women (The Combahee River Collective, 1982: 15–16; hooks, 1981; Olds, 1995; Scott, 1982; Vaz, 1995). Such images are challenged first by 'asserting Black women as legitimate subjects of study' and then 'by creating a space for the visible representation of Black women as active participants in the creation of culture, knowledge, and power' (Rodriguez, 1996: 8; see also Terborg-Penn et al., 1987). Thus, Black feminist research is dedicated to revealing and understanding the many ways and means that Black women have struggled to elevate themselves and to serve their communities by pushing for institutional change (e.g. Guy-Sheftall, 1993; Radford-Hill, 2000). At the forefront of such scholarship is the analysis of Black women's labor, and how it has been devalued from times of slavery to the present (Brewer, 1993;

Collins, 1991: 43; Davis, 1990; Harley, 1990; King, 1988: 50). Since Black feminist ideology is inherently concerned with the political power of representation, it represents a perspective that all archaeologists should consider seriously, particularly when making gendered statements about the past.

HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ANALYSIS OF INTERSECTING OPPRESSIONS

Black feminists make conscious efforts to acknowledge their predecessors: the Black women pioneers of both prominence and anonymity who struggled against racism and sexism, and worked to better the lot of African Americans (e.g. Higgenbotham, 1993; Vaz, 1995). Thus, it is common for Black feminists to cite anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells, abolitionist Sojourner Truth and educator Dr Anna Julia Cooper, as well as other early Black women activists (Brewer, 1993: 14; Collins, 1991; Davis, 1990: 3–15; hooks, 1981; Hurtado, 1994: 139–140; King, 1988: 42–43; Riggs, 1994). Reclaiming their voices and diversity of experiences is central to the Black feminist project (Weedon, 1999: 161–165), and it has been possible to do so through the historical record. With historical archaeology, however, we have the potential to recover the vast majority of Black lives who left nothing but the material vestiges of their stories behind.

Historical archaeologists have made substantial inroads over the past 20 years in interpreting race, class, ethnicity, culture and gender (including Deetz, 1995; Delle et al., 2000; Ferguson, 1992; Franklin and Fesler, 1999; Garman, 1994; Joseph, 1993; Orser, 1998; 1999; Perry, 1999; Praetzellis and Praetzellis, 1992; Samford, 1996; Scott, 1994; Singleton, 1999; Thomas, 1998; Wilkie, 1996; 1997; Wurst and Fitts, 1999). Still, the typical approach is to foreground one axis of difference or oppression (for exceptions, see Fesler, 1998; Mullins, 1999a; 1999b; Otto, 1984; Wall, 1999; Wilkie, 1996; in press). Historical archaeology informed by a Black feminist perspective would involve the simultaneous analysis of different vectors of oppression, including gender. Yet, the archaeological study of African Americans has largely omitted gendered research questions, effectively homogenizing their experiences. I turn to my dissertation research (Franklin, 1997a) to underscore this point.

In my study of an eighteenth-century enslaved site in Virginia known as the Rich Neck slave quarter, I chose to conduct a household-oriented study, and considered the intersection of race and culture in the emergence of Afro-Virginian identity formation. I failed to ask, however, 'How did not only race and enslavement, but gender, articulate in the lives of Black women?'. Ex-slave Harriet Jacobs (White, 1991: 101) wrote in her

autobiography: 'Slavery is terrible for men: but it is far more terrible for women. Super-added to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own'. As one historian has noted (Stevenson, 1996), 'Slave women alone experienced sexual exploitation, childbearing and motherhood, and the slaveholders' sexism, each structuring her work and everyday existence' (see also Davis, 1990: 44–45; Joyner, 1991: 61–73; White, 1985; 1991). While I considered the enslaved household and its related activities (e.g. production, distribution, reproduction, etc.), a more critically engaged study would have looked at the social relations regarding these activities, and attempted to discern the experiences of Black women who forged their own sense of womanhood within the context of slavery.

By being both Black and female, Black women were twice condemned and subjugated, by all Whites in general, and then further by Black men (hooks, 1981: 15–49). Enslaved women responded by inventing a different standard of womanhood, one that happened to incorporate traits that Whites also felt were appropriate behavior for their women, such as kindness, selflessness and generosity (Stevenson, 1996; White, 1991). But Black womanhood also placed a premium on self-reliance, strength and resistance, especially towards White male authority (hooks, 1981; Joyner, 1991: 92–95; Schwarz, 1988; Schwartz, 1996; White, 1985; 1991). As Deborah K. King (1988: 50–51) asserted, 'it is black women's well-documented facility to encompass seemingly contradictory role expectations of worker, homemaker, and mother that has contributed to the confusion in understanding black womanhood'. Thus, while enslaved women were expected to labor as hard as enslaved men, we find in the archaeological record that they still managed to make significant contributions to their households.

Archaeological evidence uncovered at Rich Neck included the evidence for foodways (along with indications that gardens and domestic birds were kept), cottage industries involving sewing, carpentry and possibly pottery production, and the maintenance of refuse-free areas for household-related activities (Franklin, 1997a; Walsh, 1997: 103; Westmacott, 1992: 79–82). Enslaved women were known to take the leading role in preparing and distributing food (Fox-Genovese, 1988: 159; Hess, 1992; Mitchell, 1993: 16; Perdue et al., 1976: 154; WPA, 1994: 164, 227; Yentsch, 1994), and influencing the use of space within the slave quarter. Many duties, such as soapmaking, laundry and all facets of food preparation and cooking, took place outdoors where the yard was considered an extension of the house (Edwards, 1998; Gundaker, 1993). These activities were not only vital to the survival of the community, but impacted the slaveowners' bottom line and the local market economy as well (Franklin, in press). Further, enslaved women took it upon themselves to create social networks where child birthing and rearing and other tasks were performed communally (Walsh, 1997: 175; White, 1991). This helped to ensure some stability within the

slave quarter where the breaking up of families loomed as an ever-present threat. Enslaved women therefore played a major role in social reproduction, where boys and girls learned cultural practices, survival strategies and to negotiate their gendered and racialized identities. Because my dissertation did not employ a Black feminist perspective, my interpretations of Rich Neck's enslaved community conflated the experiences of the men, women and children known to have lived there. Although it was not my intention, I nonetheless managed to erase Black women and children from this past.

While my brief example hopefully provides one model for the potential of a Black feminist-inspired archaeology, the latter calls for more. The point of employing feminist theorizing in general is to produce scholarship that leads to social change. As a small number of historical archaeologists recognize, it is crucial that our research seeks to demystify race, gender, and other socially-constructed categories as they existed in the past, and to reveal the driving forces behind the maintenance of structural hierarchies (Epperson, 1990; 1997a; 1997b; Mullins, 1999a; Paynter, 1996; Spencer-Wood, 1992; 1997). By not doing so we essentially normalize these differences and unwittingly provide the fuel needed to further reproduce them in the present.

ISSUES OF HERITAGE AND REPRESENTATION

Historical archaeologists have been largely successful in educating the public about American history through site visitations, and through outreach at historic sites such as Colonial Williamsburg (Edwards-Ingram, 1997; Franklin, 1997b), Annapolis (Leone, 1992; Logan, 1998; Potter, 1994), Monticello (Heath, 1997), the Hermitage, and Mount Vernon (Bograd and Singleton, 1997). We have taken advantage of the Internet to spread information (McDavid, 1999), as well as news media (LaRoche and Blakey, 1997) and popular US magazines such as *National Geographic* and *Archaeology* (Harrington, 1993). Through our efforts many Americans have been introduced to the experiences of African Americans within a range of historical contexts spanning slavery, Reconstruction and beyond the Depression era. And although the public consists of individuals varying in their knowledge of Black history, each comes to us with at least a preconceived notion of what it meant to be Black in the past that ultimately informs their perceptions of who they believe us to be in the present. We archaeologists have the opportunity to influence these perceptions. It is just as a number of scholars have argued: our writing of the past has social and political implications in the present, informing our understanding of who we are, or who we aspire to be, and providing the historical basis for producing and reproducing ourselves, and the societies and nations within which we live

(Blakey, 1995; Gathercole and Lowenthal, 1990; Gero et al., 1983; Kohl, 1995; McDavid and Babson, 1997; Meskell, 1998; Schmidt and Patterson, 1995; Tilley, 1989). That being said, within the US, as one scholar has observed, 'The broad notion of "America" has never really included everybody, all the redefinitions notwithstanding, and the inclusive use of "American" remains ambiguous even today' (Sollors, 1994: 115).

It is no wonder, therefore, that African Americans keep alive Black freedom celebrations (Fabre, 1994), honor 'beacons' such as W.E.B. DuBois and Zora Neale Hurston (Fabre, 1994; Fabre and O'Meally, 1994), invent cultural traditions such as Kwanzaa, and pay homage to historic places associated with significant events or individuals in Black history (Cantor, 1991). These sites of memory link us to our collective African and American heritage, imagined or not, and project our sense of longing to belong in a society where our citizenship is still in question (Franklyn, 1996, 1997; LaRoche and Blakey, 1997). As Fabre and O'Meally (1994: 10) wrote, 'In the quest for identity and the assertion of birthright and ancestry, sites are anchors and frames'. This would include archaeological sites. Thus, while Jamestown is memorialized by White Americans as the birthplace of American civilization with the arrival of English colonists in 1607, for Black Americans it is remembered as the site of the 1619 arrival of the first Africans to the British colonies, and the emergence of chattel slavery (Plunkett, 1994; Sollors, 1994). To visit Jamestown Island today, however, one would be hard-pressed to discover any evidence for the telling of this side of the story. Perhaps this should come as no surprise since slavery is 'the institution that has inspired national amnesia' (Fabre and O'Meally, 1994: 15). It is due to this continued absence and misrepresentation of Black history that, for Black feminists, the issues of heritage, representation and power remain central in the struggle for recognition (Beaulieu, 1999; Collins, 1991; Morrison, 1987; Rodriguez, 1996; Smith, 1982: 164; Walker, 1982).

Debunking the myths and participating in the interpretation and writing of our histories is a necessary mandate in Black feminist scholarship (Collins, 1991; Smith, 1983b). Politically-engaged historical archaeologists recognize the inherent problems of an overwhelmingly White field of practitioners controlling the Black past, and have taken measures to work with African Americans in various facets of their research projects (e.g. Babson, 1997; Derry, 1997; Leone, 1992; Logan, 1992; 1998; McDavid, 1997; Potter, 1994; Wilkie, in press). By and large they have found these partnerships to be engaging, educational and productive, and that the unique perspectives brought to the table by African Americans have proved beneficial in producing far more relevant and potentially transformative histories than was possible without their participation. Clearly, more action is needed as this tends to be the exception rather than the rule. The tenets of Black feminist theorizing can serve as the guidelines for producing reflective, politically

aware and emancipatory narratives of the archaeological pasts where Black experiences are embodied. Any archaeologists concerned with the socio-politics of the discipline should concern themselves with this literature.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

One might argue that the absence of a Black feminist perspective in historical archaeology is directly related to the absence of Black feminist historical archaeologists. This explanation does not suffice, as it suggests that the issues raised by a Black feminist critique could, or should, only be important to Black feminists. US historical archaeology owes its phenomenal growth over the past thirty years in large part due to the study of African Americans, particularly of the plantation South. Critiques generated within the field itself have questioned the construction of knowledge concerning Black diasporic experiences by White archaeologists, and the larger social and political implications of an uncritical archaeology (e.g. McDavid and Babson, 1997; Mrozowski et al., 2000). Still, the fact that the work of Black scholars, and Black feminist intellectuals in particular, has largely been ignored by archaeologists serves to underscore the claim by Black feminists that their work remains subjugated knowledge, pushed to the margins of academia, and deemed irrelevant to the study of Black people (for exceptions see Epperson, in press; Spencer-Wood, 1992; 1997; Wilkie, in press).

The history of anthropology is one tied to neo-colonialism, imperialism and the marginalization and oppression of women and minority groups, and the subfield of historical archaeology potentially shares in this tradition. For without our concerted efforts to transform our discipline through strategies of inclusion and responsibility, we in effect reinvent this highly problematic standard of Western academic scholarship. One need not be a Black feminist in order to take a critical stance, one dedicated to exposing the pervasiveness of racism and sexism in the past, and within the practice of archaeology itself. As Black feminists continue in the struggle for social justice, writing of their experiences from the peripheries, historical archaeologists must no longer turn a blind eye to their participation in the silencing of these voices.

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