

## FORUM

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## Excavating America's Metaphor: Race, Diaspora, and Vindicationist Archaeologies

## ABSTRACT

Over more than a century, African diasporan scholars have defined identity in complex forms that aspire to resist racial essentialism yet stake consequential political claims to collective roots. Historical archaeology has painted a rich picture of the material details of African American life that also refutes black essentialism; however, archaeologists have crafted many utterly fluid African diasporan identities that sometimes fail to examine the global connections, antiracist citizen rights, and concrete cultural heritage long examined by diasporan scholars. An empirically and politically rigorous African diasporan archaeology would be significantly extended by diasporan scholarship's vindicationist and reflective antiracist perspectives. Such an archaeology could disrupt essentialist categories and outline concrete foundations for diasporan identity without lapsing into either particularism or hyperconstructivism.

### "America's Metaphor": Constructing Diasporan Heritage

In the 1950s Richard Wright (1995:74) proclaimed, "the Negro is America's metaphor," arguing that African American heritage and experience was American history told in its most "vivid and bloody terms." Wright underscored that centuries of African American subordination revealed the contradictory and unexamined racist dimension of American democracy that Cornel West (1996:73-74) dubs, "the tragic prerequisite for America itself." Historical archaeology has painted a richly textured picture of the material details of African American life, and this surfeit of scholarship has the potential to pose a powerful reflective vision of the racialized America that Wright critiqued. Archaeology has canvassed displaced Africans' experiences across regional boundaries, class divisions, and gendered lines, but these archaeologies still face social, political, and methodological quandaries. Muddy definitions of diasporan identity and equivocal analysis of race have not always clearly positioned

archaeology in antiracial discourses; historical archaeology uneasily negotiates between African anti-essentialism and the evidence for African cultural persistence; and archaeologists remain attached to narrow empiricism that is not clearly linked to imperialism, displacement, and color line consciousness.

Despite such challenges, African diasporan archaeology has explored some of the most meaningful dimensions of American life and archaeology's disciplinary sociopolitics (Singleton 1995; LaRoche and Blakey 1997; Franklin and McKee 2004; Leone et al. 2005). Since the 1960s, archaeological analyses of the diaspora have introduced some distinctive insight into the relationship between material culture and identity, but diasporan scholars have been wrestling with the fundamental social and intellectual dimensions of diasporization for more than a century. Much like historical archaeologists, those scholars have long contemplated the collective roots of displaced Africans' identities, probed the contemporary political implications of diasporan subjectivity, and confronted the racist ideologies that aspired to marginalize black peoples across the globe. Speaking from a distinctive social and intellectual position fabricated by systematic racist marginalization, diasporan scholars have taken aim on many normative assumptions and have fashioned a quite distinctive picture of life across and along the color line for more than a half millennium. That diasporan scholarship often has been ignored because it is considered politically biased, based on uneven research, or moored in its own essentialist assumptions about Africa and diasporan peoples. Despite genuine dilemmas encountered in some diasporan scholarship, this work still has significant potential implications for the archaeology of any social collective because it confronts the racialized roots of identities, probes how lines of difference are embedded in structural relations, and examines the connection between citizen rights and critical scholarship.

The politics of diasporan archaeology are significantly influenced by how archaeologists define diasporan identity. Like many social scientists, archaeologists are sometimes guilty of what Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper

(2000:11) call “clichéd constructivism,” in which identities are painted as hypercontingent phenomena with no especially substantial collective roots. Potentially powerful archaeological framing concepts like agency, ethnicity, and creolization have often been vaguely defined and clothed in ambiguous references to domination or ideology, which can yield a rather diluted notion of diasporan identity. In some formulations, archaeologies of diasporan identity circumvent issues of power and structural inequality in favor of exceptionally dynamic notions of agency, creolization, and identity that risk making the African diaspora an analytically hollow concept. This fluid identity productively destabilizes the circumscribed diasporan subjects that dominated the pioneering African American archaeologies (and continue to linger in some studies). Nevertheless, historical archaeology is compelled to frame some substantive foundation and structural framework for diasporan identity without lapsing into a hyperconstructivist sense of identity that rejects all claims to African heritage, evades the impact of racialized experience, or minimizes the structural power of racialization.

These are complicated challenges, but different constructions of diasporan identity can yield quite different political effects. Maria Franklin and Larry McKee's (2004) assessment of contemporary diasporan archaeologies acknowledges the wealth of archaeological data and presses researchers to begin mapping out some clear sense of the scholarship's intellectual and political framework. The foundation for such a politicization actually has been well laid by diasporan scholars who have long embedded identity in transnational imperialism and citizen rights, situating processes of cultural and identity change in a direct relationship with concrete state and class interests that reproduce racial privilege. Diasporan scholars have long contemplated comparably new-found archaeological interests in the sociopolitics of knowledge, confronted racialized consciousness, and examined how present-day peoples can use history to interrogate normative assumptions. The most significant shifts in African diasporan archaeology may be promised by a clear formulation of the politics of diasporan identity that pushes beyond narrow empirical particularism and ambiguous notions of social transformation to dismantle implicitly

racialist categories, illuminate an unspoken white backdrop, and reframe American experience by confronting the profound underside of racial inequality. Many archaeologists have recognized that it is untenable to plead naivety about the complexity of racialized identities, ignore the political weight of archaeological knowledge, or wallow in narrowly conceived empirical analyses that are disconnected from broader political issues. Diasporan scholars have blazed a rich intellectual path that suggests how historical archaeology can confront such challenges.

### **Imperialism and Vindicationist Scholarship**

Since the 19th century, African American scholars have wrestled with how to define diasporan identity in a politically self-conscious form that acknowledges some shared basis for collective identity while resisting racist essentialism. The term diaspora did not actually come into widespread use until the 1960s, when it became used to signal African connections across national borders. English-speaking scholars typically wield the concept as an analytic term that unifies African peoples who were displaced over the last half millennium. As a politicizing concept it at least has the potential to frame transnational collectives (Edwards 2000; Patterson and Kelley 2000). Even without employing the term diaspora, though, African American scholars have long confronted the global connections among displaced Africans, assessed the collective black experience, and contemplated the historical originations of African America (Locke 1992). Much of the pioneering African American historiography focused on citizenship claims within the United States and the contradictions of displacement and citizenship among African Americans, and it clearly conceived of this struggle in international terms that reached across national boundaries (Kelley 1999, 2001). In a 1923 article on Haiti, for instance, George W. Brown (1923:134) cut right to the heart of transnational connections, arguing, “We do not generally speak of American imperialism. ... Imperialism in the United States, the land of the free and the home of the brave, seems ironical [emphasis in original].” Brown (1923:151) confronted globalization and its connection to diasporan politics, long before it became a scholarly staple, wondering, “Are we to pursue the ideals of ‘All men are created

free and equal' with the equally idealistic form of government, or are we to keep pace with our commercial and economic expansion and accept the complementary program of economic imperialism?"

W.E.B. Du Bois spent much of his rich intellectual career examining the complicated connections within the diasporan world. In 1925, for instance, Du Bois (1925:434) underscored the structural and psychological power of global imperialist racial ideology, noting in Sierra Leone that "Everything that America has done crudely and shamelessly to suppress the Negro, England in Sierra Leone has done legally and suavely so that the Negroes themselves sometimes doubt the evidence of their own senses: segregation, disfranchisement, trial without jury, over-taxation, 'Jim Crow' cars, neglect of education, economic serfdom." Du Bois (1925:444) painted a diaspora whose conflicted racialized consciousness undermined "the evidence of their own senses," while he also positioned Sierra Leone within a global economy linked directly to a color line across which "the oligarchy that owns organized industry owns and rules England, France, Germany, America, and Heaven. And it fastens this ownership by the Color-Line." Many African American thinkers recognized that imperialism was the vehicle for racism and marginalization, so they were suspicious of nationalism as an intellectual framework because manifest destiny attempted to alienate people to shared racist domination (Kelley 1999). Scholars like Du Bois contributed to an emergent sense of shared transnational experience and conflicted racial consciousness that articulately drew connections between African Americans and broader black communities.

A vast volume of the pioneering diaspora history was a consciously "vindicationist" scholarship meant to counter racist historical narratives (Franklin 1946:65; Bruce 1984:687; Butchart 1988; Kelley 1999; Franklin and Collier-Thomas 2002). For instance, the landmark *History of the Negro Race in America* by George W. Williams (1883:vi) aspired to "give the world more correct ideas of the Colored people, and incite the latter to greater effort in the struggle of citizenship and manhood." Carter Woodson (1919:275), surveying dominant histories of African America, echoed Williams when he said, "There is little effort to set forth what the race

has thought and felt and done as a contribution to the world's accumulation of knowledge and the welfare of mankind." Woodson (1919:276) saw African American history as a corrective with concrete political effects and argued that unexamined racist histories rationalized "the increase of race prejudice to the extent that the North has become about as lawless as the South in its treatment of the Negro." Among postwar scholars, St. Clair Drake was perhaps the most prominent African American thinker who saw his work as explicitly vindicationist and considered scholarship appropriately engaged in political struggle (Foster 1997). In a late-career retrospective, Drake (1978:92) indicated "the question uppermost in my mind was whether anthropology was of any value in 'advancing the race' ... and anthropology did seem to have some 'vindicationist' value." For Drake (1980:10) the tradition reached back into the earliest diasporan narratives that "sought to disprove slander, answer pejorative allegations, and criticize pseudo-scientific generalizations about people of African descent." Drake (1987:2) believed that vindicationist scholarship took much of its rhetorical power from its overt politicization, arguing that when diasporan scholarship "is neither vindicationist nor polemical, mainstream historians and social scientists have, traditionally, looked askance at it." He championed a rigorous vindicationist scholarship, but he also saw in it a distinctive form of textual representation and politicization that separated it from mainstream scholarship.

Vindicationist histories charted many political paths, but most wielded the authoritative voice of scholarship to outline various forms of diasporan solidarity rooted in African heritage, antiracist resistance, enslavement, or some combination of those processes. Some of the early scholarship was based on uneven research materials and academic preparation, but this clearly does not repudiate all the early scholarship. When Williams began his study, for example, he "was surprised and delighted to find that the historical materials of the Negro were so abundant and so creditable," and he clearly mined a rich range of primary resources throughout the United States (Franklin 1946:65). Arturo (Arthur) Schomburg (1925) considered his role to be the "vindication of the Negro race." By amassing one of the nation's richest libraries of African and Afri-

can American scholarly materials, Schomburg made many generations of scholarship possible (Kelley 1999:1057–1058). Criticism of diasporan scholars' source materials has often been thinly veiled skepticism of the antiracist politics found in African American scholarship. Politicization of scholarship has always been viewed warily, especially when it illuminates the fundamental inequalities of the color line, so many of these scholars defended their research in hopes that it would not be ignored simply because it was penned by a scholar of color. Williams (1883:x), for instance, felt compelled to preempt racial critics when he argued, "I can assure them that I have been actuated by none other spirit than that of candor." Intensely committed to objectivity (Franklin 1946:70), Williams (1883:x) maintained that his motivation was "Not as a blind panegyrist of my race, nor as a partisan apologist, but from a love for '*the truth of history*,' I have striven to record the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" [emphasis in original].

Some African American historiography in this vein was overwhelmingly focused on demonstrating diasporan peoples' contributions to American society as a mechanism to secure citizenship without necessarily dispelling the racialized foundation for American citizen claims. Consequently, those accounts undermined racist stereotypes, but they tended to retain a black subject defined in some relatively coherent terms and failed to attack the fundamental antiblack racism inherent in citizenship. In 1900, for example, Booker T. Washington (1900:182) indicated,

We have reached a period when educated Negroes should give more attention to the history of their race; should devote more time to finding out the true history of the race, and in collecting in some museum the relics that mark its progress. It is true of all races of culture and refinement and civilisation that they have gathered in some place the relics which mark the progress of their civilisation, which show how they lived from period to period.

Washington believed that the ascent of African America to citizen privileges and museum worthiness would be based on white Americans' recognition of their debt to and reliance on Africa America. Yet many observers were skeptical that an African American history that documented

diasporan contributions to American society would motivate whites to extend genuine civil privileges to African America. L. D. Reddick (1937:23–24) sarcastically rejected the suggestion that "If we will work a little harder, save a little more, establish a few more businesses, and *get educated*, we will some day receive our rightful place at the table of Democracy, praise God from whom all blessings flow [emphasis in original]!" Reddick (1937:24) aspired to an African American history that challenged "The inferential lesson ...: that diligence, faithfulness and discretion on the part of individuals and the group will, in time, bring their rewards." Reddick (1937:27) believed that many early African American thinkers like Booker T. Washington at least unintentionally lapsed into a "rather naïve Emersonian gospel of self-reliance, simple optimism and patient regard for destiny." Instead, he advocated focusing on "the record of the clashes and rationalizations of individual and group impulse against an American social order of an unfolding capitalism, within which operates semiarticulate arrangements and etiquettes of class and caste" (Reddick 1937:26).

Reddick (1937:27–28) aspired to fashion a history that confronted both the broad social structures of globalization and everyday life, concluding, "if Negro history is to escape the provincial nature of its first phases, it will surely *re-define the area of subject matter in terms of a larger focus* [emphasis in original]." To be truly transgressive, a vindicationist account should chart the possibilities of a heritage told in similarly broad terms that are not limited to and may step outside of racial subjectivity; otherwise, the vindicationist account simply risks lapsing into renewed racialism as it deconstructs particular black stereotypes and replaces them with newly seamless grand narratives. While not all of the earliest diasporan scholarship was necessarily transgressive in this sense, Robin D. G. Kelley (1999) argues persuasively that this broad corpus of thought shared a common and truly subversive interest in dismantling the way in which black subjectivity had been constructed in European racist discourses.

Archaeologists often have obliquely critiqued deep-seated racist stereotypes. In 1923, for instance, Gordon Blaine Hancock (1923:285) saw African archaeology as a clear repudiation of racist representation, arguing "when archaeology

as a searchlight was turned upon Africa there was occasion of surprise when that Dark land yielded evidence of a civilization that antedated the arrival of the Europeans." James Deetz (1977:154) championed a vision of African Americans at Parting Ways as "bearers of a lifestyle distinctively their own" that clearly contrasted to the stereotype of "simple folk living in abject poverty." This view is perhaps a typical archaeological perspective that tacitly positions the discipline as a rebuttal to antiblack racism without necessarily outlining those racial presumptions or voicing the implications of unseating racist stereotypes. Laurie Wilkie (2004:111) comes somewhat closer to a vindicationist perspective when she argues that archaeologists "need to continue to challenge assumptions about the plantation past. ... These stories are of interest because they complicate history; they do not conform to people's vision of what the past was." Only a handful of archaeologists, however, have championed an explicitly vindicationist research design. Michael L. Blakey (2004:98) consciously positions the African Burial Ground project as "critical theory in the vindicationist vein [that] allows the interpretations to be scrutinized, empowering factual information through scientific and other scholarly research." Mark Mack and Blakey (2004:14) depict the African Burial Ground's corrective as a humanization of captive Africans, which secures cultural and historical originations, underscores the brutality of enslavement, and empowers contemporary descendants by making them stewards who both resurrect and preserve this heritage. Warren Perry's (1999:13–14) archaeological analysis of the 19th-century Zulu state also positions his interpretation articulately within a vindicationist perspective that both African American and African scholars have used to repudiate European analysis of social disruption and state formation in southern Africa.

Most African American archaeology positions itself against a more ambiguous backdrop, aspiring to develop a richer empirical picture of African American life, not one that consciously counters dominant narratives or takes either racialization or racist stereotypes as its targets. Critical vindicationist scholarship, in contrast, is based on both an articulate political position and a consciousness of the conditions under which

diasporan knowledge is produced. In 1845, for instance, the preface to Frederick Douglass's autobiography by Wendell Phillips (1845:xxi) recounted

the old fable of "The Man and the Lion," where the lion complained that he should not be so misrepresented "when the lions wrote history." I am glad the time has come when the "lions write history." We have been left long enough to gather the character of slavery from the involuntary evidence of the masters.

Vindicationist scholarship usually recognizes that epistemic advantages are conferred by particular social experiences; using Phillips's example, "lions" like Douglass organized experience in forms that did not conform to dominant modes of representation. Assuming a vindicationist perspective confers some epistemic privileges for agents who are positioned in particular ways by racial ideology and who bring distinctive insight based on their positioning. It does not, however, imply epistemic authority that is utterly limited to identity collectives defined by experience or some essentialist claim to knowledge. Acknowledging the privileged insights of particular experiences along the color line also does not ignore that all critical scholars are part of a racialized society and can potentially bring distinctive insights to an interpretation of race.

Simply recognizing history as racist or dispelling stereotypes is not an end in itself (Perry and Paynter 1999:302). In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois (1935:713) devoted a chapter to history as racist propaganda, noting that the average American student "would in all probability complete his education without any idea of the part which the black race has played in America." Du Bois pushed beyond the simple recognition that history was biased and argued for a reflective account of how racism rationalizes contemporary inequalities *along* the color line, reaching into black and white lives alike. Du Bois (1935:714–715) used Charles and Mary Beard's *Rise of American Civilization* as an example of ideologically laden histories, critiquing how the Beards' assessment of Reconstruction's aftermath provided

a comfortable feeling that nothing right or wrong is involved. Manufacturing and industry develop in the North; agrarian feudalism develops in the South. ... Yet in this sweeping mechanistic interpretation, there is no room for the real plot of the story, for the clear

mistake and guilt of rebuilding a new slavery of the working class in the midst of a fateful experiment in democracy; for the triumph of sheer moral courage and sacrifice in the abolition crusade; and for the hurt and struggle of degraded black millions in their fight for freedom and their attempt to enter democracy. Can all this be omitted or half suppressed in a treatise that calls itself scientific?

Du Bois was outlining a narrative that would relate the undersides of history by illuminating the normative categories and assumptions that perpetuated and rationalized inequality. This maneuver undercut stereotypes in standard vindicationist form, but it also provided the possibility to redefine social relationships and illuminate unexamined systems of difference that might weave American history in a much different form.

Terrence Epperson (2004:102–103) argues that there is a pervasive archaeological reluctance to embrace such scholarship because it cuts to the very heart of American color privilege and is grounded in stakeholders' distinctive political positioning. Yet when archaeologists even unintentionally evade race's position at the heart of American social life, the discipline fails to examine how race has been systematically effaced in historical archaeology, and this seems highly unlikely to produce a socially or politically relevant diasporan heritage (Potter 1991). Archaeologists have not ignored race; however, it has tended to be defined as one dimension of identity and detached from dominant transnational processes that have significantly structured all lives. Mixed into an ambiguous notion of identity without particularly clear connections to material conditions or political positioning, race remains rather unexamined. Racialization's reach into other identities and contemporary social relations passes mostly without comment.

#### Politics of Diasporan Consciousness

Historical archaeologists often have championed agency to counter the dehumanizing potential of empirical analysis, structuring processes, or identity totalities that imply passivity (Hodder 2000:22). Agency also is essential to most diasporan perspectives that aspire to interpret African lives in terms not dictated by colonizers or European discourses. Agency, however, recurrently surfaces in archaeologi-

cal analysis in forms that caricature people as self-empowered individuals intentionally crafting ever-hybridizing identities. In the wake of de-essentialized subjects, the newly empowered individual resists domination in locally specific ways and fabricates identity in highly contingent and contextualized forms. This turn toward a highly individual agency extends a well-established archaeological tradition to illuminate the unspoken experiences of the masses within and against dominant narratives. The archaeological details of everyday diasporan agency, however, risk becoming detached from the concrete structural impressions of global racism and Atlantic cultural connections that remain at the heart of almost all diasporan scholarship. Elevating the individual agent may have its own problematic political impacts if archaeologists reproduce a distinctly European sense of individualism, and if diasporan archaeologies fail to address globality, they risk losing significant sociopolitical power (Meskell 2002:285).

African American scholars have often focused on similar issues in terms of consciousness within and against racialization. The division of consciousness was a familiar subject among diasporan thinkers who were negotiating the contradictions between black and white worlds, America and Africa, and similar racialized dualities (Du Bois 1897b:194). Du Bois influenced much of this scholarship in his definition of race's capacity to destabilize various senses of black identity. Posed this way, the scholarly questions about agency were less about how willful agents acted; rather, they revolved around how race and structural influences enabled certain forms of agency, on the one hand, and how resistant experience fostered its own distinct sense of agency within, against, and potentially outside of a racialized society on the other hand. For instance, Du Bois (1897a:11) saw race undermining African American claims to citizenship, arguing that

No Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed ... to ask himself at some time: What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates black and white America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American?

For many thinkers, racialization constructed black and African as identities polarized to American and citizen, so developing a critical awareness of the divisions in identity created by racism was a key scholarly focus.

Historic archaeology's turn to agency often wrestles with the tension between, on the one hand, individuality and highly localized social circles and, on the other hand, broader collective identity, forcing analysts to assess the degree to which people live within and against collective ascribed identity categories (Appiah 1999:613; Dornan 2002:315). Historical archaeologists, driven by both the interest in agency and individual experience, have typically favored the local experience. For instance, Wilkie's (2000a:239) analysis of African American families in postbellum Louisiana aspires to examine "the diverse experiences of individuals in the past" in a way that "can also come to see the commonalities that drew them together." Wilkie recognizes historical archaeology's distinctive strengths and focuses on the most mundane commodities as the principal material mechanisms to interpret everyday life. For Wilkie (2000a:239), this "microscale contextual" perspective frames culture and identity as the "fluid product of complex interactions and negotiations between social agents with distinct histories and agendas." This perspective grants a considerable amount of power to everyday actions and peoples' conscious perceptions of themselves and their local collectives, which focuses on everyday life and agency in ways that complement reflective diasporan histories. Wilkie (2000a:4) also voices a commonplace feeling among archaeologists who are leery of structural determinism, indicating that archaeological analysis can most profitably frame identity as "the way that individuals define and present themselves." In this vein, she argues that "race should be seen as a distinct facet of identity," which defines racism in terms of each individual's distinctive contextual experience. This provides interesting insights into the material details of everyday life, yet the focus on constructivist individualities risks eliding broader diasporan social processes. Wilkie acknowledges that resistance is a central thread in diasporan identity, and linking such resistance to dominant structuring influences seems essential to any consequential archaeology of agency. Wilkie

defines resistance in quite expansive terms, though, much as Leland Ferguson (1992) paints a penetrating culture of resistance among African Americans. The challenge to such broadly based notions of resistance and agency is to distinguish clearly between the political implications of different resistant acts or moments of conscious agency and relate them back to broader structural conditions.

There are complicated effects to forging a European sense of individuality that does not confront the relationship between race and agency or the power of racial consciousness among diasporan peoples. In 1954, James Baldwin (2004:191) ruminated over the tension between his sense of his own "real" individuality and an imposed collective racial identity in African America. Baldwin suggested that he left the United States because "I wanted to find out in what way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them [emphasis in original]." Baldwin was uncomfortably situated in the margins between the authenticity he gave to his individual experience and the effacing effects of racism that drove him to question that very experience. Baldwin argued that he was as disassociated from African Americans as whites, "which is what happens when a Negro begins, at bottom, to believe what white people have to say about him." J. Saunders Redding also believed in a conflicted racial consciousness, but he believed that African Americans recognized authentic experienced identities and tactically concealed them in white public space. Redding (1992:18) remembered that in his youth "We Negroes were aliens, and we knew it, and the knowledge forced us to assume postures of defense and to take on a sort of double-consciousness. It was not a matter of real ambivalence, or a question of identity: we knew who we were. But we feared to act ourselves."

Many of the archaeologists who are rethinking diasporan identity have taken aim on ethnicity in hopes of charting an anti-essentialist identity. Ethnicity is indeed an exceptionally problematic archaeological framework when it is applied as it once was in "ethnic markers" research (Howson 1990; Singleton 1999:4; Paynter 2000:180; Leone et al. 2005). Today, however, ethnicity is often invoked as a rhetorical device: In an ostensible warning against essentialism,

archaeologists caution that ethnicity has been reduced to a static identity, which rationalizes a focus on isolated local contexts and tends to ignore ethnicity entirely. Yet ethnicity certainly does refer to genuine historically shared experiences and practices rooted in collectively articulated identity, and those analyses that link its active construction within structural power relations seem to provide the most interesting uses of the notion. In his analysis of Japanese ethnicity, for instance, Mark Hudson (1999:2) argues that ethnic formation processes illuminate consequential social tensions between imagined hopes and concrete realities. Hudson focuses on ethnic construction, which he calls ethnogenesis, arguing that it does fabricate "imagined" collectives, but it does so in direct reference to historical realities. Alison Bell (2005) uses the notion of ethnogenesis to argue that the emergence of capitalism in the Chesapeake was dependent on the construction of white racial solidarity. In this formulation that turns the analysis of racism back to the fabrication of a white norm, ethnic identity and racial categories became mutually dependent phenomena that cannot easily be unraveled or dubbed either genuine or imposed. Bell argues that shifts in late-17th-century Chesapeake architecture were direct reflections of emergent senses of white solidarity that were simultaneously being coded in racist law. In Bell's assessment, race functions as something more complex than simply ideological rationalization for capitalism's inequalities. Instead, the formation of racial identity actually slowed capitalism's initial emergence in the short run as Anglo colonists negotiated the tense balance between individual commitment to profit and a desire to fabricate collective identity. Terrance Weik (2004:36) likewise structures his analysis of Maroon identity around the notion of ethnogenesis, but he uses the concept less to outline new class-interested collective identities than as a framework for the chaotic sorts of social change that are the core of diasporan experience. Weik paints a picture of ethnogenesis that examines emergent identities within complicated power relations, which are characterized by discontinuities, abrupt transformations, and moments of rapid displacement and disruption that provide no easy way to model sociocultural transformation. Importantly, Weik faces up to the methodological challenge of transferring elegant

theory to concrete patterns, but his response is cleverly counter-intuitive. Weik (2004:43) suggests that social collectives forming in contexts of great instability and rapid transformation may be most clearly illuminated by archaeological evidence for sheer *randomness* in artifact and spatial patterns, rather than by consistent repeatable patterns within these collectives.

Thinkers like Baldwin, Wright, and Du Bois all confronted racialization and did not disconnect it from diasporan consciousness. They situated various forms of agency and individuality in a direct relationship with racism. The challenge for an archaeology of diasporan agency or individuality is that it must establish concrete links with specific historically distinct racializing structures, or it risks imposing a dominant ideological sense of self and devolving into solipsism that risks misunderstanding or ignoring how any person is racialized. This seems especially problematic for an archaeology of the diaspora that is committed to linking experiences of racism to the systemic structures that create and reproduce racism throughout societies.

### Creolization and Hybridization

Studies of cultural transformation have long been a staple of archaeological scholarship, but diasporan contexts present especially radical displacement, sociocultural complexity, and lines of power that are collectively complicated by their reach into contemporary social life and dominant scholarly representations. Historical archaeologies routinely bog down in a methodological effort to define diasporan identity, aspiring to portray diasporization as a dynamic social process while simultaneously capturing its static face in material culture rooted in particular moments and consumption contexts. Much of the archaeological literature examining identity hybridization refers to this process as creolization. Creolization approaches typically envision some form of collective "mixing" that constructs a cultural grammar or a self-conscious identity (Dawdy 2000; Ferguson 2000). Some studies approach creolization as the fabrication of a new cultural entity in the context of colonial interactions. In Judy Birmingham's (2000:362) characterization, for instance, creolization produces a new cultural synthesis when "indigenous and adopted cultural elements blend into a new mixed culture, often



of extreme vigour, which differs from both its predecessors." Most archaeological formulations, though, seem to follow more closely [Edward] Kamau Brathwaite's (1971) definition of creolization as a hybridizing process that is relatively inchoate and distinct from notions of hybridity as a conscious and often subversive process (Young 1995). Ferguson (1999:116–117) focuses on the consciously incorporative dimensions of creolization, emphasizing "the creative character of early American, including African American, culture. In creating their American subculture, African Americans drew from African, European, and Native American culture and combined these into a new and unique way of life." Ferguson (2000:7) sees the earliest creolization studies following Brathwaite's path, which borrows from linguistically influenced models of cultural change in which "artifacts were comparable to the words of language and the ways these artifacts were used was likened to the structure or grammar of language." Grey Gundaker (2000:132) defends this notion of a cultural grammar but warns that the "languages" deployed by various agents can be quite rich and include complex reconfigurations and recontextualizations of both things and meaning. In this vein, Shannon Dawdy (2000) aspires to frame creolization in terms that foreground vernacular, "emic" experiences of creolizing transformation that focus on how people in specific contexts negotiate dominant structural factors.

Charles Orser (2004:20–21) views all of these definitions of creolization warily, suggesting that creolization is normally reduced to defining newly circumscribed identity collectives. Orser (2004:21) describes creolization as a "collectivity of difference" that acknowledges fluidity and social processes yet remains tethered to an unspoken sense of stability and internal concord that can be identified through proper empirical analysis. Orser suggests that creolization tends to construct identity collectives that are synthetic yet nevertheless merged totalities, and scholarship on these hybrid collectives poses no redefinition of dominant social groups because it rarely confronts how dominant culture itself is transformed by creolization (Anthias 2001:39). Gundaker (2000:126) sounds a comparable warning that archaeological studies of creolization tend to focus on a mechanical notion that identity is arrayed along a single continuum marked

by material commodities and symbolized through distinctly Eurocentric notions like wealth and poverty. Creolization has considerable interpretive potential, but it has typically posed a rather undefined sense of "interaction" and tended to yield ambiguous identities that are disconnected from structural power conditions.

The cases of Chesapeake pipes and colonoware are among the best examples of such identity debates over cultural mixing and transformation in African American archaeology (Ferguson 1992). The scholarship on these low-fired ceramics illuminates many of the challenges archaeologists face in defining identities that break with normative racial subjects while simultaneously connecting these newly formulated subjects to broader social processes. Most discussion of these vessels has focused on literal attribution of the artifacts to their producers, and the suggestion that they were manufactured only or primarily by African Americans has often been viewed skeptically or bitterly contested (Singleton and Bograd 2000). Matthew Emerson (1999) has interpreted many pipes made in the Chesapeake as products made by captive Africans who inscribed them with a variety of African motifs, an analysis echoed by Deetz (1993). Emerson (1999:56) concedes that Indians made stylistically similar pipes, but he argues that his Chesapeake pipes share aesthetics reflecting "a mental competence that has clear antecedents in a generalized decorating tradition in West Africa." L. Daniel Mouer and colleagues (1999) fire back a complicated methodological, stylistic, and theoretical salvo by progressively demolishing every aesthetic attribute on Chesapeake pipes that has been linked to African precedents and concluding the pipes cannot be stylistically attributed to any social group with reasonable certainty. The researchers champion the pipes as stylistic examples of cultural interaction among American Indians, the African diaspora, and Europeans. They productively write the death of stable ethnicities and ask what pipes and colonoware actually represented within social processes, but those processes end up being rather ambiguously defined as the analysis focuses on the empirical dilemmas of defining identity continuities and influences. Mouer and colleagues embrace historical archaeology's established empirical strengths by defending systematic and critical methodology, counseling

archaeologists to carefully draw relationships between things and identity, and advocating identities that have some culturally distinct aesthetics. This results in somewhat circumspect methodology, such as when they argue that “no evidence has been established that disproves that these artifacts were made by the Chesapeake’s Indian peoples for their own use and trade,” leaving colonoware and pipes disconnected from their makers and consumers alike and positioned within an ambiguously defined creolized society (Mouer et al. 1999:84). Singleton and Bograd’s (2000) definition of colonoware as an “intercultural artifact” likewise wrestles with the challenge of situating identity and transformation in social space, but Singleton and Bograd invest a significant dimension of diasporan influence in colonoware’s manufacture and consumption. The challenge facing such constructivist analyses is to identify some concrete foundation for collective identity. Mouer and colleagues (1999) demolish African precedent and position diasporan identity within a broadly defined creolized experience.

This perspective borrows from Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1992), who invest the essential formative dimensions of African American life in experiences following the Middle Passage and reject facile connections between Africa and the New World. The degree to which diasporan peoples might be called “African” is indeed socially and methodologically complicated, and the question has been at the center of diasporan historiography over the life of the genre. There has long been a tendency to distinguish between notions of African unities driving subsequent diasporan culture and definitions of creolized cultures rooted in the world following the Middle Passage, but the two conceptions of diasporan influences are clearly both necessary to the understanding of diasporan identity (Mann 2001:6). Archaeologists certainly have examined a vast volume of material evidence connecting displaced Africans across the Atlantic. Those potential African influences, though, have been drawn in essentialist and hyperconstructivist modes alike that have painted Africa as an all-encompassing influence on diasporan life as well as a long-lost precedent that was never especially unified in the first place. Many archaeological analyses of African originations focus on the methodological dilemmas of linking poorly

documented African contexts to a vast range of New World archaeological sites, which confronts how scholars evoke Africa in material analysis (Posnansky 1984). In a measured methodological march through archaeological scholarship on Africanisms, Mark Hauser and Christopher DeCorse (2003:70) argue that proving African continuities is profoundly problematic because of “the absence of any African antecedents ... during the relevant period of enslavement.” They are especially wary of unsubstantiated claims to African roots, suggesting that in many cases “the identification of supposed African characteristics has been solely inferred on the basis of features that are seen, correctly or incorrectly, as outside the realm of Euro-American traditions and thus ‘African.’” DeCorse (1999:144) has similarly questioned the attribution of blue beads found in African American contexts to African-based Islamic practice, acknowledging that beads are commonplace in African contexts but cautioning that their linkage to specific African practices at best offers “one of many alternative interpretations.” Hauser and DeCorse (2003:94) are leery of broad archaeologically imposed stylistic categories like colonoware and Chesapeake pipes that impose identity uniformity on the makers of vessels that may share only scattered aesthetic characteristics, which “allows only the most tenuous statements to be made about continuities” from Africa to the Americas. The vision of diasporan identity that Hauser and DeCorse are crafting is a contextually contingent, local experience that rigorously defines African continuities and is suspicious of archaeologies that “recognize” African identity in reconfigured forms.

Diasporan scholars have always considered some sense of “Africa” to be central to diasporan identity, which must have a material form, and this scholarship cannot be summarily dismissed because of politics or source materials. Michael Gomez (1998:9), for example, does not dismiss the hybridization that occurred among enslaved African peoples and their descendants; however, he argues that they forged a “polycultural” New World identity based on longstanding intra-African ethnic distinction with clear cultural and spiritual roots in West and Central Africa. Gomez suggests that diverse African peoples shared powerful cultural similarities based on factors such as African proximity, trade

route relations, and cosmologies. Gomez argues against ambiguous cultural syncretism models and instead champions the notion that African Americans negotiated a "culture of coercion" directed by slaveholders while they simultaneously maintained a mostly concealed "culture of volition" that reproduced African ancestral heritage. In a similar vein, James Sweet (2003) argues that Central Africans enslaved in Brazil shared a powerful and persistent cultural tradition, rooted in Mbundu origins, that was transferred to the New World. Sweet (2003:230) indicates that the Portuguese "had no antidote to the African spiritual arsenal" and "actually energized these alternative, counter-hegemonic spiritual forces" in attempts to eradicate those African practices from enslaved communities. This leads Sweet (2003:230) to conclude that "the impact of Christianity on Africans was no greater than the impact of African beliefs on Christians." Sweet (2003:229) suggests "it is no longer evident that we should start from a premise of creolization when analyzing slave culture in the diaspora. Rather, we should assume that specific African cultural forms and systems of thought survived intact. We should then assess these disparate cultural and ethnic streams and attempt to chart the *process* of creolization [emphasis in original]." This poses a model of creolization that critically assesses power relations while taking African originations seriously and not posing artificially synthesized collectives.

Many archaeologists carefully assess untroubled fabrications of African (or creolized) identity and are cautious about the concrete ways in which material culture demonstrates historical persistence and discontinuities. The dilemma is that this circumspection tends to recognize specific material forms of African persistence and is slow to grasp the reconfigurations of material symbolism in diasporan hands. Such a bounded notion of diasporan identity that revolves around continuity tends to reduce and resolve difference and discord within diasporic collectives, producing the essentialist collective that most scholars ostensibly reject (Edwards 2000:49). One approach to dismantling and complicating identities is to identify African influences that may have no concrete African precedent yet are nevertheless invested in African symbolism. For instance, James M. Davidson's (2004)

analysis of pierced coins from a Dallas cemetery examines the African roots for coin piercing, which is well documented in the WPA narratives and has often been defined as a classic example of African continuation. Yet Davidson documents a long heritage of coin piercing in the British Isles that has been ignored by most folklorists, and he acknowledges that there is no clear precedent for African use of such coins in the 16th through 18th centuries. Davidson still concludes that there are African precedents for coin piercing, but they are not wholesale continuations of African practice. Instead, African ritual practices (including a favor for reflective objects, flat circular forms, and coins' geometric similarity to Bakongo cosmograms) may have motivated captive Africans and their descendants to incorporate the European coin charm tradition. It is clear that historically concrete African originations were in the consciousness of many diasporan peoples, but as Davidson illustrates, the archaeological challenge revolves around how archaeologists can evoke those origins.

Some archaeologists see African influences (if not concrete precedents) embedded in a vast range of social and material practices across time. Mark Leone and Gladys-Marie Fry (1999), for instance, draw on a scholarship of conjuration and hoodoo that borrows heavily from the WPA narratives and usually points to precolonial Kongolesse cosmologies. Leone and Fry (1999:383) construct hoodoo conjuration as an enduring practice potentially invested in any object, so it has profound methodological implications when they advocate that "we have to look more thoroughly, with eyes attuned to the importance of objects such as pins and buttons at door sills." They pose conjuration as the evidence of diasporan resistance to racism and enslavement and see it as a contrasting spiritual system to Christianity. Yvonne Patricia Chireau (2003) outlines a similarly all-encompassing black spirituality, but she argues that African spiritualities *supplemented* rather than defied the Christianities most African Americans adopted. Much like Leone and Fry, she argues that the relationship between conjuration and Christian faith was embedded in all everyday meanings. In Chireau's analysis, conjuring looms as a politically important scholarship because it resurrects African spiritualities that surround all Americans yet remain unrecognized. This significantly com-

plicates what constitutes a symbolic connection to Africa in material goods, because it focuses on consumer meanings invested in objects and tends to see commodities and everyday things as mostly empty symbolic vessels.

Timothy Ruppel and colleagues (2003:324–325) argue similarly that seemingly commonplace spaces such as gardens were “encoded with resonant meanings that disputed notions of dependence, subservience, and inferiority” in what the researchers label a “diasporic transcript” that was “hidden in plain view.” They advocate the WPA narratives as the essential mechanism for “decoding” these hidden symbolisms that reflect African cultural persistence (even then, though, interpreting the narratives is itself socially situated). A move toward such a broadly Africanized symbolism invested in the breadth of the material world could very significantly shift how archaeologists define material symbolism. Some of the archaeological analyses in this vein argue that even the most quotidian things may have African-influenced symbolism that is ignored by dominant archaeological frameworks such as cost-status or ethnic marker identification. Laura Galke (2000), for example, examines mass-produced goods within a *minkisi* deposit and argues that specific English ceramics were chosen because their color palettes and aesthetics evoked BaKongo symbols, with no clear concern for where or by whom the vessels were actually produced. Wilkie (2000b) similarly sees everyday African American ceramic choices as reflections of a deep-seated African cultural “grammar.” The challenge such studies pose is to show how African symbolism lurks within objects that are disassociated from Africa because they are mass-produced goods or are found in commonplace contexts like sheet refuse, rather than in features such as *minkisi*. At the same time, if such broadly redrawn Africanized symbolism does not clearly acknowledge the impact of structural racism, it risks imposing its own essentialism by lapsing into equally universal characterizations drawing on an unproblematized Africa.

The recognition of ongoing identity transformations is very much in keeping with many diasporan definitions that focus on continual hybridity (Patterson and Kelley 2000), but it is always worth spelling out in the most specific

terms exactly what constitutes that “process” and critically assessing how the social notion of Africa is being deployed in identity politics. For most reflective diasporan thinkers, Africa was not a monolithic entity; its connection to diasporan identity was complex; and it was impossible to ignore Africa’s position within transnational systems of inequality. In 1922, James Weldon Johnson questioned the ways in which Marcus Garvey wielded African heritage as an essentialist unifying force with contemporary political implications, criticizing a Garvey event ostensibly intended to

remind the Negro race of what are considered the past glories of Ethiopia and the future possibilities of Africa. As regrettable as it might be, we are nevertheless faced with the fact that past glories of Ethiopia, however great they may have been, will not fit into the future possibilities of Africa (Wilson 1995:133).

At the end of a distinguished career that was constantly focused on political engagement in antiracist discourses, Drake also was wary of facile appeals to African identity and concerned that Afrocentric discourses lapsed into racist ideologies (Gaines 2002:3). African American thinkers usually have aspired to construct diasporan connections that were not based on simplistic appeals to African essentialism. In 1935, for instance, Ralph Bunche was quoted in *The Chicago Defender* (1935:4) as arguing that the

“idea of uniting the darker people of the worlds ... is pretty fanciful.” He contended that there is much less in common between the American Negro and the native African than there is between the American Negro and the American white man.

Bunche appealed to Americans to contest European incursions into Africa, not based on essential racial affinities but because “imperialistic nations ... have gone into West Africa under various guises, such as bringing new and better life to people, ‘the sort of thing Mussolini says he is seeking to go into Ethiopia to do.’” This placement of Africa within a broader imperial framework grounding racism and inequality across social groups was a common theme in African American history, and it would seem ideally suited to similar prominence in archaeological analysis (Brawley 1921:366).

### Comfort and Theft

In his introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis*, Wright (1945:xxv) argued that whites had failed to confront their uneasiness with racial domination, suggesting that "they feel the essential loneliness of their position which is built upon greed, exploitation, and a general denial of humanity; they feel the naked untenability of their split consciousness, their two-faced moral theories spun to justify their right to dominate." Popular discourses on African America have often reflected simultaneous white fascination with and apprehension of blackness, and it is unreasonable to suggest that historical archaeologists can maneuver around this heritage. Eric Lott's (1993) analysis of black minstrelsy refers to these contradictory tendencies as "love and theft," arguing that whites' powerful curiosity about black life belies an apprehension of people of color that moves whites to appropriate elements of African American lifeways.

There has not been an especially critical analysis of how and why archaeologists invoke diasporan identity, particularly the implications of scholarship conducted along and across the color line that is serving a wide range of political goals. Most of the critiques of African material continuities have focused on the methodological dilemmas of connecting Africa and the New World, but Brian Thomas (2002:148) argues that historical archaeologists focus on and seek out African materialisms because they are "comforting." He suggests that archaeologists desire to embed African American identity in a rhetorically authentic Africa that demonstrates distance from enslavement. Thomas implies that white archaeologists find some degree of social absolution in the recovery of African continuities, compensating for or even escaping complicity in racial privilege through scholarship that addresses or perhaps appears to resolve racism. While Thomas captures some of the deep-seated sociopolitical and even emotional dimensions of diasporan archaeologies, he ultimately retreats to a familiar empirical circumspection: Concerned that the subjectivity of diasporan peoples has been so concretely linked to Africa, Thomas champions framing diasporan identity as a nebulous process and avoids some of the most complicated and politically signifi-

cant issues surrounding the attraction of African American archaeology.

Many scholars have questioned how a plural diasporan history should be related when it is theorized by those who privilege from racial domination (Franklin 1997, 2001; LaRoche and Blakey 1997), and archaeologists have typically focused on partnerships between scholars and communities. Parker Potter (1991), for instance, argues that plantation archaeology has failed to confront the social role of or define the constituencies for such scholarship, leaving it with no substantial power to confront contemporary lived inequalities. Potter champions an assertive focus on the relationship between historical and contemporary inequalities, especially those linked to racism that would make plantation archaeology more relevant to present-day African American constituencies. Potter argues that the most important dimension of archaeological interpretation is archaeologists' political positioning in relation to constituencies, especially marginalized stakeholders. He assumes that African Americans have a privileged epistemic position that will strengthen scholarship and address concrete contemporary sociopolitical issues. Paul Farnsworth (1993) responds that Potter's focus on African American audiences is itself racist because it divides constituencies along racial lines. Farnsworth (1993:114–115) advocates teaching African American archaeology to white audiences, arguing that "It is European Americans who most need to be educated and who need to gain an appreciation of the African American experience. ... African Americans know all about racism. It is European Americans who must be the focus of the effort if changes are to be achieved." The dilemma is that this racialist divide casts a dystopian view of dialogue across the color line, places unseating racism in the hands of those who privilege from it, and implies that people of color have little or nothing to learn about racism. Other archaeologists have been even more critical of a diasporan scholarship rooted in political bias. Weary with intellectual debate over identity categories and political positioning among stakeholders on one African American project, M. Drake Patten (1997:138) concludes that historical archaeologists simply have become "guilty of some intellectual pandering to the same culture that we profess to be addressing."

Unless an engaged archaeology articulates repressed or ignored political demands, it simply paints evocative emotional pictures of the past with no connection to inequality. Politicizing archaeological voice should confront how African American stakeholders fabricate distinctive political alternatives outside conventional notions of politics. African American collectives are always politicized around a range of issues shaped by color line inequalities, but the shape those politics take are often grassroots forms that many archaeologists may not recognize without sustained ethnographic engagement. The rush of academics inspired by Robert Putnam (1996, 2000) to flesh out "civic engagement" has included interesting and well-intentioned scholarship, but Putnam frames an utterly bourgeois politics that does not wrestle with alternate forms of political consciousness and pays no systematic attention to the color line. Cooperative archaeological projects examining color line issues are compelled to confront the distinctive local forms political consciousness often takes in African America and to craft interpretive partnerships that do not simply transport bourgeois definitions of politics to diasporan archaeologies. Much of what today poses as public archaeology aspires to an ideologically white middle-class notion of politics that ties itself to securing footholds within existing power structures rather than critiquing the fundamental racism inherent in those institutional structures. Archaeologists often aspire to mobilize communities, but this implies that those collectives were not already politicized around concrete issues and risks imposing an ideological notion of "community" that serves state interests. It also risks being misplaced self-congratulation: Theresa Singleton (1995:120–121) is quick to point out that African Americans initiated many of the first African American archaeology projects in the 1960s, refuting the commonplace impression that civil rights consciousness propelled a wave of trowel-wielding white liberals into the field. Being in public and sharing archaeological research with communities is an essential starting point, but this does not in itself make a scholarly project "engaged" in any substantive political way.

### **"Against the grain": The Politics of Archaeology along the Color Line**

When Wright declared that "the Negro is America's metaphor," he argued that diasporan heritage constructed in discourses like historical archaeology could clarify American racialization, white privilege, and the myriad inequalities race makes possible. In 1917, a book reviewer for the *Journal of Negro History* (1917:194) sounded a common lament that Wright would recognize, arguing that "the white man of today, choosing not to become acquainted with the Negro, has constructed within his mind a person entirely different from what the Negro actually is." Wright (1945:xxvii) pushed this acknowledgement of white racial obliviousness further when he suggested that while preparing *Black Metropolis*, Drake and Cayton

had to assume that white America know little or nothing of the Negro, that a mere statement of his problem would go against the grain of American thought and feeling; they had to assume the Negro personality, Negro conditions of life, Negro feelings, and the ardent and oftentimes bitter nature of Negro aspirations constituted an alien realm for white Americans.

For Wright, a transgressive history of race and diasporan experience ran "against the grain" of dominant representations, pressing scholars to critically contemplate their social position and acknowledge the distinctive epistemic advantages various thinkers bring to any scholarship.

Diasporan archaeology seems well positioned to weave an exceptionally complicated narrative of life along and across the color line that challenges racialized presumptions and fleshes out the genuine roots of diasporan heritage, even as it examines the complicated transfigurations of that heritage. Empirically driven particularism that aspires to define identity in clearly defined material forms is untenable for any archaeology of identity. In an archaeology of the African diaspora, such particularism risks ignoring racism, imperialism, and global connections. Vindicationists blazed a path that focused on the social relevance of scholarship, and they saw the deconstruction of stereotypes as a key element in any empirically sound research

because those unquestioned assumptions inevitably shaped scholars' interpretations. In vindicationist scholarship, simply conducting rigorous empirically sound scholarship was not sufficient, because this view assumes that all knowledge is embedded in dominant representations and deep-seated ideological assumptions and structural contexts that must be reflectively dismantled. An African diasporan archaeology that confronts its own social position, scholarly privileges, and political positioning can take aim on the most fundamental American assumptions and produce a new narrative of life along and across the color line. The foundation that has already been crafted in African American archaeology is quite substantial, and it can only be expanded by a more assertive articulation with a century of diasporan scholarship that has plumbed the details of life in a racialized society.

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