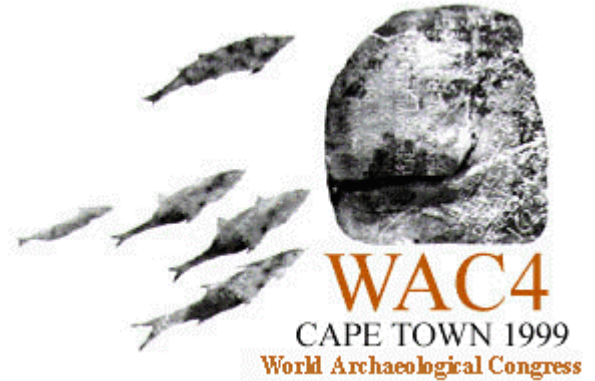


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The Global Importance of African Diaspora Archaeology In The Analysis and Abolition of Whiteness

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In this paper I would like to discuss a dilemma that is absolutely fundamental in the theory and practice of African Diaspora archaeology. On one hand, the bio-genetic conception of race is a demonstrable fiction, a social construction wrought under conditions of domination and resistance. On the other hand, race was, and continues to be, quite real in its social effects, both as a means of domination and as a locus of identity and resistance. Race obliviousness and naïve assertions of colorblindness, coupled with the continuing failure to challenge the apparent “naturalness” of whiteness, merely serve to perpetuate racism and demean the legitimate cultural and political concerns of minority descendant communities. This is the dilemma, addressed in slightly different terms, by Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutman (1996) in their recent book *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*. I would submit that we need an archaeology that explicitly foregrounds the issue of race (Orser 1998a, 1998b; Perry 1997, 1998), challenges racism, respects the concerns of descendant minority communities, and addresses Maria Franklin’s (1997) question “Why are there so few Black American archaeologists?”.

I would like to begin with a few short stories from my analysis of race in early colonial Virginia. James Deetz, in his analysis of the critical final decades of the seventeenth century in Virginia, *almost* got it right when he wrote: “The full establishment of slavery as an institution based solidly and solely on race did not take place in Virginia until after 1680.” (1993:88). He correctly identifies a crucial transition. However, it is not, as he would have us believe, an instance where the preexisting category of race suddenly became more important in defining and justifying slavery. Rather, something much more interesting was occurring—the actual construction of racial difference. Prior to about 1680, there were, in fact, no “white” people in Virginia (Epperson 1990a, 1990b, 1997; Allen 1994; 1997). While there were significant, but decreasing, numbers of “Indians” and an increasing population of “Negroes,” there were no white folk. Instead, we find people who referred to themselves as “Christians” or, less frequently, as “English,” but the self-

consciously racial term "white" does not appear until the end of the seventeenth century.

Some insight into the construction of whiteness is provided by a French Huguenot exile who traveled in Virginia in 1686-1687. Even though Durand was accompanied by a "servant" during his voyage to America, he consistently conflated indentured servitude and slavery and referred to indentured servants in Virginia as Christian slaves: "A difference exists between the slaves that are bought, to wit: a Christian twenty years old or over, cannot be a slave for more than five years, whereas Negroes & other unbelievers are slaves all their lives" (Chinard 1934:110). His account also contains an intriguing passage about the spatial ordering of tobacco plantations: "They build . . . a separate kitchen, a separate house for the Christian slaves, one for the Negro slaves" (Chinard 1934:119-120). This passage reflects a transitional phase in the spatial ordering of Chesapeake plantations. The spatial separation between master and laborers was obviously well established by the late 1680s. However, the primary dichotomy within the labor force was still between "Christians" and "Negroes and other nonbelievers." Racism, or even race consciousness, cannot be posited as an *a priori* cause or motivation for the spatial segregation between masters and bound laborers or between "Christian" and "Negro" slaves. Indeed, the construction of racial difference is, in part, a *result* of processes of spatial segregation (Epperson, nd).

The creation of whiteness can also be discerned in colonial law. The first tenuous use of the word "white" in Virginia legislation did not occur until a 1691 miscegenation law (Hening 1809 3:87). Even when "white" is not explicitly utilized, we can follow the juridical construction of racial difference. For example, note the differences between two statutes, the first enacted in 1680 and the second in 1705. The 1680 law stipulates: "If any negroe or other slave shall presume to lift up his hand in opposition against any Christian, shall for every such offence . . . have and receive thirty lashes on his bare back well laid on. (Hening 1809 2:481). The 1705 slave code repeated the provision, punishment, and general form of the earlier law, but quietly incorporated several significant alterations: "If any Negro, mulatto, or Indian, bond or free, shall at any time, lift his or her hand, in opposition against any Christian not being Negro, mulatto, or Indian, he or she so offending, shall . . . receive on his or her bare back, thirty lashes, well laid on" (Hening 1809 3:459). While the 1680 act applied only to slaves, the 1705 law was explicitly racial and applied to both enslaved and non-enslaved people of color. In 1680 Christian was an unproblematic category, but the later law recognized that a "Negro, mulatto, or Indian" could be baptized; hence, they were specifically excluded from protection under this law.

The creation and imposition of racial difference was not, of course, without its risks for Virginia's slaveholding elite. In 1710 Virginia slaveholders thwarted an uprising that had been planned for Easter Sunday, April 9 (Aptheker 1983:169-71; Kulikoff 1978:139-140; Schwarz 1988:86-87; CP 20:11-13). The accused conspirators included: Angola Peter and Bumbara Peter, both enslaved in James City County, James Booth, a free Black of Isle of Wight County, and "Salvadore an Indian and Scipio a Negro," both enslaved in Surry County (Kennedy and McIlwaine 1905:270; McIlwaine 1918[3]:234-5). Although the other accused insurrectionists escaped with lighter sentences, Salvadore and Scipio were convicted of high treason and publicly hanged. Their bodies were then decapitated and drawn and quartered and

the dismembered body parts were dispatched to every Virginia Tidewater region west of the Chesapeake for public display (McIlwaine 1925:243). In addition to punishing the condemned, this "theatrical punishment" was intended to terrify potential wrongdoers and reinscribe and reassert sovereign power.

Five months after the execution of Salvadore and Scipio the newly-arrived Lt. Governor warned of the continuing threat of slave rebellion:

[The slaves] by their dayly encrease seem to be the most dangerous; and the tryals of last April court may shew that we are not to depend on either their stupidity, or on that Babel of Languages among 'em; freedom wears a cap which can without a tongue, call together all those who long to shake of[f] the fetters of slavery ... (Kennedy and McIlwaine 1905:240).

Despite its timely discovery and relatively limited geographical extent, the 1710 attempted insurrection was extremely unsettling for the planters and rulers of Virginia. As we have seen, those implicated in the rebellion included Bumbera Peter, Angola Peter, Salvadore (an "Indian slave"), Scipio (a "Negro slave"), and James Booth (a "free Negro"). If the names of the two Peters indeed indicate their geographical origins and first-generation status in the colonies, we have evidence of rebellious cooperation that included a man from the Senegambia region, at the northern edge of Africa's slave trading coast, and a man from Angola, at the southern edge. Despite tremendous cultural differences the two men were apparently able to identify with a common cause on the basis of their shared servitude and imposed racial identity. No wonder Lt. Governor Spotswood, in the aftermath of the attempted insurrection, warned that "that Babel of Languages among 'em" could not be relied upon to prevent rebellious cooperation. The 1710 attempted uprising demonstrates that an imposed racial identity could also provide a basis for resistance that transcended prior cultural differences.

In September, 1722 Virginia slaveholders thwarted yet another "intended insurrection of the negroes." This time there was clear evidence of insurrectionary cooperation between enslaved and non-enslaved African Americans. The Virginia colonial government retaliated in part by disfranchising all non-enslaved people of color, regardless of their property holdings: "be it further enacted that no free negro, mullatto, or indian whatsoever, shall hereafter have any vote at the election of burgesses, or any other election whatsoever." (Hening 1809 4:133-4). Although sympathetic to the plight of Virginia slaveholders, the Board of Trade contested this provision, stating they could not understand why "one freeman should be used worse than another meerly upon account of his complexion" (Evans 1963:413; CO 5/1323).

Virginia's new Governor responded by evoking the specter of free Black involvement in the 1722 insurrection and implying that free Blacks have always allied with slaves on the basis of a shared racial identity and will continue to do so in the future. This passage is particularly noteworthy for its explicit recognition of the perceived need to create and mark difference between whites and free people of color.

. . . I am well informed, that just before the Meeting of the Assembly, there had been a Conspiracy discovered amongst the Negroes to Cutt off

the English, wherein the Free-Negros & Mulattos were much Suspected to have been Concerned, (which will for ever be the Case) and tho' there could be no legal Proof, so as to Convict them, yet such was the Insolence of the Free-Negros at that time, that the next Assembly thought it necessary, not only to make the Meetings of Slaves very Penal, but to fix a perpetual Brand upon Free-Negros & Mulattos by excluding them from that great Priviledge of a Freeman, well knowing they always did, and ever will, adhere to and favour the Slaves. And 'tis likewise said to have been done with design, which I must think a good one, to make the free-Negroes sensible that a distinction ought to be made between their offspring and the Descendants of an Englishman, with whom they never were to be Accounted Equal. (CO 5/1324).

The Board apparently found the governor's arguments compelling and allowed the disfranchisement to stand, providing a major milestone in the creation of racial difference.

It was with these somewhat contradictory narratives in mind that I turned to the emerging field of Critical Race Theory. CRT poses important challenges for the archaeology of the African Diaspora, particularly in its definition and critique of “vulgar anti-essentialism (Crenshaw 1995:xxvi; see also Fuss 1989 and McRobbie 1997). As an outgrowth of the Critical Legal Studies movement, CRT acknowledges, analyzes, and challenges the fundamental role of the law in the construction of racial difference and the perpetuation of racial oppression in American society. As a movement comprised primarily, but not exclusively, of scholars and activists of color, Critical Race Theorists, known as “race-crits” to distinguish them from the “crits” and the “fem-crits,” also believe that personal experiences of racial prejudice inform and strengthen theoretical analyses. They are therefore particularly interested in fostering and supporting the distinctive work and voices of minority scholars and insist—quite reasonably—that the victims of racial oppression should play a fundamental role in the analysis of that oppression. Some prominent race-crits include Derrick Bell (1987, 1996), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995), Lani Guinier (1994) Ian Haney López (1994, 1996), Cheryl Harris (1995), Matsuda (1989), Gary Peller (1985, 1995), Rose (1996), and Patricia Williams (1991, 1995). (see also Delgado 1994; Delgado and Stefanic 1993; and MacFarquhar 1996.)

The introduction of 1995 anthology *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*. explains the initial disjuncture between the Critical Legal Studies movement and the race-crits:

To be sure, these crits positioned themselves in a discourse far removed from liberalism—a certain postmodern critique of identity. Yet the upshot of their position seemed to be the same: an abiding skepticism, if not outright disdain, toward any theoretical or political project organized around the concept of race. Where classical liberalism argued that race was irrelevant to public policy, these crits argued that race simply didn't exist. The position is one that [critical race theorists] have come to call “vulgar anti-essentialism.” By this we seek to capture the claims made by some critical theorists that since racial categories are not “real” or “natural” but instead socially constructed, it is

theoretically and politically absurd to center race as a category of analysis or as a basis for political action. (Crenshaw, et al. 1995:xxvi).

While most race-crits emphatically reject the concept of biologically distinct races and embrace the premise that race is, indeed, socially constructed, they nonetheless argue that race is “real” “in the sense that there is a dimension and weight to the experience of being ‘raced’ in American society, a materiality sustained by law.” (Crenshaw, et al. 1995:xxvi; see also Mukhopadhyay and Moses 1997; Harrison 1995).

The crits were not unique in equating race with identity, nor were the race-crits unique in rejecting this equivalency. David Bailey and Stuart Hall (1992) have written: “Poststructuralist thinking ... suggests ... that identities are floating, that meaning is not fixed and universally true at all times for all people, and that the subject is constructed through the unconscious in desire, fantasy, and memory.” (quoted in Malik 1977:113). Another author asserts, “[G]ender, age, disability, race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, civil status, even musical styles and dress codes” are all “very potent axes of organization.... [A]n individual constructs and presents any one of a number of possible social identities, depending on the situation.” (Cohen 1994, quoted in Malik 1977:113, 115-16).

However, as Kenan Malik points out in “The Mirror of Race,” conceiving of race or class as an “identity” has serious consequences:

Social relations such as racial oppression become not social relations at all but personal attributes, or even lifestyle choices. When race is equated with “musical styles” or “dress codes,” the “social” seems to mean nothing more than a particular decision that any individual may make, and “society” is reduced to an aggregate of individual identities. (Malik 1997:115-6).

Faye Harrison’s criticism of postmodernism in *Decolonizing Anthropology* is also relevant to the practice of African American archaeology. She notes that “dialogic relationships” are often viewed as “textual strategies rather than as concrete collaborations” between anthropologists and informants (1991:5). Similarly, Michael Blakey (1997:142) identifies as a common strategy, the inclusion of the other “in order to validate decisions already made by Euroamericans.” If you think Blakey is being hyperbolic, I would remind of Larry McKee’s statement: “I don’t advocate avoiding input from the African-American community, but I don’t agree with ... assertions that they should define the questions to be addressed by archaeologists. What is involved here is not a matter of bias, but the issue of authority and control over interpretations of the past.” (McKee 1994:5). I would certainly agree that we are dealing with an “issue of authority and control,” but I think my sympathies are with the other side. For example, the descendant community’s act of “seizing intellectual power” (LaRoche and Blakey 1997) in the African Burial Ground project has resulted in a research program that is not only more responsive to the needs and concerns of the community but is also indisputably better science (see also Blakey 1998; Epperson 1996; 1999).

In closing, I submit that we must develop an archaeology of race that encompasses all of these narratives. We need a social constructionist account that

challenges the apparent “naturalness” of race, an account that explains how, during the late seventeenth century, the “Negro/Christian” dichotomy was transformed into a “Negro/white” opposition. Yet we also need a race conscious account to explain the common ground claimed in 1710 by Bumbera Peter, Angola Peter, Salvadore, Scipio, and James Booth. We also must understand how, in 1722, it was possible for “Free-Negros & Mulattos ... to adhere to and favour the Slaves” and why the rulers of Virginia found it necessary “to fix a perpetual brand” upon all free people of color.

Although it is valid and important, the analysis of race as a social construction should not be deployed to deny the “reality” of race, particularly for the victims of racism, nor should it be used to belittle the concerns of minority descendant communities. In conclusion, as we face the new millenium, the challenge posed by Critical Race Theorists can be stated quite simply: **we must construct an African Diaspora archaeology that is simultaneously race-conscious and anti-essentialist.** The way will not be easy, but the task is crucial.

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