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*Legacy of Resistance: Cultural Construction and The New York African Burial
Ground*

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We have filled the halls of science
With the bones of mighty giants
They'd been there for generations
Buried underneath our foundations
It's a page right out of history
Everything is still a mystery
All except for one distinction
We can stop our own extinction....
"Evolution" recorded by Oleta Adams 1993.

Introduction

The historical legacy of the enslavement of African people in colonial and early America remains even today maligned, misinterpreted, altered, under funded, under studied and or intentionally falsified. The historical contributions and achievements of Africans living in colonial and early America, in spite of their enslavement are generally diminished and routinely omitted from the “official” histories, academic discourse, curricula and public perceptions. Many factors contribute to this predicament, which can be viewed as the production of legitimizing mythologies of American society for the purpose of justifying, reinforcing, and extending its racially inequitable structure, goals, and expectations. These distortions and omissions of history constitute what Habermas’ called “ideological legitimation,” acting as a means of social control.

The control of African American social status, goals, and expectations through manipulations of historiography also constitute what Carter G. Woodson described as the “miseducation of the negro,” as early as 1933. Colonialism, slavery, segregation, and present-day discrimination have required the incalculable of the idea among the oppressed and the oppressors alike, of the acceptableness of their social and economic inequality which history and anthropology have helped achieve. African American and African scholars have long instituted academic and popular brands of historiography and anthropology labeled “vindicationism” as a means of countering the omissions, distortions, and sociopolitical effects of such Eurocentric influenced history and anthropology (Drake, 1981). Vindicationist scholars often openly deconstructed the political and psychological damage intended by Eurocentric scholarship and called for activism as an explicit application of this scholarship (Douglass, 1854; DuBois, 1903; Woodson, 1933; Cobb—see Rankin-Hill and Blakey, 1995).

Of African American history, it can be said that those who have never made important contributions to a society should not expect to benefit from it as fully as those who have contributed. The expectation of continuing inequality is all the more justified, and oppression more fully denied, if those who are perceived to have made contributions (Europeans) acted fairly and even benevolently toward those who allegedly did not contribute toward nation-building (Africans). Slavery has to be overlooked in order to produce such an effect which elevates the apparent contributions of Euro-Americans as being far more meritorious and moral than the context of African enslavement permits.

The discovery of the New York African Burial Ground, the hundreds of African skeletons unearthed, and the thousands estimated that remain in situ, made glaring the wholesale omission of their history in all but the most specialized writings. The public was shocked to learn that Africans constituted 40% of the population of New Amsterdam and 20%-25% of the population of colonial New York. Even more shocking was the revelation that the vast majority had been enslaved; and that the American north was as involved in African enslavement as was the well documented south during the colonial and early national periods. Robert Schuyler (1976), had predicted that historical archaeology might soon “reveal the partly mythical basis of” American national identity, as we see in this case. Yet African American scholars and the lay public have been consistently aware of those tendencies towards distortion, even when they have not had the data to fill the gaps, which in The African Burial Ground case emerged as the most tangible of proof. The shattering of these legitimizing myths has had important social effects which we will discuss.

We find, furthermore, that there has long been a battle for and against the legitimization of racial inequality involving the African Burial Ground. The contesting forces, the European and African, have not solely concerned history, but focused on the interpenetrating cultural and human rights of people of African descent in New York City. We intend to show that this contestation of cultural and human rights that began in the 17th century continues in the form of “culture wars” today. It is becoming apparent that assertions of culture have always been important to African American resistance: a resistance as much to the legitimization of oppression as to its physical manifestations.

Physical Manifestations of Resistance

In the New World, resistance both grand and petite played a vital part of everyday life of the African enslaved. Day to day resistance ranged from work slow down, feigning illness, and or concerted sabotage resulting in a temporary absence of the enslaved worker, to the full establishment of viable self-governing communities by the formerly enslaved (Aptheker, 1943; Genovese, 1976; Davis, 1984; Agorsah, 1995; and Thornton, 1996).

New York’s early and colonial history is filled with incidents of day to day resistance to African enslavement beginning in the 17th century when New Amsterdam was settled by the Dutch West Indies Company. The Company introduced African enslavement beginning in 1625, two years after the Dutch settlement was officially established. Africans had rights under Dutch occupation such as the right to hold land, and to receive legal rights under the law. All rights granted to Africans under Dutch rule were rescinded under British occupation. British rule in New York began August 5, 1664 and ended in 1783. During this period more than 30 laws were enacted to control both Africans and Natives. In addition to day to day resistance such as running away, large-scale revolts are also noted in the annals of New York history. A “slave revolt” in 1712 occurred in response to the British brand of enslavement. Approximately thirty African men and two Indians set fire to several buildings in lower Manhattan. Six whites were killed resulting from the fires. Twenty-seven Africans were condemned to die for their participation in the revolt.

Throughout the 18th century, period newspapers document runaway advertisements for the return of fugitives who sought their own freedom. These advertisements number in the hundreds. The 19th century witnessed the gradual freedom of New York State's enslaved population. It also witnessed free Africans as antislavery advocates and active abolitionists struggling for equal rights and assisting and harboring fugitives from the South and other enslaved areas of the country. Narratives of enslavement and freedom served as inspiration for those yet enslaved and as warnings for the enslavers. Asante and Abarry note, "From the beginning the African population was in protest against oppression." David Walker's 1829 Appeal which called for violence against "white Christian Americans" and Frederick Douglass's autobiography are cited as the best known examples of written protest by Asante and Abarry in their resource work "Resistance and Renewal".

Ideology and Resistance: Culture, Humanity, and Their Opposites

The investigation of the active resistance of enslaved Africans living and dying in 18th century New York comprises a major component of the African Burial Ground Project research (see Medford et. al. ; in this symposium).

The legacy of cultural resistance with which we are concerned here, involves the treatment of the Burial Ground itself. In colonial New York City, Africans were not permitted to bury their dead in church cemeteries whether or not they had converted to Christianity. The African Burial Ground was the municipal cemetery afforded for their use, where they buried their loved ones carefully and with generosity. The care in the placement of the dead, the interment of women with their dead children, the burial of economically and socially valuable items all point to the humane reverence of this community for one another, dead or alive.

Indeed, this cemetery has provided a rare setting in which the enslaved could assert their humanity and respect their own culture, but not without European resistance. The British who ruled the colony and its African captives, objected to the night-time funerary rituals at the site, and passed laws that attempted to regulate funeral times so that they occurred only during day light hours. The number of persons permitted to attend a burial was also restricted to fewer than twelve individuals, and the use of palls with coffins was forbidden. These intrusions were coincident with English suspicions that funerals were serving as meeting places for organized resistance to enslavement. Also, as a part of the municipal Commons, the Burial Ground became the site for municipal executions by hanging, burning, and breaking in retribution for the African revolt of 1712 and the alleged conspiracy of 1741. During the 1740's Europeans also established tanning and pottery industries adjacent to the cemetery, whose refuse was dumped among the graves while the cemetery was active. Adding to this desecration, medical students at New York hospital regularly stole fresh corpses from the Burial Ground for dissection, a practice that eventually led to a "Doctor's Riot" in the spring of 1788. In 1794 the African Burial Ground was ordered closed by the City of New York, under early American rule. Yet, we have found coroner's documents that indicate the corpses of fresh burials of African American children that were occasionally "found on" the cemetery as late as 1796.

The cemetery was filled and built over by Dutch-Americans in the early 19th century. Their cisterns and privies were then dug through the graves. Meanwhile, the African descendants and loved ones of those buried there, remained enslaved, as many would continue to be until 1827. A “New African Burial Ground” was established by 1800 on Delancey Street. Late 19th and 20th century urban development periodically unearthed human skeletons with little apparent concerns for sanctity. The African Burial Ground then largely faded from everyone’s memory, as African Americans were then by regulation forced to bury their dead elsewhere.

These events represent a struggle for human rights in the strictest anthropological sense. Funerary ritual is pan-human, and no other species of animal or plant buries its dead. The veneration of ancestry and the right to proper burial are more unique and distinguishing of humanity in the archaeological record than are the use of fire, tools, or the ability to walk on two legs. The struggle as to whether and how Africans could bury their dead, whether it was sacred ground or a dumping site, constitutes a persistent assertion of human identity against those who would belittle or belie that status for reasons of economic expediency. The debates surrounding the cemetery during the 1990’s represent, as we will show, a continuation of that struggle.

The Burial Ground was special also as a site for the assertion and elevation of the cultural distinction of New York Africans. Like the storage pits beneath cabins on southern plantations, these burials appear to have been accessed only by the Africans themselves. The attempts to strip them of their cultures—their names, languages, religion, ritual, and social organization- observable in New York at that time, may have been resisted and overcome more in the funerary context than in settings that involved direct communication and negotiation with Europeans. We do know that there were other areas, such as Pinkster Day, where Africans publicly expressed their traditional customs or syntheses through which those customs survived and developed. Given that slavery’s inhumanity was partly justified on the basis that Africans had a culture so low that they resembled beasts, they were expected to seek and assimilate European cultural traits, such as Protestantism. An absence of culture and “true” religion among Africans is a prerequisite of benevolent slavery. The maintenance and elevation of separate culture equally asserted the humanity of Africans, as least among themselves. The Burial Ground, therefore, represented a site of ideological resistance in the 18th century, as it would again at the end of the 20th century.

The 1991 rediscovery and public exposure of the African Burial Ground excavation by the television and print media launched a heated debate between the New York descendant community and the Region 2 office of the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA). “When GSA, a federal agency in charge of real property management, bought the 7,500 square-foot plot of land at Broadway between Duane and Reade Streets in 1990, it appeared to be the perfect spot to build its \$276 million dollar 34 story complex. The agency, however, got much more than it bargained for,” reported Sharon Fitzgerald of Essence Magazine, in September of 1993.

Between May 1991 and July 1992, more than four hundred human remains of African men, women, and children were excavated from the site. All of this was done without an approved research design or any official influence of the New York African descendant community. The New York African American community’s

response to the rediscovery and excavation of the 18th century cemetery was that of shock and outrage. Many viewed the excavation as sacrilegious and equally disrespectful to those buried in the cemetery, as well as to those contemporary descendants. A task force to advocate for the cemetery and the remains of those buried there was formed by New York State Senator, David Paterson. A Blue Ribbon Committee of anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, city planners, and private citizens was formed by representatives of former NYC Mayor, David Dinkins, to advise the city on the Burial Ground. The original plans for the building at 290 Broadway called for the construction of a pavilion, a four story underground parking facility. In order to accomplish this all of the human remains would have to be excavated from the site.

In July of 1992, a public hearing was convened at the U.S. Court of International Trade, in New York City, headed by former U.S. Congressman Gus Savage. The hearing came in response to the more than 40,000 signatures which were submitted to Congress by New York descendant members who advocated for the cessation of the excavation of the Burial Ground since it became public knowledge in 1991. Following the hearing a decision was reached by the GSA to cease excavating the site and to abandon plans to erect an underground pavilion, where more than 200 skeletal remains lay underground today. A Federal Steering Committee was also authorized by Congress to advise the GSA regarding the concerns of the descendant community and the African Burial Ground Project. Many of the Mayor's Blue Ribbon Committee became members of the Federal Steering Committee (FSC). This committee's tenure lasted only two years before being disbanded in 1994. In March of 1993, the "Negroes Burial Ground" became a city landmark. The Burial Ground's name was changed to the "African Burial Ground" due to community pressure and resistance by contemporary African Americans to being defined in 1993 as slaves or negroes, by the descendants of the enslavers. In April of 1993, the "African Burial Ground" was granted national landmark status. Overall, the African Burial Ground Project is found at a nexus of resistance that lies at the intersection of the restoration of humanity, culture, and history.

With information gathered from the analysis of the human remains at Howard University, African Burial Ground Project Public Educator Chadra D. Pittman created this depiction of burial #25 to convey to public audiences the violence associated with enslavement in colonial and early New York. "Although we may never know who fired the shot that enabled that lead musket ball to puncture her body, settling along side her ribs, or what specifically caused the premature death of this young woman, there are many questions that are being asked and answered in the hope of piecing together her life," adds Pittman (1998).

Pittman is a member of a public education team whose primary mission is to inform the public via slide presentations, archaeological laboratory tours, and African Burial Ground site tours on the on-going status of the African Burial Ground Project. The public education component of the African Burial Ground Project, know as the Office of Public Education and Interpretation (OPEI), operates out of offices at 6 World Trade Center, the U.S. Custom House. Since its inception the OPEI has provided updates on the constantly evolving cultural and archaeological project to more than 100,000 individuals around the world via its newsletter, Update: Newsletter of the African Burial Ground Project, and other educational materials and

documentary films. The OPEI is the first office of its kind funded by the U.S. General Services Administration.

The office exists as a governmental response to the New York descendant community and the public at large's need to know about this ancient cemetery and its history, which is not included in the popular history of the City of New York. The notion of a significant enslaved African population in New York, which historically is inaccurately viewed as a "free" state, calls in to need serious efforts to correct this misinformation. The OPEI fills this need by educating community leaders, parents, teachers, and students alike. Current resistance or activism on the part of contemporary Africans and African Americans living in New York to preserve and protect the 18th century cemetery may well be viewed as a logical outcome of a legacy of continued resistance to slavery, and its aftermath. Asante and Abarry's collection of resource documents assembled in African Intellectual Heritage "suggest that resistance and renewal has brought African communities throughout the world to the point of self-actualization in political and social terms" (1998:599).

The symbol adopted for the African Burial Ground Project is a part of the archaeological findings of the excavation. A heart shaped image made from tacks, placed on a coffin lid associated with burial #101 "has characteristics akin to the "Sankofa" symbol used by the Akan people of Ghana and the Ivory Coast," notes Professor Kwaku Ofori-Ansa, art historian at Howard University.

"The symbol identified by the African Burial Ground bears a structural resemblance with one of the many forms of "Sankofa" symbol found among the Akan peoples. Its basic structure...is heart shaped...the image was represented in both figurative and stylized geometric forms; it was used to convey political, religious and historical concepts with many layers of meanings. The original symbol was derived from the behavior of birds. Many species of birds characteristically turn their heads towards their tails to either scratch or groom themselves. This was interpreted to mean "turning ones head toward the past," to search for the good things out of the past, in order to build the future" (1997:3).

The notion of looking toward the past in order to understand the present , and to build the future is an idea integral with resurrecting and paying homage to those buried in the African Burial Ground. The education and empowerment of the descendant community are two on-going goals of the more than 150 trained African Burial Ground volunteers, and other advocates. OPEI staff volunteer coordinators Donna Harden Cole and Deborah Wright recall, "...it was the voluntary activism of the community which helped to bring attention to this historic find. It was the passion and fervor of their activism which helped to convince the GSA that this was not just another public building under construction.....but it was also ancient, historic and sacred ground" (1997:1).

"Teaching our children about this long forgotten burial ground, the final resting place for our ancestors, for me assures that we won't forget about those ancestors who are our past. Our children need desperately to know bout this past in

order to build their future. There is a lot of violence in the lives of our children. I believe that their very survival depends on understanding their past, in order to influence their future” affirms Phyllis Murray, a school librarian and ardent African Burial Ground supporter.