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# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

*C. E. Orser, Jr.*

Anthropology Program, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois 61790-4640;  
e-mail ceorser@ilstu.edu

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## ABSTRACT

Archaeologists currently studying the African diaspora generally examine three broad issues, in decreasing order of prominence: the material identification of African identity, the archaeology of freedom at maroon sites, and race and racism. While conducting this research, several scholars have learned that many nonarchaeologists are deeply interested in their interpretations. At the present time, the archaeology of the African diaspora is not a truly global pursuit and the New World is overrepresented. This situation should change as archaeologists around the world discover post-Columbian archaeology and take up diasporic investigations.

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## INTRODUCTION

The archaeology of the post-Columbian African diaspora has the potential to become one of the most important kinds of archaeology in the world. Archaeologists working on small portions of the African diaspora are conducting research that is often the driving force behind much of today's most interesting and intellectually satisfying historical archaeology. The archaeologists' advances and refinements in this area of research generally have application throughout post-Columbian archaeology because the topics they are pursuing reach into every corner of archaeological thought and practice. In this essay, I explore three prominent areas of research: the archaeology of cultural identity, the material aspects of freedom from enslavement, and the archaeological examination of race. I also explore a practical matter in the archaeology of the African diaspora, namely the idea that the archaeologists' interpretations have an impact that reaches far beyond the often narrow confines of professional archaeology.

Given the rapidly expanding nature of the archaeology of the African diaspora, I cannot provide an exhaustive overview in this brief essay. Instead, I seek only to present my perspective on the most far-reaching aspects of this archaeology and to explore some of the key issues that are central to the archaeological investigation of the spread of Africans across the globe. My focus is specifically on the archaeology of the transcontinental diaspora of African peoples rather than on the internal movements of peoples within the African continent.

Before beginning, I must address the issue of coverage. Some historians argue that the post-Columbian slave trade is largely responsible for the African presence in locales around the globe (e.g. Harris 1996). Many of these same historians, however, also point out that African peoples settled outside Africa at least 1,500 years before the commencement of the post-Columbian slave trade. Arab traders regularly took African slaves—usually identified as non-Muslim infidels—to the Middle East, India, and Asia, and Africans who were not enslaved traveled the globe as sailors, explorers, missionaries, and merchants. Without question, the African diaspora has deep roots in history and is a truly global phenomenon.

Regrettably, archaeologists have not kept pace with historians in examining the global nature of the diaspora, and our knowledge is unrealistically skewed toward the New World. The reason for the unfair representation of post-Columbian, New World Africans in the archaeological examination of the African diaspora has to do with the slow worldwide development of an archaeology dedicated to the study of the modern world. At the same time, a great deal of the world's archaeology has been focused on the application of its results to nation building and nationalism. For example, in Spain, where we may reasonably expect to see clear, early evidence of an African presence, Islamic archaeology has been slow to develop, and its precise character is still being formulated (Díaz-Andreu 1996). By the same token, archaeologists in much of Southeast Asia have ignored their region's African history in favor of an archaeology directed toward prehistoric and European colonial history (Proust 1993). As a result, the archaeology of the African diaspora as presently constructed focuses on the New World, the region where the archaeology of the Africa diaspora is most advanced. So, while my coverage cannot be as global as I might wish, the issues I explore have wide application, and it is likely that archaeologists around the world will eventually confront them at numerous sites related to the African diaspora.

## BEGINNINGS

Everyone with even a passing knowledge of world history knows that diverse African peoples were dispersed outside their homelands by numerous historical forces, led most visibly by Europe's postmedieval search for global wealth,

power, and political domination. Historians have been piecing together the diverse historical strands of the African diaspora for years, but it has been only recently that archaeologists have understood the importance of this massive population movement. The immaturity of historical archaeology is undoubtedly part of the reason for the archaeologists' late acknowledgment of the historical and cultural importance of diasporic studies, and it has been only within recent years that archaeologists have even begun to use the word "diaspora" in their writings.

The roots of historical archaeology as a field designed specifically to investigate post-Columbian history extend only to the 1930s. From then until the late 1960s, historical archaeologists directed their excavations almost exclusively toward sites and properties associated with the wealthy and the famous (Orser & Fagan 1995, pp. 25–32). In the American South, this interest translated into the study of plantation mansions, while in the North, archaeologists generally directed their excavations toward colonial settlements or sites associated with the birth of the nation. Such research often had the tangible goal of physical restoration or reconstruction of buildings and monuments intended to promote the American national ideology. These reconstruction projects in turn fed a growing interest in historical tourism and the telling of history through the homes, workplaces, and settlements of history's elites. Despite the disciplinary urge to study high society, many archaeologists were inspired by the ethnic pride movements that appeared around the globe, and many followed their colleagues in the social sciences and the humanities in turning their attention to the oppressed, ill-used, or forgotten. As part of their awakening, archaeologists developed a "subordinate perspective" as a way of examining culture and history from the bottom up (Orser 1990, pp. 122–29). This shift in focus from the elite minority to the subordinate majority inspired many archaeologists to investigate the lives of men and women who up until then had been largely erased from traditional history. Relying for the most part on their anthropological training, American archaeologists sought ways to understand these men and women on their own terms.

Before the 1980s, when archaeologists first combined their interest in subordinate lifeways with African diasporic history, they overwhelmingly turned, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Bullen & Bullen 1945; Deetz 1977, pp. 138–154; Schuyler 1974), to the slaves of the American South and the Caribbean. As a result, the archaeology of the African diaspora began and largely remains to this day an archaeology of New World slavery (but see Cabak et al 1995; Schuyler 1980), a situation many archaeologists find especially frustrating given the richness and variety of the African experience outside Africa, particularly in places like colonial New England and early modern Europe, where the African presence has been often overlooked (Garman 1994, pp. 89–90). (Useful historical overviews of plantation archaeology appear in Fair-

banks 1983, 1984; Orser 1984, 1990; Samford 1996; Singleton 1991, 1995.) The unequal distribution of archaeological research in the New World tends to foreground the United States and the Caribbean while downplaying or even ignoring important African contributions in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (e.g. Saunders 1982).

Several historians have recently illustrated the diasporic nature of African cultural history, and many of them have diligently worked to prove the African contribution to New World history (e.g. Curtin 1990; Gilroy 1993; Harris 1993; Jalloh & Maizlish 1996; Lemelle & Kelley 1994; Solow 1991). Today, many historical archaeologists freely acknowledge that the history they study is inexorably entangled with global capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism (Orser 1996). For the most part, their research on the African diaspora has always contained a tacit understanding of the worldwide nature of post-Columbian African life, a transcontinental conceptualization that began with the search for African identity at archaeological sites outside Africa.

## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF AFRICAN IDENTITY

When historical archaeologists first turned to the study of people of African heritage outside Africa, they were encouraged by their anthropological training to examine them as members of displaced cultures. As initially established, the archaeologists' contribution to African diasporic studies would be to provide tangible evidence for the continuation of African cultural traits beyond the borders of Africa. In beginning this program of study, archaeologists situated themselves within the famous Herskovits-Frazier debate over whether enslaved men and women retained elements of their original African cultures in the New World. Archaeology was immediately relevant to this debate because of the archaeologists' potential to provide material evidence of African stylistic traits on physical objects made and used outside Africa. The search for such material "Africanisms" also suited the disciplinary needs of historical archaeologists because it presented a way for them to prove that their field of study, always something of a second cousin in American archaeology (Little 1994, p. 30), had a serious contribution to make to anthropological scholarship. Clearly, archaeological excavation at sites associated with participants of the African diaspora could provide clues about cultural survival as no other discipline could. At the same time, the ability of historical archaeologists to offer tangible information about a subject that bridged anthropology, history, folklore, architecture, and several other disciplines proved that the field really was as cross-disciplinary as its proponents claimed.

Thus, when the founder of American plantation archaeology, Charles Fairbanks, began his excavations at Kingsley Plantation in 1968, he sought to support Herskovits by finding Africanisms at the plantation's old slave cabins.

When he was forced to conclude “that no surely African elements in the material culture could be identified” (Fairbanks 1974, p. 90), it was clear that even archaeologists would have difficulty identifying Africanisms. It is important to note, however, that the lack of evidence did not convince archaeologists that Frazier had been correct that the horrors of the Middle Passage had destroyed the slaves’ cultural knowledge. On the contrary, most historical archaeologists steadfastly retained their belief in the resilience of African cultures.

The controversy over the presence of Africanisms continues to be a subject of intense interest to scholars in several disciplines (Palmié 1995), and the subject continues to attract the attention of archaeologists. As the number of historical archaeologists has grown since the late 1960s, so too has the intensity of the search for Africanisms in archaeological deposits.

Archaeologists interested in locating evidence of African survivals in archaeological deposits have been perhaps the most optimistic about the potential of research at cemeteries. After conducting years of research at numerous prehistoric cemeteries throughout Native North America, archaeologists had come to rely on the assumption that the temporally static nature of burial would preserve the social elements of life in the material accoutrements of death. Based on reams of comparative information, it seemed reasonable to conclude that a person expressing an African heritage in life would reflect this persona in death. Even in cases where it can be shown that grave accompaniments refer more to the social identity of living mourners than to the deceased, the presence of Africanisms in graves could still indicate a persistence of cultural traditions outside Africa.

One of the most successful examples of mortuary analysis related to the recognition of African identity was undertaken by Jerome Handler at Newton Plantation, a late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century estate in Barbados (Handler & Lange 1978). In two carefully argued studies, Handler demonstrated that African social persona could be discerned in the interment of individuals who in life had been perceived both positively and negatively (Handler 1996, 1997). To make these interpretations, Handler relied on his extensive historical knowledge of Barbadian culture as well as the careful analyses of the artifacts contained within the burials, supplemented with bioanthropological data.

With the growth of historical archaeology and the burgeoning perception that African diasporic studies had the potential to provide insights on a wide range of intellectually significant issues, post-Columbian archaeologists soon merged their interest in Africanisms with their long-standing fascination with ceramics. One of the most important and often-cited studies in this regard is Leland Ferguson’s (1978) reconsideration of what had formerly been termed “Colono-Indian ware.”

Ferguson argued that many of the morphological elements of this low-fired, unglazed pottery found on sites associated with Africans along the coast of the

American Southeast were consistent with pottery manufactured in the Caribbean and even in Africa. This interpretation placed Africa firmly in the archaeological picture and demonstrated that historical archaeologists could provide tangible contributions to historical and cultural knowledge about subjects that had hitherto remained undocumented in the historical record.

The decision to link the New World and Africa via Colono ware ceramics was an important turning point for the archaeology of the African diaspora because it clearly illustrated the global nature of the research. At the same time, it supported the claims of cultural anthropologists that the identification of African culture outside Africa would be complex and multicultural (Mintz & Price 1976). Thus, when thinking about the cultural implications of this pottery further, Ferguson (1991) later proposed that the ceramics represented more than just tangible Africanisms. The sherds were also symbolic representations of an otherness that served both to empower African American slaves in their collective cultural difference and to provide a Pan-African sense of syncretic culture. From here, it was only a short step to the realization that any African culture outside Africa would be a creolized mixture of diverse elements and that many of the cultural elements of Africa would be masked, hidden, or even missing from archaeological deposits, even in mortuary contexts (Garman 1994, pp. 80–82; Jamieson 1995, pp. 51–54).

Research suggests that time may structure the presence of Africanisms at archaeological sites, with cemeteries again being instructive. Early interments, such as those at Newton Plantation in Barbados, tend to exhibit African characteristics, whereas later ones, such as those excavated in New Orleans, dating to around 1800 (Owsley et al 1987), show no obvious signs of African heritage. By the same token, though, burials salvaged from a cemetery on Montserrat contained no obvious African elements, even though the site was contemporaneous with Newton Plantation (Watters 1987, p. 307). As a result, today's archaeologists have learned to be cautious when making comparisons between sites (Thomas 1995). In any case, the temporal aspects of the current evidence have the potential to take archaeologists back to the largely unsatisfying acculturation studies of the past (e.g. Wheaton & Garrow 1985). Still, the end of African burial customs and the demise of the Colono ware industry provide evidence for important issues of cultural accommodation and survival that archaeologists must address.

The difficulty of discovering Africanisms at archaeological sites has not caused archaeologists to abandon the project. On the contrary, many historical archaeologists have simply moved to new kinds of evidence, typically involved with ritual, religion, and symbolism (Brown & Cooper 1990; Franklin 1996; Orser 1994a; Russell 1997; Stine et al 1996; Wilkie 1995; Young 1996, 1997). These studies not only follow current archaeological practice, they also demonstrate the tenacious character of cultural customs embedded within peo-

ples' beliefs systems and ritual behaviors. At the same time, the symbolic or ritual use of Africanisms by men and women outside Africa may speak to issues of resistance and cultural boundary maintenance that may exist in no other source.

## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FREEDOM FROM SLAVERY

Given the importance of examining resistance and cultural survival, many archaeologists are beginning to show great interest in maroon communities as truly fertile ground for anthropological research. This archaeology, though in its true infancy, is inexorably diasporic by nature, and archaeologists have already investigated sites in Brazil (Allen 1995; Funari 1995a,b, 1995/96, 1996a,b; Guimarães 1990; Guimarães & Lanna 1980; Orser 1992, 1993, 1994b, 1996), the Dominican Republic, Cuba (García Arévalo 1986), Jamaica (Agorsah 1990, 1993), and the United States (Deagan & MacMahon 1995; Nichols 1988; Weik 1997). Archaeologists are undoubtedly attracted to the study of maroon settlements for diverse reasons, not the least of which may be the romantic notion of African rebels openly defying the slave regime. In the often-overwhelming abundance of research on slavery, there is something refreshingly bold about examining men and women who threw off the shackles of slavery and demanded freedom on their own terms. At the same time, it is clear that many people of African descent have grown tired of hearing only about slavery and wish to know more about the material conditions of freedom (Leone et al 1995, p. 112).

But in addition to the romantic and often noble character of research on maroon settlements, archaeologists are intrigued by what maroon sites may reveal about African culture. Maroon research may offer important information about power relationships; the creation and maintenance of diverse social connections; and the preservation of economic, political, and spiritual life. In addition, archaeological research on maroons has the potential to provide information about the creation of syncretic cultures. The famous settlement of Palmares in Brazil provides an excellent example.

Slaves of African ancestry who ran away from the sugar plantations of the northeastern coast of Brazil created Palmares sometime around 1605. (Accessible overviews of Palmares can be found in Anderson 1996; Kent 1965; and Orser 1994a,b, 1996.) As the community cemented itself in the Brazilian backlands, the people of Palmares sustained numerous bloody attacks from Dutch and Portuguese militias that, as the shock troops of colonialism, were attempting to control the countryside for their nations' governments. But even in the face of such annual onslaught, the men and women of Palmares continued to prosper, and by the 1670s colonial observers reported that the maroon settlement housed about 20,000 people in 10 major villages. Given its geographic



size and sociopolitical complexity, several scholars have referred to Palmares as both a kingdom and a state. Regardless of its sociopolitical designation, there is little doubt that Palmares was one of history's greatest maroon societies.

Current evidence suggests that Palmares retained a vibrant African character throughout its existence, based on the Angolan roots of its rulers and many of its inhabitants. Still, the settlers of Palmares incorporated diverse cultural elements within their towns and constructed strong connections with Native South Americans (who had lived in this part of Brazil for centuries), colonial Portuguese and Dutch government officials (who used alliances with Palmares for expedient political purposes), and Portuguese frontier settlers (who often clashed with a colonial government that represented the needs and desires of wealthy plantation owners, often to the exclusion of all else).

Archaeologists have only recently begun to study Palmares, concentrating their efforts on the Serra da Barriga, a hill in the State of Alagoas that was both the center of the settlement and the location of Palmares's final military defeat in 1694. The next several years' research at Palmares and other maroon sites promises to provide information that may prove central to our understanding of how diverse peoples created and maintained the syncretic cultures of the African diaspora. The men, women, and children of Palmares forged their own freedom through running away, an act that served as a blow to the slave regime on the Brazilian coast. The rigorous efforts of the Portuguese to destroy Palmares amply demonstrated the danger maroon settlements created for their oppressive power, and the people of Palmares tenaciously fought to retain their freedom in the face of enslavement or death if recaptured. Thus, it is the attainment and retention of freedom in an inhuman environment of slavery that characterizes the history of Palmares and all other maroon communities wherever they may be found.

Another site of importance to the archaeology of the African diaspora is Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, located two miles north of colonial St. Augustine, Florida. In 1738, more than 100 enslaved Africans fled their British captors in the Carolinas and headed south for the safety of Spanish St. Augustine. Serving as a beacon of freedom to the thousands of enslaved men and women living along the Carolina coast, the settlement of Mose and its adjoining fort became a regular part of the Spanish defenses in Florida (Deagan & MacMahon 1995, p. 20). As was true of Palmares, the people of Mose created a new culture, speaking several European and Native American languages, converting to Christianity, and celebrating Catholic feast days with traditional African dress and music (Landers 1990, p. 28).

Palmares and Mose are important places within the cultural history of the African diaspora. As locales where formerly enslaved men and women openly flaunted the slave regime, both sites promise to provide abundant material in-

formation about the cultural aspects of African life outside Africa and to present new information about creolization, an emerging topic of importance to historical archaeologists (Ferguson 1992). At the same time, increased research may encourage some anthropologists to move away from creolization studies in favor of studies of cultural maintenance.

Some historians (e.g. Chambers 1996, Thornton 1992) are beginning to question the creolization thesis, arguing that slaves imported into various parts of the world did not create populations as heterogeneous as we might suppose. In some cases, for example, slave importers tended to seek men and women from specific parts of Africa. Historians have learned, for example, that rice-growing plantation owners sought to acquire laborers from areas of Africa already familiar with rice cultivation (Joyner 1984, pp. 13–14). Thus, populations of Africans with long rice-growing traditions appear congregated in various parts of the world. By the same token, we may well suppose that free Africans able to resettle where they pleased would have sought social environments with people of similar cultural backgrounds and traditions. Given this developing understanding, it appears that maroon societies also have the potential to provide information about the efforts of displaced Africans to maintain their traditional cultures in unfamiliar environments.

The archaeology of maroons will surely grow in prominence over the next several years. Before this archaeology can assume its rightful place in scholarship, however, archaeologists must confront several important practical and theoretical problems. In the first place, maroon sites are difficult to locate. Fugitive slaves sited their rebel communities in secluded, often inaccessible places. Archaeological research supports this simple reality, and many maroon sites are still difficult to reach today. As a result, archaeological efforts to examine maroon settlements can be extremely time consuming and expensive. The research at Fort Mose was a success, not only because of the expert collaborative team assembled to complete the study, but also because the State of Florida took a strong interest in the site and passed a bill to provide funds for its investigation (Deagan & MacMahon 1995, p. vii). Similar funds have not been forthcoming for archeological research at Palmares, and at least until 1990, Jamaica had shown no real interest in its maroon history (Agorsah 1990, p. 15).

The discovery of maroon sites presents a practical problem for archaeologists, but once found, these sites offer problems in analysis and interpretation. Many of the most pressing questions are simplistic, beginning with the most basic one: How do archaeologists recognize the material culture of maroonage? Research at Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose provides an understanding of the depth of this problem.

The analysis of the almost 29,000 animal bones collected from excavations at Mose suggests a distinctive pattern of subsistence at this free, African American town and fort (Reitz 1994). Its people consumed more domestic ani-

mal meat than did the surrounding Native Americans, but less than the Spanish residents of nearby St. Augustine. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the men and women of Mose had a measure of culinary self-sufficiency that was generally unknown on the coastal plantations to the north, where slaves had more access to domestic animal species. Like the surrounding Native Americans, the residents of Mose exploited the locally available wild animal populations, including both terrestrial and aquatic species.

The archaeological understanding that Africans in the New World used wild food species for subsistence is not new. In fact, the zooarchaeologist who studied the Mose remains made this discovery long ago (Reitz et al 1985), and this knowledge has served the archaeologists of the African diaspora exceedingly well ever since. But even though we have a good knowledge of the subsistence patterns of Mose, the faunal information offers little in the way of social clues about the community. Thus, the investigator used Africanisms to explain the sociocultural elements of the people's food usage. In her words, "Daily tasks may have been performed by each ethnic group in accordance with traditional beliefs, values, and customs not readily identified in faunal assemblages" (Reitz 1994, p. 38). We can conclude, then, that the animal bones, though providing an important glimpse of subsistence at Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, does not provide information that can be used to address questions of cultural formation and maintenance. This observation amply shows how far historical archaeologists are from advancing sophisticated interpretations of maroon culture based on archaeological remains, even from sites that are expertly excavated with adequate funds.

Today's archaeologists simply do not understand enough about how the material culture of resistance correlates with or diverges from the material elements of cultural formation or transformation. The artifact photographs reproduced in the beautifully presented study of Fort Mose (Deagan & MacMahon 1995, pp. 27, 43, 44) depict artifacts that one could find at almost any Spanish colonial site in the world. Included in the collection are gunflints, lead shot, spoon handles, buttons, potsherds, bottle necks, and belt buckles. Comparative archaeological information is woefully inadequate in northeastern Brazil, but the artifacts excavated from the Serra da Barriga are similarly unenlightening. The collection contains sherds that resemble local Native American pottery as well as pieces of majolica that could have been made on the Brazilian coast, in Portugal, or in any unidentified colonial workshop. Thus, it is no exaggeration to state that archaeologists have yet to devise intellectually satisfying ways to interpret the material lives of fugitive men, women, and children living in freedom on their own terms in maroon settlements.

It is perhaps for this reason that archaeologists examining maroon sites have usually turned to the interpretation of single artifacts. One type of artifact to which archaeologists have often turned is the smoking pipe. In my interpre-

tation of Palmares, for example, I used four pipes collected from the Serra da Barriga by a local resident (Orser 1996, pp. 123–29). I could not verify the precise context of these pipes, but they bore strong morphological similarities to pipes collected at the Newton Plantation cemetery (Handler & Lange 1978, p. 130; Handler 1983) and at maroon settlements in the Dominican Republic and Cuba (García Arévalo 1986, p. 50; Deagan & MacMahon 1995, p. 14).

Many pipes from maroon settlements exhibit incised decorations. The pipes found in Cuba and the Dominican Republic were etched with geometrical designs (García Arévalo 1986, p. 50), reminiscent of pipes known both from Africa and from seventeenth-century sites in the Chesapeake region of the United States (Emerson 1988, 1994). In contrast, the artisans who made the Palmares pipes had carved or molded designs into them rather than using an etching technique. I interpreted the decorations on two of the pipes as representing stylized palm tree fronds. I argued that the pipes, rather than being just functional artifacts, were material proclamations about Palmares. As tangible, largely immutable objects, the pipes said to the world that Palmares continued to exist. Historians believe that the people of Palmares called their settlement Angola Janga, or Little Angola, even though the Portuguese knew it as the “place of palm trees.” As such, it is possible that these pipes were small but meaningful reminders that the men, women, and children of Palmares continued openly to flaunt the slave regime using a symbol understood outside Palmares. At the same time, it is possible that these smoking pipes served as physical links between Brazil and maroons everywhere, just as they functioned as links of a different kind to the Portuguese and indeed the entire European system of enforced African bondage.

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND RACE

Issues of cultural identity and the interpretation of maroon settlements will continue to challenge historical archaeologists for many years. Obstacles to interpretation and understanding in these two areas have already proven to be formidable. Still, the challenges faced in these areas of research will be equaled by the problems presented when historical archaeologists turn to issues of race (Orser 1998).

We saw above that many historical archaeologists have sought to associate past human populations with specific types or classes of material culture. In relation to peoples of African heritage, this urge has caused many historical archaeologists, following a long-standing anthropological tradition, to refer to these material markers of identity as Africanisms. In other contexts, they often refer to such tangible aspects of identity as ethnic markers.

The use of the term “ethnic” is not accidental. Because historical archaeologists usually have access to textual documentation that supports their archaeo-

logical work, they can generally associate certain peoples with particular sites. These identifications sometimes assume stereotypic form, so that Asian immigrants appear at historic Chinatowns, men and women from Wales at mining communities, and people of African heritage on slave plantations. Many historical archaeologists have come to realize that such easy connections between specific kinds of artifacts and past groups of men and women are often too facile to have meaning (e.g. Muller 1994; Paynter 1990). At worst, such linkages often carry racist overtones, such as assuming that only Chinese immigrants used opium pipes when in reality opium use among non-Chinese was widespread in the late nineteenth century (Sando & Felton 1993, p. 169).

Stereotypic interpretations unfortunately have not entirely left historical archaeology, but some archaeologists are pursuing more fruitful lines of research. Some researchers now acknowledge that artifacts, rather than being simply static containers of ethnic self-identity, can serve as symbols of group identity whose meanings can be manipulated at the same time they promote a sense of peoplehood (Praetzellis et al 1987; Praetzellis 1991; Staski 1990, 1993).

Although some historical archaeologists have presented sophisticated ways in which to perceive the material aspects of ethnic self-identification, as a group they have been far less willing to examine race. In fact, many archaeologists have equated race with ethnicity. Race, though a significant element in the history of the African diaspora, has been largely absent from most archaeological research, even though race has never been absent from the sociohistorical realities of the diaspora.

Historical archaeologists have occasionally been willing to tackle the study of race where people of African ancestry are concerned. For example, in 1980, John Otto examined the material culture excavated at Cannon's Point Plantation, Georgia, along several social dimensions, one of which incorporated the concept of race as an imposed condition. Otto (1980) argued that race was a fixed legal status that created a division between "free white" owners and overseers and "unfree black" slaves. Otto used a caste model that was largely unsuccessful (Orser 1988), but he did insert the word "race" into the archaeological lexicon. Years later, David Babson (1990) used spatial patterns at a plantation in South Carolina to argue that racism was a factor in the physical arrangement of large antebellum estates, and more recently, Robert Fitts (1996) showed how racist attitudes were expressed spatially in the early history of Rhode Island. In another plantation study, Terrence Epperson (1990a, p. 36) argued that archaeologists must learn to examine race to aid in the "valorization of the African-American culture of resistance and the denaturalization of essentialist racial categories." This dual perspective permits archaeologists to realize that racism includes "contradictory tendencies to exclusion and incorporation, simultaneously providing a means of oppression and a locus of resistance" (Epperson 1990b, p. 341).

The kinds of studies historical archaeologists have so far undertaken demonstrate the difficulties of investigating a mutable designation like race with immutable physical objects. Clear interpretations are difficult to compose when we conceptualize groups as representing identifiable cultural dyads—e.g. Africans and non-Africans—but the act of interpretation grows considerably more complex when we also introduce the forces of market capitalism. Most archaeologists now examining the post-Columbian world readily acknowledge the role of capitalism in helping to shape the modern world. For many, the conduct of archaeology, particularly an archaeology that deals with the recent past, is impossible without capitalism. In concert with this view, several archaeologists are beginning to conduct extremely sophisticated analyses linking the forces of capitalism with the realities of race and racism. Paul Mullins (1996) has provided one of the most well constructed and potentially significant studies of this sort. Mullins examined a recent period of American history, 1850 to 1930, but his findings have ramifications for the study of the African diaspora everywhere in the world.

Mullins proposed that capitalism posed both an opportunity and a threat to African Americans. While the marketplace provided mechanisms for men and women of African heritage to improve their place in American society, it also presented a way for racists to pass a sentence of material inferiority on them. As we might imagine, this complex process was enacted in numerous historical ways in many material forms, but one example Mullins used was bric-a-brac. Although today we may be inclined to perceive knickknacks as meaningless kitsch without interpretive potential, Mullins viewed them as symbolically charged representations of American abundance, nationalism, and racial purity. In this sense, we may posit that these items had the same structural meaning as the maroon pipes mentioned above, except that the knickknacks were mass produced and sold as commodities. As signifiers of the national ideology, knickknacks were small pieces of the American dream that could assume prominent places in the parlors of non-African Americans, even though the objects themselves were inexpensive. According to Mullins, the meaning of these apparently insignificant pieces of kitsch changed with Emancipation. Understanding such altered meanings, some nineteenth-century social commentators opposed to enfranchisement argued that with freedom, African American men and women would waste their money on cheap objects like knickknacks. The answer to this recontextualization, in the American South at least, was to build plantation commissaries and to pay freed men and women tenant farmers with commissary tickets redeemable only at plantation stores. Even where tenants received wages, widespread racism in the countryside often kept them out of nearby towns where they could spend their money as they wished.

Mullins argued that when knickknacks began to appear in the homes of African Americans in the late nineteenth century, they were especially meaning-

ful because they distanced their owners from the racial and class caricatures that racist America had constructed. When non-African American employers gave knickknacks to their African American domestic servants, this act of giving was charged with meaning. For the givers, the apparently inexpensive and trivial objects provided a mechanism to cement relationships of power and dominance. Those receiving the gifts, however, may have perceived these items as symbolic redefinitions of their material circumstances, in that they now owned and could display objects that had once been completely off limits to them (Mullins 1996, pp. 532–33).

Mullins's research shows that historical archaeologists still have much to learn about the relationship between material culture and racial perception. This line of investigation, if pursued throughout the world, has the potential to provide profound insights into the social dimensions of African life outside Africa. Before this sort of research can occur, historical archaeologists must be willing to confront race and racism, a trend that is just now beginning.

## THE RELEVANCE OF THE ARCHAEOLOGY

One of the points to emerge from research like that conducted by Mullins concerns the relevance of archaeological research to men and women living today. His interpretations have potential meaning for all people seeking to understand how the social inequalities of today were materially expressed in the past, even in fairly recent history.

It can no longer be denied that archaeology is a public pursuit. Recent controversies between archaeologists and traditional peoples around the globe over the repatriation of skeletal remains are a well-known case in point (Biolsi & Zimmerman 1997; Hubert 1988; Swidler et al 1997), and similar controversies have arisen over the excavation of African and African American remains (Harrington 1993; La Roche & Blakey 1997; Orser et al 1986; Powell & Dockall 1995).

The archaeologist's role in society at large has become a major topic of inquiry, particularly where it concerns nationalism and the use of archaeological remains to construct national identity (Díaz-Andreu & Champion 1996; Kohl & Fawcett 1995; Potter 1994). By the same token, the archaeologist's role in telling the story of the African diaspora has also been debated (Belgrave 1990; Blakey 1990; Epperson 1990a; Franklin 1995; Martin et al 1997; McDavid & Babson 1997). In historical archaeology, the debate has been conducted largely by scholars who believe that they carry their biases with them into their research (Leone et al 1995; Potter 1991) and those who believe, contrary to this view, that the strength of archaeology derives from its ability to provide fresh insights about the past (Farnsworth 1993; McKee 1994).

The controversy over the very foundations of archaeological interpretation was precipitated by Parker Potter's (1991) critique of plantation archaeologists who provided interpretations that, though they were not racist, could be used by racists to support their prejudiced way of looking at the world. Potter called attention to the idea that archaeological research could be used outside the profession by people with political agendas inconsistent with the goals of the original, scholarly research effort. The misapplication of research findings is, of course, nothing new in anthropology or archaeology, and Potter argued that archaeologists should learn to question why they make certain interpretations as opposed to others.

One of Potter's most controversial assertions was that African Americans should be the plantation archaeologist's primary audience because they are the people most likely to be affected by the archaeological interpretations (Potter 1991, p. 94). Arguing against this perspective, Farnsworth (1993) and McKee (1994) proposed that the archaeology of the African diaspora, as a scientific pursuit, should interest all people regardless of heritage. They argued that people of African descent have always had the ability to construct their own histories without the help of archaeologists, and any suggestion to the contrary is both condescending and patronizing. Leone and his associates in Annapolis, Maryland, learned this lesson well with their interpretation of a hot, or straightening, comb excavated from the Gott's Court site (Leone et al 1995, pp. 113–14). Whereas Leone et al initially interpreted the comb in terms of assimilation, African Americans countered that the comb provided for social negotiation wherein by straightening their hair they could appear to be assimilating while they in fact were striving for cultural survival.

The presentation of counterinterpretations by nonarchaeologists has caused some archaeologists to wonder ever more seriously about which audiences should be served by their research. The recent publication of a collection of papers about public participation in African American archaeology illustrates not only that archaeologists are cognizant of the issues of inclusion, but also that solutions will be complex and often locally formulated in a global environment (McDavid & Babson 1997).

The problems of inclusion attach to sites located throughout the world of the African diaspora, particularly in cases where the sites may figure into local conceptions of identity. We discovered in our research at Palmares, for example, just how important the idea of this maroon settlement, as a mythology, was to the people of the African Brazilian community. Signs of this importance are easy to identify. In 1994, the Brazilian Ministry of Culture held an international conference entitled "Palmares: 300 Years" to pay homage to the men and women of the maroon, and today the Serra da Barriga is a national monument. Zumbi, the last ruler of Palmares, is widely revered; he is often referred to as the "first great Negro of Brazil" (Souza 1963, p. 15). In Maceió, the larg-



est city near the Serra da Barriga, jets land at Palmares Field, and the main highway to the city runs past a Zumbi Auto Parts store. In the town of União dos Palmares, at the foot of the Serra da Barriga, a huge image of Zumbi adorns the outer wall of the bus depot, and a Foto Zumbi—a film processing store—sits nearby. In 1969, a leftist group took the name Armed Revolutionary Vanguard—Palmares, and movie companies have produced two feature films about Palmares (Orser 1996, p. 202). All archaeological research at the site must be approved by the Brazilian government and receive the endorsement of the local black power movement. Anyone who thinks that the archaeology of Palmares is only about the past is sorely mistaken.

## CONCLUSION

In this brief essay, I have only been able to touch upon four elements in the current archaeology of the African diaspora: the material identification of African identity, the material aspects of maroon culture, the archaeology of race, and the relevance of the archaeological research to nonarchaeologists. These topics will be explored in great detail in the future, and new areas of research will undoubtedly be proposed. At this point in time, much of the archaeology of the African diaspora is an archaeology of the New World. Archaeologists' overwhelming focus on the United States and the Caribbean is more a statement on the current condition of global historical archaeology than any assessment of the importance of certain geographic locales. Even though African men and women, both free and enslaved, have traveled the world for generations, today's archaeologists know little about them and the cultures they helped to construct. Happily, however, a whole cadre of dedicated archaeologists are working diligently to rectify the current paucity of research. Within the next few years, these scholars are sure to develop truly global perspectives on the African diaspora.

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