Race and the Society for Historical Archaeology: Steps Toward Claiming an Anti-Racist Institutional Identity

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Nassaney, Michael, "Race and the Society for Historical Archaeology: Steps Toward Claiming an Anti-Racist Institutional Identity" (2018). Diversity Learning Communities. 16.
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Archaeologists, as social scientists and humanists, are well aware of the ways in which our personal and political lives influence our practice and vice versa. Since the 1960s archaeologists have paid increased attention to the racialization of the past and how white privilege, white supremacy, and racial hierarchies structured the material world. Yet less attention has been paid to how these conditions structure our practice. Since the discipline remains predominantly white, it follows that our practice supports and reproduces values, attitudes, conditions, and worldviews that privilege whiteness. If this compromises our discipline and makes us intellectually and emotionally less whole we should work toward an anti-racist institutional identity. What would an anti-racist Society for Historical Archaeology look like and how can we move in that direction?

Background

As a social archaeologist I am interested in the ways in which our racialized society influences our lives and by extension our archaeological practices. My modest efforts to explore these influences on our discipline are informed by my work on the Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, Multicultural Committees at my Historian-Universitarian Church, my attendance at a Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing and Training workshop, and my participation in Everyone Counts, a Western Michigan University service-learning course that examines how it is structured and faces racism. We must begin before that process is initiated and must continue throughout the degree structure; programs, products, and services; constituency; structure; and mission, particularly in the academic. This period of time, cultural resource management fashioned the growth of African-American archaeology, primarily in the South.

1970s: While archaeology was conducted in a racialized context throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, efforts to examine the archaeology of racialized populations did not occur until early work on plantation slavery in the 1960s (see Orser 2007:15-40), spurred initially by the Black archevm of the time. John Ott (1976; 1984) proposed that racial identification was used throughout American history to divide the population into two distinct groups, with implications for the archaeological record. It was type of work that substantively began drawing African-American archaeologists to the profession.

1990s: Ten articles appeared in Historical Archaeology that established race as a viable archaeological topic. David Babson posited that the CSA and the archaeology of race were central to the archaeological enterprise. If we are to continue to document inequities, identify conditions that limited women’s access, and attempted to redress some of these issues by introducing women and minority views. Teresa Epperson encouraged the study of the historical construction of race and called attention to the fact that archaeology cannot remain shielded from present-day politics. If the type of work that substantively began drawing African-American archaeologists to the profession.

1991: The discovery and excavation of the African Burial Ground (ABG) in Manhattan triggered concern over race and slavery. As in which archaeology reproduced racial hierarchy it also brought greater attention to the archaeological examination of slavery in the North. Decendant communities became involved and demonstrated how their role in archaeology can contribute to knowledge that both expands the discipline and reflects their interests and experiences. Archaeology can be an emancipatory practice that exposes the connections between past and present.

1994: SHA President Betty Reitz expanded the Committee on Gender Issues into the Committees on Gender and Minority Issues (later to be known as the Gender and Minority Affairs Committee). This came six years after the SHA’s Women’s Caucus conducted a survey to document inequities, identify conditions that limited women’s access, and attempted to redress some of these issues by introducing female archaeologists to the meetings. Because gender and minority issues are often collapsed, minority issues were less effectively addressed.

1998: The SHA hosted a controversial symposium at its annual meeting dedicated to questions surrounding the excavation of African-American sites and their political dimension. The papers were subsequently published in Historical Archaeology (1997).

2000s: Despite the early activity of the Gender and Minority Affairs Committee, it soon became relatively inactive. In the mid-1990s there was talk of abandoning the committees since “it had fulfilled its mission” (Spencer-Wood 1994:223). Since the work on the ABG there has been increasing attention paid to the archaeology of race and racialization (Garman 1994; McDavid 2007; Mulline 1998; Orser 2001, 2004; Payner 1993). Yet, there has been considerable less study of the way in which race shapes archaeological practice, specifically the voluntary association we call the SHA.

Where Did We Come From? A Brief Timeline for Important Events Related to Race and the Society of Historical Archaeology

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1. The SHA should develop an ethics statement regarding racial inclusion and diversity.
2. The SHA should develop a grievance procedure for issues related to racial discrimination.
3. The SHA leadership should participate in anti-racism training as a group, beginning with an introductory overview, in an effort to transform the SHA and move it toward an anti-racist identity.
4. The SHA should conduct a self-study that examines how it is structured to benefit white society and how white privileges is reflected in its practices, programs, products, and services; constituency; structure; and mission.

The Premises That Inform This Initiative

1. The educational path to professional and academic standing in the field of archaeology is daunting. For people of color, it is considerably more difficult.
2. If people of color know about the discipline, they must overcome prejudice, racism, sexism, and racism in the educational path to professional and academic standing in the field of archaeology.
3. Once the person embraces the profession they must pass entrance examinations often designed with an inherent bias against them.
4. If they are to succeed, they must be accepted into an institution.
5. If they are accepted, often there is no funding that ensures their attendance.
6. If there is funding, often there is no support to see the person through the rigorous demands of an advanced degree.
7. If there is support the person must still be able to graduate.
8. If they graduate and make it into the profession, they are often unable to get a tenure-track position in a major institution.
9. If they manage to get a tenure-track position, promotion is shallow.
10. At present, there is one African American who is a full professor in the field of archaeology who distinguished professor or eminent status ever be conferred?

In brief, the commitment to diversity does not end with the admission process. It must begin before that process is initiated and must continue long after we think it should end. We must come together as a profession to eliminate this disparity because individual schools operating in isolation has not been an effective strategy.

Future Action

At the close of the session, the panelists and audience participants suggested that a list of recommendations be brought to the Board of Directors for their action. The board subsequently issued these concerns back to the Gender and Minority Affairs Committee and the newly formed Ethics Committee.

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The Current Academic Climate in Archaeology for People of Color

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Acknowledgements

In producing this poster I have borrowed freely from the written and spoken words of many people including Jim Corneau, Nellie Godin-Nassaney, Charyse Marquardt, Jo-An Mundey, Charles Orser, Jr., Bob Payner, Warren Perry, the members of my WMU Diversity and Inclusion Learning Community, and my Crossroads trainees. Thanks to the SHA panelists who also shared their ideas: Jodi Barnes, Whitney Battie-Baptiste, Leslie Jones, Joe Joseph, and Barbara Little.