



## Spring 2012 Newsletter

### The Ephemerality of African Diasporic Materiality

By David T. Palmer\*

#### Abstract

The material record of the African Diaspora in the Gulf Coast and Circum-Caribbean is all too often ephemeral, elided, or erased. Interactions in this region, increasingly structured through hierarchical relations, resulted in new (some might say hybridized) modes of living and relating among the various African, European, and Native peoples. Our efforts to identify and explore, much less understand, the resulting complexity and cosmopolitanism are hindered by a legacy of racist hegemony: less substantive archaeological sites and the reification of past bias through site evaluation processes that do not account for the impact of past racism on site formation. In both overt and less-obvious systemic ways, the subjectivity and materiality of African descended persons are considered, literally and figuratively, to be immaterial in a world still largely under racist hegemony. Late 20th and early 21st century events, from the mainstream media characterization of post-earthquake Haiti and post-Katrina New Orleans, to the initial treatment of the African Burial Ground (New York City) provide examples of the continuation of racist hegemony. An examination of current site evaluation processes in the United States informed by Critical Race Theory reveals the systemic bias of a superficially fair set of criteria and processes.

The material record of the African Diaspora in the Gulf Coast and Circum-Caribbean region has played a critical role in deepening our understanding, and correcting gaps and misrepresentations, of the histories and contributions of persons of African descent in the region. All too often, however, this material record is ephemeral, erased, or elided (Barile 2004; Blakey 2004; Palmer 2011b; Wilkie et al. 2010; Yelvington 2001). If we think in terms of the flow of time, then this relative lack of materiality leaves us in far too many situations chasing the settling particles of its fading slipstream.

Why are African Diaspora archaeological sites disproportionately ephemeral? Because taphonomy or site formation is not a neutral process, but influenced by culture, and thus it projects contemporary biases limiting access to material goods, food, property, and other tangibles onto the material record as expressions of the *doxa* of the time. This results in the ephemerality of African Diaspora landscapes in the region, particularly pre- and early post-

emancipation landscapes such as plantations, small farmsteads, quilombos and the like. Sites begin as less materially substantial due to reduced opportunities to obtain, produce, and discard architecture and material goods relative to privileged persons of primarily European ancestry. If these sites were not erased outright by later development, they are often elided from the historical and cultural consciousness of the hegemonically dominant population, notably even in historical interpretations of places of enslavement. When sites that were already ephemeral are further damaged, destroyed or elided, opportunities to broaden and deepen our understanding of the roles of African-descended persons in the Gulf and Caribbean region are missed.

In my own geographic focus of work, southern Louisiana, examples of this bias abound. African Diaspora sites tend to be “off of the radar” of even those landowners and managers with an interest in area archaeology and history. This was the case at Avery Island, where a portion of the Marsh House Slave Quarters site (16IB34) was destroyed during residential construction (Palmer 2011a: 22-23). Through the intervention of the McIlhenny Company historian, permission and funding was provided for a field school to conduct survey and limited excavation of the remaining portions of the site, so the awareness has expanded in this instance of unintentional damage.

Louisiana’s state and municipal parks have also in the past contributed to the destruction and elision of African Diaspora sites and information about them. The very selection of which portion of a property to purchase and preserve, in this case typically the land closest to extant planter mansions, is both reflective of bias and a perpetuation of it. This is because it excludes from preservation the site areas where most African-descended persons lived and worked. More specific examples include the eviction of the last resident African American worker from Oakley plantation after it was purchased by the state of Louisiana to be a historic park site, and the destruction of several plantation quarter house sites at Riverlake Plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish – including one which was the early home of acclaimed author Ernest Gaines – after the remains of standing houses were removed and sold to a living history park in Baton Rouge (Wilkie 1995).

These places of enslavement where public interpretation occurs are still all too often populated by “servants” whose role in creating the wealth that allowed the construction of mansions and splendid gardens are deliberately overlooked, and whose material presence on the landscape, in the form of houses and fields of work, have been included minimally, if at all in the

presentation (Chappell 1999; Eichstadt and Small 2002). Non-plantation sites are perhaps even more likely to be destroyed, whether by “urban renewal” or flood control projects of Federal agencies such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Wilkie et al. 2010: 308).

Less dramatically harmful, but more commonplace, is the evaluation of such sites by professionals who are not specialists in African Diaspora or even historical archaeology. This is particularly the case in Louisiana, where we have only one resident professional archaeologist who specializes in African Diaspora archaeology and less than a dozen historical archaeologists (none of whom are in tenure-track teaching positions). Financial considerations for compliance contracts also militate against in-depth documentary research and oral history work, exacerbating the effects of the taphonomic bias.

The current state archaeological management plan in Louisiana does not include a specific theme for African Diaspora sites, so most are lumped under “the plantation” or “ethnic enclaves: the Blacks, Acadians, Germans, and Other Immigrants to Louisiana” (Smith et al. 1983: 64). Note that no distinction between voluntary and involuntary immigration and voluntary and involuntary minority status is made in this latter theme (Smith et al. 1983: 64; Ogbu and Simons 1998). The Louisiana Division of Archaeology and its allied Regional Archaeologists are working on revising and updating the state plan during the grant year 2011-2012. This is a step in the right direction, but this alone will not recruit African Diaspora archaeologists to work in the state, nor will it alleviate the reification of past racism inherent in seemingly neutral processes of evaluating sites on the basis of criteria including integrity.

The consequences of biased site preservation are exacerbated by the lack of any regard for this reality in the U.S.A. in historic preservation processes. As Kerri Barile made explicit for Texas, and we can confidently extend for the rest of the Gulf south U.S. region (at the least), considerations of site integrity exclude many African Diaspora sites from being considered significant, especially as archaeologists – following the *doxa* of the National Register of Historic Places process – tend to focus exclusively upon archaeological data (rather than all data) available for a site and the research value “D” criterion (Barile 2004). Viewing archaeology from a perspective informed by Critical Race Theory, this is clearly an example of systemic, structural racism because it perpetuates past bias while purporting to be a fair and unbiased process. To rephrase this, the consequences of what we might call a racist “c transform” are not adequately addressed in our current historic preservation processes, resulting in a systemic

continuation of past discrimination into the present (Barile 2004; Palmer 2011b; Schiffer 1987: 22). This is particularly true in situations of intersectionality where individuals belonged to two or more marginalized categories, such as African descent and female, African descent and indigenous, African descent and homosexual, and so forth.

Any attempts to explicitly address this issue are fraught with political danger. Vindicationist and Critical Race Theory perspectives are not widely acknowledged as valid, even within the academy, and potential remedies, such as sampling strategies in which representation of the cultural diversity of a state's population and historic events is included as a part of the NRHP eligibility consideration process would potentially be labeled a historic preservation "quota" system and attacked on the basis of that label (Barile 2004: 99).

Rather than being understood as an opportunity for restorative justice and more inclusive and deep history, efforts to rectify the problem are more likely to be perceived by whites as yet more demands for "special privileges" for minorities; these same whites having a stake in maintaining their hegemony through denial of the vast and unacknowledged contributions of African-descended persons (and other minorities) to the history, culture, and economy of the broader society. In fact, for the more aware members of the dominant group, the implications of such approaches clearly threaten the occlusion of the centuries of "special privileges" for dominant white, European-descended males which allow such individuals to deny their privileged status in society. We need not look far for examples of overt and systemic bias against African-descended persons in our region either, as the devastation wrought by the (un)natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina or the Jena 6 incident make apparent.

The pernicious effects of biased preservation from the "c transform" of racism can also be seen in Caribbean nations where African-descended people govern and form the majority, as in Haiti and the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. Haiti, having had its development potential crippled historically by forced reparation payments to France – billing the formerly enslaved for freeing themselves – in addition to foreign interference including invasions and occupations, has to focus on more pressing human-needs priorities rather than its globally significant history and culture. The persistence of bias against an independent African-Caribbean nation is still evident in the majority of popular media coverage of Haiti, much less the comments of Pat Robertson and his ilk (e.g., Mintz 2010). In the much more comfortable Commonwealth of the Bahamas, controversy over a plan by the then-ruling party to sell off a government property with intact

sites pertinent to all periods of human occupation of the Bahamas (including a cradle of African Bahamian culture – Clifton Plantation), to private developers as a quick budgetary fix were only stopped by a concerted popular effort which also cost the ruling party that status after the next election (Wilkie 2001).

In seeking to deepen the historical anthropology of the Circum-Caribbean and Gulf Coast, we use all of the available slipstream particles, whether documentary, archaeological, or oral. For our understanding of the African Diaspora, given the problematic or absent documentary record and often sub-optimal archaeological record this is *imperative* rather than just an ideal to be pursued when resources permit.

While in a material sense, we all can consider our primary or fundamental materiality to be our corporeal forms, for the majority of Africans who arrived in the New World via enslavement, this primary materiality was imposed upon them as a equal to their subjectivity by enslavers who valued them principally as laboring bodies and enumerated them along with objects and livestock. Enslaved Africans and their descendents created diverse materialities and subjectivities, and we are sometimes able to access these in addition to the primary materiality. Even when we are more limited to the primary materiality of the remains of the body, bioarchaeologists of the African Diaspora have had much success in flipping or inverting the imposed subjectivity of body/property/object by restoring the individual's subjectivity as a unique and worthy human being through reconstruction of life history from biological evidence (e.g., Armstrong and Fleischman 2003; Handler and Corruccini 1983; Khudabux 1991; Owsley et al. 1987; Rose 1985; Rankin-Hill 1997: 44-48; Tiné 2000). Many more such opportunities have been lost or wasted, although the direction of the past few years has been promising for the bioarchaeology of the African Diaspora.

We more frequently have access to artifacts, documents, and oral data than human remains. With regard to documentary evidence, we have some great researchers who do work on Louisiana African Diaspora topics. Rebecca Scott's framing Louisiana in the greater Gulf and Caribbean to have been part of the "long 19th century," provides a meaningful context for interpreting past lives and events (Scott 2007: 726). Her comparative research examining post-emancipation life in Louisiana, Haiti, Cuba and Brazil, and her more recent work which illuminates a broad, extra-national consciousness of rights among African-descended persons of the Gulf-Caribbean-Atlantic world via exploring the history of a single family are exemplars of

this approach. Gwendolyn Hall has deepened our understanding of the 1795 conspiracy of the enslaved in Pointe Coupee Parish and the development of an African-Creole culture in Louisiana (Hall 1992; Scott 2005, 2007). Judith Carney's inspired research on the plants and plant knowledge contributed by Africa and Africans to the New World is another notable contribution, as is DeJong's history of the pre-Civil rights era struggle for dignity in Louisiana which draws upon documentary and oral historical data (Carney and Rosomoff 2009; DeJong 2002).

Anthropological archaeologists of the African Diaspora have also had some successes, in spite of the obstacles, by using all available lines of evidence. Some examples of this for our region are Laurie Wilkie's archaeo-biography of Alabama midwife Lucretia Perryman, which links the local site and individual history with the broader context of changing attitudes about motherhood, childbirth and African American women (Wilkie 2003). In my own research at Alma and Riverlake plantations, I was able to find evidence of economic and other practices in the archaeological, oral, and documentary record that were concrete examples of the maintenance and expression of dignity by African Americans on sugar plantations in Jim Crow Louisiana (Palmer 2005, 2008, 2011). Struchtmeyer's thesis on an African American school site in Pointe Coupee Parish, Scott's comparative examination of foodways using zooarchaeology, and Brown's work at Oakland Plantation in Natchitoches are other examples of what can be done when all of the available "particles" are used in interpreting past lives of African-descended persons (Brown 2008; Scott 2001; Struchtmeyer 2008).

Despite the progress that has been made since the founding of field, and changes in social and political life (e.g., election of a "Black" president in the U.S.) there is still a need for a resolutely vindicationist anthropological archaeology of the African Diaspora and for a serious consideration of the ways in which our current historic preservation processes perpetuate past bias. As part of this, we can continue to expand the awareness of individuals, particularly property-owners (as is part of my Regional Archaeology Program mandate), and work using all available lines of evidence – all of the slipstream particles – to interpret the lives of past Africans and persons of African descent who might otherwise be lost in history's wake.

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## Note

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