



## December 2007 Newsletter

### Teaching the Archaeology of the African Diaspora and its Consequences: Thoughts about Entangling Education

By Timothy James Scarlett

In the Spring of 2007, I scrapped my standard syllabus for my undergraduate Historical Archaeology Class. I had become increasingly dissatisfied with my course's evolution. While the content and structure were fine, and the students learned about the discipline of historical archaeology, I felt the course fell short of its educational potential. When I realized that 2007 was the 200th anniversary of the British empire's ban on the international slave trade as well as the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, I was inspired to adopt the slave trade and its consequences as my new theme.

Historical archaeology's greatest gift, I believe, is that it is *entangled*. I use this term in a similar manner to Ann Stahl, to imply both good and bad characteristics of the discipline. Archaeology generally entangles multiple academic subjects -- science and humanities, process and agency, symbol and behavior -- which is a wonderful thing in itself. Historical archaeology, however, also offers the entanglements derived from being the "archaeology of us." It ties students to the materiality of their lives and adds the depth of time, a point that needs no elaboration here. Archaeology's materiality also entangles people with each other because it represents a tangible connection to the past that eludes most high school history curricula. Historical archaeology creates empathy between people.

Because Michigan Technological University's student demographic profile is largely non-Hispanic White (81% +/- 4%) males (76%), and only 2% of our community identifies itself as "out" (4% nationally),[1] I decided that the anniversaries provided me the opportunity to devote my entire class to the archaeology of the African Diaspora. This subject would force students not only to confront new ideas about objects and symbolism, gender and culture, agency in history, behavior and perception, which had been standard parts of my class, but also confront "otherness" in self-critical and reflexive manner.

This was ambitious and idealistic on my part since this is not my area of expertise and I am currently undertaking no research in this area. I was nervous to present myself as an authority figure talking about African and African-American history and I knew that my students would see me as such even if I explained my intellectual process. I was not thrilled at the hours I would have to spend scanning images from books and searching the WWW for pictures to create lectures. As I thought about how I could present research conducted by others without implicating myself as a coauthor or collaborator, it occurred to me that I could just ask people to

share their research *directly* with my class. I sent emails and made phone calls to my colleagues and asked who would be willing to share Powerpoint slide shows. The response from our community was heartening since everyone I asked shared, or offered to share, with me.

I set up the class to run in a relatively chronological manner. As a distribution-fulfilling class, the students come into the course with varied backgrounds. Most knew little to no anthropology *per se*, except what they learned in our interdisciplinary World Cultures class in the core studies program. Almost none of them knew anything about archaeology, so I began with introductions to archaeology and the idea of culture. This beginning also made Jim Deetz's *In Small Things Forgotten* a good introductory text. I complemented this with a detailed discussion of culture, race, and ethnicity, drawing heavily on the AAA's Race Project web pages. In addition, Carl Blair[2] gave an excellent guest lecture in which he overviewed the rise of complex societies in Africa, contextualizing regional relationships and the slave trade from the iron age to the early modern period.

I set the stage for the story of the Diaspora by describing Jamestown and her contemporary Spanish, French, Dutch and other settlements. I set this story within the rise of mercantile capitalism and Plantation America, a subject most of the students knew from World Cultures. From there I began presenting research projects contributed by my colleagues. I spoke first about the triangle trade and explained how underwater archaeology provides insight into the lived experiences of the middle passage. Both Jane Webster (University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne) and Hannes Schroeder (Oxford University) sent Powerpoint lectures through which I could share their research with my class. These lectures became points of departure from which we discussed African adaptations to the ecological and social environments of the Americas, bioarchaeology, creolization and ethnicity, and the colonial world. The students began to read Theresa Singleton's edited volume, *I, Too, am America*. Those who know my research will not be surprised that I put some emphasis on both landscape archaeology and the story of colonoware.

By week 7 of the term, I transitioned into the post-colonial world. I hoped to make colonial and plantation experiences, which are very firmly established in "otherness" for a nineteen year old mid-westerner, into prelude to the stories of people and places closer to home. I made the transition with a discussion of gender, mothering, and medical practice. The students read *The Archaeology of Mothering* and Laurie Wilkie (University of California, Berkeley) generously sent slides for an accompanying lecture. This topic inspired much discussion and I had not anticipated the enthusiastic way white male engineering students would engage with the history of medical technology as the racialized and gendered practice that Wilkie wove into her narrative. This was an ideal example of the kind of entangled teachable moments created through historical archaeology.

Sarah Fayen and Jon Prown, from the Chipstone Foundation, provided me with a lecture to further punctuate the jump from the colonial world into the nineteenth century. The students' visited Chipstone's on-line version of their exhibit *About Face: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the African American Image*. I used the story of the Toussaint pitcher to explore the changing construction of race relations in America. This also resonated with my students for an unanticipated reason. They were surprised that such an exhibit would have originated at the Milwaukee Art Museum, as the students had not considered the decorative arts alongside the fine

arts. Perhaps more importantly, they were also surprised because although many students were from Wisconsin, they had never considered the Milwaukee Art Museum as a center of African-American or Diaspora-related cultures and history.

I capitalized on that moment by extending our discussions of race and class from stories about African-American midwives and abolitionist potters to consider the archaeology of New York's Five Points neighborhood and the African Burying Ground. We made fruitful comparisons between the lives of African- and Irish- Americans during these weeks, taking full advantage of many on-line resources as well as a hearty critique of Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*. The students listened to a pod cast of Rebecca Yamin's (John Milner Associates) discussion with Marty Moss-Coaine at WHYY's RadioTimes and compared the archaeology, the movie, and the photographs of Jacob Riis. This activity, which I have used in several versions of this class, is an ideal tool to explore the relationships between representations of the past, academic inquiry, and the social tensions inherent in those activities.

We continued our explorations of the archaeology of African-American lives by connecting the 19th with the 20th century. I moved the class westward from New York, looking at studies of African-American loggers, the United States Colored Troops Civil War service, the Buffalo Soldiers in the west, and the African-American community in Nevada. The students read *Boomtown Saloons* and Kelly Dixon (University of Montana) also kindly provided slides for a guest lecture. In another unexpected teachable moment, the students connected the African- and Irish-American archaeologies in New York to the study of contemporary communities in Virginia City's western setting. Saloon archaeology was also a hit, but this was less of a surprise.

In wrapping up discussion, I wanted to bring home these archaeologies of African-American experiences. I wanted to try and somehow make them into "the archaeology of us" even though not a single person in my classroom identified any African heritage. I therefore concluded by considering the challenges that archaeology presents through the environmental justice movement, which resonates with civil and environmental engineers as much as students of the social sciences. I first explored the evolution of America's great mid-western cities, connecting historical and economic trends with their physical manifestations in urban geography. I used that perspective to consider the disaster that followed hurricane Katrina's demolition of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. This served as a timely and powerful conclusion to the class in which I could mix the work of Shannon Lee Dawdy with the personal experiences offered by my sister, who had served as a first responder in Mississippi after the disaster.

This course change made the generosity of the archaeological community clearly evident. Several other scholars offered material that I was able to include in presentations and discussions, and I am particularly indebted to Paul Mullins, Christopher Matthews, Mark Hauser, Nicholas Hanks, Christopher Espenshade, and Timothy Goddard and Paul Shackel, among others. I hope anyone I've neglected to mention will forgive my oversight. In their evaluations, the students mostly forgave the rough edges of my first time through this class and they also appreciated my colleagues' generosity. As one commented, "It was a great way to end, tying together all of it: the Five Points, the burying ground, and the saloons." Another advised me, "continue the guest lectures and presentations from other universities. I appreciate your efforts to do that." Those interested can visit the on-line syllabus to see the links and assigned readings, the

changes between what I had hoped to do vs. what I actually did, download lecture outlines as pdfs, and follow the major activities described above at:  
<http://www.ss.mtu.edu/faculty/Scarlett/Histarch/histarch2007.htm>.

I certainly exposed the students to a world they neither knew nor understood and their exams made evident that they learned a great deal about archaeology. Next spring, I will certainly refine most of my presentations. The course needs to have the archaeological narratives balanced with more personal stories, so I will probably ask the students to read an ethnography or novel, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While I used the African Diaspora Archaeology Network's website as a resource, I did not direct my students to the site, nor did I provide direct links to articles and discussions in the ADAN's *Newsletter*. I also completely neglected the resources of the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery and The Archaeology Channel. Finally, I must find a way next year to assess whether or not I added some empathy to our campus community, entangling our students with experiences lived by others.

I realize now, after other experiments with pod casting and Skype's virtual office capabilities, how much collaborative potential is emerging in the teaching environment. I hope that others will explore similar avenues and perhaps even create a venue for more substantial collaborative work. Perhaps the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter, the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery, and the Archaeology Channel could collaboratively establish a teaching space to share such resources. The benefits could be extraordinary.

### *Notes*

[1]. The statistics about race, sex, and sexuality are from Michigan Technological University (2006). MTU's community is very concerned about issues of gender and sexuality on our campus (see Matlock et al. 2006).

[2]. In addition to his archaeological expertise in early iron, Carl is the study abroad coordinator for Michigan Tech's International Programs and Services office.

### ***References Cited***

Michigan Technological University

2006 Diversity Fact Sheet. Retrieved from [http://diversity.mtu.edu/docs/DiversityFacts\\_2006-1.pdf](http://diversity.mtu.edu/docs/DiversityFacts_2006-1.pdf) on Thursday, October 4, 2007.

Matlock, John, Janet Delecke, Karin VanDyke, and Aurles Wiggins

2006 Summary Report on Diversity Accomplishments and Future Strategies for Expanding and Enhancing Diversity at Michigan Technological University. Unpublished report retrieved from [http://diversity.mtu.edu/Final\\_MTU\\_Summary\\_Report.pdf](http://diversity.mtu.edu/Final_MTU_Summary_Report.pdf) on Thursday, October 4, 2007.

**Return to December 2007 Newsletter:**

**<http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/news1207/news1207.html>**