

Recommended Citation

Parker, Kailey (2021) "Moving Toward Ethical Treatment of African American Heritage," *Spectrum*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum/vol10/iss1/8>

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Spectrum

Volume 10
Issue 1 *Spectrum 2021*

Article 8

2021

Moving Toward Ethical Treatment of African American Heritage

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Brief Description:

In this paper I examine the treatment of African and African American Heritage sites, specifically the unmarked and historical burial grounds to examine that best practices of archaeology when handling African American Heritage. The rediscovery of the New York African Burial Ground in Manhattan brought the critical eye of media and academia because of the controversial steps taken by government to examine the remains. The New York African Burial Ground is used as a base for comparison of the involvement of descendent communities and archaeologists, seen in the case studies presented in this paper. Throughout the paper I discuss the history of discrimination and racialization of African and African Americans that created the pattern of mistreatment and destruction of African American Heritage sites and the steps taken in the present to establish ethical practices.

Moving Towards Ethical Treatment of African American Heritage

The discovery of the African Burial Ground in lower Manhattan in 1991 became a point of friction between the academic and social justice communities (Blakey 1998). Although the burial ground was recorded in archival accounts, it was “rediscovered” by the United States General Services Administration (GSA) when new federal buildings in downtown Manhattan were being constructed. The New York African Burial Ground, previously known as the “Negroes Burying Ground” and renamed in 1933, was the burial place of enslaved and free Africans (LaRoche and Blakey 1997). Upon the discovery of the burial ground, the excavation of the human remains was started by the New York Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team (MFAT). From the beginning of the excavation, the forensic team conversed very little with the African American descendent community. The response to this was to challenge both MFAT and the GSA through community activism with help from government officials and the media. In response, Michal Blakey and his team proposed a new plan that was a push in the right direction, moving the power over the site to a team of African American archaeologists from Howard University (LaRoche and Blakey 1997).

The handling of African American remains by both academic and city officials was criticized due to the lack of community involvement in how to best handle the recovery and study of their community's ancestral remains. The disregard that scholars and government officials have for the descendent community and their sacred burial grounds is part of a larger problem that has also been a contentious issue for Native American descendant communities in the U.S. who have sought to protect their ancestor’s remains (LaRoche and Blakey 1997, p.85). The use of Native American or African American remains for racialized archaeological study has inspired protests from the descendent communities of the remains that are often taken without

consent or consultation- As will be discussed about African burial grounds, there was no involvement of the descendant community in the removal and study of their ancestors. The lack of respect and laws protecting the African American burial grounds is the reasoning behind the vast amount of remains in museums and institutions for educational purposes. At the time of rediscovery of the African Burial ground in Manhattan, the National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106, required consultation of interested parties, a federal steering committee of concerned community activists, and experts and professionals to guide the dialogue between the parties involved in handling (Laroche and Blakey 1997, p.960. This act however mainly focuses on the preservation of Native American affiliated historic properties or eligible historic properties affected by federally funded projects (National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106). This act lacks the protection process of unmarked graves of African remains if found during a federal undertaking, allowing unethical treatment of ancestral remains. In the past and time following the process of recovering the Manhattan African Burial Ground shows the lack of protection specifying the handling of unmarked burial grounds, a situation of many African and African American cemeteries. Mistreatment and discrimination because of race did not allow the African and African American Community the respect of a sacred burial ground given to white community members, leaving their heritage sites vulnerable to displacement. Thus, the descendent communities were and are rightfully upset with the treatment of their ancestral remains and belongings.

Implementation of legal protection of unmarked burials, especially heritage sites of African and African American communities can be modeled after the Native American Graves Repatriation Act enacted in 1990 following civil protest and efforts from Indigenous communities. While NAGPRA requires consultation with tribes on the appropriate handling of

their ancestor's human remains, no equivalent legislative protections exist for African American burial remains in the U.S. (Dunnivant 2013). The existence of legal protection allows for the Black community to be involved as stakeholders in the management of their cultural heritage. What efforts can be implemented to end this long history of hurtful and racist practices in the field of archaeology? In this paper, I examine the ethical mistreatment of the African Burial Ground in Manhattan and how NAGPRA and other activism in US during the 1990s has allowed archaeologists to learn from prior mistakes and to develop "best practices" in their studies of African American archaeology, examples of which are discussed here. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) creates more opportunities to carry out research "with, by, and for" descendent communities and move one step closer to an anti-racist archaeology.

Toward Appropriate Excavation and Treatment of African American Remains

Multiple reconsiderations within the anthropological field arose with the enactment of NAGPRA in 1990. Those that did not support a repatriation and protective legislation, believed that ancient human remains belong to everyone, reasoned that all humans are members of the same species (Kakaliouras 2012, Dunnivant 2013). Others welcomed the opportunity to reevaluate the relationship that occurs between the descendent communities and researchers. Indigenous scholar Sonya Atalay (2012) emphasizes how imperative it is that archaeologists work 'by, with and for' descendant communities; this is essential in the forward progress of an anti-racist archaeology. Black scholar Michael Blakey (2020, p S194) calls for archaeologists to ask permission to conduct research on the things that do not belong to them, as the denial of the Black voice and denial of racism is racist itself because it continues the White narrative of entitlement. Black archaeologist Justin Dunnivant (2013) calls for an African American Graves

Repatriation Act (AAGPRA) to ensure protection for African American burial grounds and historic cemeteries. The grave robbing and collection of remains without consent cannot be continued to truly investigate the cultural and historical past of African and African American peoples in the United States as something more than enslavement.

The call for AAGPRA and Atalay's (2012) discussion on the practice of community-based participatory research are two important concepts to be developed further and utilized in moving towards ethical treatment of African American burial grounds and an anti-racist archaeology. Dunnivant's (2013) discussion of a legislation like NAGPRA examines the major points that would need to be addressed. The legislation would need to include but not be limited to recognition of the sacredness of burials and artifacts associated with African and African American communities, mandating an administrative process to provide summary from museums, institutions and individuals involved in the handling of remains and artifacts, and required consultation with African American communities and potential repatriation (Dunnivant 2013, p.14). While it may take time to enact legislation for African American heritage protection, archaeologists and heritage professionals can use community-based participatory research when researching and producing knowledge on African American heritage and culture.

Atalay (2012) discusses the importance of community-based participatory research (CBPR). Archaeological research does not remain separate from political or cultural ties outside of the academic world. Those who are 'researched' are affected by the research and it creates an imbalance of power between archaeologist and the community under the academic eye (Atalay 2012, p.57). CBPR changes the process of how the knowledge is gained and produced. Community engagement involves direct engagement, consultation and collaboration creating a more critical, holistic stance in the research produced (Atalay 2012, p. 56: 2006, p.289). A large

part of CBPR is the capacity building within communities that have been harshly affected by racialized and colonialized research production in the past, it allows these communities to build new skills and be active participants in the research that affects them directly. A more equal power balance gives descendent communities stewardship over their ancestral remains and the feeling they have gained something valuable from a partnership with academic researchers (Atalay 2012, 74).

Part of the ethical mistreatment concerning African and African American remains is grounded in a deeper racist history in archaeology. Historical archaeologists bear the responsibility for the study of racialization as it has been used to set social roles and helped shape Euro-American archaeology (Orser 2003:8). When archaeologists studied race in the past, it was categorized or related to ethnicity and when studied recently many try to not touch on the topic of race due to the complexity and mutability of the topic. The studies that were geared toward assigning ethnic markers through the evidence in material culture often fell into associating artifacts to groups of people or 'ethnic peoplehoods' (Orser 1998). The issue that stemmed from this was racial stereotyping whereby a static identity was applied to materials that represented a people; for instance, assigning colonoware pottery to African Americans and opium pipes to Asians (Orser 1998). Assigning a static identity to artifacts and humans associated with race is problematic because race is fluid social designation that interacts with many other vectors of identity within a society. These other vectors of identity, such as poverty or power relations affect how the social designation of an individual and the role the identity plays in society as well. For example, the assignment of race as African American meant inferior and a right to be enslaved to the white community but those who were enslaved showed resistance, intelligence, and culture within their assignment despite discrimination and racialization. To study race in the

archaeological record, one must also look at how race interacts with other identities, such as socioeconomic status, within the individual's life. Orser (2015) notes that while the racialized identification of an individual may change, the racialized structure remains intact which can be seen today as the field of archaeology changes to include the voices that were made to be invisible for quite some time; the voices of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) archaeologists.

Race is not a biological category, but a social construct that dictates how people treat others in society (Babson 1990). Orser (2003, p.7) states "the assignment of race is a social fact with concrete reality in the daily lives of countless individuals," the evidence from this statement seen in the mistreatment and creation of unequal power relations between the whites and BIPOC communities throughout American history and still prevalent today. The racialization of the African and African American Communities has heavily affected how remains and artifacts from the community have been studied. For example, the MFAT planned to study the New York African Burial Ground remains from the approach of 'racing' methods study morphometric data that could lead to stereotypical research biases and supporting the natural route to study the 'enslaved' versus a group that could be studied for the various ethnicities present and the culture represented in the grave goods (Laroche and Blakey 1997, p.88). The marginalization of BIPOC communities based on the identification of physical traits or other racial categories that become "naturalized" within a society is a process of racialization, where individuals are perceived to be of a biologically inferior status. This status of inferiority assigned to BIPOC communities is an ideology that supports the discrimination, inequality, and mistreatment that is still prevalent today and allows for the exclusion of the communities whose culture is being used to produce data. One well-known example of racialization in the history of anthropology of Samuel

Morton's studies of human crania during the nineteenth century. Morton's collection of crania was to support his stance of white supremacy and polygenism, the ideology that the human race was five distinct races – superiority based on the intelligence of the races (Kelleher 2021). The remains that were used in this collection were obtained through his connections of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and the grave robbing of Indigenous and African and African American burials. His assessing of the crania mostly based on the visual aspects to assign race was used to rank the intelligence and superiority of the races- Indigenous and African American labeled as inferior to white people (Kelleher 2021). His production of *Crania Americana* (1839) and *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844) were used to portray the racial designations and reinforce the racial hierarchy present in western society that supported the enslavement and mistreatment of the African and African American people (Armstrong-Fumero 2014, p.1-2,p.11).

Situating the African Burial Ground

The African Burial Ground is a particularly important site for the study of race and racism in archaeology. Located in lower Manhattan, the African Burial Ground represents a key piece of New York City's history that is often missing, which includes its central role in the acts of enslavement that the English and Dutch settlements institutionalized in the Northeast United States. During the early seventeenth century, the Dutch settlers occupied Indigenous land labeling the settlement New Amsterdam, previously known as New Netherland (Wall and Cantwell 2015, p.31). New Netherland was established along the Hudson River as it was a key waterway for trade. The New Netherland community consisted of three main groups: The Algonquian Munsee tribe, Dutch and Europeans working for the Dutch West India Company and enslaved Africans. The enslavement of African peoples began in the 1620s with the

establishment of the Dutch colony, the small population became residents involuntarily due to slave trade and war related activity in the Atlantic world (Wall and Cantwell 2015, p.31). The population of Africans increased when the Dutch West India company and business of the Dutch colony entered the slave trade in Africa, their trade being fur, textiles, pots and jugs, manufactured goods and enslaved Africans from various places (Maika, p.20). As time continued, the number of Africans that were enslaved within the population grew. The power relations and political ideology within the colony shifted multiple times for about a decade between Dutch and English conquests (Wall and Caldwell 2015). The power change to the English within the colony in 1664 created the already racialized community to not only be a state with slaves, but a slave state that enacted legislation into place based on racialized ideologies.

The burial ground began within the colony around 1650 and closed in 1795 and was the final resting place of about fifteen thousand people (Howard 2009, p.2). The burial ground was a place for the enslaved Africans to hold on to their humanity against the racialized ideology that controlled them. Their burial rituals that employed shrouds, coffins, and offerings were representative of their own cultural beliefs (Blakey 2020,5187). The burial ground was filled and built over by the colony to build houses for the community in the 1790s (Blakey 1998,2020).

While it is known historically that New York played a large role within the slave trade, the Northeast region claims a commitment to abolitionism, and righteousness in comparison to the Southeast of the United States. The history that is taught in schools and memorialized in monuments from the area is “morality, righteousness, and human dignity” (Orser 2015:313). The perpetuation of this myth obscures the mistreatment of the enslaved Africans and the discrimination they faced in the Northeast throughout their enslavement and following abolition in 1865. The importance of this burial ground is not only to remember the long-term effects of

enslavement and the people who were enslaved, but to pay tribute to the lives of these African people who were captured and forcibly removed from their lands and brought to the Dutch and English colonies against their will. As Blakey (1998) notes, a proper and respectful investigation of the New York African Burial Ground is the chance to establish the identities of those buried to combat the dehumanizing ‘slave’ identity.

The issues that arose concerning the investigation of the New York African Burial Ground conducted by Blakey and his team came from the trials they faced with government and public parties. Blakey (2020) describes the situation as being surrounded by White archaeologists and those in the city that desired to control the work through statements expressing that the entire community of New York should have rights to the ‘American History’. The problematic ideology lies in the entitlement that white archaeologists and community members feel to African American remains, labeling it as ‘reverse racism’. The underlying theme in this situation is the racialization that labeled Africans as inferior has continued in the mistreatment of remains and discrimination in society, allowing Black cemeteries to be disturbed with no regard for the wishes the dead or the descendent community. The rise of activism and challenge to the mistreatment stated above supported from many different groups within and outside of the community. The governmental aspect came from individuals in congress, senate, the mayor of New York City, and municipal power to end the excavation, challenge the GSA, form a task force for oversight of the Burial Ground and form the federal steering committee (Laroche and Blakey 1997, 85). The African American community also rose and gained support from the press, media, religious communities, musicians, lawyers, architects, and the team led by Michael Blakey from Howard University. The team itself consisted of a diverse team of more than “200 researchers, thirty specialists with doctoral degrees, nine laboratories and collaborating

universities, twelve years and 6 million dollars...” (Blakey 2010, p.64). The protests and activism that came from the discovery was not new to the Black community of New York, but with the collaboration from many different groups allowed a team led by Black archaeologist to rectify a situation of mistreatment with community involvement.

Best Practices in African American Archaeology

In this section, I will examine the practices taken, especially the initial action, in the study of African American remains and the community-based collaboration used in the archaeological field to share stewardship to the descendent communities and Black archaeologists themselves. I will examine the undervaluing of African American burial grounds and heritage sites in contrast to archaeologist and officials valuing heritage sites to provide examples of what ‘best practices can look like. As the conversation of ‘best practices’ to develop an anti-racist archaeology occurs, it is important to note that stewardship is representative of the care a group has for the disposition of their ancestors. There is a vulnerability present for the descendent community at the hands of anthropological treatment, therefore ethical mistreatment and descendant community-based research is a topic that is a must within African American archaeology moving forward to ensure that the ethical code is followed, and communities are respected.

To examine the undervaluing of African American heritage sites and burial grounds I will discuss the mistreatment and obliteration of burial grounds from written and visual history as well as the racialized use of African American remains for educational purposes in our past. As discussed above the growth of urban development uncovered the New York African Burial Ground, however in Manhattan the privilege to memorialize and study burial remains was not present in the case of Richmond Virginia’s ‘second African Burial Ground’. The burial ground

was used as the primary cemetery for the city's African American community from 1816 to 1879 (Smith 2020, p.17). The archaeological record of this burial ground is close to nothing due to the obliteration of the historical burial ground by the construction of streets in 1870s, a dog pound built on one corner in the 1950s and the creation of Talley's Auto Center soon after (Smith 2020, p.18). The burial ground was documented by the city, however, overtime it was erased from memory on new documentation and destroyed by construction; early construction even using the human remains to fill the construction site to create the street. The site's reemergence to social memory occurred when construction on Virginia Commonwealth University's medical college uncovered a well that contained mostly African American bones, collected from grave robbing and the almshouse that was located near the school from before 1860. The discernment of the remains found, and the lack of ethical treatment was not addressed until 2013, nine years later from the discover of the remains. This began the investigation of the area along where the burial ground was originally located, however the site lacked 'integrity' as is mandated by the National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106 as mentioned above. The site did not demonstrate enough significance. However, as it occurred in Manhattan, public engagement and activism has raised awareness to the community through descendent communities and support from scholars to historically preserve the site. As the site itself lacks archaeological data to be discovered, the obliteration of the heritage site with the presence of the auto center serves a significant marker of the erasure of history and the ethical mistreatment of African American burial grounds that plagues African American heritage sites.

A similar tale of urban development is seen in Dunnivant's (2012) discussion of the reappropriation and documented erasure of the Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery in Walter C. Pierce Community Park in Washington D.C. The burial ground was created by the Young Men's

Benevolent Association for the organization members and African Americans denied burial in the white cemeteries. The site was discovered due to soil erosion and government officials tried to initiate construction to address the issue in 2005 (Dunnivant 2012, p.2). The community stepped in before any excavations could be completed on either of the two cemeteries – African American and Quaker. A non-invasive archaeological survey was conducted, and the construction project size was reduced to protect the site. The African American site dates from 1870 to 1890, originally containing more than 8,400 burials (p. 2). The underlying issue present at Mt. Pleasant Plains Cemetery is the reinterment, reappropriation of land and erasure of social memory of the cemetery. The reappropriation occurred due to the need to ‘beautify’ the area after the civil war and the racism that was present did not allow for the African American community to keep their sacred burial place.

Carol McDavid’s (2011) case study does not focus on the study of archaeological remains but the use of public participation within archaeology to allow descendent communities to become stakeholders in their own cultural resource management. Her focus on Freedmen’s Town presents the issue that gentrification and class struggle pose to historic preservation of African American historical areas. McDavid (2011) uses a community-based research technique of actively interviewing the community to provide a multivocal picture of effects of racialization and class on the community that is ‘losing’ its physical history. Archaeology is not always a welcomed study in BIPOC communities because of the lack of collaboration in the past. However, McDavid’s accounts of the media portrayal of Freedman in comparison shows that the flexibility of archaeologists to use CBPR to try different techniques in archeological study can foster an environment where the descendent community feels they will be listened to.

The three case studies discussed above all involve the effects of urban development of African American heritage sites that are destroyed, displaced, or obliterated because of lack of historic preservation of these sites and the systemic racism that affect's city infrastructure. The 'beautification' of these cities in the past and present involve the erasure of social memory and physical evidence of African American Heritage throughout the United States, increasingly occurring in urban cities. The African and American sites are in urban areas because these are the areas where the slave trade was most relevant and where settlements occurred and spread from, examples being Richmond, Virginia and Manhattan, New York. The lack of freedom and human rights given to African American communities in the past is seen through the treatment of their heritage sites and the silencing of their protests. As stated above, the lack of legislation and stewardship designated for African American burial grounds leaves the sites and the Black community vulnerable to the unethical treatment from scholars and government officials, in the past present and future. The gentrification of Black communities not only destroys heritage sites but forces Black residents to move because they can no longer afford the area, they live in. Therefore, the decreasing Black community may not be able to speak or have large support from the community because the descendants were driven from their neighborhoods. It is a responsibility of archaeologists and scholars to learn from mistakes of the past to advocate for CBPR and the preservation of African American sites to provide a fuller narrative of our historical past.

To contrast the opposition and unethical treatment that was present in New York, Virginia and Texas, the Portsmouth African Burial Ground outlines how a community can investigate African American history and respect the descendent communities as a collaborative team. The burial ground was found in downtown Portsmouth, NH during construction work. The

CRM group immediately involved the descendent community in the decisions on how to follow with the 18th century burial ground that had been previously paved over (Vawter 2020). The city officials, descendent community and archaeologists worked together to create a monument where the remains were found on Chestnut Street in downtown Portsmouth to memorialize these unmarked graves of enslaved Africans and to raise local awareness about New Hampshire's history of enslavement. The collaboration allowed for educational growth for the larger community as slavery is not generally recognized in New England's history, in contrast to the history of slavery in the Southern United states. The educational product that resulted from the discovery of the Portsmouth Burial Ground should be a model for those studying African American archaeological history because of the level of involvement from the community alone allowed so many more opportunities of impact to arise.

Maria Franklin and Nedra Lee's (2020) research on the Ransom and Sarah William Farmstead Project is a prime example of the steps that should be taken to create the space for descendent community collaboration. While their team faced challenges of funding and support from the governmental parties, their community outreach program with the descendent community Manchaca, Texas was successful in showing a way that community archaeology can be accomplished despite challenges faced. Their technique was to collect oral history from the descents, possibly introduce descendants to the site to help with excavation and create the project's goal collectively with the community. They were not able to include the descendants within the archaeological excavation, however the team was able to build a diverse team of students which also encourages BIPOC archaeology students to pursue a career and be involved in the study of their own history. This example of capacity building is a talking point of Maria Franklin's (2020) on how to tackle the issue of moving towards an anti-racist archaeology,

especially in the concern of creating a space for the Black voice in archaeology. The descendant community involved desired to educate and provide resources on the history of the farmstead and community ideologies, and they achieved this goal with archived versions of the oral retellings (Franklin 2020). This case study portrays the success and expansion of involvement that can occur when there is collaboration between cultural resource management (CRM), archaeologists and descendent communities.

Discussion

To create the 'best' practices and follow the steps towards a more inclusive archaeology, Franklin (2001:2020) and Dunnivant (2013) raise two main points that are important for greater inclusivity in African American archaeology. Franklin (2001) stresses the importance of the inclusion of Black archaeologists to create a diversity of the field of archaeology and create space for Black voices. She advocates the creation of programs and spaces for Black archaeologists to rise in the field. The field of archaeology is not free from politics or social movements as it often follows social movements with culture. The Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 created a space for Black Archaeologists to push for change with the platform they have already built with their education and research. There needs to be a change within the field of archaeology, starting with young members of the communities we are studying and education throughout society (Franklin 2020). Franklin (2020) notes that in order to have more BIPOC archaeologists, there needs to be a chance for them to receive the education and opportunities to be a part of the anthropological field.

The lack of protection of African American cemeteries and burial grounds is important because the burial grounds that are discovered or disturbed are often those of African American

descent. Without a protective legislation there still stands for opportunities for white archaeologists and individuals to use their privilege and entitlement, discarding the opportunity for a holistic, multivocal approach. Of course, this can be avoided with the initiative to use the 'best practices' of an anti-racist archaeology. There is no set model for the best practices or course of action, but it should always begin with the archaeologists building a platform of mutual understanding and trust with the descendant community.

Conclusion

In examples of case studies and discussion above, there are many mistakes and ethical mistreatments that can be used as examples of what to improve on in the field of archaeology as well as new steps taken to rectify the mistreatment of African American Heritage. There is a vulnerability to the remains and associated artifacts of African and African American communities. A legislation such as AAGPRA would be a progressive step towards institutionalized protection for African American Heritage sites (Dunnavant 2013). However, as there currently is no national legislation set into place and lacking state legislation to protect African American heritage, it is the responsibility of the scholars and officials involved with the excavation, research and preservation of these sites and burial grounds to use the 'best practices' they can to ensure ethical treatment of the Black community and their ancestral remains and artifacts. It is also the responsibility of the scholars to work against the racialized history applied to the African and African American history to create a narrative that does not perpetuate colonial white supremacy and discrimination. To empower these communities affected by this racialized research of the past and mistreatment, scholars must provide stewardship and build a relationship of collaboration through CBPR and the acknowledgement that race and racialization

Is a part of the research. It is our time to be accomplices in creating an anti-racist archaeology and participating in activism for legislative to African and African American Burial Grounds ((Franklin, et. Al, 2020, p. 756). The New York African Burial Ground was an example of the exploitation of African American communities as well as the space for progressive change within our culture and the academic field of archaeology. It provided an example of how activism and community involvement can further the research give an authorial voice to the Black community as they have not been given in one in the past or present concerning their historical and heritage sites.

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