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

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Background

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 1980s archaeologists have paid increasing attention to the racialization of the past and how white privilege, white supremacy, and racial hierarchy 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?

Panelists at the anti-racism forum held at the SHA meeting in Austin, TX, January 2011. From left: Barbara Little, Joe Joseph, Lewis Jones, Jodi Barnes, Whitney Battle-Baptiste, and Michael Nassaney. Photo by Andrew Robinson.

The Premises That Inform This Initiative

As a social archaeologist I am interested in the ways in which our racialized society influences our lives and by extension our archaeological practice. My modest efforts to explore these influences on our discipline are informed by my work on the Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, Multicultural Committee at my Unitarian-Universalist Church, my attendance at a Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing and Training workshop, and my participation in Everyone Counts, a Western Michigan University-based Learning Community on Diversity and Inclusion.

In my efforts to assist the SHA in claiming an anti-racist institutional identity, I operate from the following premises:

1. racism is not of our making yet we reproduce it individually, institutionally, and culturally.
2. we all have been socialized in a racist society; as a result we carry attitudes of either internalized racial oppression or internalized racial superiority.
3. our society is dominated by a notion of white supremacy in which whiteness is the norm.
4. the purpose of focusing on an analysis of racism and its place in our organization is not atonement for the past, but action for the future.

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

1967-The Society of Historical Archaeology was founded at its inaugural meeting in Dallas, TX. Among those present were some of the legendary figures of the nascent discipline including Stanley South, J. C. Harrington, John L. Cotter, Edward Jelks, and Arnold Pilling, among others—all but one of the 22 original fellows were white men from U.S. institutions. Carlos Margain was from Mexico. For much of our history we have debated the goals of our discipline. However, insofar as white men created the SHA, it was structured to meet their needs as members of white society. This is reflected in its personnel; programs, products, and services; constituency; structure; and mission, particularly in the academy. During this time period, cultural resource management fostered 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 1970s (see Orser 2007:15-40), spurred initially by the Black activism of the time. John Otto (1975, 1984) proposed the idea that racial identification was used throughout American history to divide the population into two distinct groups, with implications for the archaeological record. It was this type of work that substantively began drawing African-American archaeologists to the profession.

1990: Two articles appeared in *Historical Archaeology* that established race as a viable archaeological topic. David Babson posited that ethnicity did not account for the harmful social effects of racial ideology. Terrence 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.

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

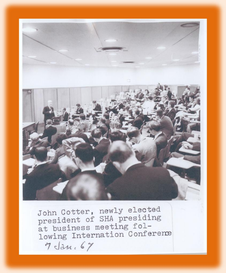
1994: SHA President Betsy Reitz expanded the Committee on Gender Issues into the Committee on Gender and Minority Issues (later to be known as the Gender and Minority Affairs Committee). This came six years after the SHA Women's Caucus conducted a survey to document inequities, identify conditions that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

1996: The SHA hosted a controversial symposium at their 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 disbanding the committee since "it had fulfilled its mission" (Spencer-Wood 1994:222). Since the work on the ABG there has been increasing attention paid to the archaeology of race and racilization (Garman 1994; McDavid 2007; Mullins 1999; Orser 2001, 2004; Paynter 1990). Yet, there has been considerable less study of the way in which racism shapes archaeological practice, specifically the voluntary association we call the SHA.

J. C. Harringtom presiding over the discussion at the inaugural meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology in Dallas,, TX, 1967. Photo courtesy of Edward B. Jelks.

The Premises That Inform This Initiative



A sea of white, male participants at the 1967 SHA meeting. Photo courtesy of Edward B. Jelks.

In an effort to raise awareness of these issues, I organized an invited and sponsored panel at the SHA's annual meeting in Austin, TX (2011) entitled: "Our Practice, Our Lives: What Would an Anti-Racist SHA Look Like?" Five panelists were asked to provide their perspectives on the following questions:

1. Is SHA welcoming and retaining diverse populations and perspectives? If not, why not, and do you see this as a problem?
2. Does institutional racism impact our practice? If so, how?
3. Do racial whites continue to set the historical agenda for archaeology? If so, how?
4. Should SHA adopt a formal declaration on race (or do we prefer to remain racially neutral)? Does the arc of archaeology bend towards justice?
5. How can we begin to effectively address the racial disparities in our profession?
6. How do we begin to claim and put into practice an anti-racist organizational identity?

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 referred these concerns back to the Gender and Minority Affairs Committee and the newly formed Ethics Committee.

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 institution and move it towards 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 privilege is reflected in its personnel; programs, products, and services; constituency; structure; and mission.

The Current Academic Climate in Archaeology for People of Color

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 first must overcome cultural and familial resistance and lack of familiarity.
3. Once the person embraces the profession they must pass entrance examinations often designed with an inherent bias against them.
4. If the aspirant passes the test, 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 rigors and 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-rack position, promotion is elusive.
10. At present, there is one African American who is a full professor in the field of archaeology. Will distinguished professor or emeritus 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.

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