BIOARCHAEOLOGY OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN THE AMERICAS: Its Origins and Scope

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Abstract The results of over 70 years of African Diasporic bioarchaeology are discussed and explained as emerging from distinct interests and traditions of African Diasporan studies, sociocultural anthropology, history, physical anthropology, and archaeology, in that chronological order. Physical anthropology is the core discipline of African-American bioarchaeology, yet it has been the least informed by cultural and historical literatures. Forensic approaches to bioarchaeology construct a past that fails to be either cultural or historical, while biocultural approaches are emerging that construct a more human history of African Diasporic communities. The involvement of African Americans, both as clients and as sources of scholarship, has begun to transform bioarchaeology as in the example of the New York African Burial Ground. The social history of the field examined here emphasizes the scholarship of diasporans themselves, and critiques a bioarchaeology that, until recently, has had little relevance to the people whose history bioarchaeologists construct.

INTRODUCTION

The origins, development, and current scope of African diasporic bioarchaeology are examined below. The review are organized as a social history, emphasizing the auxiological interaction of diverse traditions of scholarship with the social, political, and economic forces by which that field of study developed. The major research findings of selected studies are reviewed, and the vast majority of the literature in African-American bioarchaeology is referred to.

The review attempts to (a) describe the scope of theory and method used by bioarchaeologists and anthropological biohistorians, (b) present their research results on the temporal, regional, and industrial diversity of the historic African Diaspora in the Americas, and (c) explain how this field has been shaped by social historical phenomena. The reviewer’s vantage is that of a physical anthropologist, a science historian, and an African American who has participated in formative bioarchaeological research on the diaspora during the past two decades.
I believe it is the act of relating bioarchaeology to the longer and broader development of diasporan studies, and an evaluation of the field’s relationship to African Americans themselves, that most distinguishes this perspective. The African Diaspora, as the term developed, is more a concept than either a technical specialization or a geographical area of study. It is interdisciplinary and motivated by emic concerns. According to Harris (1993), the “African diaspora concept subsumes the global dispersion (voluntary and involuntary) of Africans throughout history; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social conditions; and the psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa. Thus viewed, the African Diaspora assumes the character of a dynamic, continuous and complex phenomenon stretching across time, geography, class, and gender.”

African-American biohistory “has evolved into the study of both the biological and sociocultural factors that have... influenced the health, fertility, morbidity and mortality of Afro-Amercians in the New World within an historical context. Afro-American biohistory is a meeting ground for the many disciplines that focus on the health and disease of African slaves and their descendants in the Americas” (Rankin-Hill 1997). Principal among these disciplines are history, archaeology, and biological anthropology. Although Rankin-Hill uses the term to encompass both historical and historical archaeological studies, my practical use here of the term biohistory refers to research that relies primarily on written records or anatomical collections; the term bioarchaeology I reserve for studies that focus on excavated archaeological populations. Overall, the traditions of American history, archaeology, and physical anthropology have continued to merge for the development of these specializations.

By the above definitions, African-American bioarchaeology and biohistory might have been subsumed under the broad umbrella of diasporic studies, but for interesting reasons that has not happened. They have evolved separately. Juxtaposed and periodically cross-fertilizing, these separate but related research domains also reflect different ethnic and social vantages on the black experience, emphasizing different ranges of methodology and motivations. Diasporic studies developed directly from the history of African-American and other diasporic scholarship, which rarely incorporated the tools of archaeology and biology. Bioarchaeology developed from two anthropological subdisciplines that, like biohistory, have evolved from traditions of Euro-American and other “white” scholarship, rarely incorporating the social science, humanistic, and activist understandings of diasporan studies. Both traditions, however, developed within a common world of intellectual, social, and political change that connected and divided them.

These segmented trends fostered by a “racially” segregated American society have recently been merged into a single study of the eighteenth-century African Burial Ground in the City of New York, for which I am principal investigator. This review looks backward to the origins and evolution of the intellectual trends that have coalesced only at the end of the twentieth century with a single project to garner national attention. It comments on the equally recent emergence of biocultural and publicly engaged anthropology whose liberal-left formulation achieved a
new compatibility with diasporan intellectual traditions, thus allowing the present merger and synthesis. And then there remains a distinct forensic tradition that racializes and dehistoricizes the diasporic experience.

ORIGINS OF AFRICAN DIASPORA STUDIES

Studies of the African Diaspora were probably begun by Catholic priests, commissioned by the Spanish Crown, who deviated from their assignment of investigating Native Americans with forays into the cultures and languages of Africans enslaved in the West Indies. At the end of the legal British trade in human captives from Africa, British studies were also commissioned (Drake 1993, Herskovits 1941), which, taken with the detailed commercial data on enslaved Africans throughout the Americas, are heavily relied on for knowledge of the diaspora during slavery. As an example, an important new database at Harvard University has amassed many of the diverse colonial records on the American slave trade.

Yet the accounting of chattel is less than a human history. The record of the human experience of Africans in the Americas during slavery is sparse, afforded mainly by the initial writings of people who had themselves been enslaved. Its Anglophone beginning (1772–1815) is as narratives about slavery (with comments on life in Africa), of the humanity of blacks and the inhumanities foisted on them by whites, in the works of freed and escaped captives such as Morrant, Gronniosaw, Cugoano, Equiano, and Jea (Gates & Andrews 1998), often arguing their cases with moral fervor.

Later, the narratives of abolitionist and statesman Frederick Douglass (1950) exemplified his life in slavery and damned the institution in a more analytical vein. In 1854, in a speech to scholars at Western Reserve University, he also attacked the racial determinism, craniometry, and racist Egyptology of Morton, Agassiz, Nott, and Gliddon (Nott & Gliddon 1854). With Douglass’s “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered” (1950), an African-American genre of critical, dialectical, environmentalist, vindicationist, and activist scholarship had begun that would form a fundamental distinction of Diasporan scholarship. And it would emerge in opposition to the new genre of physical anthropology and African (Egyptian) archaeology, which Douglass claimed to be merely an attempt to justify slavery. Other African Americans were going to Africa and bringing back reports to elevate an understanding of Africa and its relationship to U.S. blacks for either missionary or nascent Pan-Africanist motives (see Delany 1861, Crummell 1861). Haitian leader and scholar Anténor Firmin (1885) wrote a 600-page anthropological treatise, De l’égalité des Races Humaines, in 1885, countering arguments of de Gobineau’s adherents among the members of the Societe d’Anthropologie de Paris, which Firmin had penetrated as one of two black members (Firmin 2000). No white American, British, or French anthropologist of the nineteenth century opposed racial determinism and ranking (Fluehr-Lobban 2000, Gould 1996).
The American Negro Academy that Crummell founded in 1897 served as a think tank of and for African Americans whose interest was in the uplifting of a global black race. W.E.B. Du Bois, a charter member of the Academy, would publish the first empirical urban ethnography in 1899. Du Bois went on for more than seven decades as the dean of African-American social historical research, with application to Pan-Africanist, civil rights, and socialist organizing. [Du Bois and Firmin met at the first Pan-African Congress in Paris, in 1900 (Fluehr-Lobban in Firmin 2000)]. The Atlanta University Studies, which Du Bois began in 1898, were a comprehensive program of sociological and historical research on blacks; his editorship of the NAACP’s *Crisis* applied social science to the civil rights effort at the beginning of the twentieth century (Harrison & Nonini 1992; see Harrison 1992 and others in this special issue of Critique of Anthropology devoted to Du Bois’ influence in anthropology). His Jamaican-American contemporary of the early twentieth century, Marcus Garvey, a student of African and biblical history and head of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, was concerned with the building of an ideology and organization for diasporic self-help and African repatriation.

The African-American research was nearly always critical, in that it began from the observation that white racism had distorted the historical record that reinforced a sense of whites’ entitlement, obscured their inequities, and inculcated a sense of inferiority in blacks. Du Bois (1915) begins an early study of Africa and its diaspora by saying that the “time has not yet come for a complete history of Negro peoples. Archaeological research in Africa has just begun, and many sources of information in Arabian, Portuguese, and other tongues are not fully at our command; and too it must frankly be confessed, racial prejudice against darker peoples is still too strong in so-called civilized centers for judicial appraisement of the peoples of Africa.” The problem of an ideologically distorted Africana past continued to inspire a search for information by Diasporan scholars, creating an enormous body of “vindicationist” literature.

During the first part of the twentieth century, Zora Neal Hurston (Hemenway 1977, Mikell 1999) conveyed the complexity of African-American and Caribbean cultures through literary works based on ethnology and folklore. The Haitian Marxist ethnologist Jacques Roumain (Fowler 1972) helped found the Negritude movement, which paralleled the Harlem Renaissance in Francophone Africa and the Caribbean, writing about Haiti in a humanistic vein similar to Hurston’s. Another Haitian scholar activist, Jean Price Mars, founded the Society of African Culture and helped found *Presence Africaine*, the scholarly organ of black Francophone intellectuals. It was here in 1955 that Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop first published portions of what would become, among African and diasporic readers (Anta Diop 1974), the most influential classical archaeological and linguistic analysis of the Africanity of ancient Egypt. Another African-American anthropologist, Katherine Dunham, through the vehicle of dance, studied and performed the common and deviating threads of African diasporic culture and religion in Brazil, Haiti, Cuba, and the United States. African-American anatomist and physical
anthropologist W. Montague Cobb focused on issues of evolution, race, racism, and health care in the United States in the middle third of the century, also combining his biology with humanism and politics (Rankin-Hill & Blakey 1995; see also Caroline Bond Day physical anthropologist, under Hooton in Ross et al 1999). Fernando Ortiz conducted both bioarchaeological and ethnographic work on the African influences of Cuba (1929, 1947). Black anthropologist Irene Diggs, having worked with both Ortiz and Du Bois, covered a broad range of U.S. and Latin American subjects (see Bolles 1999). African-American historian William Leo Hansberry had been the first to write a thesis in African studies at Harvard before taking a faculty position at Howard, where in the early 1920s he advocated for African studies and archaeology programs. It was Melville Herskovits, however, who would start the first African studies program at Northwestern University following a brief visiting position at Howard, where he studied “race crossing” (Herskovits 1928). In 1916, historian Carter Woodson, also at Howard University, established the *Journal of Negro History*. The organization for which the *Journal* was principal organ, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (today the Association for the Study of African-American Life and History), began “Negro History Week” (today Black History Month) in order to disseminate the history of peoples of African descent. Work by the Fisk- and Harvard-educated historian John Hope Franklin (1947) should also be noted among these pre-1960s contributions to diasporic studies.

This is but a small sample of the prolific contributors of that period, suggestive of the breadth and focus of domestic and international work toward diasporic studies. With the exception of the enigmatic Hurston, all were involved in political activism, and many were involved in the Pan-Africanist movement, which sought to free the continent of colonialism and to unite it and its diasporic peoples. Their scholarly efforts were to preserve and report on African cultural persistence and creativity on the continent and in the Americas, to revise what they saw as Eurocentric distortions of the Africana world, and to foster an understanding of common cultural identity, albeit at times incorporating an essentialized racial identity, not unlike contemporary European romanticists.

White archaeologists and physical anthropologists had initiated no such journals and research organizations by the 1960s, nor did they publish in black journals. But some Euro-American social and cultural anthropologists and historians did use the *Journal of Negro History* and *Phylon* (edited by Du Bois at Atlanta University).

Franz Boas’s work on and interest in African cultures gave an important foundation for American scholarship in this area. His empirical and cultural determinist approaches were both welcomed by and in conflict with African-American scholarship, based on how the Boasians did and did not relate to civil rights goals (Willis 1972, Baker 1998). Colonial European anthropology of Africa was abundant but had limited the involvement of American anthropologists until the postcolonial and Cold War era breached the proprietary wall [for an example of this change point in a meeting between Evans Pritchard, Melville Herskovits, and a young Elliot Skinner at Oxford, see Mwaria (1999, p. 280)]. Boas’ student Melville Herskovits
(1930, 1941), along with Roger Bastide (1967), was among the first of non–African Americans to take an interest in a “hemisphere-wide synthesis” of black life in the diaspora. In the Boasian vein, their work focused on the persistence of African culture, acculturation, and miscegenation, without devoting serious study to social and economic discrimination (Drake 1993).

Herskovits, like many diasporan scholars, poignantly recognized that much of what had been written about African Americans constituted a “myth of the Negro past.” In sum, this mythology conspired to present blacks as “a man without a past” who, being without cultural contributions of his own, had been readily and completely acculturated by Europeans. Herskovits intended to expose and correct the myth by undertaking the study of “Africanisms” among diasporic peoples (1941).

Yet the liberal white (and prominently Jewish) tradition of scholarship represented by Boas and Herskovits was also distinguished by a patronizing and instrumental approach to black scholars who were often already advanced in their Diaspora interests. Although Boas took the conventional approach of using Hurston to gain access to craniometric data from black communities (Willis 1972, Drake 1980), Herskovits deterred black students from studying in Africa because it was too similar to their own culture (Mwaria 1999, p. 280). A counterintuitive rationale from the perspectives of most African Diasporan intellectuals, the anthropological characterization of the etic perspective as objective had served to empower the voices of white anthropologists concerning the non-white world where they worked. Despite these American social constraints, these major Euro-American cultural anthropologists commonly referred to the publications of the African Diasporan intellectuals, and vice versa.

These conflicts of liberal racism might be partly why intellectual cross-fertilization with diasporans at Northwestern and Columbia (see Sanday 1999, p. 248) tended to proceed through literary interaction, whereas collective use of primary data by black and white scholars occurred at Chicago during the same period. It is also important that the sociologists and social anthropologists at Chicago were willing to examine social and economic inequality, in contrast to the cultural focus at Northwestern and Columbia. Under the influences of W. Lloyd Warner and black graduate students such as St. Clair Drake (Bond 1988, Baber 1999), E. Franklin Frazier (1939) (Edwards 1968), and Allison Davis (Bowne 1999), Du Boisian sociology was melded to British social anthropology with an eye toward policy correctives for “the race problem.” Drake & Clayton (1945) is an excellent example of this synthesis (also see Harrison 1992). Herskovits’ elucidation of the “myth of the Negro past” and its alternative (i.e., that the Negro had a cultural history) was meant, however, to debunk the ideological legitimation of social and economic inequity as its contribution to Myrdal’s study (1945), a study being coordinated by the Chicagoleans.

By the 1960s, some Euro-American cultural anthropologists were beginning to expand their thinking to include both a diasporic scope and a critique of inequality.
on the diaspora, with white and black contributors, leading three years later to the publication of *Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives* (Whitten & Szwed 1970). Along with the work of Mintz (1974) (who had a degree from Columbia and who studied with Herskovits) in the Caribbean (1951, 1974) and Marvin Harris and others who undertook the State of Bahia–Columbia University Community Study Project in Brazil (Hutchinson 1957), one began to see studies of the socioeconomic effects of diasporic exploitation conducted by Euro-American anthropologists three generations down the Boasian lineage.

Throughout the early development of research on the African Diaspora, the members of that diaspora who framed that research approached the subject with both interdisciplinary and activist bents, whether missionary, integrationist, Marxist, or Pan-Africanist (Harris 1993, Harrison & Harrison 1999). Drake (1980) describes this African-American intellectual tradition as “vindicational” and meant to correct the omissions and distortions of the mainstream Eurocentric tradition. The research of some Euro-American anthropologists in the Boasian lineage was useful in those efforts. The interethnic collaboration at Chicago had policy implications. Yet black scholars maintained a front-line stance, as they had since the antislavery movement, in asserting the need to increase this work against the prevailing “denigration” of the black experience that was systematically perpetrated by Western education. Frederick Douglass had elucidated an ideological myth of the Negro past nearly 100 years before Herskovits, and African-American efforts to destroy the myth continued to evolve into intellectual, organizational, and activist dimensions within the future black world.

Those mentioned above are a small and prominent sample of the major sources of in-depth research on people of African descent between the mid–nineteenth century and 1960. Their research, humanistic expression, and political activism attended the global emergence of the African diaspora from slavery, colonialism, and segregation. It deliberately contributed to an understanding of people of African descent and their relation to the world that would empower those transitions and adjustments. In 1965, as an outgrowth of its International Congress of African Historians convened in Tanzania, UNESCO publications in several languages referenced the “African Diaspora” as a recurring theme (Harris 1993).

During the late 1960s and 1970s, scores of black studies programs and departments sprang up at recently desegregated U.S. colleges and universities as black students physically took over campus buildings for that purpose. During the 1980s and 1990s, the emphasis on “black studies” became more resoundingly diasporic. And although there are many Euro-American and other scholars working in African-American studies programs at predominantly white institutions in the United States, they remain the most likely academic home of black faculty, and the sociocultural refuge of black students, to be found in those institutions.

The articulation and disarticulation between these developments and the field of bioarchaeology is a major theme addressed below. This summary of intellectual history provides a reference point against which to contrast the development of an African Diasporic bioarchaeology that, though recently impacted by black
and cultural scholarship, began along a segmented trajectory of white ecological and racial scholarship that has structured the study of black people very differently. That structuring has taken place, in fact, virtually without recognition of the longer-developed intellectual traditions described above. Archaeology and physical anthropology have experienced even less interaction with the black intellectual traditions than did American sociocultural anthropology. I turn now to the white (or in their unmarked guise “mainstream”) traditions of physical anthropology and archaeology, whose branches will also penetrate African Diasporic research during the 1970s.

PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE NEGRO

African-American bioarchaeology as it has usually been practiced combines skeletal biology (principally the specialization in paleopathology or the study of health and disease in ancient populations) and historical archaeology (the archaeology of the post-Columbian era in the Americas). Skeletal biology has a longer concern with people of African descent in the Americas than has archaeology. For most of that time, physical anthropology followed a different trajectory from other research. This is mainly because physical anthropology has had little, if any, concern for culture or history. Its principal concern for racial differences meant that African-descent populations, constructed as “Negroes,” “Negroids,” or biologically “black,” were an important group for comparisons with “Caucasoids,” “Caucasians,” or “whites” as a biological standard of normalcy. This racist nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history of physical anthropology has been extensively critiqued (e.g., Gould 1996, Blakey 1996, Smedley 1993, Armelagos & Goodman 1998). It is now simple to summarize that apart from interspecific differences, physical anthropologists classified human populations racially and created hierarchical rankings of races. Whether these were evolutionary or preevolutionary rankings, European-descent groups (Caucasoids) were placed at the top, Africans (Negroids) at the bottom, and Asians and Native Americans (Mongoloids) usually intermediate. Although racial classifications were at times more diverse, from the time of Linnaeus’ eighteenth-century taxonomy to the UNESCO Statement on Race in 1951, this hierarchy was typical of Euro-American and European physical anthropology. It was typical of the thinking and policies of the general white population of which physical anthropologists were part.

The emphasis on race was part of a broader conceptualization of objective science defined by natural historical explanations of variations in natural biological categories (e.g., race). The cognizant point was to develop a science of “man” grounded in the same principles as zoology, biology, anatomy, and medicine, from which fields most physical anthropologists initially derived. But the resulting science was clearly not “objective.” Physical anthropology served as a means of ideological production that naturalized and, thus, justified colonialism, racial segregation, eugenics, class, and gender inequity. The United States, which had
no African colonies to understand and manage, instead needed simply to main-
tain the centuries-old subjugation of a black racial caste. American Negroes were
considered synonymous with former slaves, who were expected to be thankful for
the opportunities Christianity and acculturation had afforded for them to emerge
above their assumed absence of prior civilization, to be helpful to white patrons.
The dearth of mainstream research and education on Africa and diasporic cul-
tures (along with the conceptual removal of Egypt from Africa) meant that unlike
European identity, Negroid identity was left to stand as naked as a chimpanzee. There
were no contradictions between “the myth” and physical anthropological study of
blacks because the biological category of race dehistoricized and naturalized the
identities of those to whom it was applied. Physical anthropology was the primary
author of the myth. The containment of vindicatory studies within the Diasporan
communities themselves helped maintain the myth as an essential component in
Euro-America’s construction of white identity.

The Smithsonian Institution’s leading physical anthropologist, Aleš Hrdlička,
was assigned the task of reviewing all of the work on “the Negro” in 1927 for
the National Research Council Committee on the Negro (Hrdlička 1927). His bib-
liography included sociological works of Du Bois and Frazier and the historical
work of Woodson and other African-American writers among a majority list of
white scholarship analyzing what was then termed the Negro problem. Hrdlička
viewed the previous work as shoddy, not rigorous, and “tinged with more or less
bias for or against the Negro” (p. 207) and proposed that future research should
focus on the Negro brain (the organ in which he specialized), which, after all, was
the “real problem of the American Negro.” He then continued work on measure-
ments of the skulls of 26 living African Americans found at Howard University
and fudged his data so that “the full-blood Negro” appeared to be of inferior “men-
tality” (Hrdlička 1928; Blakey 1996, pp. 76–77). In fact, since Morton’s time, the
study of the Negro had been done almost entirely on anatomical collections of the
recently deceased or on living populations [for an example showing the deleterious
effects of miscegenation in Jamaica, see Davenport & Steggerda (1929)].

Earnest Hooton (Harvard) would follow Hrdlička as America’s most influential
physical anthropologist, beginning in 1930. The Pecos Canyon study by Hooton
(1930) also established what has variously been called the statistical (Armelagos
et al 1971), paleopathological (Buikstra & Cook 1980), or demographic
(Aufrère & Rodríguez-Martín 1998, p. 7) approach, which initiated the develop-
ment of modern paleopathology, in which vein most bioarchaeology is currently
conducted. Paleopathology would characterize the core of African-American
bioarchaeological studies that emerged during the 1980s, but not before.

There were exceptions to the dominant racial deterministic trend in early phys-
ical anthropology. Studies of the new documented anatomical populations (macer-
ated cadavers from the dissecting rooms of medical schools) began en force during
the 1930s. As it happened, the largest collection, at [Case] Western Reserve Univer-
sity, was completed by T. Wingate Todd, a liberal Scottish physical anthropologist
who had been an officer among Colored troops in Canada (Cobb 1939a). Todd’s
analysis of the Hamann-Todd collection’s crania showed environmental causes of differences in black and white cranial development, from which he deduced an equal potential for achievement in these “races,” in a unique presentation he made at a meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Todd 1930).

Todd’s liberal environmental analyses were furthered by Cobb (his former student and an African-American physical anthropologist at Howard), who used data from skeletal collections and living populations to show that biology did not determine the athletic acumen of blacks or whites (Cobb 1936). Furthermore, Cobb was one of the first physical anthropologists to use available demographic data, within a synthesized evolutionary and social historical paradigm, to show the high adaptability of African Americans against the adversities of slavery and racial segregation in the United States (Cobb 1939b). Cobb would later put his approach to physical anthropology and social medicine to service in the U.S. Civil Rights movement in the diasporan tradition of activist scholarship (Rankin-Hill & Blakey 1994). But these studies seem to have had little impact on the development of anthropology.

Measurements of the skull meant to show a racial evolutionary basis of social inequality (having evolved from prescientific phrenology) continued as the focus of the physical anthropology of Negroes until World War II. Cranio-metry would then continue as the focus of descriptive racial taxonomic studies in colonial Africa (Tobias 1953, Oschinsky 1954, Villiers 1968) and in American studies of racial admixture (Pollitzer 1958) and in forensic studies for the identification of crime victims and missing persons.

CONCEPTION OF AFRICAN DIASPORIC BIOARCHAEOLOGY

Physical anthropology stood at the doorstep of modern paleopathology during the 1930s, when African Diasporic bioarchaeology began. African-American scholarship was not involved, nor was a keen interest in the Africana world. Instead, the field would grow from the physical anthropologist’s main interest in race, applied to African Diasporic skeletons accidentally discovered by archaeologists who were looking for presumably extinct pre-Columbian Indians.

In 1938, a team of Oxford archaeologists, funded by Northwestern and Columbia Universities, excavated some of the first bioarchaeological sites in the African diaspora (Buxton et al 1938). In 1939, T. Dale Stewart, who had long been Hrdlička’s assistant curator at the Smithsonian Institution, responded to this article and to correspondence with E. M. Shilstone, who had made a related find in the British colony of Barbados (Stewart 1939). Stewart’s position at the U.S. National Museum made him a likely expert on the racial identification of the curious remains of the one, male, African-looking skull found in an apparently Arawak (Taino) midden in Barbados and the two “Negro” skulls that were found on Water Island, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. His analysis was that the skeletal remains were
more consistent with a “Negro” than a “Negroid” classification. It was actually the cultural data of dental versus cranial modification that were most convincing of African ancestry. Buxton et al (1938) commented on a similar situation reported by Duerden for a Jamaican site in 1897, in which the craniometric methods seemed unreliable for explaining Africans among the remains of the Arawak. In all cases, the African burials were assumed to be later intrusions, although the stratigraphy was not sufficiently careful to discount contemporaneity of African and Taino burials. The St. Thomas individuals (an adult male and female) were buried in association with red ochre mounds and stone artifacts, and with a pot over the face of one of the “Negro” individuals. Nor is it at all clear from these publications why the site is assumed to be pre-Columbian (the authors actually refer to pre-1700) simply because there were Taino artifacts; Tainos were actually present in the Caribbean in early colonial and genocidal times. The remains were curated at the University Museum at Oxford, but the temporal relationships may never be resolved. There would not be another diasporic study until 35 years later and under similarly accidental circumstances.

A notable comparison is found in the work by Ortiz (1927), and in later work by Rivero de la Calle (1973), on several cases of dental filing or modification (mutilación) in Cuban skeletal remains. Although the general assessment of the skeleton is limited, the historical, ethnographic, and folkloric context is extensively revealed with the analysis of the significance of this practice. The practice of mutilación was associated with Maroons (cimarrones) and religious enclaves. These are also the only examples of dental modification evaluated as a possible local practice, rather than as having occurred among Africans brought to the Americas subsequent to the modification of their teeth. Prior to the 1970s, no North American skeletal researchers considered the sociocultural context of African diasporic skeletons.

In 1974, two skeletons were found at site 2-AVI-1-ENS-1 at Hull Bay, St. Thomas, which Smithsonian physical and forensic anthropologists assessed to be “Negroid” (Ubelaker & Angel 1976). Skeleton B was associated with coffin nails and therefore reasonably of the colonial period. But skeleton A was definitely associated with an indigenous pottery fragment (Elenoid period, dated 800–1200) and no colonial artifacts. Radiocarbon dating only resolved that the skeletons were not recent, which was important for the forensic concerns of the investigation. In this example of another accidental bioarchaeological encounter with an African skeleton, the racing, age, sex, and stature methodology continues to be important for forensic identification, yet the further assessment of pathology (skeleton A showed a slight infection, whereas skeleton B evinced extensive infection and partly healed fractures) marks a more modern approach than found in the earlier St. Thomas study 36 years prior to it. None of the Smithsonian forensic examinations attempts to explore the population, history, or social condition of Afro-Caribbean people.

In 1976, another Smithsonian publication by Angel examined secular changes between colonial and modern American skeletons. The study compared 82
archaeological skeletons (1675–1879) with 182 modern forensic and donated skeletons. Angel anticipated increased body size in both European-American and African-American populations owing to increased genetic heterosis and “improvements in disease-control, diet, and living conditions” (p. 727). It is a traditional study in its reliance on physical anthropological and anatomical literature, early military data on stature, and evolutionary interpretations. The study showed remarkably little skeletal change, albeit greater in the black population than in whites. Life expectancy does increase, as does a pelvic indicator of nutritional adequacy, whereas poorer dental health and the increased frequency of traumatic fractures were seen to reflect modern stresses. The increased interest in the biological effects of socioeconomic environment during the 1970s is certainly suggested by the Angel paper, despite his continuing reliance on the use of evolutionary principles. With Angel, the Smithsonian had taken a significant step forward from an earlier preoccupation with the racial evolution of “Old American” white (Hrdlička 1925) or “full-blood Negro” (Hrdlička 1927) crania in U.S. history. Still, there was scant use of social history and culture.

In 1977, the skeletons of two enslaved African-American men (burial 3 was 30–40 years of age and burial 5 was 40–45 years of age) of circa 1800 were reported from a 3000-year-old burial mound on St. Catherine’s Island of the Sea Islands off the Georgia coast. These skeletons, too, were found accidentally during a long-term study of the island’s native archaeology by the American Museum of Natural History. The analysis (Thomas et al 1977) was, however, less forensic and more pertinent to historical interpretation than were the Smithsonian studies. Racial identification was made, as in the other studies, along with a modern paleopathological assessment. One man (burial 3) had a recently fractured leg that had become infected, which probably led to his death. The other “was probably shot to death by a military-type weapon” (p. 417). Both men showed evidence of arduous labor by virtue of their robustness. David Hurst Thomas, an archaeologist, and his associates also encountered the fancy burial of the slaveholder’s son in a separate location, showing him to be physically young, gracile, and lacking in evidence of hard work (Thomas et al 1977). His evidence of childhood illness and poor dental health were similar to the African-American skeletons. These comparisons were used to examine the relative quality of life and condition of the two plantation groups, bringing to bear both written and oral historical sources. The researchers had no answer for why burials 3 and 5 had been made in a much older Native American burial mound.

The study involved an inadequate number of burials for statistical generalizations and only a rudimentary historical and cultural analysis. But this study does engage such an analysis and is advanced over the previous accidental studies by suggesting new motivations in addition to its use of the new paleopathology. These authors were examining people, not a race, and probing the conditions of slavery. They reinterred the remains, rather than curate them, and made recommendations about historic burial sites that regard both public sensibilities and scientific concerns for improved rigor and cultural interpretation:
We do not, of course, advocate wholesale archaeological investigation of historic graveyards. Prevalent social and religious customs are to be respected in matters of this sort. But we do urge that as graveyards are required to be moved to make way for progress, archaeological mitigation should include adequate research designs to raise some of the germane questions regarding past human behavior and belief systems . . . (Thomas et al 1977, p. 418).

These meager examples appear to be the only African diasporic bioarchaeological studies published prior to 1978, when sample sizes and geographical ranges would increase, historical and cultural interpretation would become more sophisticated, and “customs . . . respected in matters of this sort” would begin to overwhelm bioarchaeology. What would be responsible for these dramatic changes?

GROWTH FACTORS

The emergence of an active research interest in African-American sites required that major changes take place, which they did under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. This Act required the funding of archaeological work to mitigate the effects of all federal construction projects, including buildings and highways, in order to preserve cultural heritage. These Cultural Resources Management (CRM) projects caused the growth of private archaeological consulting firms, which would quickly become the main source of archaeological employment in the United States. CRM also meant that contract funding was available for site excavation and descriptive reporting for sites that were encountered accidentally. Road and building projects produced a random sample of U.S. sites and therefore regularly encountered African-American cemeteries. If one simply wanted to keep the revenue of a CRM firm going, one would take the opportunity to acquire a contract for the excavation of the African-American sites that were popping up everywhere. Here was a target of opportunity, but it was also an opportunity for the launching of African-American and historical archaeology, which might begin to reveal the “partly mythical basis” of U.S. national identity (Schuyler 1976).

The first work on a plantation site, the Kingsley Plantation in Florida, was excavated by Fairbanks in 1967. Against the grain of the “new archaeology,” which emphasized natural ecological determinants, Fairbanks took a more historical approach. According to Ferguson (1992, p. xxxviii), “Fairbanks was not bowing to professional pressure or pleas for a new and more objective archaeology; he was addressing black demands for more attentiveness to black history, and without that political pressure African-American archaeology would have developed much more slowly, if at all.” I agree with Ferguson that this new specialty resulted from a combination of “the structure of the law, together with the pressure of black political and social protest.” But this did not mean that the archaeological community respected blacks’ intelligence.
Although sustained black protest had created both an interest in and market for black history, archaeologists (and bioarchaeologists) showed little or no interest in the huge corpus of scholarship on this subject that African Americans themselves had generated (less even than white sociocultural anthropologists had shown during the days of legal segregation!). Archaeologists did not take courses in the African-American studies departments that were multiplying during the period of the 1970s–1990s, when the archaeological shift took place. These departments remained marginal to the university education of whites. Nor did most archaeologists excavating black sites collaborate with African Americanists, most of whom were black, who had the most extensive knowledge of African Diasporic history and culture. Nor did archaeologists participate in the Association for African American Life and History, or any other scholarly associations African Americans had long established for the purposes that archaeology was just beginning to serve.

This lack of regard for the intellectual fundamentals of the subject to which archaeologists were now shifting would continue to produce important limiting effects on African-American archaeology and African-American studies. Notably, plantation archaeologist Theresa Singleton (Smithsonian and Syracuse University) and African-American studies specialist Ronald Bailey (Northeastern University) organized a week-long meeting at the University of Mississippi in 1989, which had as a goal to bring practitioners of both fields together in dialogue. It is not sociologically surprising that the only black PhD archaeologist working on plantation sites, Singleton, would be the one to notice that something was wrong and try to bring African-American studies and archaeology together to talk.

In an extensive review, Singleton & Bograd (1995) found that African-American archaeology had expanded since the 1960s to include greater regional and industrial diversity of southern sites, to address issues of race and ethnicity, acculturation, inequities, and resistance (p. 23). But their exhaustive survey also revealed that most of the literature “is largely descriptive, it relies too heavily upon flawed analytical techniques or very narrow perceptions of ethnicity, and it has been slow to incorporate African-American perspectives in developing this research” (p. 30). “That race predominates in discussions of plantation life or defines the presentation of blacks’ lives following emancipation may in part reflect white archaeologists’ and white America’s preoccupation with race. There is a tendency to presume that race, or ethnicity, is significant, which is not to say that race is not important. Rather it is to assert that white preoccupations are not always the same as black preoccupations” (p. 31). The reviewers suggest that the superior direction being achieved by some researchers is to consider ethnicity as a “process” that is both foisted on and creatively utilized by African Americans, rather than as the widespread “archaeology of ‘the other,’” consisting of static typologies that identify a group with objects. In most cases, the absence of type objects comes to constitute evidence of acculturation and assimilation when other plausible interpretations exist (see Schuyler 1980). I suspect that this typological approach is tethered to both the American “myth of the Negro past” and Herskovits’ search for Africanisms. According to Singleton & Bograd (1995), “[t]he tenor of many ethnicity studies is
problematic. One problem is that they tend to take a perspective from the outside, how archaeologists and others define ethnics or cultural groups, rather than how ethnics define themselves” (pp. 23–24). Similar issues were raised for African archaeology (Andah 1995). The ability to define another people has been a major means and measure of social control, with or without archaeology. It is against such disempowerment that diasporan scholars had been writing.

The Euro-American archaeologists and bioarchaeologists of the 1970s and 1980s were influenced by the new historiography of plantation life that had also been fostered by the social changes of the 1960s. The Black Consciousness and Black Studies movements (Drake 1993) had succeeded steadily in producing a market for history books and lectures, while the Civil Rights movement had created an openness to interest in blacks and American racism. The historical works of Jordan (1968) and Genovese (1972) followed the peculiarly early work of the left-leaning Aptheker (1943) as examples of an emerging Euro-American interest in African-American historiography that explained the origins of American racism and the condition of blacks. A historical and demographic study by Gutman (1976) opposed the influential report by Senator Daniel Moynihan (1965). Moynihan had attributed urban black poverty to the legacy of a dysfunctional slave family and African matriarchy, which Gutman showed to have little historical basis. But it was Fogel & Engerman’s economics treatise, *Time on the Cross* (1974), that stirred a major debate about whether or not working class whites were as oppressed as enslaved blacks, who they claimed were adequately nourished. Like Moynihan, Fogel & Engerman (1974) further raised the specter of apology when blacks were found to have been worse off in many respects after the Reconstruction than during slavery. The critiques of this work by Gutman (1975) and David et al (1976) were devastating to it. This critical historiography drew on the prior work of black scholars. Add to these the work by Curtin (1969), which estimated the death toll of the “middle passage” in the millions (millions more than most whites wanted to acknowledge and millions fewer than estimated by some black scholars) as major historical grist for the mill of scholarly and politicized debate.

Physical anthropologists began to pick up on the data about the demography, nutrition, and health of enslaved African Americans that were being generated to test these various questions regarding the quality of life among the enslaved. Curtin’s work and the body of work by Steckel on problems of nutrition, disease, and mortality on plantations (1986) followed work by Stamp (1956) in showing the dire demographic and health consequences of American slavery. Higman’s extensive Trinidadian data on the demography of the slave trade even found its way to the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (1979). Apologetic theories by Kiple & King (1981) and Savitt (1978) attributing slavery and racism to black genetic immunities to disease also resonated with the evolutionary bent of physical anthropologists. The biological data generated by these biohistorical debates interested physical anthropologists, who were poised to enter the discussion with the bones and teeth of the enslaved people themselves. Yet Rankin-Hill (1997) seems correct in saying that “little has been accomplished [by the historians and
economists] in expanding the conceptual limits of [biohistory]. In fact, much of the emphasis has been on the intricacies of quantification and data manipulation, and not on different approaches to interpreting and/or examining the data generated” (p. 12). The essential research question behind all these studies was, did whites do anything particularly bad toward blacks during slavery that caused their current condition?

This I believe is the stage on which the nascent bioarchaeology of the 1980s was set. Political events spurred a broader societal interest in blacks. A marketplace and government-funding venues opened for research and publications in African-American archaeology in particular and historical archaeology in general. And a biohistorical literature came to prominence that spoke to biological anthropologists, who had seized on epidemiological and demographic approaches.

Racial biological studies had lost vitality for research after the Nazi era had ended, apart from forensics at least. Physical anthropologists were looking for new ways of applying their methods to societal issues (Blakey 1996, Armelagos & Goodman 1998). Biocultural approaches that sought to use biological stress indicators as evidence of social inequality and change began to emerge during the 1970s (see Goodman & Leatherman 1998, Blakey 1998b). The data of the biohistorians, if applied to bioarchaeological contexts, were ideal for biocultural studies. The students of paleopathologist George Armelagos and others at the University of Massachusetts in the forefront of biocultural anthropology had a particular impact on the evolving shape of African-American bioarchaeology.

Finally, the hurricane-like sweep of successful efforts by Native Americans in the 1980s to control the disposition of their skeletal remains and sacred objects culminated in NAGPRA legislation in 1990 (Thomas 2000). The writing was on the wall. American physical anthropologists were losing access to a major source of professional reproduction: Native American bioarchaeological research. The field of African-American bioarchaeology was an open niche.

THE BIRTH OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN BIOARCHAEOLOGY

In 1985 there was a sufficient amount of African-American research among physical anthropologists for Ted Rathbun (University of South Carolina) and Jerome Rose (University of Arkansas) to organize the first symposium on “Afro-American Biohistory: The Physical Evidence” at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. Reference to blacks at these meetings in such ethnic and historical, rather than racial, terms was novel itself. The symposium was published as a special issue of the American Journal of Physical Anthropology, in 1987, with one paper (Blakey 1988) routed to a later issue of the journal. Rose coauthored the histological study of the Cedar Grove Cemetery site (Rose 1985, Martin et al 1987) with Debra Martin and Ann Magennis. This may have been the first African-American cemetery covered by the National Historic Preservation Act, which had initially applied only to the site’s Indian component. This post-Reconstruction black Arkansas population was shown by all indications to
have been highly stressed (Rose 1985). The work regime for these freed and free men and women “had not changed since slavery” and the “general quality of life for southwest Arkansas Blacks had deteriorated significantly since emancipation due to the fall of cotton prices and legalized discrimination” (p. v). This was a direct response to Fogel & Engerman (1974). The recent study of the Freedman’s Cemetery of Dallas, Texas examines Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction bioarchaeology in greater historical depth (Peter et al 2000).

Also included in the 1985 symposium were bioarchaeological studies of a South Carolina plantation near Charleston showing evidence of malnutrition and disease in a sample of 27 individuals who died between 1840 and 1870 (Rathbun 1987). Dental and skeletal growth disruption was found to be highest for male children, 80% of whom had evidence of anemia and infection. Most men and women had evinced bone reactions to infection, with relatively high exposure to lead and strontium concentrations, indicative of a diet high in plant foods. No clear evidence of syphilis was found (Rathbun 1987). The study contains a useful review of the biohistorical and archaeological literature, again showing the close connection to debates in history and archaeology at that time (also see Rathbun and Scurry 1991). The site was being removed because of the development of private land, where the law did not require mitigation. The research team was able to convince the landowner to allow research prior to reburial.

The demography and pathology of individuals from the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century St. Peter Street cemetery in New Orleans give evidence of arduous labor among younger males, and comparatively less such evidence among many females and older adults interpreted as house servants (Owsley et al 1987). Census data is given on variation in mortality by occupation in eighteenth-century New Orleans. The further racial analysis of this study, attributing lower life spans to “racial admixture,” along with the dearth of social and historical analysis, shows continuity with older racial traditions preserved by the forensic influences of the University of Tennessee on this study.

A subsequent study by Owsley and colleagues (1990) compares the 149 black and white skeletons from Cypress Grove Cemetery (1849–1929) of Charity Hospital of New Orleans with other sites. This site, too, resulted from the legally required mitigation of a federal highway project. Similarities were found with the St. Peter Street cemetery as well as with the infection rates of a pauper’s cemetery used by whites in New York state. The extensive evidence of cut bone showed that blacks and whites who died at Charity often were dissected prior to burial. As is consistent with the forensic approach often used in CRM bioarchaeology, the extensive data are descriptive and not integrated with community history. The accompanying volume prepared by archaeologists provides historical description (Beavers et al 1993), which deals mainly with the city health and medical context of the Hospital.

Several biohistorical studies in an anthropological vein were also presented at the Afro-American Biohistory Symposium. Hutchinson (1987), an anthropological geneticist using Harris County, Texas, slave schedules of 1850 and 1860 (and a credible range of biohistorical literature), explains its marked population growth
as a function of importation despite little natural increase. She shows that enslaved persons who were recorded as “black” tended to be older (higher life expectancy on small farms than on large farms), while those termed mulattoes were on average older than blacks on large plantations, possibly due to mulatto house servitude on large plantations where black field hands were exposed to the worst conditions. Alternatively, hypothesized immunities to yellow fever (a la Kiple & King 1981) might have contributed to differences in life expectancy between blacks and mulattoes (Hutchinson 1987).

Also combining the traditional evolutionary and biodeterministic tendencies of the field with a new bioculturalism is the work of Wienker (1987) on an early twentieth-century logging company town in Arizona. Pointing to the health care inadequacies for blacks in a town deeply segregated, the study takes great interest in the possibility that dark pigmentation might have deleterious effects in the temperate Arizona highlands.

A clearer break toward a nonbiodeterministic view, as seen in Rose (1985), Martin et al (1987), and Rathbun (1987), is also found in the symposium paper by Blakey (1988). This paper traces ethnogenesis and demographic change in an Afro–Native American ethnic group (Nanticoke-Moors) in rural Delaware from the colonial period until 1950. The study uses a political economic analysis of 406 cemetery headstones, archival data, and oral history. It proposes that community responses to racial policies and industrialization brought about a single community’s segmentation into different socially constructed races. Although genetically similar, Nanticoke-Moors experienced different educational and economic options, depending on their “racial” affiliations. Among the results were the increased isolation required for the maintenance of Indian identity, with increasingly higher life expectancy among the industrializing African American–identified kin than among Indian-identified kin who maintained a farming economy. Notably, this study took little account of the biohistorical debates [though it utilizes Eblen (1979)] and relates instead to historical and ethnographic literature on African-American/Native American relations in the eastern seaboard region.

During the mid-1980s, a major collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution and John Milner Associates (a contract archaeology concern) also contributed to the Afro-American Biohistory Symposium. The First African Baptist Church (FABC) cemetery in downtown Philadelphia had been used mostly by free African Americans between 1823 and 1841. In the path of subway expansion, archaeological mitigation was required for the site. John Milner Associates excavated 140 skeletons, a far larger African-American archaeological population than from any previous African-American site. The FABC was also unique as a northern black bioarchaeological site, and rare as an urban one (the St. Peter Street cemetery in New Orleans was the other urban exception). The fact that it was in the hands of J. Lawrence Angel, a preeminent physical anthropologist at the Smithsonian, raised the status of African-American bioarchaeology, as surely as did the Rathbun-Rose symposium itself. Angel, who had first established his reputation on the paleopathology of ancient Greece, had turned to the study of
secular change in the European and African-American skeleton from the colo-
nial period to the present (Angel 1976). Along with his assistant, Jennifer Kelley,
and the principal archaeologist, Michael Parrington, and with the collaboration of
Lesley Rankin-Hill and Michael Blakey (who together coordinated and completed
the project following Angel’s death), Angel availed the collection to a loose team
of researchers while conducting core research himself.

The population appeared to be stressed by inadequate nutrition, arduous labor,
pregnancy and childbirth, unsanitary conditions, limited exposure to the sun,
and extensive exposure to infectious diseases. Nutritional and growth indicators
showed conditions that were little better than for enslaved blacks of the Catoctin
Iron Works of Maryland, 1790–1820, although evidence of arthritis and violence-
related fractures was rarer at the Philadelphia site (Angel et al 1987). The hunt
for genetic traits persisted, as per the tradition of physical anthropology, so that
the observation of 30% of individuals with *os acromiale* (nonunion of part of the
shoulder joint) was interpreted as a familial trait, when it might have been evalu-
ated as the result of persistent mechanical, labor-induced stress during adolescent

The comparative analysis of Angel & Kelley (1987) was further developed
in a second symposium paper (Kelley & Angel 1987), for which they had as-
sembled 120 colonial African and African-American skeletons from 25 sites in
Maryland (Catoctin), Virginia, and the Carolinas, as well as forensic cases from the
Smithsonian’s collections. As in the other studies, nutritional stresses were evi-
dent in the skeleton, including anemia (which these authors overly attribute to
sicklemia). Adolescents and many adults (male and female) showed exaggerated
development of lifting muscles (deltoid and pectoral crests of the humeri) and
early degeneration of the vertebral column and shoulder. Evidence of trauma to
the skull as well as “parry” fractures of the lower arm suggest an unusually high
incidence of accidents and violence at Catoctin Furnace, particularly. The use of
historical references is rudimentary.

The First African Baptist Church skeletons were reburied in Eden Ceme-
tery, Philadelphia, by the modern congregation in 1987. At a time when Native
Americans were calling for reburial of 18,000 remains at the Smithsonian, the
Institution’s initial interest in announcing the FABC ceremony was administra-
tively quashed. The impressions of African Americans regarding this research
were mixed. Four years later, the New York community would explode over a
similar project.

John Milner Associates continued to develop the preliminary work of
Parrington and elaborations of the foundation study done with Angel (Parrington
& Roberts 1984, 1990). Blakey and associates of Howard’s Cobb Laboratory pub-
lished articles on childhood malnutrition and disease based upon analyses of dental
The dental defects in the FABC population were at frequencies similar to those
found in the Maryland and Virginia populations Angel had compared, pointing to
a degree of childhood malnutrition and disease in the recently free north similar
Blakey et al. (1994). Hypoplasia frequencies were between 70% and 100%, which were among the highest in any human population studied by anthropologists.

Rankin-Hill (1997) published the first book that synthesized a breadth of African-American bioarchaeological and biohistorical data for the interpretation of the FABC. Rankin-Hill’s extensive treatment of modern paleopathological and demographic methods and the use of general and site-specific historical sources is extensive. She presents the most developed theoretical formulation for African-American bioarchaeology, which includes the political and economic factors interacting with the physiology and health of early African Americans. Too comprehensive to be adequately summarized here, she examines the multiple stressors, cultural buffers, and skeletal effects of physiological stress in the lives of Philadelphia laborers and domestic workers.

The influence of the University of Massachusetts is tangible, as the graduate institution of Rose, Martin, Magennis, Rankin-Hill, and Blakey. It can be distinguished from the other centers of the development of this specialty (along with South Carolina) by its unabashed advocacy and development of biocultural theory [fully developed by Goodman & Leatherman (1998) and Rankin-Hill (1997)]. Early biocultural models were developed from the synthesis of the human adaptability interests of R. Brooke Thomas, the biocultural paleopathology of George Armelagos, and the historical demography of Alan Swedlund during the late 1970s and 1980s at Massachusetts. These models were honed and evolved by their students to incorporate political and economic factors that would expose the biological effects of oppression. The influences of left-leaning faculty in archaeology, cultural anthropology, and the Departments of Economics and African-American Studies influenced the physical anthropologists, all of whom were exchanging information at a time when walls were being erected between subdisciplines at many other anthropology departments.

The involvement of African Americans was also unusual at the University of Massachusetts, which included one faculty member (Johnnetta Cole), a third of the black physical anthropology students in United States (Rankin-Hill & Blakey), and the only black paleopathologists during this crucial period. African-American traditions of critical, activist, and humanistic scholarship were introduced into the departmental discourse. The progressive motivations of the 1960s and early 1970s were fresh in mind at Massachusetts, as was the abysmal record of physical anthropology regarding race. Research on the political history of physical anthropology was exceptionally active there, and the emphasis was on the development of new theory.

The Smithsonian Institution and the University of Tennessee were steeped in the racial tradition, commonly reinforced by their emphasis on forensic work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, police departments, and the court system. In fact, the prominent forensic anthropologist at Tennessee, William Bass, trained most of the leading skeletal biologists at the Smithsonian (excepting Stewart and Angel, who were of an earlier generation but nonetheless forensic in orientation). The degree-granting institution, Tennessee, had no black students of physical
anthropology. A technical emphasis on human identification grew in isolation from social, cultural, and political theory there.

The dichotomy of biocultural vs forensic approaches of paleopathology is well appreciated among practitioners today. The distinct marks made by each trajectory on African-American bioarchaeology should become more evident. The clashes between biocultural and forensic approaches that occurred during the 1990s (Goodman & Armelagos 1998), highlighted by the African Burial Ground phenomenon in New York City, are understandable from this vantage (see Epperson 1999, La Roche & Blakey 1997).

Some very interesting diasporic bioarchaeology was also conducted by researchers outside the United States by the end of the 1980s. The most sophisticated (more so than most U.S. studies) is the work of Mohamad Khudabux (1989, 1991), sponsored by the Universities of Surinam, Kuwait, and Leiden. These studies refer extensively to much of the recent U.S. skeletal literature discussed above, and to Higman’s (1979) archival data on statures of different African ethnic groups enslaved in the Caribbean. The study of the 38 African skeletal remains (57 burials) of the Waterloo Plantation (1793–1861) in costal Surinam is striking for its combination of modern paleopathological methods (from the Workshop of European Anthropologists), use of historical documents, and political economic analysis. The overarching question of the study is whether the skeletal data would confirm the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century chronicles pointing to poorer health and quality of life among the enslaved Africans of the Caribbean than among those of the United States. The data generally do so confirm, but the detailed analysis is all the more interesting.

The higher life expectancy than at sugar plantations was attributed to the less extreme arduousness of cotton work. The study makes statural comparisons with Caribbean and North American sites, with a consideration of the influences of both genetics and diet. Uniquely, the Surinam study describes variation in African cultural origins during the course of the trade, including Ewe-, Fon-, Yoruba-, and Akan-speaking societies, and thus gives a cultural texture to bioarchaeology that racial assessment otherwise obscures.

This study’s evidence demonstrates the skeletal effects of heavy work, poor housing, and poor nutrition, as does the contemporary research on North America. A definite pattern for Surinam, which the authors effectively generalize to much of the Caribbean during the active trade, is the small proportion of women on Surinam plantations. At Waterloo, there were approximately twice the number of skeletons of enslaved men as of enslaved women, and historical documents showed a less extreme but consistently low sex ratio for Surinam as a whole. They show the clearest possible evidence of syphilis in 27% of the population (with vault stellate lesions). Skeletal manifestations at this level point to a majority (possibly all) of the population being infected by treponema, most of which appears to be syphilis.

What stands above most U.S. observations of this colonial disease in blacks is the incorporation of a dynamic historical context. Documentation shows that syphilis was introduced to Africans by the frequent rape and “abuse of women” on slaving ships, and the widespread concubinage of female house servants, which
spread contagion. Since the sex ratio was so low, as was a woman’s control of her own body, it is clearly implied that European and African males would have shared women. Khudabux and his associates (1989, 1991) show that when the transatlantic trade was outlawed and Surinam needed to foster fertility among the Africans enslaved there, the ravages of syphilis had become so great that it would be a long time before its population could grow, which ironically hindered Surinam’s economic development.

U.S. anthropologists were also examining Caribbean bioarchaeological data during the late 1980s and 1990s. The historical archaeological report of Handler & Lange (1978) spurred many subsequent skeletal studies of Newton Plantation in Barbados. Since the archaeological excavation of the skeletons had been more convenient than systematic, skulls comprised the bulk of the collection and dental studies were emphasized. These studies revealed high frequencies of enamel hypoplasia, indicating high nutritional and disease stresses in early childhood (Corruccini et al 1985). Their findings included three individuals with Moon’s molars and Hutchinson’s incisors, which they extrapolated to a 10% syphilis rate for the living plantation population (Jacobi et al 1992). Studies of trace elements showed very high lead contents, which suggested a high intake of rum distilled in leaded pipes (Corruccini et al 1987b; also see Aufderheide et al 1985 on lead in African American skeletal populations). They also show dental modification (“tooth mutilation”), high frequencies of tooth root hypercementosis associated with chronic malnutrition and periodic, seasonal rehabilitation (Corruccini et al 1987a), and high childhood mortality (Jacobi et al 1992, Corruccini et al 1982).

Undertaken by Handler, a cultural and historical anthropologist, one finds a stronger historical bent in these studies. Yet the work of the physical anthropologists discussed above is modestly integrated with the more cultural and historical work reported in specialized articles. Site reports can overcome this segmentation. An example of a better integrated, small study is found in Armstrong & Fleischman (1993), who evaluated four African skeletons from the Seville Plantation, Jamaica, combining paleopathology, history, and archaeological analysis. The elegant simplicity of these house burials (showing cultural continuity between the Asante, plantation laborers, and Maroons) and their symbolic goods accentuates their evocative individual biological characterizations, but the sample is inadequate for populational analysis.

A good example of the forensic approach is also shown in the Caribbean. The Harney Site Slave Cemetery, on private land in Montserrat, was being destroyed by swimming pool construction when archaeologist David Watters obtained the owner’s cooperation in salvaging some of the skeletal remains. The site was so much disturbed that artifacts could not be established as grave goods, although a few pottery sherds were found, including imported and “Afro-Montserratian” unglazed wares. As at Newton Plantation, graves were in west-east/head-foot orientation (Watters & Peterson 1991). The remains of 17 “black slaves” found during construction (only 10 of which were in situ burials) were sent to the University of Tennessee for study (Mann et al 1987). Degenerative joint disease was moderate
and related mainly to aging. The authors point to a “harsh lifestyle” with periodic severe malnutrition and common illnesses, leading to early death (see also Jones et al 1990 on the Galways Plantation burials in Montserrat).

The lack of local historical context is striking. West Indies shipping data from one historical source is mentioned along with two comparisons with the Newton Plantation skeletal study. The remaining literature is solely forensic or skeletal biological. There is no discussion of the conditions of life on the Bransby Plantation (or of Montserrat as a whole), where the interred had previously lived and worked. The repeated references to their study of the “Negroid traits” of the “black slaves” (Mann et al 1987; see also Watters & Peterson 1991) showed an irritating continuity with the Smithsonian-Tennessee studies in which “racial” identification substituted for the construction of a human cultural and historical identity.

THE NEW YORK AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND PHENOMENON

By the 1990s, two tendencies of African diasporic bioarchaeology had become well-defined. The biocultural approach combines cultural and social historical information with the demography and epidemiology of archaeological populations to verify, augment, or critique the socioeconomic conditions and processes experienced by past human communities. In its most derived form, political economic theory structures the interpretation of data that are also critically and publicly evaluated. The forensic approach uses the descriptive variables favored by police departments for individual identifications (race, sex, age, and stature) along with pathology assessments in order to describe the biological condition of persons buried in archaeological sites. Although the majority of the technical observations, measurements, and assessments of the skeleton are the same for both approaches, they differ in the extent to which forensics evaluates biology descriptively and racially, without relying on (or constructing) social, cultural, and historical information that is required of biocultural approaches. The result of forensic work is the construction of an acultural and ahistorical group of individuals by attending to a positivistic scientism that views the discounting of culture as equaling objectivity (see Armelagos & Goodman 1998, Blakey 1998b). The result of biocultural work is a biological reflection of the social history of a community of people articulated with broad political-economic forces (see Goodman & Leatherman 1998). Given that we are dealing with only the past few centuries of history, the choice of either approach changes our current identities and understanding of the events that shape us today.

The rediscovery and excavation of the African Burial Ground in New York City between 1991 and 1992 during federal building construction brought the differences between these approaches emphatically to a head. A biocultural and African Diasporic research program took over the analysis of the skeletal remains excavated by forensic anthropologists and contract archaeologists (Cook 1992), whose
knowledge of the African Diaspora was meager. The site, dating between the late 1600s and 1794, from which 408 skeletons were removed, would later be recognized as the earliest and largest American colonial population of any kind available for study. The cemetery became a source of deep public interest and concern, especially among African Americans, who protested and held massive prayer vigils at the site during excavation. The efforts mainly of the African-American “descendant community” successfully nominated the site a National Historic Landmark and brought its disposition under their influence with the help of mainly African-American legislators. The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) responsible for the site persisted unsuccessfully to oppose African-American control, extensive biocultural research, and the law (Harrington 1993, La Roche & Blakey 1997). There had not been such public outcry about an African-American cemetery’s desecration since the “doctor’s riots” at the New York African Burial Ground and its adjacent pauper’s field in 1788. And never before had the African-American public taken such an interest in their bioarchaeology.

The forensic anthropologists’ emphasis on racial traits, their obvious ignorance of the study population’s culture and history, and their cooperation with the federal governments’ efforts to fend off African Americans’ involvement were responded to with deepening repugnance by many of the black people who witnessed the excavation. Researchers at the W. Montague Cobb Biological Anthropology Laboratory at Howard, along with collaborators from eight other universities and contract firms, would take over all postexcavation research with the backing of the descendant community. The fact that the research was conducted within a diasporan university and with an African-American clientage brought the tradition of African Diasporan scholarship squarely into the core of the research program. The availability of diaspora expertise in various departments within Howard University (especially the diaspora program in the History Department), along with the imbalance of the University’s research vs curricular resources in anthropology, encouraged the use of many disciplines to reveal the diverse human dimensions of the research problem. These characteristics were compatible with the biocultural approach. The project’s director had been working with indigenous people’s organizations, the World Archaeological Congress, and the American Anthropological Association for several years on the ethics and epistemology of repatriation and public engagement.

Combining these influences, the African Burial Ground Project formed as a biocultural, diasporic, interdisciplinary project that utilized critical theory and activist scholarship/public engagement. The research design called for the full range of the latest methods in skeletal recordation [using the manuscript by Haas (1994), then in preparation], molecular genetics, and chemical isotope studies. Specialists from Africa, the Caribbean, and North America were involved among the 25 PhD researchers in order to capture the effects of those areas in which the dead Africans of the Burial Ground had spent portions of their lives, just as the diverse disciplines (from art history to chemistry) would capture and reveal human complexity in the recounted lives of those buried. The public would review and
have input into the research design (Howard University and John Milner Associates 1993), and a federal advisory (steering) committee consisting mainly of African-American activists and cultural workers would ultimately approve it. The principle research questions concerned the population’s origins, transformation, quality of life, and resistance to slavery. An Office of Public Education and Interpretation would be directed by an urban anthropologist, Sherrill Wilson, which provided a continuous exchange of information, with more than 100,000 lay people and educators. A monument, interpretive center, and reburial ceremony have been funded and are planned for this unique, iconesque cemetery and archaeological site.

The African Burial Ground Project’s initial findings have been striking. The historically and culturally informed craniometric data (27 individuals) and mitochondrial DNA (40 individuals) identified possible Asante, Benin, Tuareg, Ibo, Yoruba, and Senegambians. Central African states whose members were frequently captured and taken to the Americas (Jackson 1997) are missing from current DNA comparative databases because few geneticists had been interested in the origins of the African diaspora (Kittles et al 1999, Jackson et al 2000; M.E. Mack & M.L. Blakey, manuscript in preparation). The Project is proceeding in cooperation with African embassies to fill in missing comparative data that should allow identification of many West Central African backgrounds as well (Jackson et al 2000). Historians have examined the dynamic history of the slave trade in Africa and the Caribbean that routed these people to New York (Medford et al 2000). Archaeologists and historians have examined diverse burial practices of these specific, named societies in Africa and among their colonial American descendants. The archaeological record revealed a modest number of symbolic African artifacts, the most striking of which may be Akan (Ansah 1995, Perry et al 1999, Holl 2000). Cranio metric analysis of specific populations rather than race also points to the Akan-speaking states (Shujaa & Keita 2000). These artifacts represent origins and resistance to the dehumanization and ethnocide carried out by the colonial English and Dutch as they wrestled for social control by attempting to destroy the culture of the enslaved.

Historians have examined the working, dietary, legal, and other conditions to which individuals in the cemetery might have been exposed in every region where these Africans had spent a part of their lives. Uniquely, their report (Medford et al 2000 and in preparation) is a study of the people connected to many places, not a study only of the site or even of New York slavery. Studies of chemical isotopes are being experimented with as sourcing data for tracking the geographical movements of individuals at different points during their lives, informed by geologists, geneticists, archaeologists, and historians (Goodman et al 2000).

An example of results in reports currently in preparation bears on fertility and the lives of women. Since the completion of skeletal recordation and assessment in 1999, it has been shown that young women had particularly high mortality related to their importation directly from Africa (unlike most men, who were first “seasoned” in the Caribbean) and conditions in New York. The female majority among New York Africans seems to have resulted from a combination of colonial European
efforts to stem rebellions against slavery (of which there were two in New York City during the cemetery’s use, in which the Akan were represented), efforts to reduce prices, and a lesser demand for the extreme stamina required for Caribbean sugar production, for which men were more often selected (Howson et al 2000). These women were exposed to desperate conditions on the ships—cold weather, malnutrition and disease, hard labor, and reproductive risks—which were stressing them simultaneously. Mortality was especially high among 15- to 20-year-old females and 15- to 25-year-old males, the ages of most new arrivals and the subjects of intensive work regimes.

Treponemal disease (much of which was probably yaws rather than syphilis) was not as prevalent as in the Caribbean and did not include cases of cloaca and cranial lesions associated with advanced syphilis (lower than in Barbados and dramatically lower than in Surinam) (Null et al 2000). Skeletal evidence of enlarged muscle attachments and muscle tears was found in most men and women. Several fractures of the spine and skull base were associated with axial loading of the head, as enslaved Africans would have been burdened with heavy loads (Hill et al 1995, Terranova et al 2000).

Skeletal demography combined with colonial census data from New York pointed to a population of low fertility (below replacement), more like the Caribbean than Virginia, despite the fact that, unlike the Caribbean, most were female and venereal disease seemed low (Rankin-Hill et al 2000). Those women who survived, and were sufficiently healthy to reproduce, bore children in a high-risk environment, where 21% of the burials were infants, likely equating to a well over 50% infant mortality when differential preservation of infant bones is considered. In fact, the Project’s mortality data from the archival records of Trinity Church show that the infants of the enslaver’s class had far lower mortality, as did 15- to 25-year-olds. English women and men lived to old age (55–60+ years of age) about five to ten times more often than African men and women, respectively (Blakey et al 2000). Most dead children show evidence of anemia (porotic hyperostosis) and infectious disease. Hypoplasia (reflecting childhood malnutrition and disease) were significantly more frequent among those without dental modification than among the 26 individuals whose filed teeth gave evidence suggestive of African childhoods (Mack et al 2000). During this period, when the legal trade was very active, enslaved Africans were worked at the expense of their fertility, merely to be replaced, unlike nineteenth-century efforts to enhance the domestic reproduction of African-American people for sale (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1** Burial #315, a women in her 30s with skeletal evidence of arduous labor, nutritional inadequacy, and infection. Her crossed arms are consistent with an Asante practice representing completion, fullness, neutralization, and transition. Photograph by Dennis Seckler, courtesy of the African Burial Ground Project, Howard University, Washington, DC.
The vivid contrasting of a human face of slavery with its dehumanizing conditions I believe accounts for much of the strong public feeling regarding this work (Blakey 1998a), as it appears in six documentary films, hundreds of news articles, and scores of radio interviews. The power of the most primary of evidence of northern slavery, the bones of the people themselves, has overturned the mythology of the free north according to introductory textbooks, and the Project’s approach to public engagement has helped advance general archaeological theory (Thomas 1998, p. 551; Pearson 1999, p. 179; Johnson 2000, pp. 168–70). The ready accessibility of the site and the Cobb Laboratory to the public for education, cultural programs, and religious observances has been important. The simple fact that this research is conducted at an African-American institution deliberately seeking to work on behalf of African Americans’ interest in their own past, to “tell our own story,” has engendered feelings of empowerment (Harrington 1993). The idea of restoring an understanding of African origins has consistently been of keen public interest for the general redefinition and psychosocial well-being of African Americans, consistent with the long-standing goals of diasporic scholarship cultivated within the black world for over a century. For the first time, bioarchaeology has been brought into that world, with a struggle to do so on that world’s own terms. Elsewhere, African Americans succeeded in influencing the historical interpretation and educational uses of Freedman’s Cemetery data in Dallas, while limiting the amount of skeletal research to far less than was allowed for the African Burial Ground (Peter et al 2000:3–19).

Of extraordinary interest to African Americans is the ability achieved by this project using DNA to establish a database for showing affiliations between the skeletons and specific African societies (Saheed 1999, Staples 1999). As a result of public interest, the Project realized that if this could be done with respect to the skeletal remains, the same comparative database might someday soon allow any living African American to estimate his or her ancestry within a reasonable probability. The technical ability to restore the knowledge of lineages that had been deliberately severed in the attempt to make their ancestors into chattel should contribute to more intimate ties between the African Diaspora and the African “homeland,” with consequences for foreign relations. The physical evidence comparing the physical quality of life under slavery versus African societies has lead to an emergent discussion of human rights, apologies, and reparations (Congressional Black Caucus Task Force on the World Conference Against Rausm briefing by Blakey 19 June 2001; UN Human Rights Commission briefing Blakey 1998a) for slavery. Surely this research relates to the point made by Singleton & Bograd (1995) about differences in Euro-American and African-American questions for archaeology.

In January of 2001 and after several attempts of legislators and community groups to hold them accountable to a memorandum of agreement, the GSA refused to fund the extensive DNA and chemical sourcing studies. These studies had been set forth in the research design that the GSA had approved under public scrutiny in 1994. The years of wrangling with the federal government brought physical anthropologists and archaeologists into a politically active campaign as advisors on behalf of a descendant community, seeking consistency between project goals.
and GSA agreements. Thus, as seen in engaged anthropological work concerning the treaties or human rights of living people, a great deal of time and energy are expended apart from the actual conduct of research when positions are taken in such a socially significant arena. In this case, the bioarchaeologists stand in an opposite relation to the culturally affiliated communities than do the forensic anthropologists suing for control of so-called Kennewick Man (Thomas 2000). Despite these differences, the resources and visibility accruing to the African Burial Ground Project are advantageous. Although the distinctive scope of work in progress is promising, it remains to be seen what long-term implications this project may have upon completion.

CONCLUSIONS

Biocultural approaches are amenable to the kinds of broad interdisciplinary syntheses, diasporic scope, critique, and public engagement that are compatible with the traditions of scholarship of diasporic people themselves. The New York African Burial Ground Project has stimulated more than an unprecedented interest in bioarchaeology among African Americans. It has brought about unprecedented and sustained national and international interest in an African Diasporic bioarchaeology that reveals the human complexity and contributions of African Americans. This project helps expose the “myth of Euro-American entitlement,” i.e., the idea of egalitarian and freedom-loving European forefathers who, all by themselves, built the nation that their descendants can feel especially entitled to enjoy.

The forensic approaches, although salvaging descriptive data that might not otherwise have become available, have demonstrated little ability to interest the public in diasporic bioarchaeology. The racialized and often ahistorical descriptions produced are so reminiscent of the early years of physical anthropology as to be at best puzzling, at worst repugnant to many African Americans, most strikingly demonstrated in New York in the 1990s. Diasporic scholarship was known to many members of the African American lay public in New York, often through recent “Afrocentric” books, study groups, tours, and seminars. For them, something was wrong with the expertise they initially saw at the site. Yet forensics seemed to be a compatible method with government clients whose interests are antithetical to extensive and community-empowering research projects that can slow construction schedules, halt site destruction, undermine their sense of authority, and expose national myth. The fact that CRM contract announcements often request “forensic” expertise rather than bioarchaeological or skeletal biological expertise is simply harmful. These are communities, not crime scenes.

African Diasporic bioarchaeology has been thrown into heated debate about who should participate in the shaping of the past and how it should be done (McDavid & Babson 1997). It is now known that choices can be made by anthropologists themselves. It is possible to work with communities and successfully struggle for a study of mutual interest to scholars and the public, albeit with the risk of seeing memorials built without study in some cases. We should live with this. At a minimum, the results of previous forensic contract work should be brought into an
academic setting and reworked into more sophisticated interdisciplinary products. The question of for whom and for what these products are intended remains essential to their form and contribution.

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