The Contested Commons

Archaeologies of Race, Repression, and Resistance in New York City

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They hang the man and flog the woman
Who steals the goose from off the Common;
But let the greater criminal loose
Who steals the Common from the goose.
—(Anonymous Late Medieval Folk Wisdom)

INTRODUCTION: THE COMMONS AND THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

The Commons, the area surrounding and including the present-day location of City Hall in lower Manhattan, has been an intensely contested landscape since the seventeenth century. The non-elite inhabitants of New Amsterdam, and later New York City, claimed this unappropriated land as a Commons in the traditional medieval sense, as an area where subsistence activities such as cattle grazing and firewood collection could be conducted (Thompson 1993). By the end of the seventeenth century, a portion of the Commons was being utilized as an African burial ground and ritual space. By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the colonial government was attempting (with limited success) to restrict and regulate activities on the Commons, including burials. Reactions to recent excavations within the African Burial Ground and subsequent controversies regarding the project research design demonstrate that the contestation continues unabated. This project provides an ideal opportunity to address several aspects of the archaeology of capitalism, including the social construction of racial

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categories, the formulation of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic histori-ical consciousness, the essentialist/social constructionist debate, and the role of descendent communities and their allies in archaeological, historical, and bioanthropological research (for general background on the project see Cook 1993; Coughlin 1994; Dunlap 1993; Harrington 1993; Harris et al. 1993; Howard University and John Milner Associates 1993; Jorde 1993, and Howson and Harris 1992).

After a short historical overview, this paper examines four moments of cultural contestation on the Commons: the 1712 Rising, the 1741 “Great Negro Plot,” a 1757 Pinkster Day celebration, and a 1788 petition against the desecration of the African-American graves. In each instance these historical moments are linked with aspects of recent and ongoing struggles over the excavation, analysis, preservation, and commemoration of the African Burial Ground.

In October of 1697, as construction of New York’s first Trinity Church was nearing completion at the present-day intersection of Wall Street and Broadway, the following regulation was enacted:

Ordered, That after the Expiration of four weeks from the date hereof (10/25/1697) no Negroes be buried within the bounds & Limits of the Church Yard of Trinity Church, that is to say, in the rear of the present burying place & that no person or Negro whatsoever, do presume after the term above Limited to break up any ground for the burying of his Negro, as they will answer for it at their peril, & that this order be forthwith published. (Stokes 1915: 403 quoting Trinity Church mss. minutes).

Interments within the 5- to 6-acre portion of the Commons subsequently recognized as the African Burial Ground probably began soon after enactment of this regulation. It is estimated that some 10,000 to 20,000 New Yorkers of African descent were buried in this area during the eighteenth century. At least half of the present African-descent population in the United States probably has at least one ancestor buried in this area (Michael Blakey, personal communication).

The location of the separate burial ground assigned to/appropriated by the enslaved and non-enslaved African community was later described as “unattractive and desolate” (Valentine 1847: 567). The earliest known documentary reference to African burials on the Common was provided in 1713 by the Reverend John Sharp (Chaplain to her Majesties Forts and Forces in the Province of New York in America):

In Religious respects there is but little regard had to them, their marriages are performed by mutual consent without the blessing of the Church and they are buried in the Common by those of their own country and complexion without the office, on the contrary the Heathenish rites are performed at the grave by their countrymen (Sharpe 1713: 355).

In 1731 the Common Council of New York City passed or reiterated a series of 39 laws, many of which were intended to limit traditional activities on the Commons, including: burning lime (to manufacture mortar and plaster), digging holes and cutting sods, cutting timber by brickmakers and charcoal burners, and cutting hoop sticks (saplings used to make hoops for casks). The Common Council also ordered construction of a gunpowder storage house on the Commons.

The 1731 acts also included “A Law for Regulating the Burial of Slaves.” This act included three provisions:

Ordained … that all Negro, Mulatto, and Indian slaves … be buried by Day-Light

Not above twelve slaves Shall Assemble or meet together at the funeral of any Slave

Ordained that no Pawl [pail] be allowed or admitted at the funeral of any slave; [nor shall] any slave presume to hold up a Pawl or be the Pawl Bearer at the Funeral of any Slave (Minutes of the Common Council 11/18/1731)

In 1745 a military palisade was constructed across Manhattan at the northern margin of settlement (Harris et al. 1993: 11; Maerschak 1755). Most, if not all, of the African Burial Ground was situated north of this palisade, placing it “beyond the pale” in the literal and original sense of the term.

In addition to the Burial Ground, the Commons became the site of several disciplinary institutions. In 1735–1736 New York City’s first almshouse was constructed on the Commons immediately south of the burial ground, at the present site of City Hall. This institution marked a profound shift in official attitudes toward poverty and delinquency. Unlike the earlier program of “out-relief,” which provided direct subsidies to impoverished individuals while they continued to live in the community, aid was now contingent upon residence in the almshouse (Harris et al. 1993: 9; Gray 1988; Ross 1988). The cost of poorhouse operations was partially offset by petty commodity production by inmates. Recent archaeological investigations have encountered evidence of copper-alloy straight-pin and bone-button manufacturing, and documentary research reveals the sale of garden produce (Baugh et al. 1990; Grossman 1991). Copper-alloy straight pins, used to secure burial shrouds, were the most common grave-related artifacts recovered from the African Burial Ground; it is quite possible that many of these pins were manufactured at the poorhouse.

In the opening chapter of Wealth of Nations, first published in 1776, Adam Smith used the manufacturing of straight pins as a case study of the advantages offered by the technical (and implicitly social) divi-
tion of labor (Smith 1986: 109–111). Smith ends the first chapter by asserting that, because of the division of labor, "the accommodation of [the frugal European peasant] exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages." (Smith 1986: 117).

Within the poorhouse complex, time and architectural space were carefully controlled to inculcate the disciplines and separations of emergent industrial capitalism, and the decision to have inmates produce straight lines may not have been coincidental. However, the administrators of the poorhouse complex were continually frustrated by their inability to provide the appropriate degree of spatial segregation between diseased and healthy persons and between deserving and undeserving poor. The completion of the New Gaol in 1759 and the Bridewell (an institution for the incarceration of debtors and vagabonds) in 1776 provided more refined spatial differentiation. These three disciplinary institutions were symmetrically aligned on the east–west axis that would later define the orientation of City Hall (constructed in 1803–1811) and the surrounding park.

By the time of the American Revolution, the Commons had also become an important military landscape. Prior to the Revolution, two barracks had been constructed immediately south of the African Burial Ground, and after the British took control of New York City in September of 1776, two additional barracks were built. During the Revolution the Bridewell and the New Gaol housed American prisoners of war, including Ethan Allen. William Cunningham, the provost marshal for British prisons in New York, reported the execution of "275 American prisoners and obnoxious persons" in this area. His account indicates that the executions and burials occurred in or near the southern margin of the African Burial Ground (Harris et al. 1993: 14–15).

After about 1795, the northern portion of the Commons was no longer used as a burial ground. In 1813 David Grim, who at the age of 76 was a leading light in the New-York Historical Society, drafted "A Plan of the City and Environs of New York." The map purportedly depicts Grim's memory of the landscape in 1744, some 69 years earlier, when he was seven years old. Significantly, Grim does not include the African Burial Ground in his remembered landscape, even though the "Negroes Burial Ground" is delineated on maps drafted in 1753 and 1754 (Plan of New York 1753; Maerschelack 1755). Instead, Grim chose to provide graphic depictions of the executions of African-descent insurrectionists on the Commons following the alleged 1741 "Great Negro Plot" (Davis 1985; Grim 1854). This selective memory is not surprising. By the
time Grim drafted his map, a radical transformation in official landscape definition had occurred. With the construction of City Hall, the "Commons" became the "Park." In addition, the Common Council had initiated a massive landscape-alteration program with the filling of the low-lying northern portion of the Commons, including the site of the African Burial Ground. Once the burial ground was safely buried beneath 20 to 30 feet of urban fill, real estate values improved dramatically:

The lots adjoining, and including the premises, and including the African burying ground, for many years since the American war, were regarded as uninviting suburbs. The streets have since been widened, the face of the ground wholly changed, and it is now covered with a flourishing population, and elegant improvements. ([Smith, ex. dem. Teller, v. Burts & Woodward, 9 Johnson Reports 182 (N.Y. Sup. Ct., 1812), cited in Howson et al. 1992.]

Ironically, although the filling of this area helped erase the African Burial Ground from the dominant historical consciousness, it also protected much of the site from subsequent urban development, setting the stage for its dramatic "rediscovery" by archaeologists in the spring of 1991, during testing conducted prior to construction of a 34-story federal office complex (Wilson and Howson 1997). Archaeological excavations resulted in the disinterment of more than 400 burials before community pressure and congressional intervention resulted in a discontinuation of the excavations in July 1992. In October 1992, President Bush signed Public Law 102-393, an appropriations bill that contained a provision ordering the General Services Administration to scale back its construction plans and permanently halt excavation of human remains at the site. Congress also appropriated $3 million for a permanent memorial on the site and empanelled a Steering Committee to advise GSA regarding commemoration and interpretation of the site (Cook 1993; Harrington 1993). Although the 34-story tower was completed as originally designed, the planned adjacent four-story pavilion was not constructed. The pavilion site contains an undetermined number of unexcavated burials and is slated to become the site of an African Burial Ground Memorial.

Although the original osteological analysis was performed by the Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team (MFAT) headquartered at Lehman College in the Bronx, by the end of 1993 the human remains had been transferred to the Cobb Biological Anthropology Laboratory at Howard University, for a six-year multidisciplinary analysis program that could ultimately cost $20 million (Scarupa 1994: 21). By halting the excavations and forcing a reformulation of the research design, the mobilized African American community members and their
allies were able to "seize intellectual control" of an extremely important scientific project (LaRoche and Blakey 1997: 100).

The New York City Landmarks Commission officially designated the African Burial Ground and the Commons Historic District on February 25, 1993, and on April 19, 1993 the African Burial Ground was designated a National Historic Landmark.

THE 1712 RISING: COROMANTEE, CHRISTIAN, AND WHITE IDENTITIES

Some Cormentine Negroes to the number of 25 or 30 and 2 or 3 Spanish Indians having conspired to murder all the Christians here, and by that means thinking to obtain their freedom, about two o clock this morning put their bloody design in Execution ....

—The Boston Weekly News-Letter April 7–14, 1712

Some Negro slaves here of the Nations of Carmantee & Pappa plotted to destroy all the Whites in order to obtain their freedom ....


As the moon was setting at about 2:00 A.M. on Sunday, April 6, 1712, some two dozen enslaved African Americans and Native Americans assembled in the East Ward orchard of John Crooke, a New York City cooper, and initiated an insurrection that had been planned since New Year's Day (March 25), 1712. Two of the insurrectionists torched an outbuilding, and as the townsfolk ran from their homes to fight the blaze, nine persons of European descent were killed and seven others were wounded. Upon hearing of the insurrection, Governor Hunter ordered a cannon to be fired as an alarm and immediately mobilized the troops. By the end of the following day, the uprising had been quelled. A total of 47 people were eventually accused of involvement in the attempted uprising; of this number 19 individuals were eventually executed, many of them on the basis of rather questionable evidence (Scott 1961). The convicted insurrectionists were probably executed on the Commons and buried in the African Burial Ground.

While the narrative history of this uprising has been covered elsewhere in considerable detail, several nuances bear directly upon the archaeological analysis of the Commons. The two accounts quoted above concur on one issue and differ significantly on a second issue. The newspaper dispatch places the blame primarily upon "Cormentine Negroes;" similarly, the Rev. Sharpe ascribes responsibility to "Negro slaves ... of the Nations of Carmantee & Pappa." These accounts are corroborated by court records indicating that eight of the accused New York City insurrectionists (including one of the alleged ringleaders) were known by Akan day-names. Two of the accused were named Cuffe, the masculine day name for a child born on Friday; four were named Quaco or Quacko, the masculine name for a child born on Wednesday; and two were named Quashi or Quassi, the masculine name for a child born on Sunday. However, the accused insurrectionists also included seven men named "Tom."

The innate rebelliousness of Akan-speaking "Coromantee" slaves was a theme that immediately resonated with both English and colonial audiences. The hero of Aphra Behn’s popular 1688 romantic novel Oroonoko, or, The Royal Slave was a wrongfully-enslaved "Coramantien" Prince, and the newspaper that reported the New York City uprising also carried an account of the murder of a Jamaica (West Indies, not Queens) plantation owner’s wife by seven "new Cormantine slaves." English slaveholders, particularly in the Caribbean, elaborated complex stereotypes to classify their bound laborers, both African and European. Scottish servants were thought to be “hardworking, loyal, unproblematic, and responsive to patronage,” while the Irish were denigrated as “violent, dangerous, untrustworthy, and aggressive.” English and Welsh servants fell somewhere in the middle of the continuum (Beckles 1989: 98–99). When referring to their African laborers, the planters generally reserved their highest praise for the Akan-speaking Coromantee (with numerous variations in orthography) from the Gold Coast, who were simultaneously valued and feared. Since planters often assigned workers to segments of the productive process on the basis of these stereotypes, Coromantees were often overseers or held other positions of relative responsibility.

The issue of “ethnic” identity should, however, be approached with extreme caution (Williams 1989). Walter Rodney (1969), in a seminal article entitled “Upper Guinea and the Significance of the Origins of Africans Enslaved in the New World,” warned against simplistic analysis of the “tribal identity” of enslaved Africans. Citing the example of the Mandinga, he stressed the importance of pre-enslavement transformations in ethnic identity related to processes of state formation and class conflict. Multilingual Mandinga traders along the Gambia river exercised cultural and political hegemony that dated to the fourteenth-century expansion of the Mali Empire and were, therefore, well placed to become middlemen and interpreters in the developing Atlantic slave trade. Most of the highly-valued “Mandinga” slaves shipped to Spanish America were actually partially assimilated subject peoples from quite disparate groups. In addition, Rodney (1969: 335) suggests that one
consequence of Mandinga hegemony was the attempt by enslaved individuals of other groups to pass as Mandinga in order to enhance their status in the eyes of Europeans.

Although all ethnonyms applied to enslaved Africans are problematic, this is particularly true with “Coromantee,” which initially denoted individuals taken from any number of quite disparate inland groups, but who happened to be exported through the port of Kormantin. The Coromantee, however, soon became reified as a nation or ethnic group with their own distinctive characteristics. Not surprisingly, Akan culture became a focus and symbol of slave resistance throughout the English colonies. Perhaps the most obvious evidence of this identification was the widespread use of Akan day-names. This practice was adopted by more slaves than the actual number of Akan-speakers warranted, and continued into the third and fourth generation of Creole slaves (Craton 1982: 56–57; Schuler 1970: 29).

The example of the Coromantee reminds us that ethnic identity is not an innate attribute belonging to a particular group of people, but rather an aspect of cultural struggle formulated and reformulated, invented and imposed, within the context of domination and resistance. Initially an invention of slave traders and slave owners, the ethnonym “Coromantee” and the distinctive traits it purportedly represented soon became a basis for resistance.

We turn now to the subtle, yet very important, distinction between the two 1712 accounts. Before the final decades of the seventeenth century, English colonists seldom referred to themselves as “white,” choosing instead to self-identify as “Christian” or “English.” Note that the newspaper story says the objective of the uprising was “to murder all the Christians,” while the Rev. Sharpe says the insurrectionists “plotted to destroy all the Whites.” Rather than being a mere semantic quibble, this discrepancy marks a pivotal moment in the social construction of racial difference in colonial New York. A 1712 census of the counties of New York, Kings, Richmond, Orange, and Westchester listed 10,511 “Christians” and 1775 “slaves.” In New York, the terms “slave” and “Negro” were conflated to an extent that would have been unthinkable in the Caribbean, where non-enslaved blacks were more numerous. In any event, the dichotomies of Negro/Christian or slave/Christian were rapidly being undermined by Anglican proselytization, only to be replaced by a new dichotomy: Negro/white. In 1680, Morgan Godwyn, an Anglican cleric who had preached in both Virginia and Barbados, published a booklet entitled The Negro’s and Indians Advocate. The Reverend Godwyn passionately advocated the baptism of slaves, arguing in part that they would become more loyal and obedient as a result: “For

Insurrections and Revolts, nothing can be imagined a greater security against them, than a sincere inward persuasion of the truths of Christianity, with a thorough knowledge of its Principals.” (1680: 130).

With the founding of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) in 1701, Godwyn’s recommendations became official Anglican policy. In 1704 Elias Neau, a French Huguenot who had previously been given a life sentence as a galley slave because of his religious beliefs, conformed to the Church of England and was given an appointment by the SPG to catechize the “Negros and Indians” in New York City. By October of 1705 Neau’s school had enrolled 42 “Negros” and 4 “Indians” who had been sent by 36 separate slaveholders. In response to the most common criticism expressed regarding his school, Neau secured passage of a 1706 assembly bill specifying that baptism of enslaved persons in no way affected their status as slaves. In 1710 Robert Hunter, a member of the SPG, was appointed Governor of New York, providing additional support for Neau’s mission (Cohen 1971: 17–18; Manross 1974: 110).

It came as a severe shock, therefore, when Neau’s school, some of its students, and Christianity itself were implicated in the 1712 insurrection. The Reverend John Sharp reported that “The Spanish Indians were at first most suspected as having most understanding to carry on a plot and being Christians.” Sharp here refers to two individuals: Hosea or Hosey, “Indian slave of Mary Wenham,” and John, “Indian slave of Peter Vantilbrough.” Hosey and John were presumably Catholic and had apparently been free Spanish subjects until they were captured as prisoners of war by a privateer. Because of their dark complexions, the privateer was able to sell the men in New York, despite their repeated claims that they were free Spanish subjects. Although sentenced to be hanged for participation in the insurrection, Hosey and John eventually received Royal pardons.

Two of Elias Neau’s students were implicated in the uprising. Sharp reports that only one baptized student (whose identity cannot be determined from the sources at hand) was implicated. This individual was hanged during the first wave of executions, although he was subsequently “Pitied and proclaimed Innocent by the Generality of the People.” The second accused student was Robin, who, for over two years, had unsuccessfully sought his master’s permission to be baptized. The fact that Robin was sentenced to be “hung in chains and so to continue without sustenance until dead” indicates that he was thought to be one of the three ringleaders of the insurrection. Despite Sharpe’s statements and Governor Hunter’s continued support, the slaveowners became increasingly hostile toward Neau’s school, believing religious in-
struction "Would be a means to make the slave more cunning and apter to wickedness" (Cohen 1971: 21)

Therefore, Sharpe's own accounts indicate an insurrection that was much more complex than an attempt by "some Negro slaves of the Nations of Carmantee & Pappa to destroy all the Whites in order to obtain their freedom." When analyzed within a broader context, we can also see the 1712 Rising as an important transitional moment in the social construction of "white" identity. In the aftermath of the uprising, Governor Hunter advocated passage of a stricter slave code as well as a bill "to Encourage the Importation of White Servants" (Scott 1961: 71).

The advocacy of slave baptism by the Anglican Church undermined the customary social opposition of Negro versus Christian. Because the SPG and the Anglican Church challenged the Negro/Christian opposition without fundamentally attacking the social and economic relationship upon which it was based (i.e., slavery), they unwittingly necessitated the formulation of a different set of oppositions. Even though it could be argued that their work was non-racist, it ultimately contributed to the "need" for elaboration of explicitly racist assertions of "Negro" inferiority.

The 1712 Rising raises three issues that are relevant to the ongoing analysis of the African Burial Ground. First, the temptation to focus on the presence of "Africanisms," as the basis of cultural resistance should be approached very critically. In a paper entitled "Objectivity and Critical Analysis in Mortuary Studies" Nassaney (1986) argues against the search for literal "cultural survivals" and argues that acculturation and autonomy should not be viewed as elements in a mutually exclusive dichotomy:

"Continuity and change are not mutually exclusive processes, but rather articulate in a dialectical relationship. In other words, indigenous groups can be acculturated and still retain a sense of ethnic identity. A group need not maintain cultural isolation and biological purity to assert cultural autonomy and ethnic solidarity.

Like all forms of domination, colonial slavery was characterized by a fundamental contradiction, the tension between inclusion and exclusion, between the need to incorporate the oppressed people within a unified system of control, and the need to create distance, difference, and otherness (Sider 1987). Neither tendency could ever be total and they were in constant, shifting opposition. The Reverend Sharpe saw baptism as a mechanism for enhancing the incorporative aspect of domination by improving surveillance, undermining African cultural traditions, inculcating purportedly shared values, and improving control through better knowledge of slaves' behavior and motivations. However, as is the case with all ideological weapons, Christianity was a double-edged sword. Although deployed as a form of control, religion also became a means of challenging the denial of slave humanity, a basis for resistance that transcended African ethnic boundaries, and a mechanism for surreptitiously maintaining and asserting African spiritual values. Despite the Reverend Sharpe's protestations to the contrary, New York slaveholders realized that Christianity could serve as a basis for slave resistance.

The second issue concerns the construction of "white" identity, an issue discussed in greater detail in the following section (Allen 1994, 1997; Ignatiev 1995). As indicated above, the 1712 Rising occurred at a critical moment in the invention of whiteness. Therefore, any analysis that assumes the existence of static biological races will not be attained to important realms of cultural struggle and contestation. In addition to being a standard element of conventional Euro-centric histories, the "notion of naturally and qualitatively delineated races" is also a limiting characteristic of many schools of Afro-centric analysis (Blakey 1995: 214).

The third issue raised by the 1712 Rising is the analysis of genetic affinity and cultural identity. The original research paradigm for the African Burial Ground osteological analysis was prepared by the Metropolitan Forensic Anthropology Team (MFAT), headed by James V. Taylor. This approach was based upon an essentialist, biogenetic conception of "race." As control of the analysis was shifted to Howard University this approach was displaced by a research paradigm that emphasizes genetic affinity and cultural identity, greatly enhancing the social relevance and scientific importance of the project (Epperson 1996; LaRoche and Blakey 1997). For example, the project will utilize emergent mitochondrial and nuclear DNA studies to examine genetic origins and change in the archaeological population. DNA-based genetics, anatomical structure, chemical signatures for environments, and cultural traits will be used to link individuals from the Burial Ground with specific cultural/regional origins in Africa. (Howard University and John Milner Associates 1993: 68, citing Vigilant 1991).

However, the example of the Coromantee cited above should warn against expecting any literal and direct linkage between geographical origins and cultural identity. For example, the research design proposes:

Archaeological, ethnohistorical, and ethnological assessments will be made of the cultural origins of individuals with ornamentally filed incisor teeth and any other evidence of African birth. Patterns of bone chemistry showing
reasonable correlation with such cultural data (as well as genetic affinity data) will be considered reliable regional chemical signatures for individuals for whom other sourcing data are unavailable. These identifications will allow African-born adults to be partitioned for comparison with other samples (Howard University and John Milner Associates 1993: 68).

Ornamentally filed incisor teeth have, of course, been documented in several African contexts. Although supported by documentary evidence (Handler 1994, 1997), the correlation between filed incisors and African birth should be treated as a hypothesis subject to testing. American-born slaves could have learned this custom from recent African arrivals and may have adopted the practice as a form of cultural resistance, similar to the use of Akan day names. Fortunately, the research design also offers a mechanism for testing this hypothesis, the examination of C3/C4 (carbon) ratios. It should be possible to distinguish between reliance upon American maize (a C4 plant) and consumption of tubers and other C3 plants common to tropical West Africa (Howard University and John Milner Associates 1993: 67). Similarly, examination of strontium (87Sr/86Sr) ratios has been successfully used in South Western Africa to distinguish between coastal and inland inhabitants (Howard University and John Milner Associates 1993: 67, citing Sealy et al. 1991). However distinguishing between African and American birth cohorts and determining the geographic origins of interred individuals does not necessarily determine their ethnic identity. To the extent that it analyzes ethnicity as a social construct rather than a biogenetic phenomenon, the current research design has the potential to enhance our understanding of ethogenesis, the active creation and reinvention of cultural identity under conditions of domination (Mintz and Price 1992; Levine 1977; Sider 1987; 1994; Stuckey 1987).

THE “GREAT NEGRO PLOT” OF 1741

During the winter of 1740–1741 a polyglot group of enslaved, indentured, and wage workers gathered at the tavern of John Hughson to plan an insurrection on St. Patrick’s Day 1741. The conspirators included Irish, English, Hispanic, African, and Native American men and women. The insurrectionists torched Fort George, the Governor’s Mansion, and the Imperial Armory, all important symbols of Royal authority in New York City. In the hysterical aftermath of the attempted uprising, 13 people were burned at the stake, 21 were hanged, and 77 were transported from the colony as servants or slaves (Davis 1985; Horsmanden 1971; Linebaugh and Rediker 1990: 225–226). The executed conspirators included four people of European ancestry. Most of the executions were carried out on the Commons, at or near the location of the African Burial Ground. As previously noted, this is the event David Grim chose to depict selectively on his 1813 “Plan of the City and Environs of New York.” These executions and their subsequent depiction are an important component of the ongoing contestation of the Commons.

According to subsequent coerced testimony, the insurrectionists included David Johnson, a journeyman hatter of unknown European origin who “swore, in that room that he came into, in the presence of the company, that he would help to burn the town, and kill as many white people as he could” (Horsmanden 171: 309). John Corry, an Irish dancing master, and Hughson, the tavern keeper, reportedly made similar vows. Although the construct of “whiteness” was well established in colonial law by this date, we should not approach this situation with preconceptions about who was considered white and what this category meant. As Noel Ignatiev (1995) has shown in How the Irish Became White, membership in the white club is not an automatic consequence of pigmentation. When David Johnson vowed to help “kill as many white people as he could,” “white” clearly referred to the wealthy and powerful, a category from which he was obviously excluded (Davis 1985: 194).

The first conspirator executed was Caesar, an enslaved African “owned” by John Varrock, a New York City baker. Caesar was hanged on May 11, 1741 and his body was hung in chains in a gibbet on a Collect Pond island near the Commons gunpowder house (Horsmanden 171: 65–66). Over the coming months many more conspirators were executed on the Commons, both by hanging and burning at the stake. These events were massively-attended public spectacles. On June 12th John Hughson, his wife Sarah, and their indentured Irish servant, Margaret Kerry, were hanged. Caesar had reportedly provided financial support for Margaret Kerry’s child, who was born under suspicious circumstances. John Hughson’s body was hung in a gibbet next to Caesar’s and the other conspirators whose crimes were deemed particularly heinous. When six additional Blacks were executed on July 18th, the bodies of John Hughson and Caesar were still on display. At that time a “wondrous phenomenon” occurred, which, for white observers, confirmed Hughson’s race treachery. According to the judge and primary reporter of the case, the corpse of Caesar, who had been “of the darkest complexion,” had bleached or turned whitish, while Hughson’s complexion “turned as black as the devil” (Davis 1985: 190–191; Linebaugh and Rediker 1990: 226).
In the subsequent historiography of the rising there has been a transubstantiation that rivals the "wondrous phenomenon" of Hughson and Caesar's corpses exchanging colors. The initial account of the event, published in 1744, was entitled, A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and Other Slaves for Burning the City of New-York in America. This account was republished almost verbatim in 1810, but the title was changed to The New York Conspiracy, or a History of the Negro Plot. Today, the event is generally recalled, if at all, as the "the Great Negro Plot" (Davis 1985). This shift effectively effaces the multicultural nature of the uprising and, through a process of racialization, marginalizes the threat it posed.

For Linebaugh and Rediker (1990), the events of 1741 represent "a many-sided rising by a diverse urban proletariat—red, white, and black, of many nations, races, ethnicities, and degrees of freedom." They believe that concepts such as nationality, race, and ethnicity have obscured "actual points of contact, overlap, and cooperation" between elements of the early modern working class. They continue by criticizing researchers who "consciously or unconsciously posit static and immutable differences between workers black and white, Irish and English, slave and free," and urge a transAtlantic perspective that examines connections between disparate elements of the working class. This approach is mirrored by Gilroy's (1993: 15) opposition to "absolutist conceptions of cultural difference" and his recommendation in The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness that researchers "take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective." In addition to providing important insights into the specific experiences of enslaved and non-enslaved people of African descent in New York City, the African Burial Ground studies also have the potential to force a fundamental reconceptualization of the formation and resistance of the Atlantic working class.

PINKSTER DAY, 1757: THE POLITICS OF SPECTACLE AND CULTURAL PROPERTY

In his 1845 novel Satanstoe, or The Littlepage Manuscripts: A Tale of the Colony, James Fenimore Cooper provided a detailed description of a Pinkster celebration, "the Great Saturnalia of the New York blacks," that purportedly occurred in 1757 (Cooper 1990: 61). Pinkster Day was derived from the Christian holiday Pentecost or Whitsuntide, commemorating the receiving of the holy spirit by Jesus' disciples. This holiday had originally been derived from Shavout, the Jewish festival that celebrates the receiving of the commandments by Moses and the early summer harvest (Harris et al. 1993: 10; Stuckey 1987; 1994; White 1989).

From Cooper's detailed geographical description it is clear that the celebration occurred on the Commons at or very near the site of the African Burial Ground. According to Sterling Stuckey (1994), who has conducted a detailed comparison between this account and the better-documented festivals held in Albany (where the celebration was banned in 1811), Cooper's account is quite credible. Cooper writes that the "Pinkster fields" were located "up near the head of Broadway, on the Common."

By this time nine-tenths of the blacks of the city, and of the whole country within thirty or forty miles, indeed, were collected in thousands in the fields, beating banjos, singing African songs, drinking, and worst of all, laughing in a way that seemed to set their very hearts rattling within their ribs.... Hundreds of whites were walking through the fields, amused spectators. Among those last were a great many children of the better class, who had come to look at the enjoyment of those who attended them, in their ordinary amusements. (Cooper 1990).

Because of shifting slave trading patterns, the proportion of African-born (as opposed to Caribbean- or American-born) slaves within the New York City population was increasing (Lydon 1978). Pinkster provided an opportunity for African Americans to become acquainted with African-born slaves and to formulate a collective cultural identity through the celebration of a Judeo-Christian religious holiday. In his account Cooper highlighted the importance of the African connection:

The features that distinguish a Pinkster frolic from the usual scenes at fairs, and other merry makings, however, were of African origin. It is true, there are not now, nor were there then, many blacks among us of African birth; but the traditions and usages of their original country were so preserved as to produce a marked difference between this festival, and one of European origin. Among other things, some were making music, by beating on skins drawn over the ends of hollow logs, while others were dancing to it, in a manner to show that they felt infinite delight. This, in particular, was said to be a usage of their African progenitors. (Cooper 1990: 65).

Folklorist James H. Pickering does not question the authenticity of Cooper's account, but challenges the location, suggesting that it occurred in Brooklyn or adjacent Long Island, as such a festival would not be tolerated in Manhattan (Pickering 1966: 17). Stuckey, however, does not question the setting of Cooper's account, but instead offers a compelling explanation of why such celebrations were, indeed, tolerated in New York City and elsewhere. Citing the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984:...
7), Stuckey (1994: 78) speculates, "No doubt the pathway to tolerance of and fascination with black dance was to some degree smoothed by the presence of laughter, which tended ... to deflect one's attention from the sacred ...." Yet, Pinkster was not a true carnival for the white observers. According to Bakhtin (1984: 79), "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live it, and everyone participates because its very nature embraces all the people." Cooper's account (and several others examined by Stuckey) show quite clearly that, for most Euro-Americans, Pinkster was not a carnival in which they participated but rather a spectacle staged for their entertainment. Cooper's own account of the celebrations could be seen as a second appropriation, a retelling of an African festival for a predominantly white audience.

Pinkster is important to the present narrative for two reasons. First, it indicates that the Burial Ground was used by New Yorkers of African descent for rituals other than burials. Second, it raises disconcerting questions about how African and African-American cultural resources are appropriated and transformed into spectacles suitable for mass consumption (Lott 1993), or are put to uses inimical to the interests and desires of the descendant community. In this context the emerging concept of "traditional cultural properties" would appear to be extremely relevant (King 1997; Parker and King 1992).

In many ways, this project mirrors issues raised by implementation of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (Public Law 101-601, see Fine-Dare 1997; Merrill et al. 1993; and Zimmerman 1989). As the African Burial Ground excavations proceeded and the extent of the site became increasingly apparent, the mainstream preservation community began to realize that the site was an extremely important cultural resource. However, in terms of National Register significance, the importance of the site was considered almost exclusively under "Criterion D": "[sites] that have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history." This is a nice example of what Thomas King calls "archaeo-centricism," a tendency to view cultural resources primarily as sources of archaeological data (King 1997). If a site is significant only for its "information" it becomes a "removable resource," and any adverse effect can be mitigated by scientific study (i.e., excavation):

1. There is no adverse effect when the property is of value only for its potential contribution to archaeology, historical, or architectural research, and when such value can be substantially preserved through the conduct of appropriate research ... 36 CFR 800.9(C)(1)

An important challenge to this logic was presented in a brief filed by the Minority Environmental Lawyers Association (MELA) (reprinted in GSA 1993: np):

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It's ironic that the only identified adverse effect is one which allows unfettered construction after the remains have been studied.... The irony of this conclusion is that it fits very conveniently within the project's aims, specifically it justifies the destruction of the Burial Ground already completed and contemplated destruction of unexcavated Burial Ground.

The MELA brief insisted that the African Burial Ground site also be evaluated under National Register Criterion A: "[sites] that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history ...." The MELA position has, to a large extent prevailed. The current mitigation measures include preservation in place, a permanent memorial on the site, an extensive program of public participation and education, and eventual reinterment of the remains in accordance with the wishes of the descendant community (Howard University and John Milner Associates 1993: 100-112; LaRoche and Blakey 1997).

Although initially applied to Native-American spiritual sites, the concept of traditional cultural properties has wide applicability. National Register Bulletin 38 states that a traditional cultural property can be eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places "because of its association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that (a) are rooted in that community's history, and (b) are important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community" (Parker and King 1992). These criteria provide mechanisms for incorporating spiritual and cultural values, which may not be addressed by conventional archaeology and historic preservation criteria, into National Register assessments. In his professional workshops, Thomas King (1997), coauthor of National Register Bulletin 38, uses the African Burial Ground as a paradigmatic example of a traditional cultural property.

Although it has not figured in debates surrounding the African Burial Ground, the concept of traditional cultural properties could be quite applicable in comparable future situations as a mechanism for fostering both community involvement and the participation of professional researchers who are grounded in the cultural context being investigated. For federal undertakings the guidelines require that "culturally sensitive consultation" be conducted by researchers who are thoroughly grounded in the history, culture, and concerns of the community being studied. Diligent application of these criteria could prevent a recurrence of the situation that characterized the initial phases of study at the African Burial Ground, where "anthropologists who had engaged ... in very little study of Africana history and culture" produced a research design that was "culture-less, history-less, and biologically shallow" (LaRoche and Blakey 1997: p. 89).

One excellent example of the necessity of having researchers who
are grounded in the history and culture of the community being studied is provided by a multivalent symbol, a pattern of nail heads found on lid of one of the coffins. This elaborate symbol was initially interpreted as a heart, but an African-American researcher recognized a resemblance to Sankofa, an Asante Adinkra symbol (LaRoche and Blakey 1997; Perry 1997a, 1997b). This recognition was confirmed by an analysis performed by a Ghanaian historian of African Art (Ofori-Ansa 1995: 3). The Ghanian connection with the Burial Ground project was solidified in 1995 when a contingent led by Nana Oduro Namapau II, President of the Ghana National House of Chiefs, toured the Cobb Biological Anthropology Laboratory at Howard University and the Burial Ground site in Manhattan (Anonymous 1995a, 1995b; Gaines 1995). This visit was part of a five-city “Fihankra” tour initiated in Ghana in December of 1994 to perform traditional rituals to atone for the misdeeds of those ancestral rulers who helped sustain the trans-African slave trade” (Anonymous 1995b). At the Burial Ground, the chiefs performed a libation ceremony of atonement and purification, confirming the importance of the property as a sacred ritual space.

Perhaps the most important struggle over the excavation and interpretation of the African Burial Ground has been the determination that the project be accountable to, and address the interests of, the African-American descendant community. In large measure this effort to define and control cultural property has been a success, preventing the project from becoming another Pinkster Day celebration, an event the dominant culture perceives as a spectacle staged for its benefit and amusement.

**THE 1788 PETITION AND “DOCTOR’S RIOT”**

In 1788 a delegation of enslaved and free African Americans presented a petition to the New York City Common Council in which they complained:

That it hath lately been the constant practice of a number of young gentlemen in this City who call themselves Students of Physick, to repair to the Burial Ground assigned for the use of your petitioners, and under the cover of the Night, and in the most wanton Sallies of Excess, to dig up the Bodies of the deceased friends and relatives of your Petitioners, carry them away, and without respect to Age or Sex, mangle their flesh out of a wanton Curiosity and then expose it to Beasts and Birds. (Heaton 1943: 1862)

Outrage against resurrectionists, people who stole bodies for dissection, resulted in the April, 1788 “Doctors Riots.” This disturbance included a multicultural, multiclass assault against the New Gaol, where several doctors were being held in protective custody (Ladenheim 1950). Five rioters and three militia members guarding the jail were killed during the disturbance.

For many in the African-American community, the 1991–1992 archaeological excavations at the Burial Ground site were understandably interpreted as the modern-day equivalent of bodysnatching, and their reactions were not dissimilar to those of the 1788 petitioners. By April of 1992 it was becoming increasingly evident that the number of burials excavated would greatly exceed the original estimates of 50 interments (Brown 1992a). In addition, GSA was becoming increasingly intransigent in its position that the construction project would be completed on schedule, regardless of community concerns about the Burial Ground. On April 25 (four days before the acquittal of four Los Angeles policemen who had been videotaped beating Rodney King) Sonny Carson, a well-known activist, was quoted, “This could be a very hot summer if the federal government doesn’t yield to our demands.” (Brown 1992b). By late June the legendary jazz violinist Noel Pointer was actively organizing the support of artists and collecting signatures on petitions to Congress (Strickland-Abuwi 1992). By late July efforts to halt the excavations had garnered the support of Mayor Dinkins and the Congressional Black Caucus (Brown 1992c). In addition, Congressman Gus Savage (D-Illinois), chair of the Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, convened hearings in Manhattan in late July in an attempt to force GSA to submit an acceptable research design before proceeding with the excavations (Boyd 1992a). On August 9, a 24-hour vigil was conducted at the site by a wide-ranging coalition of cultural workers, including contingents of Native-American activists (Boyd 1992b). By this date the excavations had been halted and control of the project was being transferred to Howard University and John Milner Associates (JMA).

Although there was strong support for transferring the project to the JMA/Howard University team, the new researchers faced the formidable tasks of garnering support for the reformulated research design while simultaneously assuring that the research was responsive to the needs and concerns of the descendant community (Officer 1993a, 1993b, 1993c). In accordance with the American Anthropological Association’s Statement on Ethics and Professional Responsibility and the World Archaeological Congress’ First Code of Ethics, Michael Blakey’s research team recognized the right of the descendant community to accept, modify, or reject the research design. The pressure to have the osteological analysis performed by Howard University initially arose from two sources: the perception that MFAT was disrespectful and unprofessional in their handling of the human remains, and the desire...
to have the analysis performed by a historically black institution. However, many of the activists also soon began to apprehend the fundamental differences between the two research paradigms. The original research paradigm was a non-historical approach predicated on an essentialist, biogenetic concept of race (Dibennardo and Taylor 1983) that most members of the descendant community found to be demeaning and scientifically invalid. The Howard University team offered an anti-essentialist approach that foregrounds issues of history and culture; challenges the concept of biological races; and emphasizes genetic affinity, cultural identity, and the physical manifestations of class-based oppression (Blakey 1987, 1996; Brace 1995; Epperson 1996; Goodman and Armelagos 1995; LaRoche and Blakey 1997; Lieberman and Reynolds 1995; Mukhopadhyay and Moses 1997; Sauer 1992).

In an article entitled "Race, Identity, and Political Culture," Manning Marable (1992) distinguished between two conceptions of "Blackness": racial identity, an imposed category of domination that refers only to physical attributes, and cultural identity, a category that also includes African-American history, politics, and religion. As we have seen, the MFAT research paradigm was concerned primarily with identity in the first sense, while the Howard University paradigm represents an important attempt to also encompass identity in the second sense. The most important lesson of the African Burial Ground project is that the act of "seizing intellectual power" (LaRoche and Blakey) by the descendant community has resulted in a research program that is not only more responsive to the needs and concerns of the community, but is also indisputably better science.

CONCLUSION: ESSENTIALISM, IDENTITY POLITICS, AND THE ANTI-RACIST STRUGGLE

One of the important symbolic victories won by the African-American community in New York City was a change in the name of the burial ground site. A 1735 map depicted the area as the "Negro Burying Place" (Stokes I: plate 30) and a 1755 map carried the notation "Negros Burial Ground" (Stokes I: plate 34). During the early phases of the project the site was generally referred to as the "Negro's Burial Ground." However, as awareness of the project increased within the African-American community, pressure grew to avoid use of the word "Negro." It was argued that when they had the opportunity to name their own cultural institutions during the eighteenth century, people of African descent generally preferred the term "African" (e.g., African Methodist Episcopal Church), although this issue subsequently became very controversial (Stuckey 1987: 193–244). In addition, an 1812 New York Superior Court document cited above refers to the area as the "African Burying Ground." For the most part this transformation has been accepted by the mainstream press and cultural institutions. However, two major "gatekeeper" institutions, The New York Times (Dunlap 1993) and the New-York Historical Society, continue to resist this name change.

The move from "Negro's Burial Ground" to "African Burial Ground" is indicative of the extent to which the biogenetic category of race has been successfully displaced by the cultural category "African." Nevertheless, although race is, to a large extent, "debiologized" by this maneuver, distinctions such as European and African often remain as essential (in both senses) categories.

The discontinuation of burial excavations and the redirection of the African Burial Ground research design are important victories that attest to the power of identity politics. A mobilized and politicized minority community was able to halt construction of part of a federal complex that had to be built and subsequently force a major paradigm shift in an important research project. Nothing presented in this paper is intended to detract from the significance of these remarkable accomplishments. This project, however, also raises important issues that bear upon debates about essentialist and social constructionist theories of identity. In various forms, these debates are ongoing in the gay and lesbian, feminist, and African-American communities (Fuss 1989). For example, a 1994 Princeton University conference that featured presentations by Cornel West, Patricia Williams, Stuart Hall, Toni Morrison, and Angela Yvonne Davis focused on the issue of political essentialism (Winkler 1994).

In this analysis we have seen how identities such as Coromantee could simultaneously serve as both a means of domination and a basis for resistance. Similarly, despite attempts by the Anglican hierarchy to deploy religion as a means of controlling enslaved Africans and African Americans, Christianity could also serve as a basis of resistance. What is required is a "double-strategy" that fights oppression (homophobia, racism, sexism) while simultaneously interrogating and valorizing "difference" (Scott 1988).

LaRoche and Blakey (1997) quite appropriately situate the African Burial Ground research design within the tradition of "vindicationist" studies. However, this placement must be further characterized by a brief examination of current debates within activist African-American scholarship. In his classic essay "Anthropology and the Black Experience," St. Claire Drake discusses the literature of "racial vindication," which can be traced to eighteenth-century attempts "to disprove slander,
answer pejorative allegations, and criticize pseudoscientific generalizations about Africans and people of African descent." A classic example of this genre is the Reverend Norman B. Wood's _The White Side of a Black Subject_ (enlarged and brought down to date), _A Vindication of the Afro-American Race From the Landing of Slaves at St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565 to the Present Time_, which was published in 1897, one year after W.E.B. DuBois received a doctorate in History from Harvard University (Drake 1980: 10). African–American scholars and activists, including DuBois, assessed disciplines in terms of how favorable or inimical they were to the "vindications" struggle. Until Franz Boas began popularizing his work, anthropology was (quite correctly) viewed as an unequivocal enemy of this struggle, much as African intellectuals tended to consider the discipline as adjunct to oppressive colonialism. Although mainstream British and American anthropology remained undeniably racist, African-American scholar/activists began to realize the vindicationist potential of anthropology. Although Drake recognizes the value of this approach, he also discusses its limitations. He closes his essay by stating, "Anthropology is a tool—certainly—but it should not be only that; it has always had affiliations with art and literature as well as with administration and revolutionary action. Beyond the black experience lies the human experience" (1980: 29).

In his recent book _W.E.B. DuBois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line_, Adolph Reed, Jr. is extremely critical of the literature of "racial vindicationism," stating that it is a "defensive psychology" that "often leads to a conceptual narrowness and atheoreticism" (1997: 5). In place of the vindicationist paradigm, Reed advocates what he calls a generativist approach, "which resolves the tensions between the scholarly and hortatory imperatives in Afro-American intellectual life. Its objectives are probing and tough-minded academically and, simultaneously, directly linked to civic concerns" (1997: 183). Although it is not discussed in these terms, the research program for the African Burial Ground has, in many important respects, already transcended the limits of its vindicationist origins and incorporates elements of the generativist approach advocated by Reed. The descendant community and the researchers are interacting in a dialectical relationship. While the research design must (and does) address vindicationist concerns, the researchers also demonstrate how the project can transcend the defensive posture of countering racist mythologies and adopt an assertive posture that poses new questions and offers findings that will force a major rethinking of American and trans-Atlantic history that transcends the immediate initial concerns of the descendant community.

Whether we like it or not, there is no such thing as non-political anthropology (Harrison 1991; 1995), and those of us who are not members of minority communities should be as clear as possible about the implications of our work. For example, an effort to deconstruct categories such as "race" could have the unintended effect of undermining very powerful identity-based political action, an approach characterized by some critical race theorists as "vulgar anti-essentialism" (Crenshaw et al. 1995: xxvi). One approach is to join in the anti-racist struggle by interrogating the category of "whiteness."

One change in direction that would be real cool would be the production of a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness... [Only a persistent, rigorous, and informed critique of whiteness could really determine what forces of denial, fear, and competition are responsible for creating fundamental gaps between professed political commitment to eradicating racism and the participation in the construction of a discourse on race that perpetuates racial domination. (Hooks 1989, see also Epperson 1997; Hartigan 1997; Marable 1995; Page and Thomas 1994).

Although it is seldom expressed in these terms, the struggle against the essentialist concept of race is also an aspect of the struggle against capitalism itself. Race has been—and continues to be—"essential" for the development of capitalism in two senses. Racism was, and continues to be, essential in the philosophical sense, "one of the most blatant and potentially evil forms of essentialist thought" (Crapanzano 1986: 20). Racism has also been essential within the political economy of capitalism as a mechanism for creating discipline, distinctions, and divisiveness within the working classes (McGuire and Payner 1991; Robinson 1983: 51).

Race is not an innate attribute of the human condition. Rather it is an ideology, a social construct that is being constantly reinvented and rearticulated (Fields 1990; Goldberg 1993). Race is not a thing or an attribute that explains behavior or historical events. Race was not the _a priori_ explanation for Trinity Church's 1697 decision to ban persons of African descent from their burial ground. Rather, the essentialist conception of race and the attendant racism emerged from, and is nurtured by, countless moments of class-based oppression. Today, we are faced with a decision: we can either continue to recreate and re-enact "race," or we can join in the anti-racist struggle.

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