The Challenge of Race to American Historical Archaeology

Historical archaeologists should be leaders in examining the archaeological dimensions of race and racism in the United States. With few exceptions, though, this has not been the case, as most archaeologists have conflated race and ethnicity. American historical archaeologists have a great opportunity to provide new insights to the anthropological investigation of race and racism if they choose to take this course of action. [historical archaeology, race and racism, archaeological interpretation, African Americans, Irish Americans]

Issues of race and racism, though never absent from the realities of American life, are once again assuming a prominent place in our collective anthropological consciousness. This development is not completely surprising, since Americans, goaded by the writings of pop-sociologists and the comments of television's political pundits, tend to see every issue through a racial lens (Fischer et al. 1996:171). Scholars foregrounding race do not restrict themselves to any particular period of history, and reinterpretations of both the past and the present are well underway.

The pedigree of American anthropologists in the study of race is well documented, and it is only right that cultural and biological anthropologists should take center stage in the debates about race and racism that will surely emerge across the globe. But in light of the widespread interest that will undoubtedly be generated, we may well ask where archaeologists fit into the discussion. What is the role of these anthropologists in the work of examining race and racism? Will archaeologists be able to increase knowledge about the material dimensions of racism and to determine how material inequality has been attached to racial categorizations? When thinking about such questions in terms of the future, we may justifiably suppose that historical archaeologists will assume a prominent position in the intellectual enterprise of illuminating the material dimensions of American race and racism.

My purpose in this essay is to explore issues of race and racism in the archaeology of modern America, defined here as post-Columbian in time (see Orser 1996). Although American historical archaeologists should be in the forefront of the study of race and racism, with only a few exceptions their interest to date has been minimal. Overwhelmingly, the interest of American historical archaeologists has focused on issues of ethnicity rather than of race. This trend is showing signs of changing in line with current anthropological thinking, but historical archaeologists in America still have major strides to make before their research will become relevant to a wide range of scholars, including even their anthropological colleagues.

Historical Archaeologists and Ethnicity

Archaeologists' interest in past cultural entities stretches back to the nineteenth century, when pioneering prehistorians struggled to identify archaeological "cultures" in the silent refuse from the past (Shennan 1989). In the course of their research, these early practitioners learned that to make meaningful statements about past cultures they had to be able to distinguish them with material culture. The act of segregating the remains of different peoples seems relatively simple. It follows logically that peoples with different traditions will create and use things that look appreciably different from the things made and used by peoples from other traditions. Thus, the presence of red pots at one site may be used to identify men and women from one culture, whereas the discovery of white pots at another site may identify a second, distinctive culture. As is the case with most archaeological research, however, reality often imposes on even the best model, and prehistorians have regularly been bedeviled by cultural identification. Childe's (1926:200) observation of over seventy years ago is thus still pertinent today: "The path of the prehistorian who wishes to draw ethnographical conclusions from archaeological data is often beset with pitfalls." The wisdom of Childe's comment is intimately understood by every archaeologist who has ever attempted to identify a discrete group of people with recourse only to their material remains.
The problems of cultural identification that torment prehistorians also exist in historical archaeology. With the benefit of supplemental textual information, however, historical archaeologists have a somewhat easier time understanding what kinds of socially defined groups can be expected to have inhabited certain sites. Put most stereotypically, Asian immigrants can be assumed to have lived in Chinatowns, Welsh men and women in mining camps, and men and women of African descent on slave plantations. Having acquired such basic knowledge from textual sources, historical archaeologists have generally framed their studies in terms of ethnicity, beginning with the idea of using material objects to identify past social groups.

Studies assigning ethnic affiliation through material culture began in historical archaeology with the search for "ethnic markers," or specific artifacts that could be associated with certain peoples, or "ethnic peoplehoods." At sites associated with African Americans, for example, such research began with a search for African survivals in the archaeological deposits at southern plantations. The logic here was straightforward. African slaves in the Americas brought their cultural knowledge with them from Africa. When they made or refashioned physical things for their use, they invariably did so in ways that were consistent with their cultural knowledge. Archaeologists excavating slave cabins at plantation sites, then, should be able to locate these objects and to distinguish them as signs of African cultural survival in the New World. Once this kind of research became standard practice, it was not long before archaeologists expanded the search for ethnic markers to other peoples. Archaeologists who associated colonoware pottery with African Americans soon expanded this understanding to link smoking pipes embossed with harps to Irish immigrants, and opium pipes with transplanted Asians.

Many historical archaeologists today recognize this kind of archaeological stereotyping as reifying perceived artifact associations, while investing artifacts with a static ethnicity by assuming that only an Irishman could smoke from a pipe marked "Erin Go Bragh." This kind of rudimentary interpretation has not entirely left the field, but some historical archaeologists have adopted much more sophisticated efforts to envision artifacts as symbols of group identity that, rather than being static containers of ethnicity, are free to be manipulated by conscious human actors (Praetzellis et al. 1987). Within this more theoretically mature framework, some archaeologists have begun to see artifacts as tools for manipulating the social order while also creating and promoting a sense of peoplehood (Praetzellis 1991; Staski 1993). Historical archaeologists who have stepped beyond the search for ethnic markers have begun with studies of assimilation and ethnic boundary maintenance, as well as investigations of ethnic pride, in which they have attempted to demonstrate the contribution of various nonelite groups to the multicultural history of the United States (Kelly and Kelly 1980; McGuire 1982:161-162; Staski 1990).

Numerous historical archaeologists have been drawn to the study of ethnicity, but fewer have shown an overt interest in the archaeological examination of race. Most historical archaeologists seemingly have been willing to accept the widely held, albeit nonanthropological, understanding that associates race with ethnicity. This facile understanding of race has made it possible for historical archaeologists to downplay or to sidestep racism as a means of creating and upholding the social inequalities that characterize American society. The failure of American historical archaeologists to address race and racism in any substantive way has served to maintain the field's tacit political conservatism, a stance consistent with the traditional use of historical archaeology to examine sites associated with places and personages important in the dominant national ideology. Race perception, though a major contributor to American social inequality, is largely absent from historical archaeological practice (but see comments in Orser and Fagan 1995:213-219).

**Historical Archaeologists and Race**

Not every historical archaeologist, however, has entirely ignored race in American history. Examining sites associated with planters, overseers, and slaves at Cannon's Point Plantation in Georgia, John Otto (1980) made one of the earliest attempts to study race as an imposed condition. Otto argued that race was a fixed legal status that created a divide between "free white" planters and overseers, and "unfree black" slaves. Based on this caste model, Otto attempted to identify artifacts and artifact classes that had been distributed or acquired because of this categorization. In a way, Otto's use of race was just another way of looking at ethnicity, but he at least inserted the word *race* into the archaeological lexicon and made it a topic of serious archaeological investigation. Although his study is flawed in several serious and well-known respects (Orser 1988a), the ambiguous results of his analysis demonstrated the complexities inherent in the static investigation of an extremely fluid social designation. Such simplistic analyses, though pioneering when first conducted, have been largely though not entirely abandoned for more sophisticated studies.

In an important statement on the importance of a historical archaeology of race, David Babson (1990) argued that by insisting on the study of ethnic groups as timeless, immutable social artifacts, historical archaeologists have missed important opportunities. Also, by reifying ethnic identity through association with specific artifacts or artifact classes, American historical archaeologists have ignored the ways in which racist beliefs have defined identity in relations of power. Babson argued that because racist ideology structures how people treat one another,
racism should leave identifiable traces in archaeological deposits. To illustrate his point, Babson explored the material and spatial effects of racism at a slave plantation in South Carolina. The antebellum southern plantation is one category of site where we may expect racism to be readily apparent and therefore abundantly visible in archaeological deposits (also see Babson 1987). In a more recent though theoretically similar study, Robert Fitts (1996) demonstrated how racist beliefs were expressed in a segregationist use of space in the early plantations of Rhode Island.

In another study of plantation society, Terrence Epperson (1990b) argued that historical archaeologists must maintain a dual focus in their studies of race and racism. This dual perspective, modeled on W. E. B. Du Bois's (1961:16–17) concept of "double-consciousness," allows historical archaeologists—examining race in a racist society—to work toward two goals: the "valorization of the African American culture of resistance and the denaturalization of essentialist racial categories" (Epperson 1990b:36). This approach allows historical archaeologists to realize that racism "embodies contradictory tendencies of exclusion and incorporation, simultaneously providing a means of oppression and a locus of resistance" (Epperson 1990a:341).

These kinds of studies demonstrate the challenges faced by historical archaeologists when they attempt to examine race and racism. Race is a highly mutable, often situationally defined designation, and archaeologists do not know precisely how to study it using material culture. As if the changing nature of racial perception as expressed in material culture is not slippery enough, racism is inexorably intertwined with capitalism, another major topic of historical archaeological research. The presence of incipient and eventually full-blown capitalism in the New World after 1492 defines American historical archaeology both in terms of its subject and its contemporary practice. Today, it is as impossible to conceptualize the post-Columbian world without global commercialism as it is to imagine historical archaeology without capitalism (Handsman 1985; Leone 1995; Orser 1988b, 1996).

The appearance of market forces in a capitalist world has practical significance for historical archaeologists. The vast majority of objects used by post-Columbian Americans were not made by them. Thus, with increasing frequency as we move closer to our own time, men and women were called upon to select the things they wished to use from an often broad, but still finite assemblage of products. These acts of selection, and the assignment of meaning to the decisions made, are exceedingly complex issues, even in observable market situations. Faced with myriad possibilities to account for artifact presence at an archaeological site, historical archaeologists seeking distinctions between "ethnic markers," economic markers of class, and visible symbols of racial designation usually provide only tentative interpretations. The problems inherent in this kind of study were exemplified in historical archaeology several years ago.

In 1943, Adelaide and Ripley Bullen (1945) excavated a homesite in Andover, Massachusetts, that was once inhabited by a freed slave named Lucy Foster. Foster died in 1845 at the age of 88 as an impoverished freedwoman who had been on the poor rolls beginning in 1812, the year her mistress died. Several years after the Bullens' excavation, Vernon Baker (1978, 1980) analyzed the excavated ceramics in an effort to illuminate "patterns of material culture distinctive of Afro-American behavior" (Baker 1980:29), or in other words, to determine which ceramics were indicative of African American ethnicity. In the end, Baker could not decide whether his findings reflected poverty or ethnicity, a central problem for historical archaeology that is still unresolved almost twenty years later (e.g., Yamin 1997). The major reason for the inability of historical archaeologists to decide whether the artifacts they excavate relate to past ethnic, racial, or class designations derives from the simple reality that these typological threads are never really separate in American life.

Without doubt, understanding the material relationships between and among reified categories of ethnicity, race, and class presents perhaps the greatest challenge to contemporary American historical archaeology. The way in which archaeologists respond to this challenge will establish the relevance of their discipline within both anthropology and within the broader transdisciplinary investigation of human life. Although historical archaeologists have yet to take this challenge seriously, one recent analysis stands out by offering one direction for future research.

In a sophisticated study, Paul Mullins (1996) provides a thought-provoking exposition on African America and the consumer culture of the United States between 1850 and 1930. Mullins argues that material consumption presented African American consumers with a Janus face. On one hand, consumption provided a mechanism for African Americans to cement and to improve their places in American society, but on the other, it offered a way for racists to subordinate them by imposing on them a sentence of material inferiority. Living in a country dedicated above all to capitalism, African Americans, with the rise of all-pervasive mass consumption, were confronted with a way to enter public spheres of consumption that were once closed to them.

We may well suppose that the movement of African Americans toward full-scale American consumerism undoubtedly took many material forms, but Mullins's (1996:528–533) exploration of the African American acquisition of bric-a-brac is particularly instructive. Although we may be inclined to view knickknacks as insignificant kitsch, in truth they were symbolically charged representations of American abundance, nationalism, and
that historical archaeologists would be ill advised to use the presence of knickknacks as ethnic markers for African Americans. When found in archaeological deposits, brightly painted porcelain statuettes of a regal-looking George Washington or of quaintly dressed peasant girls do more than simply reify our already stereotypic understanding of the relationship between artifact ownership and past social standing. As Mullins (1996:533) observes, "Material goods and consumer space harbored a legion of possibilities which played on affluence, democratization, and nationalism and lurked within a rich range of accessible objects and flexible symbols." Clearly, when we begin to analyze even the most commonplace artifacts in terms of race and class, we enter a fluid world where meanings, being temporally and even situationally mutable, defy easy interpretation.

Historical Archaeology, Race, and Poverty

In Mullins’s analysis we see the glaring complexities inherent in analyzing race in American historical archaeology. Much of the interpretive challenge centers on the complex relationship between racism and consumerism. This relationship was succinctly expressed by boxer Larry Holmes when he said, “I was black once, when I was poor” (Oates 1987:62). The problem with race, from a purely archaeological standpoint, is that it is not ethnicity. As a result, even if the search for archaeological “racial markers” was desirable as an end in itself, it would be appreciably more difficult than the search for “ethnic markers.” On a practical level, though, the search for racial markers would be no more satisfying than the search for ethnic markers. Nonetheless, historical archaeologists still maintain a strong interest in examining archaeological deposits in terms of reified social entities, even in cases where the authors claim to do just the opposite (see Cook et al. 1996:58).

At present, the few historical archaeologists who are interested in questions of race confine themselves to African Americans. For historical archaeologists, it is as if race attaches only to men and women of color. But even a brief consideration of the Irish illustrates the flawed nature of this conclusion and suggests the immature state of race research in historical archaeology.

For the sake of convenience, we may consider the Irish to be an ethno-nationalistically defined people from an identifiable politico-geographical unit, an island in the North Atlantic (GAP 1987:24–25; Rose 1974:13). Given the American propensity for creating “us” and “them” categories around perceived racial categories, we may be willing today to consider the Irish as members of the White Race. The racialization of the Irish, however, was a much more contested process that took many years to be resolved. In short, the Irish were not always "white."

Recorded history shows that the colonizing English considered the native Irish to be a barbaric and inferior
people. In 1366, English overlords passed the Statutes of Kilkenny as a way to legislate enforced acculturation. The native Irish were commanded to use the English language, to ride their horses with saddles in the English manner, to use English naming practices, and to wear English clothing (Bartlett 1993:239).

With the rise of large-scale enslavement in the New World many years later, it was not long before English observers began to compare the still-despised Irish with African American slaves. For example, in 1749, Anglican bishop and philosopher George Berkeley wrote that “The negroes in our Plantations have a saying—‘If negro was not negro, Irishman would be negro’ ” (Berkeley 1871: 439). Just over one hundred years later, the staunchly anti-Catholic clergyman Charles Kingsley stated that he was “haunted by the human chimpanzees” he saw around Sligo. For him, “to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours” (Gibbons 1991:96). Two years later, the English satirical magazine *Punch* referred to the Irish as “A creature manifestly between the Gorilla and the Negro.” and as late as 1885, British anthropologist John Beddoe referred to the Irish as “Africanoid” (Foster 1993:184; Young 1995:72). Not surprisingly, such attitudes were also expressed visually, and it was common during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for English artists to portray the Irish with apelike features (Curtis 1971). Racism thus became a common element of English-Irish interaction, as the English strove to establish the Irish as the Other, comparable to the many Others their country’s explorers and colonists encountered around the globe (Doan 1997; Lebow 1976; Waters 1995).

When Irish immigrants began to flood the streets of America in the early-nineteenth century, it was not at all clear that they were members of the so-called White Race (Ignatiev 1995:41). Since Congress decreed in 1790 that only “whites” could be naturalized citizens, Irish immigrants found that they had to fight for the national privilege of being perceived as white. The American White Race was an invention, and since the days of the Puritans, the American power elite consciously worked to build a homogeneous Americanized state based on their perception of whiteness (Allen 1994; Carlson 1987). Before Emancipation, foremen and labor-gang bosses often used Irish laborers instead of slaves for the most dangerous jobs because the Irish, as poor freemen, were wholly expendable (Ignatiev 1995:109). As a people, the Irish did not move into the ranks of “white” America until they repudiated the rights of those deemed nonwhite. The stereotypic character of the evil Irish overseer on the southern slave plantation is a literary device intended to show this accommodation. Tara, mythic America’s most famous plantation, was named for a venerated site in Ireland, and its owners had the time-honored Irish name of O’Hara (Mitchell 1936).

To summarize, the Irish in America had to struggle to attain the racial designation that put them in the nation’s highest racial category. To accomplish this act of wholesale racial advance, they had to overcome years of discrimination to create a place for themselves in the American scheme of whiteness. Some Irish immigrants even climbed to the highest echelons of the American elite, with their names becoming synonymous with wealth, power, and the American Dream (Birmingham 1973; Greeley 1981). Nonetheless, the movement of the Irish into the ranks of White America has yet to interest American historical archaeologists. The Irish in America are still perceived monolithically as an ethnic group inhabiting the sphere of whiteness, and their place in White America is taken for granted.

### Race in the Future of Historical Archaeology

If the present corpus of scholarship is any guide, the way in which Americans address issues of race and racism will undoubtedly be many and varied over the next several years. There is danger, of course, in the notion that the most serious discussions will be restricted to the realm of scholastic inquiry and will not reach a wider audience (Cole 1995). The problem of intellectual isolation is particularly acute for archaeology, since the only times the field is regularly mentioned outside the profession is when the popular media designates a new discovery as especially spectacular, or when pseudo-scientists have made some new outlandish claim.

The possible courses of action for the development of serious, concerted research in the historical archaeology of race are infinite, and we may well hope and expect that the approaches taken by archaeologists will be varied. I believe, however, that the examination of the material side of race and racism provides archaeologists with a rare opportunity to use their discipline’s unique transdisciplinary insights and methods to promote greater understanding far beyond archaeology. In a nation like the United States—where the national ideology is wholly given over to capitalist accumulation and conspicuous consumption—the role of historical archaeologists may be easily expanded beyond the narrow halls of a few universities and the conference rooms of cultural resource management firms. At a time when political conservatives are using race in a wrongheaded and divisive manner—the effusive excitement over *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994) being one clear example—historical archaeologists are afforded the opportunity to show the historic origins and manifestations of racial categorization and the relationship of such pigeonholing to social and material inequality.

In an important essay, Jesse L. Jackson Jr. (1997) argues that it is not enough to talk about race in America
without taking action on employment. To discuss one without the other is to engage in what Jackson calls "race entertainment." Racial justice is not synonymous with economic justice, but the two are clearly linked. As Jackson (1997:24) notes, "In a nation with the economic and technological ability to provide every American with a decent life, it is a scandal that there should be so much social misery."

Will race ever become an important subject in historical archaeology, or will historical archaeologists only engage in "race entertainment," forever examining race as if it were ethnicity? This question cannot be answered now, but to become true partners in the expanding anthropological discourse on race in America, historical archaeologists must seek to illustrate the effects of racism on African Americans and other peoples, developing at the same time a historical archaeology of whiteness. Baker (1978:113) inadvertently made this suggestion when he stated that to interpret the meaning of the ceramics at Lucy Foster's homestead, historical archaeologists must also conduct research on sites inhabited by poor whites. Most historical archaeologists now accept "whiteness as an unassailable fact of nature" rather than as a social construct (Epperson 1997:10). This tendency is adequately demonstrated by examining how historical archaeologists have examined, or not examined, the Irish in America.

Because the appellations of whiteness and nonwhiteness contain deep-seated notions of social inequality, studies of domination and resistance should constitute a major focus of research in historical archaeology (Paynter and McGuire 1991). Through this sustained research activity, historical archaeologists will be able to denaturalize the condition of whiteness, and to demonstrate the material dimensions of using whiteness as a source of racial domination even in cases, such as with the Irish, where racism may initially appear absent (Harrison 1995:63).

Recently, Robert Paynter (1997) proposed that historical archaeologists must understand the complexities inherent in examining social inequality in historic America. Three questions he posed as worthy of future study in historical archaeology are particularly relevant here:

Under what conditions do stratified societies mark and hide social cleavages with material culture? How, during the age of capital, did wage labor, mass consumption, and white supremacy produce distinctive and shifting identities? And, how did local communities redefine identities among these global shifts in race, class and gender relations? [Paynter 1997:11]

Providing answers to such questions as these will not only make historical archaeology more relevant to anthropological inquiry, it will also raise the profile and societal relevance of the field. Whether large numbers of historical archaeologists ever move to the examination of the material dimensions of racial categorization is simply a matter of what historical archaeologists wish their field to be.

Note

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