Viewing the Color Line Through the Material Culture of Death

ABSTRACT

Historical archaeologists have recently begun to explore the intersections of race, class, gender, and death in American society. This paper uses an approach to the material culture of death grounded in the reception theory of Wolfgang Iser (1978). Grave markers from the African-American cemetery at Newport, Rhode Island, are considered as intersubjective texts with ranges of different meanings for different viewers. Understanding the ranges of possible meanings is crucial for determining the extent to which the color line dividing African Americans and Euroamericans has been set, negotiated, and reset through time and space. The reception theory framework is used to interpret three time periods in Newport’s history ranging from 1720 to 1830; interpretations of textual similarities and differences in cross-cultural mortuary activities revolve around white paternalism, conspicuous consumption, and African-American strategies of resistance and assimilation.

Introduction

On a dark winter afternoon, when the southwesterly winds blow snow clouds in from the Atlantic Ocean, H. P. Lovecraft’s (1983[1939]:94) description of Newport, Rhode Island, as “climbing wraithlike from its dreaming breakwater” acquires a certain resonance for visitors to the city’s Common Burying Ground. Within the overgrown confines of this place, which served as the secular municipal cemetery for three centuries, a deeply-rutted dirt road divides the main burial ground from its northernmost corner (Figure 1). The monuments north of the road are smaller than those in the other parts of the burying ground, and the arrangement less linear than the neat rows stretching to the south. Even the names of the dead—Pompey, Subiner, Nero—are strikingly different from the English names surrounding them, for this northern corner has been the burying place of Newport’s African-American community since the 18th century, when the slave ships of Lopez and Rivera moored along Bannister’s Wharf, and when Africans in chains were considered merchandise at the city’s Brick Market.

In The Souls of Black Folk, W. E. B. Du Bois (1990[1903]:8) wrote that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea . . .” Du Bois contended that to live with this color line was to experience a dual consciousness:

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world (Du Bois 1990[1903]:8).

Scholars have quoted and requoted these passages to the point where they have come to symbolize all of Du Bois’s work. Yet while archaeologists have studied African-American sites in the Northeast for almost 20 years (Deetz 1977; Baker 1978; Schuyler 1980), they have only recently turned their attention to Du Bois’s problem of the color line, and the extent to which it has been negotiated and contested through time and space (Paynter 1990; Bower 1991; Hautениemi 1992; Muller 1992). This paper explores the color line’s relevance for historical archaeologists, particularly for those working on what are loosely termed “African-American” sites. From such a perspective, questions of what particular characteristics constitute “Euroamerican” or “African-American” identities assume less significance than questions concerning the dialectical relationship between these two groups. This dialectic, which has material as well as social, political, and economic correlates, is what Du Bois meant by the color line.

The objects studied here are part of the material culture of death—that is, the visible, above-ground artifacts associated with mortuary activities, like funerary monuments and cemetery landscapes. Artifacts usually recovered through excavation, like coffin hardware (Bell 1990; Little et al. 1992), are not part of this study. Building on a previous analysis of the Common Burying Ground (Tashijan...
Johnsen and Olsen (1992) note that one of Hodder’s professed aims has been to understand the decision-making processes of people who actively create material culture. Conversely, historical archaeologists have paid relatively little attention to the readers of material culture texts, and the diversity of messages readers take away from their encounters with objects or landscapes in the visible world.

Social theorists have long argued that people view the world from a range of subject positions—wealthy and poor, female and male, African-American and Euroamerican, to cite just a few examples. Sometimes the same individual experiences life from several different subject positions, depending on the situation. Determining the range of these subject positions offers insight into the past, especially when the archaeologist also incorporates the social and historical conditions of material culture production into the interpretation. Reception theory, a form of hermeneutics articulated by Wolfgang Iser (1978), offers a way to attempt this project.

While a comprehensive review of the origins and development of hermeneutic theory is outside the scope of this paper, it is necessary to trace briefly its origins to provide a context for understanding Iser’s ideas. Derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, “to interpret,” hermeneutic theory is used in many disciplines ranging from literary criticism to anthropology (cf. Crapanzano 1992). In tracing the theory’s development, Johnsen and Olsen (1992:421) point to the significance of Johann Gustav Droysen, a 19th-century German philosopher. Droysen delineated the difference between approaches of *Verstehen*, understanding, and *Erklärung*, explanation, ascribing them to the social and natural sciences, respectively. In its boldest Romantic manifestation, hermeneutic theory represented the empathy of the humanist historian with the thoughts of people in the past. By putting one’s self in the position of historical fig-

**FIGURE 1.** View northeast of the African-American section of the Common Burying Ground. Note the road in the foreground dividing the Euroamerican cemetery from the wedge-shaped corner in which African Americans and others perceived as “outsiders” were interred.

Material Culture, Reception Theory, and Hermeneutics

Post-processual attempts to interpret material culture as texts have become increasingly visible in archaeology within the last five years (e.g., Shanks and Tilley 1987, 1992; Tilley 1990; Beaudry et al. 1991; Little 1992a). Most efforts have aimed at understanding the writers of material culture texts and their cultural-historical contexts. In a recent analysis of Ian Hodder’s theoretical positionings,
ures, one could project back to learn why people responded as they did to specific circumstances. Such an approach is not without some rather obvious limitations. As others have pointed out (Barrett 1987), attempting to recover intentionality is idealistic, especially because life rarely unfolds in the way humans intend it to unfold.

In the mid-20th century Hans-Georg Gadamer developed a more explicitly self-reflexive brand of hermeneutics, one in which the dialectic between the past and the present provides the stimulus for understanding (Gadamer 1975): “enriched self-knowledge,” writes Terry Eagleton (1983:79), “springs from an encounter with the unfamiliar.” The relevance of Gadamer’s hermeneutics for archaeology is seen as threefold (Johnsen and Olsen 1992): first, hermeneutics moves the act of interpretation explicitly into the present; second, archaeologists can therefore learn something about themselves by interpreting the past; and finally, this critical perspective develops theoretical debate in archaeology.

Writing from a perspective grounded in the work of Gadamer and Anthony Giddens, Shanks and Tilley (1992:110) have argued that archaeology is hermeneutics, based on “a dialectical approach to the past.” They are especially adamant about opening up dialogues between the past and the present, noting that “the task of a philosophy of archaeology should be to offer potentialities rather than to foreclose them” (Shanks and Tilley 1992:114).

Although descended from trends in literary theory, rather than philosophy, reception theory is similarly concerned with the “interplay between text and reader” (Iser 1978:107), an interesting parallel with the reflexive interplay between the interpreter and interpreted. Eagleton describes the theory’s relatively late appearance as ironic, compared with previous movements aimed at the author and the text itself, respectively:

The reader has always been the most underprivileged of this trio—strangely, since without him or her there would be no literary texts at all. Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the practice of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author (Eagleton 1983:74).

Iser describes a “reading process” in which a reader encounters a text, an event that generates recall and reassessment of one’s surroundings:

This feature of the reading process is of great significance for the compilation of the aesthetic object. As the reader’s conscious mind is activated by the textual stimulus . . . the unit of meaning is linked to the new reading moment in which the wandering viewpoint is now situated (Iser 1978:117).

The “new reading moment”—the encounter between the reader and the text—is the focus of this paper, although elements of Gadamer’s hermeneutics will be used to develop a reflexive perspective on the practice of archaeology. Understanding the ranges of subject positions from which readers experience texts—conscious or unconscious, intentional or not—is the first step in understanding the dialectical nature of the color line in the material world. And understanding the color line in the past entails understanding its manifestations in the present. The ultimate positioning of the historical archaeologist in a dialectic with the past, an approach advocated by Shanks and Tilley (1992), is seen as a necessary further step, particularly in the charged sociopolitical context of African-American archaeology.

Pre-Revolutionary Newport (1720-1770): Euroamerican Paternalism and African-American Markers

African-American slavery in New England is a topic that has been downplayed or sanitized in most secondary histories of the region. “The New Englanders, at the worst, were not hard task-masters,” writes Mason (1884:104) in his Reminiscences of Newport, “and it is well known that, as a general thing, they took a lively interest in the welfare of their dependents.”

Newport, favored with a deep, protected harbor and its situation on Narragansett Bay, was settled as a trading port in 1639–1640. Surprisingly, the city’s complex history as an imperial entrepôt has attracted relatively little attention from historical archaeologists (Mrozowski 1981; Schmidt and Mrozowski 1989). Throughout the 18th century
Newport’s merchants extended their trade networks toward first the West Indies and then Africa, a phenomenon well-chronicled by social and maritime historians (Chyet 1970). The success of Newport’s mercantile efforts would ultimately lead to increased attention from British authorities, and an eventual crackdown on smuggling in the decade prior to the outbreak of the American Revolution (Schmidt and Mrozowski 1989).

Newport’s first slaving expedition took place in 1649, when William Withington hired the vessel Beginnings for a West Indian venture, although debate exists as to whether the ship returned to Newport with slaves (Bridenbaugh 1976[1974]:24–25). Crane (1985:17) cites 1723 as “the year in which [Newport’s merchants] became irrevocably committed to the slave trade,” since that was the year Rhode Island traders began shipping their home-distilled rum directly to the west coast of Africa.

The social characteristics of slavery in a northern entrepôt like Newport have yet to be adequately resolved. The census of 1774 lists 1,084 African slaves (some of whom actually may have been Native Americans) out of a total city population of 9,209 (Rhode Island State Archives [RISA] 1774). The same document lists 311 white families with one or more slaves co-residing; relatively few white families (n=32) are shown as co-residing with more than five slaves. With the additional presence of free African Americans and Native Americans in various degrees of freedom and enslavement, urban Newport must have been a place where the color line was a part of daily life.

What were the attitudes of white Newporters toward African Americans in the context of their daily life, where material constraints forced a sharing of physical space? On her 1704 journey through New England, Madam Sarah Kemble Knight recorded her disgust at finding African Americans and Euroamericans sharing the same dinner table in nearby eastern Connecticut:

> But too Indulgent (especially ye farmers) to their slaves: suffering too great familiarity from them, permitting them to sit at Table and eat with them, (as they say to save time,) and into the dish goes the black hoof as freely as the white hand (Knight 1935[1825]:37–38).

A recent study of room-by-room probate inventories from nearby Portsmouth, Rhode Island, from 1640 through 1762 reveals that both African-American and Native American slaves lived within the houses of their masters, usually in a garret or a cellar (Garman [1994]). Unlike Southern masters, whose slaves dwelt in cabins as autonomous family units, Rhode Island masters forced slaves inside the main house. While some writers have taken this circumstance as a symbol of a kinder, gentler Northern slavery (Mason 1884:104), the degree of surveillance, supervision, and spatial control by masters probably actually increased when slaves were brought together with Euroamerican families, resulting in heightened tensions over the use of domestic space.

An important aspect of surveillance was religious instruction, although Newport’s clergy rarely admitted that even their most earnest efforts to gain African-American converts were of any success. An exception was the Reverend Ezra Stiles who, bemoaning the lack of African Americans in his congregation, enthusiastically held meetings at his own home on Sabbath evenings:

> As far as Stiles and other white Newporters were concerned, African Americans needed to be watched over constantly during their coerced acculturation to Euroamerican life. This supervision took place in all arenas of life: in homes, in workplaces, and especially, as Piersen (1988) has shown, in Euroamerican churches.

The cultural landscape of the city’s Common Burying Ground was a visible material reminder of Euroamerican control of ritual space. The graves of African Americans lie scattered north of the main burying ground, an arrangement not without precedent in 18th-century New England; Greene (1966[1942]:284) notes that a 1714 petition by Boston’s grave diggers asked the government to
appoint a place to bury "strangers and Negroes." The earliest surviving marker for an African-American in Newport, the monument for Hector (Figure 2), lies so far to the north and west of Euroamerican graves that it represented a remote and isolated point when it was placed in 1720 (Connelly 1973). Although Euroamericans shared living space with African Americans, they seem to have objected strongly to sharing the space of death, perhaps because of the permanent nature of the latter state (Pierson 1988; Garman 1992).

The marker for Hector is worth examining in greater detail (Figure 3). John Stevens I, the patriarch of a well-documented family of stone cutters, apparently carved the gravestone in the year 1720 shown on the epitaph. The text relates Hector directly to his mistress "Mrs. Ann Butcher of Barbadoes." What is immediately striking about the stone is its blankness, its utter lack of detail within both the lunette and the finials. Possibly the stone represents a limited or tentative economic commitment to memorializing a slave; alternatively, the blankness may also imply an absent soul, or as an anonymous reviewer of an early draft of this article wrote, "doubt about the slave's fate after death." Since no other stones for African Americans are as undecorated as this one, an argument about limited investment seems more appropriate than one concerning general attitudes of Euroamericans toward slaves.

FIGURE 2. Grave marker for Hector, "late Servant to Mrs. Ann Butcher of Barbadoes," 1720, Newport, Rhode Island. This marker was probably cut by John Stevens I, and is distinguished from other gravestones by its comparative lack of detail.
Certainly other white New Englanders thought that slaves were capable of attaining Christian salvation, expressing this belief by commemorating African Americans with gravestones (Bell 1991). Mann and Greene (1962:26) list several epitaphs memorializing "good and faithful servants," including this 1780 example from North Attleboro, Massachusetts:

Here lies the best of slaves
Now turning into dust
Caesar the Ethiopian craves
A place among the Just.
His faithful soul is fled
To realms of heavenly light,
And by the blood that Jesus shed
Is changed from Black to White.

Mann and Greene (1962:37) also cite the epitaph of Amos Fortune, found in Jaffrey, New Hampshire:

Sacred to the Memory of Amos Fortune
who was born free in Africa
a slave in America, he purchased
liberty, professed Christianity,
lived reputedly, died hopefully.
Nov. 17 1801 AEt. 91

Both the form and narrative content of the African-American material culture of death in Newport are strikingly different from forms and contents documented in other areas of the United States. In Texas Graveyards, for example, Jordan (1982) includes a photograph of wooden grave markers shaped into stylized human figures by African-American artisans. "The human effigy shape may be of African origin," he writes, "since it appears, generally in wood, among blacks in Texas, Georgia, and perhaps elsewhere in the South" (Jordan 1982:45). Jordan (1982:17) and Vlach (1978, 1991) cite other African-derived forms of Southern burial ritual, including shell decoration of graves, scraped earth in burying grounds, and broken pottery scattered on burial mounds.

Archaeological studies of African-American cemeteries in the Northeast have found similar evidence of burial practices derived from Africa. In a discussion of the burials from the 10th and Vine Street First African Baptist Church (FABC) cemetery in Philadelphia, McCarthy (1990:4) ascribes the placement of shoes on coffin lids as a material representation of the journey home to Africa. Interestingly, excavations by John Milner Associates at the two FABC cemeteries did not recover any evidence of headstones or footstones; Parrington and Wideman (1986) note that any burial practices described as African at the Eighth and Vine Street FABC were within the graves, not at the surface of the grave sites; the same was true at the 10th and Vine Street FABC cemetery (McCarthy 1990).

In Newport, where no African-American burials have actually been excavated, one is struck by the dominance of Euroamerican form and narrative content in the headstones and footstones that have survived. The tendency is not surprising when one considers who was doing the actual ordering and purchasing of the grave markers. Possibly Newport’s African-American community practiced rituals of commemoration, such as outlining grave mounds with shells, that would only be recoverable through archaeological excavation of the burying ground.

The actions of the masters in staking out and monitoring the landscape of death rendered these rituals invisible to the viewer. Euro-americans interred African Americans in plots generally arranged by masters, while their own burying
grounds remained arranged in family plots. An example is the double marker for Mille and Katharine, two slaves of Henry Bull, Esq. (Figure 4). Although the two women died a year apart, Bull chose to commemorate them thriftily on a single stone, mentioning his own name on both epitaphs. Husbands and wives lie in separate plots established by their different masters, underscoring that, in the eyes of Euroamericans, an African American’s most important connection was to the master, not to any blood relations. The stone commemorating Cato, for example, lists not only Cato’s current master in the epitaph text but also the one who preceded him (Figure 5), and that for Dinah Tweedy includes her husband’s master as well as her own (Figure 6).

The contradiction between Madam Knight’s observations about shared space at the table and the archaeological evidence of segregation in the burying ground can be resolved by considering white paternalism (Kruger-Kahloula 1989). This paternalism is the logical extension of the Christianizing rationalization offered by white elites for enslaving Africans. Mason, for example, cites an unidentified Newport minister who always returned thanks on the Sunday following the arrival of a slaver in Newport ‘that an overwhelming Providence has been brought to this land of freedom another cargo of benighted heathen to enjoy a gospel dispensation’ (Mason 1884:104).

The gravestones support the notion of whites treating African Americans as naive beings requir-
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FIGURE 5. The marker for Cato (1763) lists not one but two of his masters, underscoring the point that for white Newporters, Cato and other African Americans existed only in relation to their owners.

ing instruction in the ways of Euroamerican culture. A comparison of markers for African Americans with markers for whites reveals overlap in the surface area for African-American gravestones and the surface area of those cut for Euroamerican children (Figure 7). To term this finding the conscious artifact of planned activities by crafts workers would be problematic. One may argue that the size hierarchy is clear, whether or not direct comparison to children is intended.

Other evidence for paternalism comes directly from the epitaph texts of African-American gravestones. Epitaphs containing both testaments to the virtues of deceased slaves and the identities of their masters are seen most often in the period 1720–1770. These expressions, exemplified in the marker for Edward Collins (Figures 8, 9), border on the formulaic: “Faithful and loyal servant,” “Well-beloved of his Master,” and “A Faithful servant for more than Forty years.” Furthermore, they echo ironically the words of Jesus Christ in the parable of the talents (Matthew XXV:21): “His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faith-

FIGURE 6. An unusual variant on the epitaph is that for Dinah Tweedy (1762), listing the names of her own master, her husband, and her husband’s master.

FIGURE 7. Cross-cultural comparison of gravestone surface area during the pre-Revolutionary period, 1720–1770, reveals overlap between markers for African Americans and markers for white children, a tendency reflecting Euroamerican paternalism.
FIGURE 8. Formulaic expressions of masterly affection abound in the pre-Revolutionary period. This marker, cut by John Stevens II of Newport, was commissioned by merchant Henry Collins of Newport.

FIGURE 9. Detail of epitaph for Edward Collins (1738/9).

sentiments are perhaps not as significant as the more subtle function of visually linking the bodies of slaves in the burying ground with the masters who survived them.

Who would have read these messages of ownership? And what ranges of understanding, or Verstehen, would have resulted from those acts of reading? Kruger-Kahloula (1989) has argued that masters selected epitaphs that projected ideals of how slaves ought to behave. Her argument can be carried further, with emphasis on the others who would have read the texts. Newport's elite, who controlled both the creation of material culture and the surrounding landscape, were struggling to justify their power over at least three different communities: over living African Americans (Kruger-Kahloula 1989); over whites of lower economic and social standing; and over each other, in a material dialogue similar to that seen in the formal gardens of Maryland's elite families (Leone 1984).

These three different levels of experience are worth examining in detail. One would have spoken to an audience of living African Americans, who may have read the epitaphs as warnings from their masters. White elites controlled the boundaries of space in death as they did in life; furthermore, those slaves who were faithful and virtuous, and who served virtuous masters, would be reunited with their masters in death, a sentiment many African Americans may have found somewhat less than reassuring (Piersen 1988; Kruger-Kahloula 1989). A second communication may have been experienced by white Newporters of lower status than the masters: not only could elite families afford slaves, they could also commemorate them with expensive and permanent gravestones. This reading would have forced whites to grasp the material extent of the elites' social and economic power.

The final communication is one of shared prestige among masters. One of the ways that elite families maintain their standing within their communities is through patterns of conspicuous material consumption (St. George 1985; Sweeney 1985). Given the relatively small number of surviving gravestones for Newport's large African-American population, burial in temporarily-
marked or unmarked graves was certainly more common than commemoration with permanent stone markers. The act of placing a gravestone from the John Stevens Shop may have been read by other masters with approval. Alternatively, masters may have made the implied connection that loyal and virtuous slaves can only belong to a master who is himself loyal and virtuous; these monuments, then, attest to that masterly "virtue" in the visible world.

Revolution and Emancipation (1770–1800): Expressions of Crisis in the Common Burying Ground

Changes in the pre-Revolutionary meanings of Newport’s material culture of death were engendered by twin crises in the city’s social structure: the erosion of slavery as a mode of production, and the occupation of Newport by British and Hessian troops from 1776 until 1779. Among the numerous effects of these crises was an alteration in the relationships between gravestone carvers and their clientele, an alteration that is perhaps most usefully studied through a group of three markers carved by John Stevens III.

The marker for Dinah Wanton Wigneron is representative of this group of three, which includes monuments for Violet Hammond and Pompey Brenton. The high-quality slate used in Wigneron’s marker is indicative of significant investment on the part of the consumer, while the use of modillion blocks as a visual frame for the epitaph evokes the changing architectural order of the day (Figure 10). The bold signature “Cut by John Stevens, junior” across the bottom of this frame (Figure 11) reflects both pleased self-appraisal and a shrewd sense of promotion on the part of the artist (Tashijan and Tashijan 1974). Unlike most of the ready-made stones of the pre-Revolutionary period, all three of the 1772 markers were expensive and specific to the individuals they commemorate, especially the well-known “portrait” of Pompey Brenton (Figure 12).

One reading for the group of stones is that other consumers of gravestones would have realized the cost of these markers and made the correlation that the masters of Dinah, Pompey, and Violet held them in particular esteem (Franklin 1913; Battle 1932; Howe 1959). Yet 18th-century readers would only have experienced a similar message if they too equated expenditure with esteem, a problematic assumption when considering the mortuary activities of any time period (Parker Pearson 1982).

A second interpretation sees the 1772 markers as objects of conspicuous consumption by elites demonstrating their wealth, rather than their affection for their slaves. Such expenditures would have been significant during the period prior to the Revolution because of Newport's uneasy economic status in the world system. Tariffs imposed by Brit-
ish authorities, including the Molasses, Sugar, and Hovering Acts, had interfered with the city's trade, resulting in a dramatic increase in smuggling and rebellion:

Tensions grew between 1763 and 1776, reaching their peak with the burning of H.M.S. Gaspee on June 10, 1773 [sic], in Narragansett Bay. The Gaspee, significantly, had been harassing the smugglers of Narragansett Bay; in the group that burned her were prominent merchants (Schmidt and Mrozowski 1989:36).

If Doctor Wigneron, Captain Hammond or former Governor Brenton had surplus resources on which to draw, it seems unlikely that they would have chosen to spend them in a flagrant display of wealth, unless there were conscious motivations to the act of display. These motivations did exist, and are found in the maintenance of power, which often underlies conspicuous consumption by elites during crisis periods (St. George 1985; Sweeney 1985). The three 1772 markers could represent an effort by the elite to assert their control of the city's strategic resources in the face of a faltering economy.

No active conspiracy to manipulate the material culture of death existed during this period, but after the arrival of the 1772 markers in the Common Burying Ground, several other, similarly-expensive gravestones appeared beside them in the burying ground. The marker for Portsmouth is interesting in this regard because it was cut in 1772 by John Bull, rival of John Stevens III (Figure 13). That Bull was also carving equally elaborate, and costly, stones for African Americans at this time argues that the statements of power originated with the consumers of material culture, and not the carvers who executed the work. Free African Americans, slaves, and Euroamericans of lower status would all have read the 1772 markers as texts delineating the elites' emphatic claim as the controllers of secular and sacred landscapes.

A final point worthy of consideration in the Revolutionary War era is the increasing separation of material culture by gender, rather than ethnicity. As Figure 14 shows clearly, the tendency is for the surface area of gravestones for white adult males to form a category unto themselves. This tendency foreshadows later analyses of patriarchy in the cemeteries of upstate New York (Roveland 1983; McGuire 1988), and continues in the final period considered in this study.

Post-Revolutionary Newport (1800–1830): The Triumph of Industrial Capital Over Artisanry

The disruption of Newport's commerce and the occupation of the city by foreign troops had a devastating effect on the local maritime economy. In a speech made on the eve of the American Centennial, a local antiquarian described these depredations from the perspective of 100 years:

Hundreds of buildings had been destroyed, the vessels and wharves had gone to decay altogether. . . . The forests and groves of native trees had been cut down, the farm fences had been wasted, farm stock had been consumed . . . schools
broken up, churches scattered, houses deserted, buildings out of repair, and ruin was stamped on everything which eight years before was alive with prosperity (Sheffield 1876:45).

After peace had been established, Newport’s merchants attempted to rebuild the city’s maritime economy through trade with Asian ports, but the leveling of the infrastructure rendered them unable to compete with their Massachusetts counterparts in Salem or Boston. By 1800 most efforts to recover from the vicissitudes of revolution and occupation had failed. Rhode Island’s shift from merchant to industrial capitalism was moving jobs and industries inland, and as new mills appeared along the Blackstone and Providence rivers, Newport’s wharves rotted and crumbled from inactivity.

The process of emancipation in Rhode Island was painfully slow and protracted. Court records indicate that at least some African Americans were free from the 17th century on, but their activities and participation in Newport’s economies are not yet understood. An act of the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1774 ended the importation of slaves into the colony, but as McLoughlin (1986[1978]:106) points out, the law contained a clever proviso: slave traders caught in a poor market were permitted to retain slaves for up to a year, or until they were able to sell at a profit. Even the Assembly’s half-hearted decision to ban slavery in 1784 only provided freedom for children born after 1 March of that year. The resulting confusion initially fragmented African Americans into divisions of free and enslaved persons with varying degrees of legal status; often these divisions occurred within families, as masters obstinately refused to release African Americans from bondage.
FIGURE 13. Grave marker for Portsmouth "Servt. of Mr. DAVID CHESEBROUGH for more than Forty Years" (1772). Stonecutter John Bull's epitaph echoes an identification of slave with master much more common in the first half of the 18th century.

African-American Children
African-American Women
African-American Men
Euro-American Children
Euro-American Women
Euro-American Men

Average Surface Area (sq. in.)

FIGURE 14. During the Revolutionary War era, 1770-1800, the surface area of gravestones for white adult males began to form a distinct category, foreshadowing material expressions of patriarchy in 19th-century cemeteries (McGuire 1988).

African Americans were hardly powerless in the face of Euroamerican racism. Gutman (1976) has shown that Southern African Americans were able to maintain their family structure despite the pressures of overwhelmingly white society. Another response, available only to men, was to form benevolent societies, or fraternal groups that may have served as grassroots political organizations. Newport's African Union Society, one of the earliest benevolent societies in the United States, was founded in 1780. "The organization sought to record births, deaths, and marriages among Newport's blacks," write Gaines and Parkhurst (1992: 15), and "it was also concerned with the moral and religious condition of Newport's black community, and its members also went on record to oppose slavery." Death and burial also formed important aspects of the African Union Society, whose leadership issued decrees in 1790 and 1794 regulating the behavior and dress of its members at funerals (Robinson 1976).

The support networks of African-American benevolent societies did not survive long. By the late 1790s, the African Union Society crumbled under the external pressures of racism and the internal pressures of political infighting. McLoughlin describes the position of post-emancipation African Americans in Rhode Island succinctly:

While most black Rhode Islanders were free after 1807, they remained the victims of prejudice and oppression in every sphere of life. They were segregated in the churches, kept out of the public schools, denied employment in the textile mills, and finally, in 1822, denied the right to vote (McLoughlin 1986[1978]:107-108).

Newport's political climate was not appreciably better for African Americans than that in other cities in Rhode Island, as competition for jobs in a depressed economy engendered a populist racism, the effects of which are seen in the Common Burying Ground.

The characteristics of the material culture of death and the readings they inspire point toward some of the underlying tensions during this time. Unlike monuments from the other periods, markers in the last sample are only identifiable as belonging to African Americans because of their location in the corner of the graveyard. Although the gravestones may have appeared similar to those of Euroamericans, the landscape of the burying ground
still divided African Americans from whites. The color line did not disappear with emancipation; indeed, its effects were felt more keenly as contests between two groups of free people took shape in the material world.

This sharply-drawn and differently-constituted racism is evident in the 19th and perhaps even into the 20th century as African-American burials continued to be segregated at the north end of the burying ground. Despite varying degrees of integration in Newport's ecclesiastical cemeteries, markers for African Americans are not visible in other, white, sections of the secular Common Burying Ground.

Changes are apparent, however, in the African-American material culture of death in this time period. Although epitaphs are lengthier than they were previously, they rarely mention ethnicity. The two exceptions are the markers commemorating Dutchess (sic) Quamino (1804) and Dinah Neptune (ca. 1805), both of which include striking racially-grounded epitaphs memorializing the women. The marker for Dutchess Quamino is particularly effusive in its praise for the deceased, describing her as "a free black of distinguished excellence: intelligent, industrious, affectionate, honest, and of exemplary Piety."

In an examination of African-American pauper records in Providence, Rhode Island, Coughtry and Coughtry (1985:111) noticed a similar phrase commonly used as a descriptive epithet. During the period 1804 through 1832, they found African Americans "invariably described as 'respectable' men and women 'of color'."

The tendency for a shrinking disparity in size between gravestones of African-American men and women and gravestones of Euroamerican women continued until little difference remained between the three types of markers (Figure 15). Erosion of size difference was related to the industrial production of markers, a trend that began in the 1820s and continues to the present day. The material culture of death became more restricted, with fewer choices available for all consumers as the idiosyncrasies of individual carvers disappeared. Moreover, the tendency of markers for Euroamerican men to form a separate and distinct category, first noticed in the Revolutionary period, continued to accelerate after the turn of the 19th century.

Even if market choices constrained African Americans from choosing a material culture of death containing iconographic expressions of ethnicity, consumers might still have marked their ethnicity in other ways. For example, they might have retained control over the epitaph and expressly ordered a text that referred to their African-American heritage (Quarles 1973[1961]; Kaplan and Kaplan 1988). Yet they chose not to select epitaphs recalling either Africa or their newly-won freedom.

How would different audiences have read this increasing homogeneity and uniformity in the material culture of death? By 1800–1830, both the actors and audiences for the performance of funerary ritual would have been exclusively African American. Euroamericans would have found little reason to enter the northern corner of the Common Burying Ground; indeed, the story of Mintus, Newport's "last colored undertaker" (Mason 1884:104–108) serves as a pertinent reminder of this separation. The patronizing description of the funeral ceremony is telling:
It took Mintus some time to organize a funeral; but when everything was ready, he gave the signal to move, by walking ahead of the hearse . . . then he turned his head, and, jerking his thumb over his shoulder, exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, "Come along with that corpse!" (Mason 1884: 106-107).

Everything about Mintus—his clothing, his bearing, his actions in leading the funeral—is seen through white eyes as a heathenish ritual, one that is less directly threatening but worthy of contempt. If whites ridiculed African-American death rituals, how did African-American audiences view the masking of ethnicity in the landscape of the cemetery?

One interpretation uses assimilation to understand the erosion of difference. Those who were paying for grave markers may have wished to emphasize their families’ participation in the culture of the new republic, forcing readers of epitaphs to admit that they, too, were part of this culture. Just as there are no ostensible differences in death, there should be no such differences in life—a hopeful message that later events would prove overly optimistic.

Alternatively, African Americans might have seen the presentation of "public selves" as an effort to legitimize their own identities in post-emancipation New England. These consumers of gravestones did see white Newporters as part of their audience, and they hoped to confront all readers with a realization of the equality of African Americans. African-American readers might have understood this message as an injunction to stand up for treatment as equals, and not to allow Euro-Americans to create racial differences, even in the arena of the commemoration of death.

A third message may have been one of fear, a fear that riots in nearby Providence during the 1820s would certainly have justified. Possibly African Americans saw their counterparts’ epitaphs as conscious efforts to avoid representation as African Americans, although the location of those texts in the corner of the burying ground would have rendered such efforts relatively powerless. African American readers of these texts would have experienced the sensibility that calling attention to one’s self could bring down retribution, especially for African Americans living in an overwhelmingly white society.

These three readings dramatically underscore the complexity of the color line dividing African Americans and whites while pointing to some of the tensions generated over the legal identity and status of African Americans in society. Many of the messages of interpretation emerge from these tensions, even into the present. One ought not to point specifically to changes in production or to attitudes of assimilation, confrontation, or fear to find the one reason why the masking of ethnicity occurred; all of these factors were operating simultaneously in Newport during the period 1800-1830. The major difference in grave markers between this period and the ones that preceded it were the audiences for the texts; this last period was one in which African Americans spoke directly to other African Americans. White Americans were neither the writers nor the readers of the material culture of death, although African Americans may have directed messages of confrontation or demands to be recognized directly at them.

African Americans found few responses to their protestations of equality. The frustration engendered by the lack of reaction, or the reaction of outright racism, was most poignantly expressed by Occramer Marycoo, who had been brought to Newport from Africa in 1760. At that time, according to Mason (1884:154), "he was still a savage and unable to speak other than the language of his tribe." Marycoo, whose captors gave him the name Newport Gardner, organized the Colored Union Church and Society. In 1825, at the age of 80, Marycoo finally gained sufficient means to return to Africa. At his departure, Marycoo said:

I go to set an example to the youth of my race; I go to encourage the young. They can never be elevated here; I have tried it for sixty years—it is in vain (Mason 1884:159).

The archaeological evidence from the Common Burying Ground suggests that at the time of Marycoo’s embarkation, African Americans were engaged in a wide range of what might be termed resistive responses to whites. The masking of ethnic difference in the material culture of death was one way of attempting to legitimize identity, and to
force fellow African Americans and Euroamericans alike to live up to the promises of the Revolution.

Discussion: Viewing the Color Line Through the Material Culture of Death

For any time period in the history of Newport, the material culture of death has multiple interpretations for readers of the gravestones and the burying ground landscape. Although the physical separation of burying places for Euroamericans and African Americans remained fixed in space, the messages carried by the texts generated a wide range of meanings for those who stopped to read them. Understanding these ranges of meanings provides historical archaeologists with an entry into the dynamics of the color line in coastal New England, and how African-American ethnicity shaped the context of daily life for both black and white residents of Newport, Rhode Island.

The interpretation of the material culture of death in Newport provided in this paper presents immediate questions for further research directed at developing the specific historical issues raised in this paper. Some questions are site-specific to the folklore and traditions of the Common Burying Ground. For example, to what extent were enslaved or free African Americans carving markers in the John Stevens Shop (Tashijan and Tashijan 1988)? Although Pompe (sic) Stevens, a slave working in the shop, signed a 1768 marker for Cuffe Gibbs, the extent to which African Americans were actually carving remains a tantalizing question worthy of investigation.

Other questions to pursue concern the ability of the diverse audiences of material culture to understand sentiments directed toward them. A study of comparative literacy in colonial Newport would reveal to what extent readers were able to read and experience fully the messages in the material culture of death. Still other questions, including the complicated changing legal status of African Americans in Rhode Island, require more extensive research into the documentary record. Finally, the demographic information contained in the markers offers extraordinary insight into mortality and kinship patterns of a Northern African-American community.

The results of these research efforts will ultimately lead historians and archaeologists alike to construct histories of Newport that are more inclusive of the city’s African-American community than those that have been constructed to date. Tashijan and Tashijan close their analysis of the Common Burying Ground on a similarly hopeful note:

In the final analysis, it is the existence of these gravestones in conjunction with external documentation that might eventually lead to a reconstruction of black community life in Newport . . . these gravestones call for a recognition of the textures and sensibilities of black communal life in eighteenth-century Newport (Tashijan and Tashijan 1988:190).

The use of hermeneutic theory to shed light on the color line raises a larger question of archaeological theory: How do efforts to understand the dialectic of the color line translate into the practice of historical archaeology? The implications of using Iser’s (1978) focus on the readers of texts to construct archaeologies of the color line are significant, given the growing interest in a series of loosely-related topics lumped under the rubric “African-American archaeology,” a phenomenon that eludes even the best efforts to define it (Singleton 1991).

With relatively few exceptions, the focus of African-American archaeology has centered on the experience of plantation slaves in the Caribbean and the American South. At the 1992 Society for Historical Archaeology Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology in Jamaica, for example, at least 100 papers could be classified as at least partially addressing African-American archaeology. Sixty-one of those papers dealt explicitly with plantation slavery, while only 17 considered free African Americans. (The remaining 22 papers fell into categories of overviews, artistic motifs, and theoretical discussions.) Of the 17 papers addressing the lives of free African Americans, only four were concerned with New England or the Northeast. The message is disturbing: for historical archaeologists, African Americans often
exist principally as plantation slaves in the South or the Caribbean.

The intent here is emphatically not to dismiss studies of plantation slavery as irrelevant or meaningless. It must be acknowledged, however, that an archaeology that studies African-American experiences only through this particular mode of production is not addressing the range of variation, since, as Little (1992b) has shown, it effectively ignores the larger issue of the development of the world capitalist system in generating "the cultural, historical, social, and political processes that affected African Americans" (Singleton 1991:1).

The increase in attention toward defining African-American ethnicity through concepts like "plantation" has roused critics like Potter (1991), who argue that if historical archaeologists incorporated more reflexivity in their analyses, they would not be lulled into interpretations that gloss over the day-to-day realities of the color line. Similarly, Gaines and Parkhurst, in examining the historical records of Newport, conclude that the very act of trying to define an African-American community leads the researcher into troubling questions with ramifications in the present:

Not only has the Newport African-American community's history received little attention, it is not even clear who that community is. . . . Furthermore, the color line has never been hard-and-fast: definitions of who is black vary considerably over time and by context. Our situation is in some ways comparable to that of a historian who sets out to study child labor and finds that some sources include 16-year-olds [sic] in statistics on children, others consider anyone 12 or older an adult, and many do not specify their definition (Gaines and Parkhurst 1992:2).

No reasonable person would deny that the increasing attention to African Americans in both the historical and archaeological records is a significant step toward interpretations of the past that are more inclusive than ones that have preceded them. Yet Potter's warnings about the dangers of objectifying African Americans have become increasingly appropriate. If the extensive publicity surrounding the discovery of Manhattan's "African Burial Ground" (Harrington 1993) has taught historical archaeologists a lesson, it is that the social and political realities of African-American archaeologies entail not only dialogue, but proactive partnerships with the living descendants of the people they purport to study.

By shifting the focus of African-American archaeology toward an archaeology of contests over the color line, researchers might begin to see a more holistic picture of those contests, one that does not reduce African Americans to a collection of material traits with links to Africa. No one wrote more expressively about these contests than Du Bois, who believed that the challenge facing African-Americans was to merge the African and American aspects of their consciousness, to suppress the inherent feeling of "two-ness":

In this merging, he [the African American] wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes . . . for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows (Du Bois 1990[1903]:9).

Paynter (1990) has argued that if archaeologists want to know what it was like to live in Massachusetts during the last 300 years, they need to understand the experiences of both African Americans and Euroamericans. Forms of reader-response theory might offer a promising entry point into discussions concerning the color line identified by Du Bois. By rediscovering the readers of material culture, historical archaeologists will gain insight not only into the construction of race in the United States, but also into the associated tensions that survive today.

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