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Cheers of Protest? The Public, the Post, and the Parable of Learning

ABSTRACT

In 1994, the Washington Post decried the appointment of a white archaeologist to excavate an African-American site in Charlottesville, Virginia. Considerable discussion resulted: in the media, in the Smithsonian’s African American Archaeology Newsletter, and at conferences. Charlottesville held a similar debate between the public and the academy. What story was to be told? Who would tell the story? Would it get told at all? Both debates are embedded in historic and modern relationships of race and class. By the nature of our work, many historical archaeologists are forced to enter these debates or walk away from them. These issues, then become fundamental to involving and exciting the public about what we do. This paper explores the nature of the Charlottesville debate, suggesting that archaeology can be a meaningful form of activism, provided that it yields to the needs of the public it hopes to engage.

Introduction

This paper suggests that the responsibility of public archaeology and education involves being accountable for the ways we describe and talk about our sites. Whether we like it or not, archaeologists are cast as authorities, and our public still expects us to tell them “how it was.” I suggest here that at Venable Lane, an African-American site in central Virginia, our relationship with the local public suffered initially, not only because we were white—the reason widely given by the press—but because we were not immediately thoughtful about the meaning that the label “African American” meant to that public. In our disciplinary haste to give voice to the “inarticulate,” we have also sometimes succeeded in marginalizing them even more than their historic identities might suggest. Simply put, our current perception of the ways in which categories of race, ethnicity, or religion marginalize identities often becomes the structure of our research. In turn, we set about to confirm this marginalization by couching our interpretations in terms of “resistance” and “survival.” This paper discusses the process of one such confirmation as it occurred on a 19th-century site in Charlottesville, Virginia. I examine the impact of preexcavation assumptions about race and ethnicity on the interpretation of the site, and on the local public.

Past as Prologue

What follows is a parable of sorts: a parable of learning. Perhaps it is also an urban folktale, but I hope not. At the very least, it is an American story.

In 1833, a woman named Catherine Foster purchased two and one-half acres of land just a few miles outside of Charlottesville, Virginia. Like many of her neighbors, Catherine invested in what was essentially speculative property, developed and sold by John Winn a local merchant and postmaster. He and other landowning whites had recently subdivided their land holdings south of Jefferson’s new university and encouraged the settlement of an experienced labor force to build and maintain the academic village. Catherine Foster paid John Winn $450 in cash for her purchase, which included a one-story wooden house, as well as number of outbuildings—a kitchen, a privy, a smokehouse. The house sat on a broad road, then known mostly for its southern link to Lynchburg and its eastern route past the late president’s plantation, Monticello. Eston Hemings, who was to witness Catherine’s son’s marriage, had been a slave at Monticello, along with his mother, Sally. More recently, however, the road had become trafficked with new occupants who lived along its length: the workers of Venable Lane and the students and faculty of the Academical Village. Although Catherine Foster eventually added a well to her property, which included a one-story wooden house, as well as number of outbuildings—a kitchen, a privy, a smokehouse. The house sat on a broad road, then known mostly for its southern link to Lynchburg and its eastern route past the late president’s plantation, Monticello. Eston Hemings, who was to witness Catherine’s son’s marriage, had been a slave at Monticello, along with his mother, Sally. More recently, however, the road had become trafficked with new occupants who lived along its length: the workers of Venable Lane and the students and faculty of the Academical Village. Although Catherine Foster eventually added a well to her property, initially a wide stream served not only the Fosters but the other members of the neighborhood as well. Its ample supply was an essential resource for the laundresses who occupied some of the nearby dwellings, and it provided water for individual gar-
dens and livestock. Although separated by the road to Lynchburg, the university and the growing neighborhood to its south were in clear view of one another. The Rotunda's dome was just visible from Catherine's porch, as was the students' exercise yard that ran along the north side of Lynchburg Road. From the students' lawn rooms, the roofs and chimney stacks of Venable Lane broke the straight southern vista.

When Catherine Foster died in 1863, she was somewhat elderly by late 19th-century standards—close to 70 when she was interred in a small family burial ground behind her home. The neighborhood, made up of cooks, painters, laborers, laundresses, domestics, and gardeners, could not help but take notice of Catherine Foster's death. Not only was her property one of the larger lots in the enclave, but she was one of its longest term residents. Across generations, the Foster women's occupations as dressmakers and seamstresses made them a central source of information about other areas of town, as well as another link to the source Catherine and her neighbors all shared—that of the university.

Catherine Foster's children and their families had long ago outgrown the small frame house she bought 30 years earlier. The accompanying acreage now supported additional residences, numerous outbuildings, and a modest strip of land under cultivation. Catherine's heirs would add pathways and yard spaces; they would subdivide the land, selling some of it out of the family, and redistributing other parcels within. By the third quarter of the 19th century, the immediate neighborhood became increasingly integrated, both racially and ethnically. Soon after the Civil War, the neighborhood began to be referred to as "Canada," perhaps in reference to enslaved Virginians' flights to freedom. It had also grown in physical area, and its edges now tumbled over into another ethnically diverse neighborhood called Gospel Hill.

By the time Theresa Foster Spradling, Catherine's granddaughter, died on the last of the Foster land in 1921, little remained intact from the family's 1833 land purchase. New land divisions and property boundaries broke up the old neighborhood, and tall apartment blocks were being built along the eastern face of the old Foster land. Across the street the once open view was obstructed by a new classroom building: a structure so placed, according to university records, as to "block the unsightly buildings beyond." Although many of "Canada's" residents continued to work at the university, major changes were occurring in the neighborhood, brought about by local land speculation, an expanding university, and increasingly institutionalized racism. Members of the Foster family moved to Iowa, West Virginia, and Washington, as did many of their neighbors. As pieces of the original Foster landholding were sold off, they were resold with legal codicils which prevented land sales to people "of African descent."

This racially restrictive covenant was one of the last to affect the Fosters. Like many 19th-century Americans, they found their experiences shaped by the legal and social categories of race which was assumed to be their heritage. Catherine Foster and many of her family were inconsistently categorized in the United States census. In other words, the same person might show up differently defined in each decade's entry—sometimes defined as a white person and at other times as a person of color. And, like many Americans, the Fosters' ambiguous 19th-century categorization as "mulatto," and later colored, implied a heritage which blurred the supposedly rigid color lines which much legislation was designed to enforce.

Having witnessed the beginning of the Civil War, Catherine Foster died just after Lincoln issued the Emancipation proclamation, an action foreshadowing a new era in which ideas about freedom would be redefined, as would notions of race. Catherine's children would one day be absolved of the cultural burden that these racist policies had applied to their ancestors, as they moved west and north to new lives in cities where their identities relied on visual encounters, and the vagaries of their own genealogical accountings were not suspect. By the time archaeological work began at the Foster homesite, all of Catherine Foster's descendants were identified as white, both legally and socially.
Talking the Talk, Walking the Walk

In January of 1994, the Washington Post ran an article headlined: “Blacks Protest Excavation Team” (Leeds 1994). At the center of that protest was a small 30-x-40-ft. plot of ground, which held remains of 12 individuals, mostly children. Based on their interpretation of deeds and census data, archaeologists had gone public with the information that this gravesite belonged to a 19th-century family, the head of which was a woman named Catherine Foster. By the time Catherine Foster’s homesite became the subject of public interest, virtually all her descendants had “passed,” and many were unaware of this story of personal and cultural heritage. Catherine Foster’s legacy, surely unexpected, has been to awaken the sleepy history of a small town, heretofore famous only for its geographical proximity to Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. Overtly at issue was the question of who had the right to dig, but the true concerns were: who would ask the questions, and to whom would the answers be addressed. Not only were there town\gown issues, but this ill will was equally embedded in class and race conflict that framed university and nonuniversity relations alike.

Community support—black and white—was not easily won, and in the process, that struggle became a significant, if not the, organizing principle of our work. Since its shaky beginnings in 1993, Archaeology at Venable Lane: The Foster Homesite (Grey et al. 1993; Linney 1993; Patten 1994; Fife 1995; Ford et al. 1995) has been lauded as having the most integrated visitation for historic sites in the area. The message we have openly embraced has been both educational and political. The latter has allowed the Foster story to serve as a reminder to current city residents and developers of the painful and permanent legacy of racist land policies. Created in response to the relationships developed since May of 1993, our version of a mission statement includes the following:

As single, free, “mulatto” women who owned land, raised families and supported themselves in the 19th century, the Fosters resist modern notions of categorization. Neither black nor white, enslaved nor wholly free, these women are pivotal to illustrating the complex nature of American culture. It is this very ambiguity which we believe makes this project of interest to the public, speaking as it does to our shared and troubled history. Archaeology at Venable Lane: The Foster Homesite is significant—not only because it shares a history misplaced—but because it suggests the possibility of a future reformed.

Two years into the project, Catherine’s great-great-grandson learned about his heritage from university researchers. At his first visit to the site, Frank Morris told the local paper and our crew about his father: “If we went to the movies and [a black] sat down next to us, he would make us get up and stand in the back . . . . He just didn’t want to be near them” (Frank Morris 1997, pers. comm.). The Fosters, like many American families had “passed” on the color line, and like many such families, although they knew of their “matriarch” Catherine—and even her granddaughter Susan—they knew nothing about the free black registers, or the census categories in which the names of their ancestors appeared. The genealogical researchers who made the first contact with these descendants were aware of the impact these revelations might have for people living in a mostly racist America. Of greater concern to me, however, was how the public, which held on firmly to the notion of an African-American site in a town constructed around androcentric histories, would react to this. Sure, it is a popular topic, this revelation of race: just check the talk show circuit and the covers of mainstream magazines. From Oprah Winfrey to Cosmopolitan, America is proving, once again, that we can make anything palatable for the MTV nation. But “passing,” as it relates to public programming at a historic site is, I argue, something quite different.

Speaking in Tongues

Categorized as “mulatto” in 19th-century census records, Catherine Foster falls into a somewhat enigmatic historical category, and a completely untenable modern one. I believe that
although researchers used the phrase, “categorized as mulatto,” in their discussion of evidence, our overall relabeling of Catherine as “African American” served to disguise a pivotal element in the construction of her identity, both past and present. Catherine’s historical category was immediately “translated” by the archaeologists, the media, and the public to mean African American. I recall my discomfort with my colleagues over the automatic replacement of the category “mulatto” with a modern category, a category with which I saw a different organizing principle at work, but I stepped away from the battle.

Within the year, in my second attempt to explore this category, I suggested in a presentation before the anthropology department at the University of Virginia that the 19th-century category of “mulatto” was important to examine both as an organizing principle with archaeological ramifications and as a category which might share identities with other modern and historic categories, such as Native American and Anglo-European. I believe the adjective I used was “fluid.” I also questioned whether “mulatto” ought to be publicly equated with the modern category “African American” and offered the possibility that this might be an opportunity to publicly address the construction of race through the testimony of an archaeological site. I was met with accusations of academic ignorance and personal racism. Our slogan that summer?: “Ask me about African-American archaeology in Charlottesville.”

At the center of this dilemma for me was what I viewed as the problematic remodeling of Catherine Foster, now utterly appropriated by the local community, however they might be categorized. For Catherine became, and has become, a model of a public’s “African-American” woman, complete with mainstream stereotypical notions of black women today and in the past. These notions, often at odds even with each other, have been supplied by the public and the academic community alike. It should come as no surprise that once in the public domain, Catherine’s identity became highly contested. What might surprise one, though, is that it was not Catherine’s race—left to us in the form of a small “m” in the census—that became the focus of this contest. Rather, Catherine’s identity as a free, landowning, no-obvious-men-present, child-raising, woman became the focus of countless models and scenarios, all of which painted Catherine Foster as an unaccountable anomaly. These models include ideas that black women could not have attained independence, actual or financial, without a white man; that they were prostitutes—stemming from a lack of recorded men and a preponderance of children; and that these black women who did succeed were somehow “different.” It does not take much thought to connect these ideas to modern white imagery of the “black welfare mother,” nor to the perpetuation of images which represent black women as highly sexualized: the Mammy/Jezebel equation writ large. Yet, despite these disturbing models, Catherine’s overarching model remained that of a struggling anomalous survivor. Although perhaps more palatable, this model should be equally disturbing. Catherine’s life, even before we had begun research, fit far too nicely with modern notions of race, class, and gender. Reclassified, Catherine Foster served many purposes. Reclassified, no one needed to take responsibility for what the records and the ground might tell us. Reclassified, we had our blinders firmly in place.

Toni Morrison suggests that silence and evasion have ruled public discourse on race, that “the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice it is to recognize an already discredited difference” (Morrison 1992:9–10). But she realizes the double nature of such a position: “To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (Morrison 1992:9–10). But to break the silence without exploring the significance of the rupture is, I believe, equally wrong. We know only too well that the creation of America, despite the demographics of its participants, was a creation of “whiteness,” and its historical accounting has mostly proved an exercise in giving meaning to that white experience. This exercise has often skirted and edited
class and gender relationships at the same time as it has embraced and solidified ideas that make race seem real and permanent. Durable, even if untenable, relationships have been built on these understandings, and as archaeologists we have often been guilty of both their perpetuation and their condemnation.

Historical archaeology occupies the enviable and problematic position of confining itself to periods of a national past for which there are almost always extant primary written, visual, and even oral sources. The position can be viewed as enviable, because historical sources can be both contextualizing and provocative: they fill in "gaps" and provide avenues for investigation. On the other hand, the position of historical archaeologists is seen as problematic for similar reasons. We are often forced to consider, how limiting is the presence of documentary evidence to the ways in which we undertake our interpretations, and how much more significant is a site for which documents exist? The latter position has frequently been countered by arguments from archaeologists whose research is aimed at understanding people who are traditionally viewed as disenfranchised or marginalized: people whose pasts have been neglected or encompassed by the politics of mainstream history. In North America, this has usually involved the study of indigenous and immigrant populations, with the notable exclusion of Anglo- and certain Euroamerican populations. Native American, African-American, and various "modern" immigrant groups including Chinese, Irish, and Italians, as well as ethnic\religious peoples such as Jews and Catholics, have all been categorized as "marginalized" peoples.

The most recent trend along these lines has occurred in 19th-century studies; clearly part of a larger attempt, in other disciplines as well, to define nonelite life during this significant century. Yet, within archaeology, regardless of differences in focus, and even taking into account complementary studies conducted on "new" immigrant communities and ethnic neighborhoods, the body of data available is limited. More importantly, the limitations of these studies are best exemplified by the very tie that binds them: I refer to the assumption that all such groups are inherently unequal and that this status has distinct archaeological correlates. Further, studies of white Anglo and specific European groups is never viewed as an 'ethnic' investigation, although the methods and the modes of analysis are often indistinguishable. The result of this has been to sublimate alternative interpretations to those that privilege questions of "agency," "resistance," "success" and "empowerment." Without placing qualitative judgment on these ideas, the assumption that such values are present and archaeologically accessible has become an integral part of research designs and interpretive work undertaken on historic sites across the U.S. I am not suggesting that these questions are irrelevant, nor would I suggest that they should be disregarded. My concern is that other organizing principles may be overlooked in the process. By stressing stories of resistance and survival, we leave implicit the position of elite white culture, it is neither reformed, nor removed from its superior position.

Studies of marginalized groups should remind us that what we access as archaeologists are not the various cultural categories which label and organize life itself, but the results of peoples' interactions with, within, and beyond these categories. It stands to reason, then, that exploring the process of this construction might be beneficial, and it also follows that we need to look to our historic categories without assuming we are fluent enough to translate them for a modern audience. At issue is not that the 19th and 20th centuries have produced and continue to produce problematic social categories and relationships, but that the direction of our archaeological research is often reproductive and sustaining of what we seek to understand. The racial "labeling" of the Foster site as African American warrants comment because of our almost immediate removal of a significant historic category from the frame of our interpretation. We were guilty of Toni Morrison's (1992) complaint, that
of “enforcing invisibility through silence.” This decision has had significant implications in our relationships with the public.

Labeled as an “African-American site,” Venable Lane almost immediately became a focus for local politics and even, in some instances, national ones—witness the attention of the usually disinterested Washington Post. When the Post condemned our project, the focus was not on the questions it raised, nor even on Catherine, but on me, on my racial identity as white. There is a certain irony to this: both Catherine Foster and I had become subject to the same external application of a category, even as our lives were temporally separated. Still later, the first group of students to excavate at the site were similarly condemned for being white, likened by one African-American anthropologist to Nazis being allowed to dig a Jewish site. At the University of Virginia, one of the African-American student leaders came out publicly against the project, explaining to me that, although he believed that I would “do the right thing,” he could not afford to support my work in front of other black students.

Locally, in Charlottesville’s African-American community, reaction to the excavation of Catherine’s homesite during our first season was often in flux. Although we ended our season with overwhelming support, it was a long season. Our approach was straightforward and, at times, confrontational. We engaged in conversation over the Washington Post article, and we asked people to give us their feelings about the separation of white and black history. We asked them questions they did not expect, but were often willing to discuss at great length. In response to the public’s request, we designed a program which enabled public involvement and encouraged local emotional and intellectual involvement in the telling of the story of “Canada,” the interracial, multiethnic worker community of which Catherine Foster and her family were a part. Although we spoke publicly about the category of “mulatto,” it was always accompanied by what I call disclaimers. Although we talked about race as constructed we could not show it, and the idea of racism as a culturally organizing principle began to take a back seat to race, to race as something with archaeological correlates. But, with this approach, we were successful—perhaps too successful—in winning local attention and interest.

During our second season, the public learned what we had begun to find out in the months after our first season. Catherine’s descendants were white—or at least they are understood to be white in today’s world. They had “passed” sometime early in this century. None of them had any knowledge of having an African-American ancestry. I mentioned Frank earlier, and his stories of his “bigoted father.” His cousin Donna acknowledged a strong tradition of family history, and brought us her collection of family heirlooms. One of her brothers had attended law school at the University of Virginia, walking across the Foster land everyday as a shortcut to his apartment. It has proved more difficult for the African-American community to engage with a Catherine Foster whose descendants are living as white. This is not to say that modern Charlottesville African Americans were surprised: they had always engaged in conversation about southern miscegenation and encouraged my desire to explore the meaning of the category “mulatto.” But as a public body, they have been disappointed. The initial exuberance over the physical and emotional location of a non-Jefferson, Charlottesville history has been forced into a period of redefinition. And while the arrival of white descendants offers provocative ground for research and discussion, and asks important questions of archaeology, it also changes the nature of our project. What does that t-shirt slogan, “ask me about African-American archaeology,” mean now? How much has our acceptance of a category disarmed us of the ability to show the world what archaeology can show them? On a purely technical level, I feel that we always engaged in conversations and interpretations which made problematic the idea that race is real. But professionally, as public archaeologists, I feel that in many ways, we failed. We failed precisely because we were unable to extract ourselves from our contemporary understandings of race and identity.
Conclusion

Just after the Foster descendants’ story was carried in the local paper, I hovered uncomfortably on the edge of an academic conversation about “identity,” fielding comments about the timeliness of the project, the wonderful opportunity for publication it presented, and so on. Pushing outside I hiked up the lawn towards that Rotunda—the one Catherine Foster saw, the one they later blocked from her view—and heard my name being yelled from a landscape truck parked on the lawn. Two men, two men our culture would divide thus: one black, one white, were gesturing to me. They wanted to talk about the Post article, too. They had visited the site frequently during the summer, first as workers for the university, and then during their lunch hour.

“Hey, I saw us in the paper! What do you think?” This from the white man. His companion said, “I’m glad our site was in the paper . . . those white Fosters. That family finding out the real story . . . .” And off they went, talking about “our” site. I drifted up the lawn, hearing their conversation as it continued: “Did you hear the part about them moving to Ohio? Are they gonna dig next summer?”

Let us get it straight: Intellectual attempts to show race to be a cultural category carry little weight for people who live within those categories everyday. As always, the academy and the world make uneasy bedfellows. Race may not be real, but racism is. For those of us who see our work as situated beyond the academy, this is a tremendously important distinction, and it makes what public archaeologists do—or can do—even more important than our academic colleagues acknowledge. Referencing the work of the Boasians or waxing poetic about Cornel West’s latest essay may be good sport, but it is not useful sport on American terra firma. This is not to say that the public cannot or should not be interested in our theoretical pretexts, but for people whose lives are confined or expanded because of the way the world categorizes them, these scholarly understandings are most clearly adrift.

We dishonor ourselves and our public when we ask them to continue to see the world in fragments: an African-American site here, a woman’s site there, and so on. I want to be clear that I am not in any way suggesting that we should rewrite our labels: I am not—in any way—suggesting, for example, that the Foster site be renamed. Nor am I calling for new labels. Despite my concern that we acknowledge racial ambiguities at the Foster site, I am not for a moment suggesting a description that incorporates the category of “mulatto.” Rather, I am calling for an end to such labels, concomitant with an increase in our public education about race and gender as cultural constructions whose meanings change over time and space. We are, I fear, guilty of some intellectual pandering to the same culture we profess to be addressing. In our rush to fulfill “graceful, generous, liberal gestures,” we are indeed “enforcing,” not necessarily only “invisibility,” but more significantly, visibility. That has its dangers, too.

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