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Matters of Strife & Death: Bioarchaeology of the African Diaspora & NAGPRA

By putting into conversation a review of a diverse bioarchaeological projects concerned with chattel slavery and the structure and problematic elements of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, this paper aims to imagine the possibilities of similar legislation as applied to the African Diaspora.

Unless otherwise stated, slavery in this paper refers to chattel slavery as practiced in the antebellum United States, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Inspired heavily by Michael Blakey's 2001 treatise on the roots of the bioarchaeology of the African Diaspora, the first section of the paper aims to continue that work through a broad review of a diverse range of bioarchaeological investigations of slavery in the Americas. Case studies are organized thematically/chronologically: the first subsection presents pre-emancipation case studies, and the second presents post-emancipation case studies. The second section synthesizes the above case studies, paying attention to underlying trends within the bioarchaeology of the African Diaspora: humanizing the enslaved, searching for the (bio)archaeological signature of slavery, diet and health reconstruction, labor reconstruction, seeking signs of violence, and determining geographic origins of the enslaved. The next section posits possible areas of future research interest within the bioarchaeology of slavery. The fourth section explores parallels between Native and African American communities' relationship to

archaeology through a critique of NAGPRA. The fifth and final section proposes possible guidelines for legislation concerned with the protection of archaeological resources of the African Diaspora community in the Americas.

Bioarchaeological Case Studies of Chattel Slavery

Embodying Violent Systems: Pre-Emancipation Case Studies

Nearly all case studies presented below are drawn from the United States where emancipation coincides with the end of the American Civil War in 1865. For the single case study from Barbados, emancipation coincides with the abolition of slavery within the entire British Empire in 1834.

Archaeological work on Newton Plantation in Barbados has included the excavation of human skeletal remains from a slave cemetery since the early 1980s. The excavation of these remains has resulted in the analysis of 101 individuals, deceased and interred between 1660 and 1820 (Corruccini et al 1982:444). Skeletal and dental analyses reveal an abundance of tooth decay, common bilateral tooth loss, periodontal disease, root hypercementosis, severe linear enamel hypoplasia, and/or Harris lines on nearly every individual (Corruccini et al 1982). The first four are dental pathologies that speak to poor diet, lack of dental/medical care, severe infections, and/or physical violence and trauma (Larsen 1997). The last two are transverse lines of denser enamel or bony tissue visible on teeth and the bones of the limbs, respectively. Linear enamel hypoplasia and Harris lines are the result of severe physiological stress during growth and development (Larsen 1997). The presence of these pathologies in conjunction with one another speaks to devastatingly brutal nutritional, biological, and physical circumstances (Corruccini et al 1982).

Newton Plantation is a unique site because of its thorough collection of historical records (Corruccini et al 1982; Handler and Corruccini 1983). This availability of historical records has provided intriguing counterpoints to some archaeological evidence. For example, analysis of historical records estimates average age at death among those in the cemetery as 20 years old and exhibits a high infant mortality rate (Corruccini et al 1982:455-6) while bioarchaeological analysis yields an average age at death of 29 and a relatively low infant mortality rate (Corruccini et al 1982:456). These discrepancies are likely due to poor preservation of the delicate bones of infants and very young children, the presence of a separate but unstudied burial plot for the very young, and/or parallels to ethnohistorical evidence which shows that the very young were not buried in most regions of West Africa (Corruccini et al 1982:455-6). More study could help to determine which, if any, of these factors most contributes to the underrepresentation of the very young in the slave cemetery of Newton Plantation. This case study is an excellent example of the severe need to contextualize osteological and biological data within broader historical, anthropological, and archaeological data when conducting bioarchaeology.

The New York African Burial Ground is perhaps the most famous bioarchaeological case study of the African Diaspora in the United States. Archaeological survey and excavation connected to a Lower Manhattan construction project in 1991 revealed intact burials. The General Services Administration, the independent agency of the United States government in charge of the survey and excavation, quickened their pace and excavated the remains of over 400 individuals deceased and interred between before 1712 until 1794 (La Roche and Blakey 1997:84). Protests from the local and scientific communities halted further work by the GSA,

and a team led by Howard University anthropologist Michael Blakey created a new archaeological project ((La Roche and Blakey 1997).

Analysis of the remains revealed "skeletal evidence of intense labor, high rates of systemic infection, poor dental health, varying degrees of healthy dental development, a high rate of infant mortality, and relatively early adult mortality," (Mack and Blakey 2004:11-12). In other words, the enslaved people buried in the New York African Burial Ground experienced backbreaking labor, nutritional distress, and otherwise biologically, physically, and physiologically grueling lives.

The New York African Burial Ground project is also notable for its intensive scientific components (Mack and Blakey 2004:11). For example, DNA sequencing was done on skeletal samples drawn from many individuals: 32 of these sequences demonstrated shared ancestry with populations in Benin, Nigeria, Senegal, Niger, and other areas throughout western Africa (Mack and Blakey 2004:11). The project represents a broad spectrum of bioarchaeological projects concerned with the African Diaspora, beginning as a rushed, cultural resource management project and eventually transforming into one of the most famous and well-funded archaeological projects of the African Diaspora in the United States that enjoys the support of both local communities and extensive scientific networks.

The following four case studies were studied by Ted Rathbun and Richard H. Steckel in a comparative project exploring the health profiles of four different Black populations across the eastern United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Excavations on Belleview Plantation in McClellanville, South Carolina in Charleston County unearthed the remains of at least sixteen individuals, nine white adults, five white children, and at least two Black adults who died between 1738 and 1756 (Rathbun and Steckel

2002). Shockingly, all of the individuals studied exhibited similarities in health conditions, except for markedly higher levels of lead found in the bones of the white individuals (Rathbun and Steckel 2002:214).

Eighty-nine African-Americans deceased and interred between 1810 and 1822 were recovered from the cemetery associated with the First African Baptist Church in Philadelphia. They represent the largest collection of urban, free Blacks to be studied bioarchaeologically (Rathbun and Steckel 2002:212). Those interred at the First African Baptist Church showed signs of better health than even their white contemporaries. This may have been a function of the social, economic, and medical safety net provided by the Church community (Rathbun 20012:219-20).

Excavations on Paul Remley Plantation in Charleston, South Carolina yielded the skeletal remains of thirty-six enslaved Black individuals who died between 1840 and 1870. These individuals "exhibited signs of childhood stress and anemia, and among adults the women had shorter life spans. Poor diets and parasite loads provoked anemia, as indicated by the frequency of cribra orbitalia and porotic hyperostosis, and infection with subsequent recovery appears in over 60 percent of the sample," (Rathbun and Steckel 20012:214).

Finally, nineteen adult males buried in 1863 were excavated from a Union Army cemetery on Folly Island, Charleston, South Carolina. Enlarged musculoskeletal markers—areas or features on bones where muscles once attached that can be used to determine the decedent's levels and even types of physical activity—on every individual suggested a high level of physical fitness (Rathbun and Steckel 2002:215).

These case studies are interesting in their similarities and contrasts. Markedly poor health seems to correlate with slave status (Rathbun and Steckel 2002). Freed Blacks in the eastern

United States seem to have comparable health to their white counterparts (Rathbun and Steckel 2002). The incredibly sharp contrast in health status between urban, freed Blacks in the North and plantation slaves in the South is interesting in that it demonstrates the incredible biological toll that can be created by experiences of enslavement.

Slavery's Afterlife: Post-Emancipation Case Studies

The sociopolitical, cultural, and economic effects of slavery did not disappear with upon Emancipation. Instead, Black people in the United States experienced varying forms of structural violence built upon the foundations of chattel slavery, including but not limited to housing segregation, hiring discrimination, poverty, over policing, and violence perpetrated by whites. These legacies and new manifestations of slavery affected the biological and physiological experiences of the now free Blacks, and those effects can be archaeologically accessed through their bones.

Freedman's Cemetery in Dallas was excavated as part of a salvage project linked to the construction of a highway in northeast Texas. According to historical records, the excavations involved three different sections of the cemetery used at different times: the section corresponding to 1869-1884 included sixty-four individuals; the 1885-1899 section included 171 individuals; and the 1900-1907 section included 884 individuals (Davidson et al 2002:228). Generally, those interred in Freedman's Cemetery were average statured and showed signs of degenerative joint disease (Davidson et al 2002:242). Diachronically, there seems to be a significant upward trend in rates of anemia as evidenced by porotic hyperostosis, or increased porosity of long bones, elements of the skull, and other bones (Davidson et al 2002:249; Larsen 1997). This upward trend may reflect the industrialization of foodways in Dallas (Davidson et al 2002:228). Only some folks interred in the 1869-1884 section of the cemetery would have

worked in agriculture, and none interred in the two later sections would have likely worked in agriculture, as industrialization and urbanization in Dallas integrated Blacks as laborers or domestics (Davidson et al 2002:228). Urbanization was only possible through the industrialization and mechanization of agriculture, which likely resulted in poorer nutrition foodstuffs (Graham 2014:134). Archival newspaper work and geographic analysis combined with the bioarchaeological investigation of Freedman's Cemetery compelling demonstrates that Blacks experienced incredibly disproportionate amounts of violence in areas at the interface between Black and white communities and within white communities themselves (Davidson 2008).

Cedar Grove Cemetery is a rural burial ground located in the southwest corner of Arkansas that was likely used by Black communities between 1881 and 1927; eighty skeletons were excavated as part of a salvage mission (Davidson et al 2002:227). Historical records indicate that the majority of those interred in Cedar Grove were sharecroppers and/or subsistence farmers (Davidson et al 2002:228). Bioarchaeological indicators of health are varied and even contradictory: an above-average average height suggests good nutrition during childhood, but the very common presence of linear enamel hypoplasia suggests bouts of extreme physiological stress such as near starvation or sever infections (Davidson et al 2002:246). Compared to individuals from Freedman's Cemetery, individuals from Cedar Grove were twice as likely to show signs of severe anemia and exhibit much more evidence of physical trauma (Davidson et al 2002:273).

Three Georgia Cemeteries—known as Area 1, Area 2, and Avondale Burial Place—were excavated, unearthing a whopping 490 individuals (Graham 2014). Due to the sheer number of individuals, only dental arcades were examined in this case study (Graham 2014:2). Area 1 and

Area 2 are coastal sites, located near Savannah, Georgia, and Avondale Burial Place is a central Georgia site located near Macon.

Area 1 contained the fewest individuals with forty-one people ultimately excavated. These individuals also showed a disproportionately lower incidence of dental pathology and incredibly low infant mortality rates when compared to Area 2 and Avondale (Graham 2014:116, 128). Area 1 is in close proximity to the First Zion Baptist Church of Belmont of Savannah Georgia whose possibly collective and collaborative religious community practices may help to explain the relatively good health of individuals excavated from Area 1 (Graham 2014:133). Further, Area 1's location also likely allowed access to both coastal and wetlands resources to the people who lived in the area.

Area 2's enormous size suggests that it may have been a large public cemetery used by people living in Savannah and her hinterlands (Graham 2014:128-9). Dating techniques and archival work strongly suggest that the cemetery was established in response to an enormous influx of poor, Black Americans after the Civil War (Graham 2014:134). These poor, newly urban people likely only had access to industrially produced food, which is almost always nutritionally poor (Graham 2014:134).

Avondale Burial Place is incredibly rural and may have been used over the course of centuries. The rurality and relative isolation of the area around Avondale likely meant that the people who lived there experienced access to finite variety of resources and were even less likely to be able to access medical care than their more urban, coastal counterparts (Graham 2014:130-2). Because of the site's seemingly long time depth, it may have also been in use before Emancipation (Graham 2014:142).

The data from both of these case studies reveal a saddening, sobering truth: life was not easy for Blacks living in the postbellum United States, regardless of rurality, urbanity, occupation, or geography.

Trends in the Bioarchaeology of the African Diaspora

The brief overview of the above case studies reveals several common topics and research goals common in the bioarchaeology of chattel slavery in the Americas. Interestingly, only the questions of humanization and archaeological signatures are unique to bioarchaeology; concerns of diet, health, labor, violence, migration, and origin are popular topics in bioarchaeology more broadly.

Humanizing the Enslaved

One of the cores of the bioarchaeology of chattel slavery is attempts at humanizing the enslaved. (Bio)archaeology is powerfully suited to this cause as it has unique ways of providing insight into the lives, lifeways, and experiences poorly represented in archival sources, such as slaves (Marshall 2015:8). A key example of this is articulated through the desires of descendant community members at the New York African Burial Ground project for detailed understandings of African cultural backgrounds of the enslaved. Through the study and consideration of the lives of the enslaved beyond their experiences of enslavement, the humanity of the enslaved is articulated and reinforced (Mack and Blakey 2004:14).

On a more structural level, bioarchaeology can showcase, "the effects of systems of social control [and] can offer insight into the lived experiences and biological well-being of enslaved and captive individuals," (Harrod and Martin 2015:41). Attempts at reconstructing diet and health, labor practices, and violence are all manifestations of this endeavor and will be discussed in more detail below.

Searching for the (Bio)Archaeological Signature of Slavery

As archaeologists are unlikely to encounter tools of domination such as shackles, some scholars have argued that slavery is "archaeologically unrecognizable" (Marshall 2015:5). Bioarchaeology challenges that notion and has developed creative and innovative ways of investigating slavery. Although no single scholar has created or determined a compelling, single, and unfailing archaeological signature of slavery, bioarchaeologists have argued that a variety of features—such as evidence of poor health (Corruccini et al 1982; Handler and Corruccini 1983; Rathbun and Steckel 2002), evidence of extreme labor (Mack and Blakey 2004:11-12), racially segregated or unmarked burial sites (Mack and Blakey 2004; Davidson 2008; Graham 2014; Handler and Corruccini 1983), and stable isotope analysis suggesting nonlocal origins (Marshall 2015:6)—with proper historical context are strong predictors of slavery.

Beyond the impulse to merely "delineate material signatures" of slavery, bioarchaeology has begun to shift analytic focus toward exploring "slavery's effects and consequences," such as the diets, health, experiences of labor and violence, and migrations of the enslaved (Marshall 2015:7).

Reconstructing Diet & Health

Reconstructing the interconnected measures of diet and health seems to be standard practice in the bioarchaeology of chattel slavery, as evidenced by its presence in every case study listed above. This is done through a variety of methods, including identifying porotic hyperostosis and cribra orbitalia as a sign of anemia (Rathbun and Steckel 2002; Larsen 1997:29-40), lesions from infectious diseases (Rathbun and Steckel 2002), linear enamel hyperplasia and/or Harris lines (Corruccini et al 1982), dental pathologies (Corruccini et al 1982; Mack and Blakey 2004:11-12), a population's average height (Steckel and Rose 2002a:4). The last method

was underutilized in the above case studies; however, macroanalysis of average height of slave children has shown that slave children consistently fell below the first percentile in height using contemporary standards (Rathbun and Steckel 2002:209). Although this measure has a tinge of presentism, it viscerally illustrates the consequences and experiences of slave nutrition and health.

Reconstructing Experiences of Coerced Labor

Like diet and health, reconstructing experiences of labor of the enslaved can be a visceral reminder of slavery's brutality. This reconstruction can also be done through multiple methods, including trauma analysis and musculoskeletal marker analysis (Harrod and Martin 2015:44). The interdependent relationships between labor, nutrition, and health make labor reconstruction ubiquitous in the bioarchaeology of chattel slavery.

Deciphering Signs of Violence

Bioarchaeological investigations of experiences of violence in contexts of slavery are done in two scales: individual and structural (Klaus 2012). On an individual level, "human skeletal remains offer a quantifiable and clear record of traces of trauma that resulted from acts of dominance and submission," (Harrod and Martin 2015:42). With multiple individuals being examined and proper historical context, bioarchaeologists can use signs of violence as, "an empirical means to identify systems of social control and exploitation," (Harrod and Martin 2015:44). Structural violence is thus accessible for study through remains, grave goods, burial positioning, mortuary contexts, and many other archaeological materials (Harrod and Martin 2015:46-7; Klaus 2012).

Determining Geographic Origins

As the bioarchaeology of slavery explicitly positions the experiences of the enslaved in a broad global context of coercion and exchange, issues of origin and migration are a common topic of study. For example, the first of three main research questions of the New York African Burial Ground project was "what are the origins of the population?" (La Roche and Blakey 1997:86). Questions of migration and origin are important in that they help to contextualize and humanize the enslaved as a people with a long-running history independent of enslavement. Further, the reconstruction and rearticulation of ethnic and cultural groups and identities can be an important step in decolonization.

Possible Research Futures: A Macrobioarchaeology of Slavery, Osteobiographies, & Community Collaborations

As the bioarchaeology of slavery develops and diversifies as a field, a plethora of research interests may emerge. Most compelling are macrobioarchaeology, osteobiography, and community collaboration.

Macrobioarchaeology is perhaps best understood as an interdisciplinary, comparative bioarchaeology that seeks to incorporate the, "historic, economic, ecological, and cultural contexts" of human skeleton remains on scales ranging from site to region to continent to global (Steckel and Rose 2002a:7). This paper aims to contribute to the growing academic dialogue that is macrobioarchaeology, by putting into conversation an enormously diverse body of research in order to learn more about the variety of experiences of enslavement.

Osteobiography is defined as a life history developed from extensive investigation of skeletal evidence and contextualization using archival materials (Saul 1976). In other words, it is the precise opposite of macrobioarchaeology. Whereas macrobioarchaeology aims to understand the interconnectedness of history, economics, ecology, and culture, osteobiography works to

articulating a single person's life story at the nexus of those interconnections. Osteobiography has proven useful in humanizing the past in a way that is both compelling and accessible (Mack and Blakey 2004:14). Osteobiography continues the broad archaeological task of democratizing the past. It allows for in-depth stories of 'common' people to be told with the same academic and intellectual weight and respect as the narratives created concerning monarchs, presidents, and entire nation-states.

Community collaborations as part of (bio)archaeological research design are not new. However, the success of the research design implemented through community input and approval at the New York African Burial Ground has created a model that showcases the incredible potentials of collaboration. The New York African Burial Ground collaboration was fueled by the local community, who in turn were fueled by the uncomfortable and exploitative racially segregated intellectual histories of archaeology and African-American Studies (La Roche and Blakey 1997:92). By building from a place of mutual concern, local and scientific community alike were able to design a research design that asked important questions and answered them in ways that were mindful of community values. Through openness to community concerns, the New York African Burial Ground became one of the most interacted with archaeological projects in the history of the United States.

All of these futures speak to simultaneously growing interests in the stories of individuals and of narratives of history broadly. For the public, this means attempting to trace their histories, individual, community, and collective. For scholars, this means greater research focus on identity studies, osteobiographies, studies with ever increasing scope and interdisciplinarity, and structural violence (Saul 1976; Insoll 2007; Knudson and Stojanowski 2009; Steckel and Rose 2002a:7; Curtin 2002; La Roche and Blakey 1997; Klaus 2012).

NAGPRA: Problems and Parallels

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (hereafter referred to as NAGPRA) was signed into law in 1990. Although the act was among the first codifications of Native American rights to their own archaeological resources and cultural patrimony, it is not perfect legislation. Primarily, NAGPRA's greatest weaknesses are its limitations: it only applies to federally owned land and institutions that receive federal funding; only federally recognized Native groups can make claims to archaeological and cultural resources under the law; and the archaeological and cultural resources in question only represent certain types of artifacts, such as human remains.

Scholars have also criticized NAGPRA, particularly its dependence on the concept of cultural affiliation. Cultural affiliation has three parts—a present-day tribe, an identifiable earlier group, and a relationship of shared group identity. The relationship of shared group identity is most problematic as, "it employs an essentialist model of identity, forcing tribes (and museums) to adopt the untenable position that Native American identities have not changed through time," (Liebmann 2008:76). Essentialist models of indigenous identity are rooted in colonialist discourses that construct indigenous peoples as static, timeless, and history-less. A hybridity model of indigenous identity that, "posits that the interaction of social groups produces new cultural forms that are neither wholly immigrant nor wholly indigenous but are instead interdependent and mutually constituting," can be useful in articulating complicated relationships between contemporary groups and practices and ancient ones (Liebmann 2008:83)

Despite its flaws, NAGPRA may help to inspire African American and ally activists in conceptualizing and actualizing legislation that protects African Americans' rights to their own archaeological and cultural resources.

An African Diaspora Graves Protection and Repatriation Act?

Just as effectively no legal protections were in place for Native American archaeological sites before NAGPRA, African diasporic sites have little to no legal protection in the United States (Cryne 2010:102). This is perhaps best exemplified by the initial phases of the New York African Burial Ground Project: the burial ground was discovered as a result of archaeological excavation done to satisfy building and development codes (Mack and Blakey 2004). Initial response from the archaeologists conducting the excavations was to dig as quickly as possible; this process was not challenged or modified until the extended involvement of US Congress, the Press, local clergy, activists, lawyers, architects, concerned local citizens, and many other stakeholder groups (La Roche and Blakey 1997:85). Activists' work halted the speedy excavations, and eventually resulted in an archaeological project that was both sensitive to community concerns and on the cutting edge of bioarchaeological analyses (La Roche and Blakey 1997; Mack and Blakey 2004).

Legal structures should be in place that prevent even the possibilities of a similar situation from happening again. Following the template of NAGPRA, an African Diaspora Graves Protection and Repatriation Act could posit local communities as descendant communities. The research questions developed by community collaboration and the New York African Burial Ground project's lead researchers could serve as a template for determining what types of objects should be considered for protection. NAGPRA is an admittedly faulted piece of legislation; however, elements of Native American disenfranchisement from the archaeological community mirror those of African Americans and thus there is promising potential in the development of legislation that actively works toward a more inclusive bioarchaeology of the African Diaspora.

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