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### The Archaeology of Slavery on Antebellum Plantations

Historians traditionally prefer documentary evidence to construct narratives of the American experience, drawing from official documents and personal archives alike, viewing tangible words as the most legitimate (though often biased) memory of the past. Institutional racism fueled by capitalism has ensured that these records disproportionately represent straight white men, as segregation and the exclusivity of higher education limited the number of scholars from marginalized communities. Thus, historians have framed American history through the lens of whiteness, learning of people of color's experiences not from their communities, but from an outside, capitally-interested source. The experiences of black enslaved people, specifically, have been retold by their oppressors due to a lack of written evidence from black communities, reinforcing white supremacy through the extension of literacy. To reconcile the effects of imperialism, I believe the history of slavery should be constructed through their archaeology, drawing from their material culture to describe how black communities functioned, how they interacted with their oppressors, and how they resisted against their enslavement. While antebellum plantations were spaces of severe persecution for slaves, they were also spaces of community engagement, vibrancy, identity, and resistance, and by favoring black archaeological evidence over white documentary evidence, the intricacy of these societies can truly be appreciated.

The history of slave archaeology is relatively brief, beginning right after the civil rights movement due to an increased academic interest in the experiences of black Americans. Ascher and Fairbanks published one of the first studies of a slave community in “Excavation of a Slave Cabin: Georgia, U.S.A.,” countering the “writings of slave owning groups” by portraying American slavery through archaeology.<sup>1</sup> Using a processual approach, they analyzed “a [blue] bead” found in the cabin, stating that the bead “was [likely] carried from Africa to America” by a slave and that in African tradition it was an “ambassador bead,” used as a “passport...between tribal chiefs.”<sup>2</sup> These archaeologists attribute greater humanity to the slaves who, before these studies, were reduced to their function in the plantation economy; the bead carrier, for example, is no longer just a slave but an individual with a culturally significant relic from home, adding complexity to her story and the stories of her community members (although the authors fail to fully interpret slave material culture to this extent, limiting their analysis to listing artifacts and their cultural context). Ascher and Fairbanks succeed by supplementing the archaeological evidence with black oral and documentary evidence, using “fugitive slave narratives” to examine what provisions the owner supplied and what food the slaves gathered for themselves, determining that slaves “managed to add considerable protein to their diet, apparently through their own efforts.”<sup>3</sup> White documentary history did not capture these smaller moments of slave resistance due to their perceived insignificance, allowing archaeologists to uncover forgotten experiences and imagine what life in the slave communities was like.

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<sup>1</sup> Ascher Robert and Charles H. Fairbanks, 1971, "Excavation of a Slave Cabin: Georgia, U.S.A.," *Historical Archaeology* 3, JSTOR Journals, EBSCOhost (accessed December 13, 2017), 3. Ibid., 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 11, 13.

John Solomon Otto began adding complexity to the experiences of slaves by theorizing how an archaeologist can correctly interpret racial and class differences from the archaeological record, reconciling the effect of racism on slaves' material culture. Otto, in "Race and Class on Antebellum Plantations," notes that traditionally archaeologists assume that "lower quality" goods were owned by "low status" populations, however, he states that "there are a great variety of status differences" that could affect this, including "racial...differences."<sup>4</sup> This claim was influential in the archaeology of slavery by acknowledging that racism can be interpreted from the record, allowing for a better understanding of how white masters subjugated their slaves through cheap provisions and how slaves resisted this oppression. In examining whiteness against blackness at the Cannon's Point Plantation, Otto explains that the white "overseer's house more closely resembled the planter's luxurious house than the small one-room slave cabins," pointing out that although overseers were closer in social status to slaves than the planter elite, racial status alone differentiated their living conditions.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, he examines food remains, concluding that slaves "were more dependent on wild animals to supplement their diet," exposing, like Ascher and Fairbanks, their agency in resisting white refusal to provide proper meals.<sup>6</sup> Otto's emphasis on how status and race is reflected through the record better contextualizes enslaved people's experiences, yet he also argues that archaeologists must first confer with sources from the planters for explanations of spaces and their inhabitants. This methodology, however, does not allow an archaeologist to construe evidence without a racial

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<sup>4</sup> John S. Otto, "Race and Class on Antebellum Plantations," 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

bias, for by approaching a site with white documentary history as the basis of information, all following interpretations will be skewed through this lens.

Babson in “The Archaeology of Racism and Ethnicity on Southern Plantations” influenced the archaeology of slavery by calling for the increased study of racial categories and ethnicity in antebellum America, focusing on how racism caused the creation of black community identity. The United States’ desire for unending profit created “racism,” as “economic exploitation” formed categories of “innate” inferiority based on “largely inescapable” human qualities to fulfill the needs of the growing capitalist system.<sup>7</sup> Thus, plantations are the perfect site for these studies of race, capturing both the immediate effects of racism on slaves and the secondary effects, such as “the establishment of a culture that resists racism.”<sup>8</sup> Babson uses the South Carolina Rice Coast as a case study, noting that this entire plantation system survived not only from the exploitation of labor, but the “exploitation of existing cultural differences,” as white planters utilized “African methods and knowledge” of rice cultivation to succeed.<sup>9</sup> The enslaved people’s superiority in planting techniques gained them some, though extremely limited, autonomy, allowing them to integrate “African elements” of food, art, and religion with their experiences in the United States to create a “creole culture” that ultimately “define[d]” their community and allowed for unified resistance.<sup>10</sup> Although racism cannot always be directly seen in the record, Babson explains that it does “provide a context” for racial “interactions,” transforming artifacts into “conduits for cultural processes of domination and resistance.”<sup>11</sup> At

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<sup>7</sup> David W. Babson, 1990, “The Archaeology of Racism and Ethnicity on Southern Plantations,” *Historical Archaeology* no. 4, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 24.

the Jordan plantation, for example, evidence surfaced proving the existence of “a traditional African healer in this community,” demonstrating the enslaved people’s efforts to “resist racism” by “maintain[ing] [their] traditions”; Babson states that archaeologists should only interpret artifacts of enslaved people through their “cultural function in...African-American” rather than “European-American societies,” for this framework ensures that its role in defining slave communities will not be filtered through white constructs of understanding.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Babson claims that studying the way in which the archaeological record reflects institutional racism allows archaeologists to better compose narratives of black identity formation and resistance, using the realities of racism to contextualize their artifacts.

Orser and Funari promote slave resistance and rebellion as a new framework for interpreting the archaeology of slavery, influencing this topic by adding new narratives of slave identity construction through resisting imperial infrastructure. As they explore in “The Archaeology of Slave Resistance and Rebellion,” all previous examples of slave archaeology were restricted to “determining the nature of slave material culture” due to history’s inadvertent erasure of these experiences and a disappointingly recent interest in slave sites.<sup>13</sup> Yet Orser and Funari take this a step further, using postprocessual and Marxist archaeologies to create a more active view of their culture which highlights individual experiences, shifting the field from establishing slave material culture to analyzing and interpreting it in the context of their rebellion against capitalist body politics. Their framework defines resistance as “an ongoing process” which is “often extremely subtle” in the record, limiting the extent to which archaeologists can

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<sup>12</sup> David W. Babson, 1990, "The Archaeology of Racism and Ethnicity on Southern Plantations," *Historical Archaeology* no. 4, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Charles E. Orser Jr. and Pedro P.A. Funari, 2001, "Archaeology and Slave Resistance and Rebellion," *World Archaeology* no. 1, 62.

view and interpret it--especially individual acts of resistance--but if an archaeologists refuses to believe that “slaves accepted their bondage,” as Orser and Funari call for, then they must “accept the possible presence of symbols of resistance” rather than self-evident artifacts.<sup>14</sup> Through this methodology, “artefacts” have a “function[al] and symbol[ic]” purpose, such as “smoking pipes” which slaves used both to smoke with and to “promote group cohesion and self-identity.”<sup>15</sup>

Orser and Funari criticize past perspectives of slave “accommodation” to their oppression, for “diminish[ing] resistance...ignores the harsh realities of human bondage” while favoring white explanations of power; instead, they champion the assumption that all humans, including slaves, innately fight for their freedom and influence their material culture accordingly.

<sup>16</sup> This methodology influenced further archaeological studies, such as by Weik in “The Archaeology of Antislavery Resistance,” as he analyzed “fugitive slave” Maroon settlements in the antebellum era as sites of cultural resistance. “Self-liberated Africans...used a variety of defensive strategies” when picking locations for their “sedentary” settlements, demonstrating these villages existence as both places of defiance and of complex community interaction.<sup>17</sup>

Weik’s postprocessual perspective diachronically examines free black people’s engagement with Native communities, for as “Native American artifacts [gradually] outnumber...those made by European or Euro-Americans” in the record, a narrative of solidarity between these populations, continued independent commerce, and resistance to American capitalism emerges.<sup>18</sup> Orser and Funari’s and Weik’s ideas succeed not just by constructing a more realistic view of history rooted

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<sup>14</sup> Charles E. Orser Jr. and Pedro P.A. Funari, 2001, "Archaeology and Slave Resistance and Rebellion," *World Archaeology* no. 1, 63.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>17</sup> Terrance M. Weik, *The Archaeology of Antislavery Resistance*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012, 77-78.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

in slave material culture, but also by “fostering empowerment and critical awareness” for modern populations, extending the bounds of archaeology from recording history to applying it.<sup>19</sup>

In my first case study, “The Archaeological Dimensions of Soul Food: Interpreting Race, Culture, and Afro-Virginian Identity,” Franklin explains how enslaved people used “foodways” to form community identity and “position themselves within colonial society,” responding to their condition by demonstrating their creativity and ability to support themselves despite injustice.<sup>20</sup> By studying charred seeds at slave sites in Rich Neck Plantation in Williamsburg, Virginia, Franklin describes the personal gardening practices that allowed slaves to “supplement their diet” and “earn money...through sale of produce,” noting how it provided slaves more independence while allowing them to “construct their foodways” independent of white provisions.<sup>21</sup> Enslaved people hunted and gathered indigenous plants and animals, suggesting their desires to “create a distinctive foodways style...associated...with their collective identity” and to gain a “familiar[ity] with the lay of the land.”<sup>22</sup> Franklin notes how this subsistence became resistance since forests offered “secrecy and anonymity” for runaways, providing opportunities for successful escapes through these community engagements. Franklin also analyzed the “large iron pots” and “mammal bones” recovered, concluding that “slow stews” were a popular meal for slaves, fitting within their long schedule of manual labor while utilizing “African foodways.”<sup>23</sup> This theoretical perspective views African-American identity as an amalgamation of African and American practices chosen by slaves, and stews, which

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<sup>19</sup> Charles E. Orser Jr. and Pedro P.A. Funari, 2001, "Archaeology and Slave Resistance and Rebellion," *World Archaeology* no. 1, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Maria Franklin, “The Archaeological Dimensions of Soul Food: Interpreting Race, Culture, and Afro-Virginian Identity” in *Race and the Archaeology of Identity*, ed. Charles E. Orser, University of Utah Press, 2002, 88.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

“reproduced...traditional practice[s]...with new ingredients,” became a unique part of their American experience.<sup>24</sup> Franklin assumes that similarities in the archaeological record automatically suggest “cultural homogeneity” between populations, making this framework unstable as it views any comparability as direct markers of cultural unification rather than just social trends, as they may be.<sup>25</sup> However, these similarities, whether coincidences or not, still contributed to forming black identity on plantations, especially as white Virginians avoided “slave foods” such as fish and chicken, creating distinctions in foodways that ideologically separated these cultures.<sup>26</sup> She clearly demonstrates how slaves created their own identity based on food, yet she fails to expand her analysis to explaining what this new identity meant for enslaved people, limiting the archaeology of slavery to the past rather than applying it to the present. Franklin’s approach works by acknowledging the effect white planters had on their slaves while assigning all agency to the enslaved community, countering the belief that slaves merely assimilated “white foodways” by describing the way they creatively combined available ingredients and maximized efficiency in cooking against strict body politics.

My second case study, “Social Dimensions of Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Slaves’ Use of Plants at Poplar Forest” by Bowes and Trigg, describes how choices concerning plant usage “were imbued with social relations of power and resistance,” analyzing archaeobotanical remains to depict the “social context” of slave life on this plantation. Unlike Franklin, Bowes and Trigg examine the greater social implications of cultivating and gathering certain plants, noting diachronic changes in their prevalence in the record and how that demonstrates evolving

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<sup>24</sup> Maria Franklin, “The Archaeological Dimensions of Soul Food: Interpreting Race, Culture, and Afro-Virginian Identity” in *Race and the Archaeology of Identity*, ed. Charles E. Orser, University of Utah Press, 2002, 97.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.



resistance to white provisions. During Jefferson's years as the plantation owner, the "proportion of crops from plantation fields" in slaves' diets was highest, suggesting the importance of "provisioned rations" in these early years, and the later need for "plants coming from slaves' gardens and forests" as the proportion of rationed crops reduced.<sup>27</sup> These archaeologists conflate spatial configuration analysis and food remains, using both the "taxa from features" to discover how that feature functioned and the feature itself to determine how slaves manipulated their environment to fuel their survival.<sup>28</sup> Bowes and Trigg complicate the implications of the archaeological record, providing alternative narratives; for example, the "richness" of food in the record could either reflect enslaved people's "increasing effort to obtain food...because the food provided by owners was insufficient" or decreased "restrictions on slaves' mobility."<sup>29</sup> Bowes and Trigg's perspective, while illuminating, focuses heavily on the ways in which white authority shaped the experiences and diets of enslaved people rather than how black individuals created community dynamics based on cultivation, a framework which ultimately decreases slave's agency by making their daily existence contingent upon their masters instead of their own free will. These archaeologists needed to not only explore "the complexities" of enslaved personal and community subsistence, but expound upon these dynamics to discover how this subtle form of resistance unified the enslaved population or how specific roles in food production influenced social hierarchies.

Battle-Baptiste, studying the Hermitage in Nashville, Tennessee in "Case Study: Black Feminist Archaeology," argues that a feminist perspective in the archaeology of slavery can

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<sup>27</sup> Jessica Bowes and Heather Trigg, "Social Dimensions of Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Slaves' Uses of Plants at Poplar Forest" in *Jefferson's Poplar Forest: Unearthing a Virginia Plantation*, ed. Barbara J. Heath, University Press of Florida, 2014, 156.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-156.

elucidate previously “hidden” spaces and create new conceptions of the home not constrained by Euroamerican notions of femininity. Unlike previous archaeologists, Battle-Baptiste uses a black feminist framework to understand the roles that women and men played in enslaved societies, refusing to interpret “the domestic realm” as the “sole concern of the captive women” and accordingly increasing their presence in the historical record.<sup>30</sup> She promotes the term “homespace” as a new way of understanding slaves’ “domestic sphere,” noting the way in which both the home and surrounding yardscape “bec[a]me the location of culturally prescribed and understood action,” providing a safe space for healing and “thoughts of resistance.”<sup>31</sup> To Battle-Baptiste, a cooking pit built by slaves at the first Hermitage site represents “the heart of the...homespace,” for the wide range of evidence in the record—including “marbles,” “pins and buttons,” and “fish hooks”—suggests that this was a space for all ages and genders, unifying the various dwellings into a community.<sup>32</sup> The enslaved people “manipulate[d] the landscape” in a way that allowed for socialization and the practice of “resistance and autonomy” around the cooking pit, providing a space for “black cultural production” completely separate from the planter elite.<sup>33</sup> While Battle-Baptiste’s methodology of cultural ecology succeeds in examining how enslaved people constructed and used spaces to form community identity, she fails to heavily imbed her argument in archaeological research, theorizing the cultural value of spaces rather than rooting her interpretations in their material culture. However, her feminist perspective adds depth to the slave narrative by complicating assumptions of gender dynamics and demonstrating how the entire community repurposed cooking—a traditionally female function—to

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<sup>30</sup> Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Maria Franklin, *Black Feminist Archaeology*, Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2011, 88.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-104.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-106.

unify themselves, hinting at the unique social structures and cultural values of enslaved populations.

The archaeology of slavery comments on the gradual formation of black identity through resistance, yet a gap in research exists concerning the dynamics and organization of slave communities, privileging narratives of identity building and enslaved interactions with the planter elite. Archaeologists have failed to ideologically separate the black community from the white community on plantations, analyzing macro-social structures--i.e., racial hierarchies--through racial disparities in material culture rather than the complex social framework of individual slave communities--i.e., hierarchies based on country of origin, job on the plantation, age, gender, sexuality, etc. By refocusing the archaeology of slavery towards establishing these community structures, archaeologists can better construct histories of enslaved people, complicating their conception as a completely homogenous group and defining individuals not by their labor, but by their role in their society. This focus will redress the erasure of personal experiences in current slave archaeologies, for when an archaeologist analyzes how an enslaved community functioned, she can begin fitting individuals and artifacts back into the narrative, distinguishing enslaved people and reassigning their agency that has been historically forgotten. Detailed documentary records bring white Americans out of historical erasure, yet black Americans have been denied this privilege, as enslaved people have been reduced to anonymity, only recognized by their oppression. Archaeology has the distinct responsibility to enrich societal understanding of enslaved communities, and while demonstrating the growth of community identity and resistance elaborates their experiences, the focus remains on enslaved people responding to their condition of servitude in some way. I believe that archaeologists

should first excavate slave sites with the intention of constructing individual narratives and examining the micro-social structures that specified their lives, for by depicting how independent slaves expressed their agency and free will through their daily experiences, we can better understand how they expressed their agency against institutional racism.

Some archaeologists have made strides to close this gap in research, such as Lori Lee in “Consumerism, Social Relations, and Antebellum Slavery at Poplar Forest” who “recontextualizes” artifacts into slaves’ “expressive environment and daily routines.”<sup>34</sup> Analyzing the material culture of “economic consumption” allows Lee to interpret the “social relations” that “were entangled in economic transactions.”<sup>35</sup> For example, by examining how “the[ir] purchases...were related to clothing or items of personal adornment” as reflected in the archaeological and documentary record, Lee explores how “these objects...shap[ed] identity” and “maintain[ed] social relations,” highlighting individual purchases and how it functioned as an expression of free will.<sup>36</sup> Participating in the market economy as a merchant “altered [a slave’s] social and economic conditions,” allowing archaeologists to view changes in the complexity of their material record as reflections of their evolving class and status within the slave community.<sup>37</sup> Lee’s perspective begins to close the gap in research by distinctly defining black social structures based off of economic activity, however, many lenses through which to interpret slave experiences remain unexplored, such as defining social structures through access to education,

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<sup>34</sup> Lori Lee, “Consumerism, Social Relations, and Antebellum Slavery at Poplar Forest” in *Jefferson’s Poplar Forest: Unearthing a Virginia Plantation*, ed. Barbara J. Heath, University Press of Florida, 2014, 161.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

the responsibilities of motherhood/fatherhood, familial ties across plantations, or quality of food, for example.

Another gap that limits this topic is the low number of black archaeologists, constraining interpretations of the black experience to a white lens. Black archaeologists approach the record with methodologies and theoretical frameworks formed by their experiences, which are different to those of white archaeologists, allowing for a greater understanding of the history of enslaved people. Agbe-Davis, in "Archaeology and the Black Experience," points out that only "two" of the "1,644 members of the SAA" are of African American descent due to the "perceived social impact" of archaeology, which many believe to be none.<sup>38</sup> Archaeology, however, highlights the nuances in history, reflecting the "dynamic aspects of culture" that historians often forget when viewing "how contemporary African American culture" was shaped by slavery.<sup>39</sup> For example, archaeologists viewed the presence "English pottery" at slave sites as the loss of "something uniquely African," however, the "forms" and "decorations" of the pottery demonstrate something unique to the enslaved communities, showing the "flexibility of culture." Viewing history as a series of causes and effects erases this cultural versatility, making archaeology paramount for elucidating the trends and conditions that fail to conform to traditional interpretations. If black scholars understand the importance of studying archaeology for specifically constructing their history, then more will join the field, increasing the wealth of knowledge and accurate analysis of the record.

The archaeology of slavery more accurately constructs a narrative of the black experience from their own material culture, countering white documentary history that limits enslaved

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<sup>38</sup> Anna Agbe-Davies, "Archaeology and the Black Experience," *Archaeology* 56, no. 1, 2003, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

people's existence to their labor by exploring community dynamics and increasing enslaved agency through the study of their identity formation and resistance. Although the archaeological record is inherently biased by the functions of time and privilege, the items that survive directly challenge the belief that these people's lives centered around their condition as forced laborers, allowing study of their community's vibrancy and survivance despite direct oppression. The archaeology of slavery alone can purely construct enslaved people's history, privileging narratives of their daily experiences and community dynamics. They did not just exist in relation to their white masters, as history portrays, but functioned individually with unique social relationships, roles, and hierarchies, interacting with the greater American community in more ways than just by cultivating their exports. To understand how history influenced the modern black experience, we first need to fully understand the lives of black enslaved people, describing a dynamic view of their culture shaped, but not defined, by their white oppressors. As scholars seek to rectify modern oppression and the discrimination of black identities, they can apply studies of past injustices, drawing links between how communities reacted to their condition then and now. Additionally, by challenging master narratives of power through archaeology, black Americans will see the full complexity of their history, empowering modern populations through descriptions of their ancestor's resistance, identity, and experiences.

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