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HANDBOOK OF
POSTCOLONIAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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**COMMENTARY:
AN ARCHAEOLOGIST FINDS HER VOICE: A COMMENTARY
ON COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITIES**

Whitney Battle-Baptiste

“My foremost priority is taking care of myself and keeping my soul intact. . . .”

Wallace 2004: 15

Each morning before I leave my house, I stop by a small altar that stands just at the edge of my kitchen. I say a few words of thanks—for the new day, the positive things in my life, and the ability to maintain an open relationship with my ancestors. On this altar are pictures of family members who have passed away, glasses of water (symbolizing the medium that separates the world of the living from the world of the dead), flowers, a portion of food my family has eaten for breakfast, a cup of coffee sweet with sugar, unprocessed cotton (the sugar, coffee, and cotton are representative of those crops cultivated by my enslaved ancestors), several small bottles of liquor,

and a source of light. This altar is for my *Egun*, which in the Yoruba language means “bones.” These bones are the bones of my ancestors, not in the physical sense, but in the spiritual sense, a way to acknowledge the connection between the living and the dead. Let me explain further. I was raised in a religious community of Orisha traditionalists based in New York City. Followers of Orisha (pronounced “orisha”) are part of an ancient spiritual tradition indigenous to contemporary Nigeria and Benin. Throughout the African diaspora it is called by different names: Santería, Shango, Lucumí, Candomblé, or Ifá. I was raised in this tradition among a very active and vibrant Orisha community in New York City.

When I was younger, I often kept my faith as a private matter. As an adult, I have generally kept my faith a part of my non-public self. As an anthropologist, I am learning that my

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subject position enhances, rather than inhibits, the work I do; therefore I wanted to begin this commentary with this bit of information about myself to perhaps give some insight into why I think the future of historical archaeology will be about connections, genealogies, honest dialogues, and *Egun*. The connection to the past can mean learning and understanding the very rich and lengthy black intellectual traditions of Vindicationist, Critical Race, Black feminist, African Diaspora, and Afrocentric/Africana theories; the genealogies are about those scholars and African-American anthropologists who have maintained a marginalized position in the anthropological canon; the honest dialogues begin with being able to convey to descendant communities that we are versed in the African and African-American past; and *Egun* is about continuing a dialogue with our Africanist brothers and sisters also engaged in the struggle of interpreting the African past.

What does postcolonialism have to do with a historical archaeology based in *Egun*? Well, I did some soul searching to understand what a postcolonial archaeology might be. I began to try to understand what postcolonialism sets out to accomplish as it is related to the issues so central to African diaspora archaeology. Postcolonialism, as a theory, is still marginal to many of us doing archaeology in the United States. Or so I thought. Although I had never perceived myself as directly fighting colonialism, I did relate to using archaeological interpretation to confront and critique this fluid thing we call colonialism. For me, postcolonialism had always been about the search for redefining one's identity, writing

against imperialist notions of truth, and finding ways to create viable critiques of the colonial past and centering the cultural and political needs of the Indigenous somewhere else. I have read a lot of material on the subject to figure out how to handle my research and the challenges of interpreting life under slavery. Yet, I still had not connected what I had read with the types of struggles I was engaged in here in the United States. However, is the United States of America not a former colonial site? I am not only the product of a long colonial moment, but also a child of the so-called inner city, the concrete jungle, the playground of the urban social scientist, who in many ways plays a part in maintaining a form of imperialist (read "culture of poverty" here) discourse. This is about connections.

I believe that at times, as archaeologists are coming to grips with the needs of various publics and shifting their focus to descendant communities, we often believe we are coming from a place of knowing. We are fully aware of what descendant communities need, what they are looking for—before they even understand what it is that we do. However, we rarely engage in these critical conversations with a sense of who they are and what they already know. I will give an example from my own life experience. My arrival at the Hermitage plantation, where I would do my dissertation research, was a reality check about what historical archaeologists did. I immediately recognized that my training (although in history) was not only different, but was opposed to that of many of the archaeologists I would meet in those first few years in the field. My connection

to an African world view, a solid foundation in contemporary African history and African-American culture, felt misplaced. It gave me a variety of factors that marked my difference: my faith, race, gender, class, and knowledge base.

To some extent, I began to do my own ethnography of African-American archaeology. I had long conversations about how those around me were trained. I asked questions about their background in African history, African-American history and culture, African-American anthropology, Caribbean literature, and black women's fiction. To my dismay, many of those I talked to had bits and pieces of these elements, but never enough to hold a lengthy conversation about an intellectual tradition that continues to be relegated to African-American/African studies departments. This was real for me, and it has taken me almost 10 years to come to grips with this reality and be able to write about it. This is about genealogies.

A topic that figures prominently in this literature and in popular culture is the historical position of Africa, and the ongoing relations we have with African governments, institutes, and specific individuals. In other words, what are our relations with our colleagues on the African continent? They can tell us about the African past; we can tell them about the implications of that past. In this conversation, we can all better understand that the transatlantic trade in African captives adversely affected both the African continent and the New World. Without these conversations, we have no connection and are without a genealogy, without an ancestral line, without *Egun*.

Recently I was asked by a colleague, whom I respect, about ways to enrich her understanding of the intersection of race and gender in her work. Based on this conversation, I realized that I could use my commentary in this book as a means to push archaeologists to think about scholarship that is overlooked in anthropology and to consider other works that are outside the discipline. I feel that passing along even a preliminary sketch of the genealogical literature that African-American archaeologists should be familiar with is the first step to shifting the focus from "margin to center" (hooks 2000). Please understand that this is not all there is out there, and there are many scholars I have omitted. In many ways, I need my colleagues to understand that for me to be a conscious member of African America, it is vital to understand the connection that race and racism have on the perspectives of African diasporic peoples, so I have to be able to turn around or look up and find the book or the article that may have something I can use or that at times can be the source of inspiration when I am writing or preparing to teach a class. This is another part of my personal practice or routine. It enters into all aspects of my work—in my office, when I write, and when I am in the field. I am familiar with this literature and these experiences, which is to say I have a grasp of the genealogies.

Here is a brief list of some of my mainstays (also included in the references, below); Aimé Césaire, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Leith Mullings, Michele Wallace, Audre Lorde,

Toni Morrison, Robert Farris Thompson, Chandra Mohanti, Chinua Achebe, Paul Gilroy, Walter Rodney, Ron Eyerman, Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Lee Baker, St. Claire Drake, W. E. B. Du Bois, John Gwaltney, and Theresa Singleton. Another reason I have listed these authors is because they have become my guides to understanding the impact of race and racism on people of African descent. What would an archaeological interpretation look like with some of these works woven into them? How would an anthropology program benefit from including some of this scholarship in graduate seminars? Imagine coming to a site or a conversation with a descendant community with questions informed by a world that reflects the everyday issues and critiques of American society that are important to many marginalized groups of people. Imagine a world where we can have conversations that are not just about making up for lost time and misunderstandings, but realizing the role of oppression and white supremacy before the community outreach programs are constructed. There should be a moment when archaeologists are no longer concerned about struggles of power and control of archaeological knowledge, because once we as archaeologists recognize that there is a different voice from which racialized minorities and other oppressed communities speak, the dialogue, in my opinion, becomes a different conversation. This could be an honest dialogue.

So with this commentary, I hope to put some ideas out there that have been on my mind for some years. It is also a moment to reflect and give thanks to all of those *Egun*

scholars who have gone before me and helped me to understand that this work can be difficult, but at the center of it all is the ability to keep your soul intact.

Peace & light.

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