Background

Archaeologists, as social scientists and humanists, are well aware of the ways in which our personal and political lives influence our practice and vice versa. Since the 1980s archaeologists have paid increasing attention to the racialization of the past and how white privilege, white supremacy, and racial hierarchy structured the material world. Yet less attention has been paid to how these conditions structure our practice. Since the discipline remains predominantly white, it follows that our practice supports and reproduces values, attitudes, conditions, and worldviews that privilege whiteness. If this compromises our discipline and makes us intellectually and emotionally less whole we should work toward an anti-racist institutional identity. What would an anti-racist Society for Historical Archaeology look like and how can we move in that direction?

Where Did We Come From? A Brief Timeline for Important Events Related to Race and the Society of Historical Archaeology

1967: The Society of Historical Archaeology was founded at its inaugural meeting in Dallas, TX. Among those present were some of the legendary figures of the nascent discipline including Stanley South, J. C. Harrington, John L. Cotter, Edward Jokl, and Arnold Pilling, among others—all but one of the 21 original fellows were white men from U.S. institutions. Caesar Mangum was from Mexico. For much of our history we have debated the grade of our discipline. However, insofar as white men created the SHA, it was structured to meet their needs as members of white society. This is reflected in its personnel; programs, products, and services; constituency; structure; and mission, particularly in the academy. During this time period, cultural resource management fostered the growth of African-American archaeology, primarily in the South.

1970s: While archaeology was conducted in a racialized context throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, efforts to examine the archaeology of racialized populations did not occur until early work on plantation slavery in the 1970s (see Garman 1994; 1990). Yet, there has been considerable less study of the way in which racism shapes archaeological practice that reproduces racial hierarchy. It also brought wider attention to the archaeological examination of slavery in the North. Descendant communities became involved and demonstrated how their role in archaeology can contribute to knowledge that both expands the discipline and reflects their interests and experiences. Archaeology can be emancipatory practice that exposes the connections between past and present.

1990s: Ten articles appeared in Historical Archaeology that established race as a viable archaeological topic. David Bahnson pointed out that this was not accounted for the harmful social effects of racial ideology. Terrence Epperson encouraged the study of the historical construction of race and called attention to the fact that archaeology cannot remain shielded from present-day politics.

1991: The discovery and excavation of the African Burial Ground (ABG) in Manhattan triggered concerns over racial identity and the ways in which archaeology reproduced racial hierarchy. It also brought wider attention to the archaeological examination of slavery in the North. Descendant communities became involved and demonstrated how their role in archaeology can contribute to knowledge that both expands the discipline and reflects their interests and experiences. Archaeology can be emancipatory practice that exposes the connections between past and present.

1994: SHA President Betsy Reitz expanded the Committee on Gender Issues into the Committee on Gender and Minority Issues (later to be known as the Gender and Minority Affairs Committee). This was six years after the SHA Women’s Caucus conducted a survey to document inequities, identity conditions that limited women’s access, and attempted to redress some of these issues by introducing childcare at the meetings. Because gender and minority issues are often collapsed, minority issues were less effectively addressed.

1996: The SHA hosted a controversial symposium at its annual meeting dedicated to questions surrounding the excavation of African-American sites and their political dimension. The papers were subsequently published in Historical Archaeology (1997).

2000s: Despite the early activity of the Gender and Minority Affairs Committee, it soon became relatively inactive. In the mid 1990s there was talk of disbanding the committee since “it had fulfilled its mission” (Spencer 1996: The SHA 1991: The SHA 1997). The early activity of the Committee on Minority Affairs, it soon became relatively inactive. In the mid 1990s there was talk of disbanding the committee since “it had fulfilled its mission” (Spencer 1996: The SHA 1991: The SHA 1997). This came six years after the SHA Women’s Caucus conducted a survey to document inequities, identity conditions that limited women’s access, and attempted to redress some of these issues by introducing childcare at the meetings. Because gender and minority issues are often collapsed, minority issues were less effectively addressed.

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1998: The SHA hosted a controversial symposium at its annual meeting dedicated to questions surrounding the excavation of African American sites and their political dimension. The papers were subsequently published in Historical Archaeology (1997). It was a landmark event that expanded the scope of the discipline and highlighted the importance of understanding the historical and cultural context of archaeological sites.

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2007: The SHA Women’s Caucus expanded the Committee on Gender Issues into the Committee on Gender and Minority Issues (later to be known as the Gender and Minority Affairs Committee). This was six years after the SHA Women’s Caucus conducted a survey to document inequities, identity conditions that limited women’s access, and attempted to redress some of these issues by introducing childcare at the meetings. Because gender and minority issues are often collapsed, minority issues were less effectively addressed.

2011: At the close of the session, the panelists and audience participants suggested that a list of recommendations be brought to the Board of Directors for their action. The board subsequently issued these concerns back to the Gender and Minority Affairs Committee and the newly formed Ethics Committee.

Future Action

The Current Academic Climate in Archaeology for People of Color

1. The educational path to professional and academic standing in the field of archaeology is daunting. For people of color, it is considerably more difficult. But:
2. If people of color know about the discipline, they first must overcome the personal and cultural and familial resistance and lack of familiarity. To get this far, they must be accepted as members of the profession.
3. Once the person embraces the profession they must pass entrance examinations often designed with an inherent bias against them.
4. If they are accepted, they must be accepted into the institution.
5. If they are accepted, they must fund their attendance.
6. If there is funding, there is support for the person through the rigorous demands of an advanced degree.
7. If there is support the person must still be able to graduate.
8. If they graduate and make it into the profession, they are often unable to get a tenure-track position in a major institution.
9. If they manage to get a tenure-track position, promotion is shunted. At present, there is one African American who is a full professor in the field of academic who will distinguished professor or eminent status ever be conferred?

In brief, the commitment to diversity does not end with the admission process. It must begin before that process is initiated and must continue long after we think it should end. We must come together as a profession to eliminate this disparity because individual schools operating in isolation has not been an effective strategy.

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To provide their perspectives on the following questions:
1. What will we do to welcome,(enact) and retain diversity?
2. How do we institutional racism impact our practice? If so, how?
3. Do we have institutional racism impact our practice? If so, how?
4. Should SHA adopt a formal declaration on race (or do we prefer to remain racially neutral)? Does the arc of archaeology bend towards justice?
5. How can we begin to effectively address the racial disparities in our profession?
6. How do we begin to claim and put into practice an anti-racist organizational identity?