

## African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

---

Volume 1

Issue 1 April 1994

Article 1

---

4-1-1994

### Notes from the African-American Cross Cultural Workshop

Carol McDavid

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

---

#### Recommended Citation

McDavid, Carol (1994) "Notes from the African-American Cross Cultural Workshop," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol1/iss1/1>

This Articles, Essays, and Reports is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

## Notes from the African-American Cross Cultural Workshop

*Submitted by Carol McDavid*

The purpose of the 1994 workshop was to discuss and debate various theoretical approaches to the study of African American archaeology (contextual, functional, traditional, post-processual, etc.). Esther White (Mount Vernon Ladies Association) and Joe Joseph (New South Associates) made brief formal presentations, after which ensued a rather lively debate on the merits of various approaches and a discussion of the social/political issues encountered when involving local communities in planning and implementing archeological work.

White's comments dealt with what she termed a "contextual" approach to studies underway at Mount Vernon, and the importance of dealing with what she described as "three different levels" of context. She first discussed the need for rigorous analysis of the entire assemblage in relation to surrounding soils, TPQs of different levels, intrusions, and so on, rather than restricting analysis to artifacts alone -- that is, the need to deal with "archaeological context" more exhaustively. By focusing on the entire assemblage, researchers at Mount Vernon have been able to see patterns which do not become apparent otherwise, and have attempted to lay a foundation for more effective intersite studies. White then stressed the need to examine each site as part of a broader "historical context"; that is, to analyze assemblages as part of larger systems -- systems in which African Americans relied on, and were relied upon by, different elements of the plantation, community, or region. Without consideration of this kind of context, White pointed out, the tendency is to fall back on particularistic, descriptive site reports. Finally, she highlighted the need to implement minimum standards for reporting data, in order to make meaningful comparative work possible. While she did not use the term, "scientific" or "analytical" context might be appropriate to apply to this third level of context.

Joe Joseph then pointed out that archaeologists dealing with African-American sites cannot yet evaluate the success of various theoretical approaches because they have not developed adequate culture histories -- that is, until recently African Americans have been studied as if they were simply another form of the "white" or "dominant" culture. For example, using Miller's (1980) approach to analyze ceramics on African-American sites would probably be inappropriate, because that approach assumes that the people who deposited the pottery in the archaeological record defined status in the same way as did the producers, distributors, and, in some cases, purchasers of the pottery. Joseph suggested that the approach used by Brown and Cooper (1990) would be more effective in studying African-American sites in that it recognizes African-American cultural systems as having different roots than European-American systems. He suggested that a more "ethnohistorical" approach could help to develop a better appreciation of the processes of acculturation and adaptation that actually took place within African-American communities.

Discussion then moved into several areas. Dennis Poque (Mount Vernon Ladies Association) pointed out that archaeologists should expect to see a great deal of diversity in patterns found on African-American sites. He commented that simply "looking for Africanisms" is both simplistic and ultimately unproductive, and that archaeologists will very likely see different patterns from

plantation to plantation -- that blue beads, for example, do not always mean "African", and that other contextual elements need to be considered when analyzing such items.

White and others pointed out the potential benefits of examining previously excavated materials in the light of new approaches. This led to a several comments about the need to encourage granting agencies to fund analysis of "old" sites, and to several suggestions about how funding might be obtained.

It was suggested that this newsletter might be a good forum for publicizing research opportunities for graduate students to analyze previously excavated material. [see the Thesis Corner in this issue, ed.].

The discussion then moved into an examination of the issue of whether to, and how to, involve a community in the archaeological examination of a site, and how the archaeological, scientific "agenda" for any given site could well be different from public, audience-driven agendas. There were a number of participants in the workshop from John Milner Associates, so the discussion revolved to some degree around the issues that arose from the politically charged situation surrounding the excavation of the African Burial Ground in New York City. There was a great deal of spirited discussion about a number of related issues.

- the power of the press in disseminating inaccurate information about a site;
- the desire of some contemporary community leaders to use African-American sites to "empower" those who perceive symbolic connections to the site;
- the ways archaeologists should, or should not, acknowledge and deal explicitly with those symbolic connections and perceptions;
- the importance of the idea of "ancestors" in African-American life, and the ways that not understanding this idea influenced the decisions of those originally involved in dealing with the New York burials;
- the need for the scientific community to deal more effectively with situations that are "spiritually charged."
- the need for archaeologists and other scientists to acknowledge, when planning and executing their research, that things that are "artifactual" may exist, for the audiences of archaeology, in a "spiritual" context;
- and the possibility of having a session on the New York African Burial Ground at the next SHA meeting.

In one sense, the discussion in this year's workshop came full circle, from Esther White's initial comments about different levels of context to a discussion of the influence of contemporary contexts on the supposedly scientific process of doing archaeology. The workshop clearly illustrated that even though we may define ourselves as objective, rational scientists, we conduct our investigations within a racially polarized and politically charged culture. That culture affects our discourse with each other as well as our communication with our various publics, whether those publics be politically active New Yorkers or rural southern communities. As anthropologists,-- "of all people", as one participant put it later -- should be able to talk constructively and openly about issues of race, politics, power and symbolism -- especially if we intend to deal with such questions on the sites that we dig and analyze.

## References

Brown, Kenneth L. and Doreen Cooper

1990 Structural Continuity in an African-American Slave and Tenant Community. *Historical Archaeology* 24:7-19.

Miller, George L.

1980 Classification and Economic Scaling of 19th Century Ceramics. *Historical Archaeology* 14:1-40.