



BLACK FEMINIST ARCHAEOLOGY

WHITNEY BATTLE-BAPTISTE

Black Feminist Archaeology



*For Egun, my ancestors, and the Old Ones.
Those whose names are known and those whose
names have been forgotten. Thank you for giving me
the strength to pull the words together to
tell your story...*

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Whitney Battle-Baptiste

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Foreword



I can't think of another work written by a scholar that starts with as revealing an assertion as, "I begin this journey with a moment of honesty." Moreover, taking the plunge into the realm of self-revelation (in so public a manner, no less) is rare for an archaeologist. We generally prefer the comfort of a couch cushioned by distance and objectivity. Yet the journey that Battle-Baptiste leads us through is not only one that brings into focus her motivations, objectives, and importantly, her life history, it is one that encourages each of us to examine our own in the pursuit and production of knowledge. This is not an exercise in self-reflectivity that leaves us wondering about its relevance to anything else, let alone archaeology. It is a positioning, a standpoint, if you will, that situates Battle-Baptiste within a politics of black feminism, a legacy of black vindicationist scholarship, a history of black struggle and resistance, and a range of transformative practices in archaeology. Yet she envisions this space as one that is open to all of those who seek to challenge inequality along its many fronts, in her claims that, "I did not write a book to push for a theoretical agenda that excludes anyone. I write for an audience that is ready to hear about how race, gender and class complicate the field of archaeology and make it relevant to the larger world."

Critical self-reflection, politics, and alternative forms of writing are not new to archaeology, especially within feminist and social

archaeologies. Yet few have ventured to relate their missteps, anxieties, hopes, anger, intellectual growth, and passion with respect to archaeology and their relationship to it as the author has done here. Thus, while archaeologists will be familiar with the topics (households, landscape, class, women's labor and consumer practices, etc.), Battle-Baptiste's black feminist theorizing brings us onto less-traveled terrain for the discipline. She maintains an active presence in the text as she takes us through her process of forming questions about the past, and questioning the canon as she seeks an alternative, more inclusive and politically responsible way to engage with the past. Battle-Baptiste relies as much on black women's literary traditions as she does the usual academic scholarship in constructing her narrative, which is rooted to her veneration of family and ancestral matriarchs. People are highlighted over artifacts within these pages, gently reminding us what our research is supposed to be about. The mystifying language of archaeology is replaced by a welcoming one of accessibility, a voice that seeks a much broader audience defined by the author as "my elders, my peers, my children and my community." Thus, while Battle-Baptiste reaches back to recover the past, she also reaches out with the goal of placing her work in the hands of those beyond the spheres of academe and the profession.

The journey that Battle-Baptiste maps for us traverses individual and group histories, a range of geographical spaces and eras, and her own personal memories. She takes us from the Hermitage Plantation during her formative years as an archaeologist, to the walls of her campus office at UMass, and eventually to the site of the W.E.B. DuBois childhood home, with other destinations of import along the way. It is a journey that underscores the relationship between the past and present, and the positive role that positionality can play in the research process. Ultimately, this journey is one of recovery and healing. It compels us to take seriously the omissions of our craft in writing narratives that deny the presence of women, let alone their contributions as scholars and historical agents.

Reading this book brought back memories of attending my first Society for American Archaeology annual meeting in the early 1990s.

As far as I could tell (and, trust me, I looked), I was not only the sole black woman in attendance, I was the only person of African descent. That this book even exists, therefore, is a wonder to me. Nonetheless, I certainly empathized with Battle-Baptiste when she recalled her frustration as a black woman of being rendered invisible, and thus unheard: “There were many moments when I was screaming at the top of my lungs to look around and realize that no one was listening.” How many out there have raised their voices only to be tuned out because of their class, race, sexuality, gender, age, nationality, religion, and so on? So open up your ears, folks, and listen. The message is well worth it. Inspired by the black women that she hails herein, those who sung the blues, fought to keep their families together and their dignities intact, and those who still struggle against tremendous odds, Battle-Baptiste has wielded her keyboard in bringing awareness to the life stories of those who have too long walked in the shadows and invites us to bear witness to them. In doing so, she provides another crucial perspective to the growing literature on the potentials for transforming archaeological practice and theory, and the rationales for why this is necessary.

Maria Franklin



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INTRODUCTION



Understanding a Black Feminist Framework

My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget. Even though they'd burned everything to play like it didn't never happen. Yeah, and where's the next generation?

Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*

We exist as women who are Black, who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world.

Wallace 1975: 2

The Journey

I begin this journey with a moment of honesty. I am writing this book with an agenda. I want to present the components of a methodological tool kit that will enable Americanist archaeologists to