

Exploring How Black Feminist Geographies
Can Support Community-based participatory Spatial Studies of the Past

Jeffrey Burnett
Michigan State University

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Author Bio:

My name is Jeffrey Burnett (he/Him) and I am a white settler archaeologist and PhD. student at Michigan State University. My research explores the construction, expression, and experience of identity in the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries and how these have shaped our social, economic, political, and cultural present. I am also interested in how intersectional approaches to the study of the past, which are community-based, can reveal new and socially-beneficial understandings of the past and help to diversify the field of archaeology and provide communities and individuals with additional tools with which to combat social inequality.

Abstract:

In this paper I explore how the historical archaeology of communities can be informed by Black feminist philosophies of space and place, exploring what possibilities emerge when Black studies encounter archaeology of communities. This is not a novel concept in historical archaeology, particularly in archaeology of the African Diaspora, but it is one that is best explored from the ground up, to engage with deep and dynamic literature of Black studies. This paper proposes that archaeologists studying the history of the African Diaspora can, by engaging with Black feminist conceptions of land, as space, place, and location, and conceptions freedom, enhance their understanding of how existing in space can itself be an act of resistance and expression of refusal. This is beneficially for conducting community-based projects in areas where the descendant and local communities maintain strong connections to place and are engaged in non-archaeological heritage work. To do so I first lay out archaeological perspectives on community, a focus which reemerged in the 1990s after being subsumed for decades by disciplinary focus on regional projects and questions. I then explore Black feminist conceptions of geography, as space, place, location, and bodies and establish these knowledges as particular understanding of the world and ontologies which inform and are informed by the lived experiences of Black women in the Americas. I then posit that archaeological conceptions of space and community and those of Black feminist philosophies can be integrated through conceptions of refusal and anthropologically informed process philosophy. I do this engage explore that which can be uniquely understood through a Black feminist informed archaeology of community to understand existing “out of place” as refusal and a conception of freedom as process.

Thank organizers and fellow presenters

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Land acknowledgment

I acknowledge that Michigan State University occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary Lands of the Anishinaabeg–Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples. The University resides on Land ceded in the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw.

Community-based Archaeology of Discordance

In this paper, I consider how Katheryn McKittrick’s concept of demonic grounds, and Ayana Flewellen’s use of the concept in archaeology, make space for community-based participatory research in Oak Bluffs, a resort town on the island of Martha’s Vineyard off the coast of Massachusetts and the ancestral and contemporary lands of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head Aquinnah. The possible research project here is still in the development stages, though I did exploratory fieldwork in 2019, limited to archival work and interviews.

McKittrick (2006: 134) redefines Black women’s geographic praxis as “demonic” in order to ask, “what happens when black womanhood, ... femineity, ... spaces, places, and poetics are ‘*Not on the margins*’?” (emphasis in the original). McKittrick contends that asking this question asserts that Black women’s spatial ontologies are part of “a larger story of human geography,” not outside of this story. Black women’s heterogeneous experiences of racial-sexual-gendered domination take place in geographic space and reveal moments of contestation that connect the social construction of space to ongoing locations of struggle, de-naturalizing spatial marginalization (McKittrick 2006: 135).

Utilizing McKittrick’s Black feminist geographies may constitute a way of doing archaeology in Oak Bluffs that engages with the work of Black Feminist archaeologists and

builds capacity and solidarity with communities by extending pre-existing heritage work. The African American Heritage Trail of Martha's Vineyard is an organization that identifies and memorializes sites associated with the history of people of African descent on the Island. As part of their work, they have produced a memory landscape through both physical plaques and guided tours that is grounded in preserving, sharing, and celebrating the heterogenous lives of people of African descent on the Island. Many of the sites represent counter memories, revealing "hidden pasts" or redressing misrepresentations of the past.

One such site, called the "Landladies of Oak Bluffs", memorializes two early-20th century boarding houses owned by Black women, one of whom, Mrs. Anthony Smith, experienced anti-Black residential segregation in Oak Bluffs. This site represents the historical marginalization of Black women on the Island and their efforts to recenter Black life. However, the AAHT does not fully control the site and this lack of control makes space for the co-option of the historical narrative by others who are not grounded in representing African diasporic perspectives. In this case, the geography of memorialization limits the presentation of complex, heterogenous histories, despite the efforts of the AAHT to reveal the paradoxical history of the community. The experiences of people of African descent who lived in places ostensibly restricted to whites represents a significant part of the narrative of community formation, resistance, and freedom making in Oak Bluffs as community and space are constructed through exclusion as well as inclusion.

The Wesleyan Gove Camp Grounds, the site of yearly, weeklong Methodist revivals starting in 1835, is often presented as. (Railton 2006:186, 196), the center from which Oak Bluffs, as a resort community, grew around. This space was slowly secularized throughout the 1880s and 1890s, but the yearly revivals remained as did the strict ordinances of the Camp

Grounds, written and unwritten. One unwritten, but seemingly well enforced restriction prevented African Americans from owning homes within the community (Railton 2006:377-81). Popular conception of the Camp Grounds then and now present it as a white space, but the AAHT and local historians (Hayden and Hayden 1999:49, 65) complicate this idea.

Despite claims in the local newspaper from the early 1880s that asserted it was the policy of the Camp Grounds to not make distinctions based “on the grounds of color” and that at least 25 lots were leased by individuals of African descent, historian of Black life Robert C. Hayden identified at least two instances where Black women were excluded from the neighborhood. (Hayden and Hayden 1999:49, [61-62](#)). Martha James, in 1889, was prevented from renting a cottage at the site by a white male resident who object her presence and who found her “another house to rent (Hayden and Hayden 1999:49).

The other incident of anti-Black segregation in the Camp Grounds was when Mrs. Anthony Smith, who, after purchasing a cottage, was forced out by her white neighbors who claimed that she intended to run a boarding house. Mrs. Smith went on to buy a home elsewhere in Oak Bluffs from which she ran boarding house that provided African American workers and vacationers a space to stay on the Island (Hayden and Hayden 1999:61-62; Weintraub and Tankard 2005 77-78). It is clear that whatever anti-discrimination policy the Camp Grounds had was not always enforced and the exclusion of two Black women, one of whom may have intended to rent out her home, raises questions about the intersection of class, gender, and racial oppressions in Oak Bluffs.

Due to Mrs. Smith’s community-building actions her home, and another boarding house near to it, are memorialized as part of the AAHT and marked by a plaque on a bench across the street,. The story of the site presented by AAHT in print and in guided tours (Weintraub and

Tankard 2005:77-78), seems to combine aspects of the stories of Mrs. Smith and Martha James into a single narrative. Further, when attending a non-AAHT tour of the site a white interpreter told the story differently again, mis-informing listeners that the cottage in the Camp Grounds was left to Mrs. Anthony Smith in the will of her white employer. What can we make of this re-framing and of the possible mixture of narratives around Mrs. Smith and Martha James?

Following the work of Ayanna Flewellen (2017), which integrates McKittrick's concept of demonic grounds into a critical analysis of memorialization at Kingsly Plantation, I believe it is productive to view these as a consequence of the paradoxical space of the site that shares the complex and disavowed location of Black women in Oak Bluffs. Once revealed by Hayden and translated to the public by the AAHT, other heritage tourism groups attempt to make sense of the paradoxical location by fitting it into pre-existing understandings of race, gender, class, and geography. By eschewing a desire for neatness it may be possible to explore the site, and Oak Bluffs as a whole, through the complex, heterogenous and intersecting identities, experiences, and ontologies of Mrs. Anthony Smith that reveal her as a whole person.

What is clear from the actions of Mrs. Smith, is that she believed that the white-coded Camp Grounds was a place she should and could live in. She placed herself, and temporally occupied, this center and was forced out. Thus, the narrative of the center, is incomplete without the story of the exclusion of Mrs. Anthony Smith, Martha James, and other people of African descent who experienced life in Camp Grounds. Their experiences represent, in the words of McKittrick, a paradoxical understanding of Oak Bluffs wherein the space of exclusion can and must be defined from the space of the excluded. The discordant narratives presented of the Landladies site represent attempts to settle the story into a single narrative.

These stories of the past complicate the social production of where historical and present-day communities reside in Oak Bluffs; they encourage tourgoers to consider the marginalization of women of African descent and their resistance to this marginalization. However, because this memory site is located outside of the Camp Grounds, the memory landscape itself does not disrupt the mapping of racialized spaces in Oak Bluffs. The presence and exclusion of Mrs. Smith from the Camp Grounds shows the violent and intentional process by which marginalization occurred yet, the AAHT memory landscape does not, and cannot, effectively challenge the construction of the Camp Grounds as defined by passive geography that naturalizes Black marginalization and white centrality.

Mrs. Smith's challenge to normative geography is not erased, the spaces remain on the landscape, but by not being able to memorialize her act of resistance within the Camp Grounds, the narrative is made ungeographic. The narrative is disavowed, to borrow from Fleweller's reading of McKittrick. Thus, when history of the Camp Grounds is told and celebrated, it is from the perspective of the white majority, white experience is normalized as the only experience of that space and Black experience and spatiality is pushed to the margins, is literally relocated.

What power does archaeology possess, and can transmit to communities, that could help challenge the racialized geography of white patriarchal histories? In Oak Bluffs, archaeology, as a new tool on the heritage environment, may be able to help extend the AAHT memory landscape into currently inaccessible sites. In this way community-based collaborative archaeology engages with the work of the AAHT, work that has remapped spaces of African American placemaking. This placemaking centers on processes of geographic resistance that are encapsulated by Mrs. Anthony Smith's refusal to be constrained by white patriarchal conceptions of space that *placed* her, as a property-owning Black woman, outside of the Camp Grounds.

For the last section of this I want to consider how we can recognize these processes archaeologically in Oak Bluffs.

Sylvia Wynter (1990) and Katherine McKittrick (2006), theorizing racial geography, speak of the need to view the perspectives of marginalized peoples as part of the center and explore the power of these ontologies to counter hegemonic narratives and to rethink and deconstruct inequality that has been normalized on the landscape. McKittrick (2006:11-12) argues, that experiences of domination produce geographic perspectives that are difficult to see because “Black geographies do not make sense in a world that validates spatial processes and progress through domination and social avowal”. Thus, it may be possible to locate sites of resistance by understanding how people were placed on a landscape and then exploring the out-of-placeness of those individuals whose sense of home and space refused to accept dominate conceptions of these. By centering these stories, it becomes possible view acts of spatial resistance as part of the process of constructing landscapes.

Tina Campt and Audra Simpson show that refusal is generative, is a daily act of imagining and living out possibilities different to those which would be forced on individuals by structures of power (Campt 2017; Simpson 2016). Because these acts are generative, they should be visible on the landscape archaeologically in the ways that past actors try to control how they connected with and disconnected from harmful institutions, worldviews, and expressions of power. Refusal, as a lived experience which aims to protect against daily, repeated injustices, is not necessarily loud, but it directly questions seemingly normative Euro-American conceptions of success and futurity. Refusal is neither a complete negation of oppression nor passive acceptance, but an ongoing process. In this sense it is a liminal state, but one that is not temporary, but may be constant.

Viewing refusal as a process prompts us to ask what is produced when the liminal experience does not end (Arpad Szakolczai (2009:155-65)? What is created when hierarchy is continuously exposed and critiqued in daily action, rather than reaffirmed? This type of liminality can be disruptive, even destructive. This, I believe, is what McKittrick (2006:61-3) means when she invokes subaltern spatialities and the power of the “not-quite spaces” of Black women to construct oppositional paradoxical ways of being in the world. As archaeologists we can ask what this form of being produced in the past and what it is continuing to do in the present. One such effect is the seeming erasure of Black history and presence from the Camp Grounds and its continuous re-creation as white space.

I am drawn an analysis of refusal, as a quieter register of resistance, in Oak Bluffs because makes it space for both joy and resistance, which seems essential in an archaeology of a resort community. It provides a way of understanding how individuals and families of African descent, legally free and experiencing various conditions of unfreedom, resisted because they remained and by doing so they remade the space of Oak Bluffs as the space also likely shaped residents. These ideas support and build upon the knowledge produced by heritage professionals already working in Oak Bluffs and Martha’s Vineyard, like the Heritage Trail.

Space making, community building, and freedom are processes rather than events. A focus on the specific spatial conceptions and experiences of Black women though Black feminist theory indicates how anti-hegemonic ways of thinking and being in the world can challenge and disrupt instances and systems of oppression through practices of resistance and refusal. An archaeology informed by such ontologies is better prepared to listen to the actors and more likely to produce a version of history that is counter to those produced by hegemonic understandings of space, community, and freedom.

- Wholly complex black women's lives
- Intersectionality – race, gender, class operations of power and oppression
 - Spatial and temporal specificities of power
 - Race, class, sexuality, and gender = less as personal attributers and more systems of power (P. H. Collins)
 - Used to study lived experiences of Black women as well as a broad category of research; Black Fem expands
 - Kitchen table politics – intentionally conversational; space where BW have communally gathered
 - Apocalypse – epistemically and ontological; after the death of western epistemic hegemony

Questions

- What is Black fem for you
 - Watkins: Embodied experience; gendered and raced absences in the discipline
 - Battle-Baptiste: BF practice (not just theory) – the difference that BF practice takes on includes action; since and before the CHR; what radical BF looks like (not always a BF – it is action, a way of thing, thinking about the ways archaeology can center Black women and families; Womanist, not Black fem; being about the community, about the liberation of Black people, not sure how to pull these together with Black Fem; “why arnt you a Black Fem?, what do those words mean in the academy – how we identify ourselves – how does your life experiences influence how you seem material culture / interpret data; what you lend to the work; articulating that what you say is not the only answer, but as process of understanding the past from a certain perspective (Black Fem /=/ echo white supremacist undertones)
 - Sterling: more than saying ___ is a social construction, and then when turn to the past saying we can understand gender in the past (or not thinking about it at all) bc its biological
 - Thinking about humans in the deep, deep past simply and also projecting on them
 - Treating them in past as European; as men and women; as binaries, not cultural being; basically always / normal to have multiple groups of humans; cannot place Homo Sapien Spaien at the top of the tree (supremist view)
 - Make sure the discipline is open, welcoming, and accessible to all; how do we treat our colleagues / student; who do we consider legitimate knowledge producers

- Personal and intellectual; how you actually show up as well as what you study and how you interpret data / conceive of projects
- In Archive at the end of the world – BF is an apocalypse, erases the commodification and oppression of Black women / Black people
 - Battle-Baptiste: getting to know Christine Sharp; doing “wake work”, acknowledging a past that has never been silent, whether they have been heard or not; in wake work, we need to think of the afterlife of slavery – the ability to understand that the work is disruptive to the status quo; Du Bois, once realize that data wasn’t gonna free AA, data / art w.o propaganda are not the tools we need to push – wants to interrupt; help all of the screaming ancestors and to allow the perspectives that we hold, not only telling own story, think of new question based on life experiences
 - Don’t need to be a BW to be a BF, but need to read BW, talk to BW, etc. – engage in the Black academic tradition and Black fiction – Toni Morrison, not just fiction, but re-memorialization process that helps to give voice to the screaming ancestors
 - Sterling: Idea of apocalypse – moment or process (event stretching out over long time, there is uncertainty on how it will turn out); BF is a disruption; forcing some ppl to open their eyes / ears, and simply to believe. Cite BW; personal disruptions → working in an area not realizing own presence (as a BW) would be disruptive, “world heritage didn’t include me”, makes others uncomfortable / suspicious. But makes other POC excited
 - Watkins: apocalypse = revealing truth, revealing long tradition of Black activism and scholarship; revealing lack of humanity; BF praxis, is a revealing of the truth that doesn’t try to support the current intellectual tradition, but bringing Black scholarship into it
- Epistemological roots around reckoning / wake work / expanding boundaries – where are the spaces that you root down into, disciplinary cannon
 - Sterling: a lot of Black women, Toni M., P H Collins, Black artists and scholars, people working in Indigenous archaeology; very broad, going beyond the same set of names, scholars who are not archs, but who are thinking about politics of knowledge production, standpoint theory, etc.
 - Teaching w/ fiction – *Dance with the Tiger*, the Neanderthals are light skinned and moderns are dark – we know that this is the case, but when we construct as N. as primitive, we give them darker skin bc we equate primitiveness with melanin
 - Fiction allows a humanization of people in the past – fiction is a great piece of evidence that is typically not considered evidence
 - Watkins: focusing on an area / disruption – within Bio Anth, a lot of effort and development on how we contextualize the remains of the people they study; limited way to present the biocultural experience of the people they study – there is a focus on the material evidence of health and ideas, and it’s difficult to get at those spaces of freedom. But using Wynter, Sharple, Hartman to create frameworks that explore the freedom, not materially evident, but sometimes in you, but you need to be able to make that connection in the work. In a scientific context, “putting flesh on bone”, but limited to scientific translation, how do you bring in BW fiction / scholarship that speak to the

limits of scientific realism – these possibilities need to be factored in; changes the goal?
→ rethinking “reproducibility” and how Anti-Blackness / misogynoir is being reproduced

- Doesn't teach without music, fiction, art, and engaging students – teaching grounded in introducing students in a critical humanistic human biology in fiction – starts with critique of science that opens up a question of science and working way back to tractional stuff
- Focus on action – what are you going to do when see something? Moving from identification to action; understanding continuities between past and present
- Battle-Baptiste: mostly reading Simone Browns, Black Survlaience; other author, Black Sholes; Hartman; Lorraine Hansberry, after reading Looking for Loraine; reading Sherly Du Bois; transnational diaspora; other spaces where Black folk are engaged outside of the US, and there is so much more when we exchange with other places and people; this gives new language, perspectives and expands what she already knows / wants to talk through archaeology; language as a liberary tool; “Black lives as snuff” – what happens when this becomes part of our culture? What's the continual pain that is being revisited is almost as if the filters no longer protect us from the violent images; not only cite BW, but thank BW
 - Syllabus - Posing older articles with new critiques – gives opportunity to show students debate and how disciplines move
 - Use of fiction, art, music to get gives hope that there are endless possibilities; to do an ethnography is an mechanism to translate a way of being to a western eye; what happens when POC begin to be the very ones who are engaging in these conversations – “our voices and ability ... to hear voices of ancestors” and these should be part of the way we do the work
 - I can talk about the way I felt when I walked on the landscape, that the landscape has memories; not translating for western eyes, but for the communities you are working with; listening to the voices / memory, trust own vocie, etc.
- Tina Campt, registers of Black life, what do we need to do to register these?
- Pivoting to wke work / complexity → wading into complexity / uncertainty; how does intersectionality show up? What is missed w.o it?
 - Battle-Baptiste: hard to separate, depends on context; assumption that in the past there were heterosexit ideals; position of all this stuff is hard to sperate out one-by-one and needs to stop the seeping in of some normative comparison – there is not way to parse out / be narrow, because BF praxis doesn't allow it – cannot predict which oppression will be leading each day, so cannot expect to do this in the past.
 - Walkins: showing up as your whole selves; need to model this so others can trust that it is something that they need to do;
 - Sterling: if you archaeological interpretation is not complex, it is wrong; people are always complex; we do not walk to talk over past people, but we do not want to under determine them; real ppl do not practice culture formulaically; we want to get the stoy right, and the story is complex

- What are the palatable black experiences that ppl continue to write about – especially flat discussions of life / BW; how to wade into what is uncomfortable