

“Telling Stories of Resistance: Exploring How Black Feminist Geographies
Can Influence Spatial Studies of the Past”

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This summer I conducted pre-dissertation research for a potential community-based collaborative archaeological project in the town of Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts. Oak Bluffs is located on the island of Martha's Vineyard, called Noepe by the Aquinnah-Wampanoag and their ancestors. My research focuses on the late 19th and early 20th century period in which Oak Bluffs became a destination for religious and secular summer vacationers, many of whom owned second homes or rented homes for the season, placing them in the middle- or upper-class strata of American life. In addition to these individuals were farmers, shop owners, service workers, domestic servants, fisher peoples, and many others who made their lives on the island and who supported the tourism industry; they, too, rented or owned homes there. My research focuses on the growth of Oak Bluffs as a pluralistic community during this period, examining the importance of African American homeownership to the growth and maintenance of the community. I see this work developing into a collaborative community research project that combines mapping and archaeological excavations to reveal the long history of African American presence in Oak Bluffs and to understand how post-Emancipation communities defined and enacted freedom on their own terms.

My interest is in the lived experiences of freedom of African Americans and how community structure, geography, identity, and material realities restrict or enhance these experiences of freedom. Travel and the creation of vacationing spaces is one these experiences where wealthy and middle-class African Americans, in the years following the failure of Reconstruction, negotiated both prosperity and racial segregation. Archaeology of community, that integrates micro, macro, and meso scales of analysis, is particularly suited to material-based studies of experience. I want to develop this work towards a dialectal archaeology which studies freedom as a process, understanding that freedom is defined relationally to unfreedom and oppression. This conception of freedom necessarily places studies of black life in conversation with whiteness and anti-black structures.

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, and as Dr. Battle-Baptiste (2011) has demonstrated it is one that is best explored through a combination of theoretical lenses including African-descendant feminisms, critical race theory, oral history, anthropological theory, and African Diaspora theory. This paper builds on these ideas by engaging with black feminist geographies to explore how resistance occurs on the margins, how existing in space can itself be an act of resistance and expression of refusal, and how archaeology may be used to expose the stories of those who have been ignored, but not silent, as Battle-Baptist points out (34). These stories, if listened to, are lessons in way of being that rejects Enlightenment era restricted humanism and opens a path to envision new futures.

To do so I first lay out archaeological perspectives on community formation informed through collaborative focused archaeologies. 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. The challenge though, is to ensure this work happens in a way that does not “Other”, dehumanize, or objectify black women and their experiences. Truly collaborative community base archaeological projects present a way forward.

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The archaeology of community and collaborative archaeology intersect in interesting ways, as both highlight the ability of heritage work to contain and deal with multiple, entangled, and sometimes conflicting historical perspectives (Richardson & Sanchez 2015; Silliman 2016).

The archaeological study of communities has expanded the concepts of community and community members to include intra-community discord (Harris 2014), affect, and nonhumans in the construction and development of space, place, and identities (Harris 2014; Dawdy 2016). Similarly, recent trends in public and collaborative archaeology have focused on redefining the relationship between archaeologists and collaborators as a partnership in which various types of expertise and knowledge are valued. Multi-vocality here is directed towards developing project goals, methods, and ethics in which structural constraints and participant's right to refuse are acknowledged (Clark & Horning 2019). These ideas, while broadening what archaeological investigation can look like, require archaeologists to develop deep understandings of the past, present, and future of the communities in which they plan to work. Social ties relate directly to the process of doing archaeology by allowing archaeologists to learn from community members, incorporate diverse ideas into all stages of the work, and to ensure their outcomes are social justice orientated.

Archaeologists have long realized that studying history means working in the present (McGuire 2008) and in our political present, multi-vocal collaborative projects must retain the authority to refuse certain voices and local people must maintain the authority to refuse archaeology (Gonzalez-Ruibal et al 2018; Marina La Salle and Richard M. Hutchings 2018). This can only be successful if archaeologists do the early work of introducing themselves and their ideas and incorporating the considerations and limitations of local people and contexts from the very start. This is particularly important when looking for the hard to recognize signs of resistance in place.

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What initially interested me about Martha's Vineyard and Oak Bluffs was its history of black land and home ownership, an idea that adds depth to the area's well-known identity as a welcoming place for black vacationers. Census records (Census Reports 1902; US Census of 1900) support this, showing that in 1900 60% of people living in homes with black heads of house, owned those homes. This was higher than the national average overall (45%) and the national average for white homeownership (50%). It was nearly three times higher than the national average for black homeownership (22%). The same discrepancy between race and homeownership occurs in Massachusetts generally. Martha's Vineyard and Oak Bluffs are outliers in this regard. Various interviewees spoke to the importance of homeownership in the maintenance of the community and the reason people were able to come there in the first place. These data show that the construction of Oak Bluffs a place for African Americans to live, work, and vacation can be linked to control over space and property.

Other interviews focused on the fact that the homes bought in this period were considered affordable and land in the Highlands area of Oak Bluffs was available to black land purchasers who may have faced discrimination when buying land in other areas. Secondary sources also suggest housing discrimination, restrictive covenants and redlining, also effected the human geography of the island (Railton 2006: 380), though researchers I spoke with indicated that material evidence of this has been elusive (Finley 2019: 47-54). Deed records have to potential to add nuance to this, but it many sources indicate that the Highlands area was a center of African American life on Martha's Vineyard.

Homeownership is inherently constructive, it allows people to control space, to grow their property, to pass it on to their children and relatives, and to invite others to visit or live. In general, it builds community. Dr. Nedra Lee, writing on black land ownership, notes that homeowning "emphasized the preservation and continuation of family ties and social networks through land", the ways land

marked internal social differentiation, and the ways landownership can problematize flat discussions of race and class which undertheorize the black middle class after emancipation (Lee 2014: 30). This study takes a point of view of community from a middle-class perspective, but it recognizes that the experiences of class differed across racial lines (Lee 2014: 65). To investigate this topic on Oak Bluffs requires community level study of multiple types of sites and the inclusion of oral histories and written documents.

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While sites within the Highlands represent one part of a narrative of community formation, resistance and freedom making, the experiences of people who lived in places ostensibly restricted to whites represents another. The creation of a community is influenced by many factors ranging from local to global, highly entangled with systems of power and racial capitalism which seek to exploit people of color and justify inequality and hierarchies (Gilmore 2002; Gilmore 2017: 225-7). Historical archaeologists have sought to understand how particular historical or contemporary communities came to be, understanding that a particular outcome was not inevitable.

In Oak Bluffs, the Wesleyan Gove Campgrounds, was the site of a yearly, weeklong Methodist revival starting in 1835. For the first decades visitors put up elaborate tents for the duration of their stay, but starting in the early 1850s permanent houses were constructed by Methodists, many of who extended their stays beyond the revival (Railton 2006: 186, 196). This space was slowly secularized throughout the 1880s and 1890s, but the yearly revivals remained as did strict ordinances of the campgrounds, written and unwritten. One unwritten, but seemingly well enforced restriction prevented African Americans from owning homes within the campgrounds (ibid: 377-81). Public conception of the space then and now is that it was always a white space, but historian Robert C. Hayden (1999: 49, 65) complicates this idea. Hayden, using local newspapers details two occasions where African American

women, Martha James in 1889, and Mrs. Anthony Smith, in the early 1900s, bought homes in the Campgrounds and were forced to move by the protests of their neighbors. To contextualize this Hayden includes an early 1880s article from a local newspaper, written in response to an incident of anti-black racial segregation, that claimed that it was the policy of the campgrounds to not make distinctions “on the grounds of color” and claimed that at least 25 lots there were leased by African descent.

These stories of the past complicate the makeup of the landscape where present day communities reside, and interpretation of the past has to consider the present. While little is known about what Martha James, Mrs. Anthony Smith, or any of the black people of color living in, or attempting to live in, the Methodist Campgrounds, but it is likely that their experience did not match that of the white residents. Yet, when the history of that place is told and celebrated its from the prospective 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. However, Sylvia Wynter (1990) and Katherine McKittrick (2006), discussing racial geography, speak of the need to engage with the perspectives of marginalized peoples and the power of these ontologies to counter hegemonic narratives and to rethinking and deconstructing inequality that has been normalized on the landscape.

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McKittrick (2006), in particular argues that black women’s geographies, their understandings of space/place/body, constitute a critique of the racial-sexual-gendered domination of colonialism and patriarchal white supremacy. She argues that experiences of domination produce alternative geographic perspectives to more traditional forms space making, discovery, mapping territories, and delineating boundaries 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” (ibid: 11-12). She

believes that it is possible to locate sites of resistance by understanding how people are placed on a landscape and then exploring “bodies out of place”, those individuals who’s sense of home and space refused to accept dominate conceptions of these. By centering these stories and expanding the notion of community, it becomes possible view acts of spatial resistance as part of the process of constructing spaces.

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In these cases refusal is generative, is it a daily act of imagining and living out possibilities different to those which would be forced on individuals by structures of power (Camp 2017; Simpson 2016). Because these acts are generative, they should be visible on the landscape and archaeologically in the ways that actors try to control how they connect with and disconnect 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 nor clear, but it directly questions the 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, a threshold between negation and acceptance. In its original conception liminality was believed to be a rare and temporary state of being (Turner 1969).

However, Arpad Szokolczai (2009: 155-65) posits that in the modern world explicit rituals have faded and liminality may be a constant state for some. This raises interesting questions: what is produced when the liminal experience does not end? What is created when hierarchy is continuously exposed, rather than simply reaffirmed? If liminality shows how experiences of refusal “literally and effectively transform the very mode of being of those individuals involved” (ibid: 158), then perpetual liminality, because it does not allow the social order to resettle, may literally and effectively transform society. This type of liminality can be chaotic and destructive. This, I believe, is what McKittrick (2006:

61-3) means when she invokes subaltern specialties and the power of the “not-quite spaces” of black women to construct oppositional paradoxical ways of being in the world.

Refusal produces both worlds and people (Stenner and Moreno-Gabriel 2013), examining community creation from these perspectives allows us to go beyond pointing out the ways in which racism and structures of power are spatial processes which have produced and normalize the present. It can be used to imagine what a different past may have looked like and how to create those potentialities in the future. Black feminist perspectives seek to create a different future through the past and present, if the past was is not determined, but constructed, then the future cannot be determined either. Another life is and must be possible.

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An archaeology which is attentive to the specifics of resistance as refusal would highlight the explicit ways individuals experienced and used material artifacts, structures, and the landscape to gain insight into what people in the past may have felt and the ways actively negotiated the landscape – connections made and not made. Rather than symbols (of status, ethnicity, etc.) materials would be active. They would be used in the daily negotiations of space and place (Agbe-Davies 2018). Sometimes informing, other times allowing or disallowing actions, material culture are the material remains of actions, feelings, and decisions, neither determinate nor passive, but a participant. In exploring the use or (dis)use of materials, structures, or landscapes, in a very broad definition of the term *use*, archaeologists may be able to listen to past actors, following them, and letting them speak for themselves.

I am drawn an analysis of refusal, as a quieter register of resistance, for the study of the historical African and African American populations on Martha’s Vineyard because it seems to account for the lived realities of life there for people of color. How do researchers interested in the past account

for the many ways black renters and residents, domestic and service workers, ministers, educators, transient mariners, business owners, and visitors (Dresser 2010; Hayden & Hayden 1999) protected themselves from and pushed back against daily encounters with oppression? These individuals and families, legally free and experiencing various conditions of unfreedom, resisted because they remained. The remade space by refusing to be limited or to stay in “place”.

Space making, community building, and freedom are processes rather than events because each must be produced, and none are inevitable. A focus on the specific conceptions and experiences of black women through Black Feminist Theory indicates how alternative ways of thinking and being in the world can challenge and disrupt instances and systems of oppression through explicit 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.

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