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Global Archaeologies of the Long Emancipation: An Introduction

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Abstract

This article serves as an introduction to this guest-edited special issue of *American Antiquity* entitled "Global Archaeologies of the Long Emancipation." We begin by discussing Rinaldo Walcott's notion of the Long Emancipation, noting how the failed promises of the legal ending of slavery led to sensations of freedom and ongoing forms of anti-Blackness. In response, Black communities have employed various strategies in pursuit of freedom. We then apply this argument to archaeological thought and practice, suggesting that archaeology is well positioned to provide evidence of Black creativity, action, and struggle in a variety of global contexts. The article closes with an overview of this special issue, which includes a brief summary of individual contributions.

Resumen

Este artículo sirve como introducción a este número especial editado por invitados de American Antiquity titulado "Arqueologías globales de la larga emancipación". Comenzamos discutiendo la noción de Rinaldo Walcott de la Larga Emancipación, señalando cómo las promesas fallidas del fin legal de la esclavitud condujeron a sensaciones de libertad y formas continuas de anti-negritud. En respuesta, las comunidades negras han empleado diversas estrategias en busca de la libertad. Luego aplicamos este argumento al pensamiento y la práctica arqueológica, sugiriendo que la arqueología está bien posicionada para proporcionar evidencia de la creatividad, la acción y la lucha de los negros en una variedad de contextos globales. El artículo se cierra con una visión general de este número especial, que incluye un breve resumen de las contribuciones individuales.

The Long Emancipation

Emancipation was a legal edict that nominally ended slavery. Historically, it was instituted across colonial and national territories, freeing African and African-descendant peoples from bondage, most commonly in the nineteenth century. Economically, the passing of such edicts sent shockwaves across global systems as industries adapted to mitigate the consequences of what Thomas Holt (1992), in referring to labor regimes in post-emancipation Jamaica, called the "problem of freedom." Socially, Black populations asserted their place in communities, nations, and colonies as structures of White supremacy erected new barriers of disenfranchisement and stoked the flames of unceasing racial violence. That chattel slavery ended across the Atlantic World is a historical fact referenceable through dates, places, and legal text. That forms of anti-Black dispossession and discrimination persist is the post-emancipation reality.

Barbadian-Canadian philosopher Rinaldo Walcott insists that our contemporary moment is part of a Long Emancipation (2021), a political moment that has yet to arrive and a way of being human that has yet to be fully experienced by Black people. And yet, Black individuals, communities, and political

movements have continuously struggled to claim humanity and rights promised through emancipation. That tension is at the heart of this special issue.

Post-emancipation periods rarely receive the same amount of archaeological attention as that of slavery, yet the decades and centuries between emancipation and the present represent the afterlives of slavery (Hartman 2007) and the strategies implemented by less-than-free peoples in combating them. As Walcott (2021:5) notes in his essays on the Long Emancipation, "Black freedom has been denied despite juridical emancipation, and that denial produces the conditions of a future-oriented Black expressivity—a Black freedom to come."

Our approach to the Long Emancipation is therefore a consideration of the racist structures that disrupt and imperil Black life, as well as thorough analysis of Black struggle, creativity, and political action. For the former, Walcott is indebted to Katherine McKittrick's (2013) notion of plantation futures. As Walcott (2021:50) notes, "The core of her argument is that the plantation is not in the past but continues to animate the present and the future through both spatial and other logics that place Black life in continued servitude, precarity, and ultimately death." As the case studies in this issue demonstrate, earnest emancipation necessitated more than the removal of chains; it required a rearticulation of the mind, body, and soul. Nominal freedom did not rid Black subjects of the plantation mindset, spatial logics, architectures, or methods of material production. We, as archaeologists, are particularly well positioned to perceive and interpret meaning from material expressions of Black subjectivity and then relate those interpretations to transcendental narratives regarding sovereignty and freedom-making in a global context. This issue therefore presents a plurality of attempts to produce Black emancipation. The case studies represent the spectrum of nominal success and failure, with results ranging from continued physical oppression to communal or national sovereignty.

According to Walcott (2021:12), "Forms of Black creativity are central to any consideration of Black freedom because, as I will argue, this is where we glimpse the possibility of Black freedom; those forms emerge at moments when Black people are responding to themselves, unintended upon by the white gaze." Our archaeological approach posits that material and expressive culture can be a lens through which to understand Black creativity. These forms of expression are also what unite Africa and its diaspora throughout history, in the present, and into the future. Our case studies across continents provide not only evidence of unyielding agency despite unfreedom but also the salve for the undelivered and false promises of emancipation.

The insufficiencies and failures of legislative emancipation serve as Walcott's point of departure, but for our archaeological purposes, temporal registers are significant, given that they provide the necessary contexts through which enslaved and free Black communities subvert(ed) dehumanizing structures. Crucially, this includes the decades and centuries prior to official emancipation. For instance, communities in Ecuador (Balanzátegui Moreno and Delgado Vernaza), Dominica (Rodriguez et al.), and Amazonia (Hartemann) each took matters into their own hands prior to action in the legislative halls in colonial metropoles. In contexts like Tanzania (Marshall and Bigenagwa), Sierra Leone (Agbelusi), and Liberia (Reilly et al.), stagnated terms of emancipation (for the former) and murky boundaries of unfreedom for the populace (for the latter two) make African "moments" of emancipation insufficient for understanding how people in Africa conceptualized and experienced subjectivity.

The historically immortalized moments of political emancipation do not therefore encapsulate the spirit of emancipatory action, politics, and ideology of African and African-descendant communities. Recent scholarly trends have nonetheless privileged certain forms of action, especially marronage and fugitivity. Critical of the fascination with such terms, Walcott (2021:106) argues that "our turn to these terms demonstrates exhaustion with how unfreedom still frames Black livability and Black life." Unconvinced of the liberatory value of the terms, he continues, "To hold [fugitivity and marronage] as radical Black forms of freedom is to deny that each term and its practice is dependent on unfreedom being present, and indeed each term only makes sense and can only be felt in a full condition of unfreedom" (Walcott 2021:106–107). We take this thoughtful critique seriously, positing that rigorous studies of marronage can and should be put in conversations with Black experiments of nation-building and sovereignty, aligning forms of Black creativity along a spectrum from unfreedom to freedom. Considerations of this Long Emancipation are therefore a necessary endeavor for archaeologies of the African Diaspora.

African Diaspora archaeology has exponentially grown to be one of the most vibrant subdisciplines in the field today. Previous commitments to exploring race and racialization are now matched by anti-racist archaeologies that unabashedly blur the boundaries between scholarship and activism. Mobilization in the form of literature, including in this journal (see Flewellen et al. 2021), has been pronounced in the United States and Europe, with community activism and long-standing struggles in the Global South largely going unrecognized in academic circles. These efforts build on crucial archaeological work dedicated to post-emancipation struggles, particularly in the United States. Jodi Barnes's *The Materiality of Freedom* (2011) remains a landmark in this regard, highlighting how Jim Crow gave anti-Black racism a new identity in the United States, making a politically engaged archaeology necessary for conducting work with communities.

This special issue builds on Barnes's groundbreaking work, yet it marks a pointed effort to embrace the global scope of the African Diaspora (see also Bates et al. 2016). The Black Atlantic World is prominently represented in this issue, given that the transatlantic slave trade and fifteenth- to twentieth-century colonialism were indeed major forces affecting the movement of people and things across the ocean. Case studies from Ecuador and Tanzania offer compelling examples of why we must expand our analyses to also include the Pacific and Indian Oceans—recognizing the long-standing intimacies of these continents (Lowe 2015). As we broaden dialogues pioneered in archaeological studies of the United States, we argue that the Long Emancipation is a useful framework for describing the varied liminality, precarity, and vulnerability embedded within the pursuit of freedom for Black subjects on a global scale.

Issue Overview

In building the original conference session and this special issue, we, as coeditors, sought participants based on the quality of their research and their commitment to ongoing emancipatory struggles. This includes struggles within the field of archaeology itself. Acknowledgment and condemnation of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination in archaeology are not new. However, on a global scale, the afterlives of slavery and colonialism manifest in exclusionary practices that the field has yet to adequately address. Articles in this collection were first presented at the January 2023 meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) in Lisbon, Portugal. Two of our presenters, now authors, were denied visas for travel to participate in the conference in person. With passports from the Global South, these scholars were denied the same level of participation as their White, American, or European counterparts. The SHA and other organizations are, of course, beholden to geopolitical structures that marginalize African peoples around the globe, but—aside from the clunky and inconsistent use of virtual options—the field has yet to come up with adequate solutions to combat racialized policies that keep doors and borders closed for many.

The map in Figure 1 depicts the locations of each of the case studies found in this issue. The map itself is an important analytical tool. First, it focuses on an equatorial region that deprioritizes the Global North. With the United States and Europe at the margins, we can attend to the nuances and complexities of regional, long-term, and ongoing struggles for freedom of Black communities. Without exonerating or rendering irrelevant the role of the Global North in these processes, privileging the Global South allows us to move beyond American-centric ideas about race, the African Diaspora, and freedom. The struggle for place, belonging, and humanity was not the same in nineteenth-century Tanzania as it was in Liberia, Ecuador, or St. Croix—yet, Black creativity surfaces in each locale as communities confront the colossal afterlives of slavery.

Second, the map signals complex colonial pasts that allow the marginality of the United States and Europe to weigh on the various forms of unfreedom experienced by Black communities, even through emancipation and independence. The Germans, British, Danish, Americans, Spanish, Portuguese, and French all played a role in the contexts discussed in these case studies. Authors, however, privilege the perspectives, actions, and creativity of Black individuals and communities who sought ways of being beyond the yoke of coloniality. Global examples of emancipatory struggle outlined in this issue point to the diverse manifestations of political will and liberatory action that transcend imperial boundaries and generations.

Figure 1. Map of case studies featured in this special issue. Each highlighted location is labeled with the authors of the relevant article. (Map by Méch Frazier and Craig Stevens.)

This special issue is therefore not organized chronologically or regionally. Instead, thematic resonances connect the pieces across contextual space and time. Importantly, each article is co- or fully authored by junior scholars, scholars from the Global South, and/or scholars either from Africa or of African descent. Demographics within the field are very slowly changing, but it is rare for scholars from underrepresented communities to be in dialogue with one another in disciplinary-wide journals. Moving African Diasporic conversations out of their traditional subdisciplinary or regional settings, this edited collection is an attempt to provide a mainstream platform for the archaeological study of emancipatory struggle.

Hartemann provides an essential conceptual guide for our exploration of the Long Emancipation. As they eloquently argue, such investigative journeys involve material, physical, and spiritual intimacy with ancestors. Pushing back against the archaeologist-as-detective trope, Hartemann presents other ways of knowing and being with the past. The Amazonian community of Mana provides the setting through which to explore intersections of French colonialism, Blackness, Indigeneity, and being across multiple generations. Archaeology is therefore a tool to explore roots and embeddedness across ancestral divides, claiming place and belonging against a colonial backdrop that denies Black personhood. Hartemann proclaims their own ancestral belonging in the Mana community, providing a critical foundation of personhood, place, struggle, and storytelling that guides the contributions of this special issue.

The false promises of emancipation are uniquely discernible in West Africa, where anti-slavery and abolitionist movements set the stage for colonialism in the region. Oluseyi Agbelusi illustrates this historical process through the lived experiences of 100,000 Africans who were "liberated" and resettled in the British colony of Sierra Leone. His archaeological investigation of the architecture, settlement patterns, and materials that were created, traded, used, and disposed by diverse groups of liberated Africans examines the impacts of the Atlantic slave trade on West African communities and their

convoluted post-emancipation struggles for freedom. His contribution widens the aperture of our analysis and encourages a nuanced conceptual framework of Black Atlantic migration, settlement, and adaptation that connects the freedom-making efforts of African groups across the globe.

The afterlives of slavery are visible across Caribbean landscapes in a variety of forms, but some of the most conspicuous elements of the built landscape have long gone unnoticed. Ayana Omilade Flewellen's analysis of coral limestone is a powerful reminder that some of the most ubiquitous and mundane material signatures of colonial violence often escape our attention. Inspired by Saidiya Hartman and Tianna Bruno, Flewellen explores the biophysical afterlives of slavery, connecting island inhabitants with their physical environment from centuries of slavery to the present. The plantation machine was so pervasive on the landscape of St. Croix that it became impossible to eradicate its physical traces even over a century and a half after emancipation. Plantation infrastructure, in the form of limestone buildings, now serve educational purposes, with Crucian children learning and socializing surrounded by the limestone blocks that were quarried and assembled under brutal regimes of violence. Flewellen makes a compelling case for the pervasiveness of material afterlives of slavery that are woven into the fabric of everyday life generations after so-called emancipation.

Emancipation in the Americas often meant little for African communities living under various forms of unfreedom. In Tanzania, bound labor practices were greatly affected by the transatlantic slave trade, though they continued to transform in its wake from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. Marshall and Biginagwa draw primarily from archaeological and oral sources to explore the complexities of slavery as diverse actors came into contact in the Tanzanian community of Kikole. The lesser-explored Islamic slave trade is particularly significant given the blurry boundaries between different forms of unfreedom. Powerful rulers struck fear into the hearts of local community members who resisted capture into slavery. And yet, the status of those compelled to join the ranks of powerful slave traders remains ambiguous. For the many actors involved in the Eastern African slave trade, analyses of the Long Emancipation trace conscripted labor well beyond important moments of abolition in the Atlantic World.

Rodriguez, Wallman, and Honychurch offer a spatial examination of marronage on the Caribbean island of Dominica. Smaller, mountainous islands of the Lesser Antilles have understandably offered much for archaeologists exploring interisland interaction and peripheral spaces of empire. This manuscript expands such analyses by thinking about the mechanisms through which Maroon communities selectively claimed space in inconspicuous locales while simultaneously maintaining connections with other Maroon groups across the island. These communities are notoriously difficult to locate archaeologically, but the authors build a strong case for identifying potential sites based on archival, oral, and archaeological evidence. They illustrate a methodology whereby GIS (geographic information systems) technology can be utilized to examine, map, and interpret clandestine social networks of resistance. Drawing attention to these networks in the past has enormous potential for building contemporary Black-Indigenous solidarity in Caribbean spaces and beyond.

Reilly, Banton, Stevens, and Laurore present findings from the first archaeological examination of Providence Island, Liberia's paramount heritage site. Argued to be the birthplace of the nation, this is the site where 88 Black Americans settled in 1822—which, in 1847, would become Liberia, Africa's first republic. Liberian colonization was itself a manifestation of emancipation prior to the ending of slavery in the United States in 1865. For settlers, migration to their African homeland was an inspiring means through which to claim freedom. The archaeological work, however, comes on the heels of over a decade of brutal civil conflict in Liberia. Their work highlights how the emancipatory spirit of Liberian settlement and the narrative that privileges Providence Island as the nation's Plymouth Rock is incomplete, given that the material culture forces a reckoning with the many pasts of the space, including the presence and persistence of Indigenous populations.

Notwithstanding the omnipresence of racialized colonial structures that limit the agency of post-emancipation Black communities, Balanzátegui Moreno and Delgado Vernaza present the usefulness in mapping Afro-Ecuadorian resistance strategies and the collaborative construction of collective care. For their communities, archaeology aids the preservation of ancestral memory, honors the complex systems of ancestral knowledge transmission, and assists the study and celebration of

Afro-Ecuadorian resistance to perpetual race-based violence. Here, the archaeological study of marronage interrogates the spectrum of post-emancipation place making and the varied responses to displacement and dispossession by Black communities in Latin America. The authors remind us of the persistent consequences of the Long Emancipation and the role archaeology can play within the ongoing quest for liberation by global African Diasporic communities.

This special issue highlights innovative and timely African Diasporic research taking place across the globe. These case studies contribute new perspectives on Black struggles for freedom in underexplored contexts while also highlighting the urgency with which we must consider the unfinished projects of emancipation. As these articles make clear, slavery and freedom were not stable concepts or statuses. Rather, struggle and creativity proved necessary as Black communities remained steadfast in their quest for freedom. Such struggles persist as the Long Emancipation drags on. It is our hope that these case studies serve as a source of inspiration for those who continue the fight.

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