

# DIGGING UP THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN PAST: HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY, PHOTOGRAPHY AND SLAVERY

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*Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1659–1800.* By Leland Ferguson, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1992, pp. xlv + 186, US\$35.00 (cloth) and US\$14.95 (paper).

*Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age.* By Sylvia R. Frey, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991, pp. xii + 376, US\$29.95.

*Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South.* Edited by Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr. with Kym S. Rice, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1991, pp. xv + 219, US\$19.95.

In late eighteenth-century New England, a small settlement of free blacks established itself at Parting Ways, near the fork in the road from Plymouth to Plympton. In pre-Revolutionary times, the residents of this community — Cato Howe, Prince Goodwin, Plato Turner and Quamany — had been slaves in society in which blacks were a very small minority of the population; during the Revolution they had fought in the Continental Army. On both grounds we would expect them to be fairly well acculturated to white society. Yet evidence from an archaeological dig at Parting Ways hints at a more complex picture. Although the community's houses were built of much the same material as others in New England, their design was different. It utilised an African or African-American twelve-foot floor pattern, rather than the sixteen foot pattern typical of Anglo-American dwellings. Furthermore, the four houses were clustered together at the intersection of the blocks, an arrangement that quite possibly reflected the more communal patterns of Africa.<sup>1</sup> There are indications, then, that after living a good proportion of their lives as slaves within a white New England society these blacks, on regaining full control of their lives, drew on their African past to build a settlement that, in important ways, was at variance with those of their Yankee neighbours.

The example of Parting Ways points to the varied and eclectic nature of the evidence that historians investigating the lives of African Americans in the American colonies and in the early years of the new nation have to examine. Few slaves could read and write;<sup>2</sup> for even fewer was it the case that what they did write was likely to survive. These simple facts provide the major intellectual challenge for those attempting to recover the black past. Evidence is almost invariably hard won, fragmentary, and ambiguous — allusive rather than definitive. Interdisciplinary analysis and imagination are required to tease out its full significance. Those who work with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century materials must look with envious eyes at the cornucopia of evidence (in particular the W.P.A. interviews) available to historians of later periods.

Historians have met this challenge in a number of well-known ways, both reinterpreting old sources with new methods and uncovering new types of evidence. For a long time now historical archaeology has appeared (at least to me) to offer the most promise of

turning up new material that can help deepen our knowledge of slavery, particularly of the details of everyday slave life, the sorts of things not commonly mentioned in either oral or written sources. Until recently, the very high cost of conducting excavations, lengthy time lags before material is published and thus made available to those who are not 'insiders', and a tendency of historical archaeologists to ask questions of their material that sometimes seem either obtuse or obscure, have combined to limit the utility of their work for other scholars. However, a new generation of historical archaeologists, with a more sophisticated understanding of the historiography of slavery and an ability to minimise jargon, has begun, now, to come up with findings that do not just illustrate what we already know, but extend and challenge our understanding of some crucial aspects of slavery.<sup>3</sup> Historical archaeologists are beginning to deliver the goods and historians would do well to pay attention to their work.

Leland Ferguson begins *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650–1800* with a brief account of the short history of African-American archaeology. To all intents and purposes it originated in the 1960s when the Civil Rights movement prodded scholars into a realisation that black Americans were part of the colonial past. In 1967 Charles Fairbanks was contracted by Florida State Park Service to excavate Kingsmill plantation and under Fairbanks' influence the University of Florida became the centre of what he called 'plantation archaeology'. The groundswell of feeling concerning the historical experience of blacks in America that flowed on from the Civil Rights movement pressured the federal government to interpret the National Historic Preservation Act so as to include African-American archaeological remains. As a result, many archaeologists conducted their fieldwork just ahead of the bulldozer on federally-funded construction projects. In the 1970s and 1980s most historical archaeologists were doing work on a contract basis. They accumulated huge quantities of data and, required to submit reports, took their lead from the social scientists then dominating the discipline, working out lists of artifact frequencies, measuring the rate at which slaves picked up European traits, and using the artifacts to demonstrate the different economic status of slaves and their owners. As Ferguson tartly concludes in relation to their activities, some of the data and interpretations are useful, but their more general conclusions 'are of little anthropological or historical interest' (p. xi).

In *Uncommon Ground* Leland Ferguson, influenced by the work of historians over the last decade or so (and here I should add that this historian was a bit unnerved to have his profession constantly held up as the epitome of sweetness and light in many of the author's intradisciplinary turf battles), sets out to write an introductory book that is 'wide ranging and speculative; not a review of completed research, but an offering of newly discovered awareness, ideas and things' (p. xxxiv). His main concerns are with pots and housing, the two classes of artifacts about which African-American archaeologists have amassed the most knowledge.

It was in the 1930s that archaeologists at Williamsburg and surrounding plantations first found fragments of clay pots used by slaves. In 1962 Ivor Noël Hume, from Colonial Williamsburg, published a paper in which he argued that these vessels had been made by free Indians. Noël Hume, after concluding that the astute Indians may have found a market among the slaves, labelled the artifacts Colono-Indian Ware. This remained the conventional wisdom well into the 1970s when the sheer quantity of material being recovered in South Carolina forced a reconsideration. Here Ferguson's account becomes just a bit breathless, with faint echoes of Indiana Jones, but he and others were able to

show, by looking at pots made in Africa and searching the written record as well as analysing thousands of bits of pottery, that slaves made pots in America. Not all were made by African Americans — some were clearly Native American — but more than enough were to warrant Ferguson proposing that the ‘Indian’ be dropped and the artifacts labelled simply Colono Ware.

The fragments found were almost invariably from bowls and not plates, hinting at a rather different pattern of foodways from that of the Europeans. But Ferguson’s most fascinating finding about the use of Colono Ware concerns a small number of bowls from South Carolina marked with a simple cross or a cross enclosed in a circle on the base. Most of these pieces were discovered not around slave quarters but in rivers adjacent to old rice plantations. Ferguson suggests that the marks are Bakongo cosmograms and that these small bowls contained sacred medicines or *minkisi* and were used in rituals involving the ubiquitous West African water spirits. If he is correct, and his argument appears convincing, then these marks are a quite striking demonstration of the continued importance of some African ways in the South Carolina low country.

Housing is the other type of evidence which archaeologists have investigated in some detail. Although most of our knowledge concerns the antebellum period there has been some excavation of eighteenth-century sites. Slave houses found in the Carolina lowlands, at Yaughan and Curriboo, were different from other structures found in colonial America. The houses had clay walls similar to those found in Africa. Nearby pits were used initially as a source for clay for daubing the walls and later to hold rubbish. By the nineteenth century the structures were taking on some European features, particularly chimneys, but the houses remained very small, much smaller than those found in Virginia. Again this appears to reflect African cultural patterns — Europeans lived inside their houses, but for African Americans most activities occurred in the yards around their dwellings.

Some of the details in *Uncommon Ground* are new, but Ferguson’s major contention about the importance of the African past in the lives of slaves in mainland North America contains few surprises for anyone versed in the historiography of slavery over the last decade or so. However, for this reviewer, at least, it was the author’s material, both from his own research and that of others, highlighting the fluidity and contingency of African-American culture that was most novel and interesting. In particular, the evidence pointing to Native American influence in the formation of African-American culture helps to draw out a factor that is often hinted at, but never really developed fully in the work of historians relying on the written record.

It appears that the old idea of a segregated existence, implicit in the label ‘Colono-Indian Ware’, was mistaken and that to a much greater extent than historians had previously thought there was a three-way cultural contact occurring in colonial America. Perhaps the earliest example of this process, although this is still a controversial interpretation, involves pipes made in seventeenth-century Virginia. Matthew Emerson, a student of James Deetz, re-examined 694 pipe bowls from fifteen sites in the colony. He concluded that basically the shape of the pipes was European and that the decorations were predominantly African, but that they also demonstrated Native American influence. Most of these pipes were made in the late seventeenth century when whites and blacks lived in very close contact; locally made pipes declined and disappeared early in the eighteenth century as plantation life became more segregated and European pipes more readily available.

One of the best examples of the creation of this creole culture is contained in Ferguson's fascinating discussion of the foodways of South Carolina blacks in which he shows how Native American, African and European influences combined within the constraints of slavery to shape their distinctive culinary practices. Basically, there was a change from an African diet of rice, millet and manioc to one centred on corn (even in the rice colonies, for rice was a valuable cash crop), with supplements from game they were able to snare. Whites served food on platters and plates, but slaves used their fingers and ate from a variety of bowls.

Historical archaeologists are also able to provide evidence about the timing of cultural developments. For example, in South Carolina the incidence of Colono Ware, ubiquitous in eighteenth-century sites, drops markedly after the beginning of the nineteenth century. A number of factors — the end of the African slave trade, the increasing awareness among African Americans of glazed and highly fired pottery, and the increased availability of industrially manufactured ceramics — combined to diminish the importance of plantation made-pottery. In the nineteenth century, the demand for Colono Ware bowls — they were highly valued for cooking African-American dishes such as okra — was met by itinerant Catawba Indians.

Although the point is not discussed by Ferguson, implicit in much of the material he adduces is a sense of the interaction between slaves and the fundamental transformation of the economies of the North Atlantic World during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The issue this raises, of course, concerns the extent to which the consumer revolution affected the life of North American slaves. Were African-American craft traditions rendered increasingly obsolete by the penetration of cheaply manufactured goods into the market of the slave South? The evidence from seventeenth-century Virginian pipes and Colono Ware certainly suggests that this was the case. There is, however, at least one area where the situation was rather more complicated. In the colonial period slaves wore garments which were either made by themselves from cheap imported cloth or were, with surprising frequency, as the runaway advertisements indicate, ready-made. This changed in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Starting with the non-importation movement during the Revolution and gaining momentum in the years after the invention of the cotton gin and the rapid expansion in the growth of cotton, this aspect of slave life was transformed. By the time the ex-slaves who would be interviewed in the 1930s were growing up in the 1850s and 1860s, their parents, particularly their mothers, were weaving cloth and making their clothes. Testimony from the ex-slaves is filled with pages of detailed descriptions of the hours spent weaving cloth, manufacturing dyes from various leaves and berries, and tanning leather to make shoes. To be sure, store-bought clothes and shoes were highly valued and any extra money earned in the slaves' own time was frequently spent on them, but it is still the case that this was one African-American craft that expanded in antebellum years.

There is a certain amount of idiosyncrasy in *Uncommon Ground*. Although a short book, it sprawls with not particularly well-organised chapters. Twice the author uses fictionalised recreations to illustrate his point (a strategy which, to my surprise, I found helpful on the second occasion). The Epilogue, a confessional account centred on the eight-year-old Ferguson and a friend using the word 'nigger' to a black railroad worker in 1949, while interesting enough, seemed barely relevant. But the book is certainly engaging and easy to read, and it effectively conveys to outsiders a sense of the potential of historical

archaeology for those interested in the African-American past. Hopefully historians, particularly those unfamiliar with the work of historical archaeologists, will read it.

Sylvia Frey's *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* illustrates well the range and variety of evidence that historians need to piece together in order to attempt to recover the black past. Her research in written sources, particularly archival material concerning the conduct of British operations in America, is little short of prodigious, and she has turned up much new information about African Americans. The author is also particularly sensitive to the possibilities in the work of historical archaeologists and frequently incorporates their findings into her account. Sylvia Frey's thesis can be simply stated: to a much greater extent than most historians had previously thought, African Americans were closely involved in the American Revolution in the South. In her words, '... a black liberation movement was central to the revolutionary struggle in the South, and the failure of that movement did not dissipate the black revolutionary potential, which re-emerged in the postwar period as a struggle for cultural power' (p. 4). Frey shows how blacks in the years after 1765 were swept up by 'the force of ideological energy' (p. 49), and how the colonists' fear of black restiveness shaped Britain's southern strategy. Her account of the role blacks played in the Revolution in the South, of the incredible disruption caused by what was often a vicious civil war, and of the way some Southern slaves, carrying with them a distinctive African-American culture particularly in the area of religion, ended up in all sorts of obscure places in the aftermath of the Revolution, is an important contribution to the historiography.

According to the author, in the early years of the New Republic, evangelical religion played a crucial role in the shift from a patriarchal to a paternalist system. Once the Baptists and Methodists acknowledged their failure and shucked off their hostility towards slavery, they became 'increasingly influential in shaping the paternalistic ethos that was to become the distinguishing mark of an antebellum society' (p. 244). The result, Frey argues, was a 'gradual amelioration of some aspects of slavery' (p. 280). Evidence from historical archaeology of the replacement of African style housing with frame housing, even the raised wooden flooring on some plantations and a shift from Colono Ware to imported European ceramics, supports her contention. If evangelical religion offered slaveholders a way to live with the moral problems of slavery, it meant something rather different to the slaves. For them, it was a symbolic assertion of self, a way of transcending their status in a slave society. Religion became the centrepiece of their culture. Southern blacks were thwarted in the Revolution, but their hopes for freedom became increasingly tied up in cultural assertion in ways that ranged from the rise of unsanctioned commercial activity by slaves to the establishment of separate black churches. Thus in Frey's account, the American Revolution was a pivotal moment in African-American history as well, and that most mythic of American events no longer has to carry the burden of a Jim Crow past.

As is probably apparent by now I had mixed reactions to this book. The middle section, dealing with the Revolution, is exhaustively researched and as comprehensive and convincing an account of the role blacks played in the struggle as one could hope to find, but in the rest of the book, although there were useful insights, I was often left struggling. Much of my unease stems from Professor Frey's ideas about the nature of black culture and my differences with her over the sorts of conclusions that can be drawn from fragmentary and imperfect evidence. What I would like to do here, by way of illustration, is to look in some detail at a couple of issues raised by Frey's opening chapter, a forty page survey of slavery and black culture in the pre-Revolutionary South.

The author repeatedly asserts that there was a 'systematic repression of the African heritage' (p. 36). The main evidence adduced to support this proposition is the 'strikingly apparent ... absence of African-related or African-derived ritual objects in archaeological deposits where they would be expected to appear' (p. 36). She also claims that 'the material expressions of African religion were largely destroyed by the slave regime' (p. 36), and later, that the evidence collected from burial grounds in Maryland and Virginia from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries shows 'minimal African influence and suggest[s] the forced extinction of African practices' (p. 40). This line of argument is carried through into the period after the Revolution: in the last chapter of the book Frey talks of a 'massive program of cultural genocide developed and efficiently managed by slaveowners' (p. 285).

Professor Frey's quite startling claims about the suppression of African culture in the colonial period appear to be based on a misunderstanding of the sort of evidence historical archaeologists are likely to turn up. Archaeologists digging through slave quarters are usually only going to find objects that have been abandoned, discarded or lost. Not even all of these are going to survive; basketry and items made of wood or cloth remain intact underground in only the most exceptional circumstances.<sup>4</sup> Further, things that hold particular value are more likely to be passed on than left for archaeologists. Excavations on the Jordan plantation in Texas provide a good illustration of these points. Here Kenneth Brown and Doreen Coopler did actually find a collection of artifacts probably used in healing and divination rituals. The forced and abrupt abandonment of the site by the black residents, they argued, led to the discovery of objects usually not present in the archaeological record.<sup>5</sup> But this was atypical. In short, the sort of artifacts Frey apparently seeks in excavations of slave quarters probably would not even be found in the excavation of most eighteenth-century West African villages.

But I think rather more is involved here than Professor Frey's unrealistic expectations of what historical archaeologists should uncover. Implicit in much of her discussion of slave culture is an assumption that African culture survived the middle passage pretty well intact, only to fall foul of an oppressive and interventionist white slaveowning regime. My own view is that the slave trade was more traumatic, the slaveowners more tolerant of the culture of the slaves (not from any feelings of benevolence, but because they had other concerns), and that the term 'African American', with its suggestion of a dynamic creole culture, is the correct one.

There is no need to embrace fully Stanley Elkins' famous thesis in order to acknowledge the profoundly shocking impact of the slave trade and the middle passage on African slaves. Evidence from a variety of sources hints at the massive cultural disruption that inevitably ensued. Excavations at the seventeenth-century sites of Pettus and Utopia in Virginia uncovered pottery made by slaves that was of a very poor quality. As Leland Ferguson pertinently asked, how could West Africans, coming from a culture with a tradition of fine handbuilt pottery, make these crude examples? Similarly, Theresa Singleton points out that African ceramics were elaborately, even ostentatiously, decorated and that by comparison African-American pots were almost bereft of decoration.<sup>6</sup> A third example of this process concerns 'country marks' or ritual scarifications. These body and racial markings are frequently found on African-born slaves, but to my knowledge at least, no one has found them on an American-born slave.

The explanation for these and other cultural transformations does not lie in anything as crude as direct white interference in black lives on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century plantations. To be sure, slaveowners and officials clamped down on anything, such as large gatherings for funerals or the banging of drums that had the potential to foment rebellion, but I have never seen any evidence of slaveowners or overseers forbidding, for example, ritual scarifications. Even had they done so it is doubtful that banning the practice could have been so completely successful that not one slave shows up in the historical record as being so marked.

A more satisfying explanation can be found in the nature of the slave trade and the circumstances in which Africans found themselves in the New World. Although some areas in mainland British North America did end up with concentrations of slaves from the same region in Africa — for example Kongo-Angola was a very important source for South Carolina slaves — slavers deliberately mixed the ethnic make-up of their cargoes as a safety measure. Probably even more important was the youth of slave cargoes, a factor that has received little emphasis in the historiography of slavery. The purpose of the slave trade was to supply labourers; about two-thirds of slaves undergoing the ‘middle passage’ were males and most were either teenagers or in their early twenties. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century West Africa, as Leland Ferguson points out, pottery was generally made by female specialists, who then traded their goods. Young girls from families who made these wares learned the craft, but the majority of Africans probably did not. The chances were against any one plantation in seventeenth-century Virginia or early eighteenth-century South Carolina ending up with a skilled African potter. On the other hand, most Africans would have had some idea about the basic materials and techniques. And, to speculate further, such people, if they sought to make pots, were probably more open to picking up practices from Native Americans or Europeans than someone who knew exactly what they were doing.

African culture was based on an integrated view of the world, a view that the slave trade and enslavement in the New World turned upside down. Subjected to slavery, with the consequent loss of control of their lives (a loss that was doubtless particularly acute for males resulting in masculine feelings of inadequacy and frustration), it is likely that Africans would have seen initiation ceremonies and ritual scarification, signalling the rite of passage to manhood, as wildly inappropriate. What survived in the New World was not African culture as such, but the elements of African culture that were useful in the setting of the plantation. These were combined with what was already present in the Americas to form a new and dynamic creole culture that we now call African-American. Colono Ware was anything but a replica of West African pottery. It was a response to new conditions and that is why, for example, Colono Ware from Virginia was much more influenced by European ideas of form and shape than that found in South Carolina. It is also why pottery from the South, in contrast to that of West Africa, was almost completely undecorated.

African-American culture was fluid and dynamic. It was also contingent, constantly responding to the conditions in which African Americans found themselves. Because those conditions varied considerably throughout the New World, historians must be extremely wary of assuming that a generalised pattern based on what happened in Africa or in the West Indies would necessarily occur in Virginia, South Carolina or New York. Sylvia Frey’s study illustrates the problem. In the middle of a good discussion of the slave family

in the pre-Revolutionary South she claims that '(p)olygyny, a respected and formally sanctioned arrangement throughout West Africa, was also *prevalent* throughout the South' (p. 34, my emphasis). Quite possibly this was the case. The black family is probably the most politically charged area of African-American historiography, and not coincidentally, is most in need of re-evaluation, but it is still the case that there is little known evidence to support her contention. Frey cites one example from Richard Dunn's study of Mt. Tayloe in nineteenth-century Virginia. This case and the other one Dunn found may well turn out to be crucially important, but they hardly demonstrate the 'prevalence' of polygyny in the pre-Revolutionary South.

The other assumption implicit in much of the recent work of African-American culture is a model of declension. African influence was at its peak at some time early in the eighteenth century and thereafter diminished in importance. The corollary is that if one can find something in the nineteenth-century, in this case a polygynous union, then it must have existed earlier in the colonial period. This reviewer remains unconvinced that culture travels in such conveniently straight lines. Roger Bastide's conclusion that religious cults should be viewed '... as a series of discontinuous events, of traditions interrupted and recovered', could have a broader application to African-American culture in the United States, particularly in the years before 1808 when the slave trade officially ended.

Changed circumstances may well have made practices retained only in the collective memory of African Americans newly relevant. James Deetz's work at Flowerdeew Hundred uncovered a strong correlation between the incidence of Colono Ware and the establishment of separate housing for slaves in the late seventeenth century. This suggests that once the situation of slaves changed and they were removed from a very close contact with their white owners they began to make their own bowls. Similarly, the blacks mentioned at the beginning of this essay who settled at Parting Ways in New England drew on African cultural patterns once they regained control of their lives. I suspect that when, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, slaves began in greater numbers to make their own clothes this may also have brought to the surface again memories of how to make various dyes from ingredients such as berries, leaves and bark that lay close to hand.

With the third study under review here, the focus shifts forwards to slavery in the antebellum period. *Before Freedom Came* is a book designed to accompany a museum exhibition organised by the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia, which was on view in Richmond and then was shown in Columbia, South Carolina and Wilberforce, Ohio. Usually, it is rather hard to take the text in books that accompany exhibitions too seriously — something about the large size format, the glossy paper or the abundance of pictures signals that the reader is expected to browse and not to read. In this case, though, that would be a mistake. Six well-known scholars have provided substantial essays of an impressively high standard. Drew Gilpin Faust outlines the role slavery has played in the American scheme of things; John Michael Vlach uses an array of sources to describe the setting of the plantation; Deborah Gray White reprises her earlier work to give an account of female slaves; Charles Joyner describes the plantation world of slaves, judiciously balancing black creative achievements with the constraints imposed by slavery; David R. Goldfield, probably better-known for his work in the twentieth century, gives a fine account of urban slavery in the antebellum South, and in the final piece Theresa A. Singleton offers an excellent assessment of the contribution that historical archaeology can make to understanding slavery. I am not certain how useful the volume will prove for casual exhibition-goers, but there can be little doubt of its value in the university.



It will be ideal for good students in survey and black history courses who wish to learn about antebellum slavery.

With all due respect to the authors, though, it is not just the essays that make this book such good value for money. What lingers in the mind when one puts the book down are the 170 illustrations, woodcuts, paintings and, in particular, photographs, taken from the exhibition itself. Some of the images are well-known, others less so; but they are all worthy of the attention of anyone interested in the South or the black experience in America.

Historians have not taken full advantage of visual material in their attempts to uncover the African-American past. Occasionally they have highlighted their argument with a particularly apposite image — the photograph of five generations of a slave family tellingly used on the cover of Herbert G. Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (1976) is a notable example — but generally illustrations appear to be an afterthought rather than an integral part of their analyses. The mechanics and costs of book production, with photographs usually segregated from the text, have hardly helped this process. In the case of *Before Freedom Came*, the illustrations are spread through the book, but the discussions of their meaning are disappointingly infrequent, and the material is set out in such a way that almost invariably one has to turn a page to find the image being referred to.

The principal analytical use of visual material has been in studies of 'the black image in the white mind'. There are a number of outstanding studies of paintings, in particular, but also woodcuts and illustrations, which reveal much about the assumptions and attitudes of whites towards blacks.<sup>7</sup> More recently a number of scholars have published work dealing with photographs, particularly those taken in the 1930s, but here, as in the case of painting, they have placed the emphasis on the assumptions and intentions of the person creating the painting or photograph. This is obviously important, perhaps even crucial, but it leaves unanswered the question of whether paintings and photographs can tell us anything about the person or object being represented.

There is scope for the historian to use images of slaves, particularly photographs, in different and rather more illuminating ways. Whatever reservations one may have about *The Civil War* television documentary as history, it would be churlish to deny that the techniques used by Ken Burns infused new life into hundreds of photographs. Such an effective use of the medium might make historians wonder whether they have been glossing over a potentially useful source. Extremely imaginative in their use of runaway advertisements, which, of course, are essentially verbal descriptions of slaves, historians should be able, with a little inventiveness and skill, to use the hundreds of existing photographs of slaves as evidence and not merely illustrations.

One possible way of achieving this is by viewing the bodies of slaves as a source. Nineteenth-century observers were certainly well aware that there was something distinctive in the appearance of blacks other than skin colour. Confronted for the first time by a large number of blacks in the markets of Washington D.C. in the 1850s, Frederick Law Olmstead concluded that '[i]n their dress, language, manner, motions — all were distinguishable almost as much by their colour, from the white people who were distributed among them, and engaged in the same occupations'.<sup>8</sup> The way in which African Americans presented their bodies to themselves, to whites and to photographers, the way they walked, talked, dressed and styled their hair was significant and offers a point of entry into their world that may reveal something new about African-American culture.

The sense of difference or otherness noted by Olmstead pervades some of the photographs in *Before Freedom Came*. In one eye-catching image (on p. 10) about two dozen male and female labourers walk home from the fields on the Woodlands plantation near Charleston. On the heads of all but a couple of the males are large loads of cotton. The single file of slaves curves from the right middle ground across the picture and then back to the right foreground, focusing attention on the slave driver in front. Dressed in a top hat, a frock coat and a white shirt, garb very similar to that of the slave driver whom Basil Hall, an English traveller, sketched with his drawing machine three decades earlier (a sketch reproduced on p. 55), and holding some sort of stick, he cuts a striking figure. Judging by the position of the slaves' feet, the photographer has told his subjects to be still while he takes the picture, but the driver, unlike the other slaves who are looking at the camera, gazes resolutely off the right margin of the photograph. With other photographs it is less the overall impact and more the detail that is important. As Theresa Singleton points out, at least five of the women in an 1862 photograph taken at Drayton plantation, Hilton Head, South Carolina (on p. 163) are wearing beaded necklaces. Charm strings, as one African American, Mollie Dawson, remembered, '... was supposed to bring good luck ter de owner of it'. Similarly, I have spent a considerable amount of time recently examining photographs and paintings trying to find out more about the shoes ex-slaves spent so much time discussing in the W.P.A. interviews. Thus far my conclusion is no more momentous than that it is amazing how many slaves were photographed with their feet obscured by furrows, shovels or whatever else lay close to foot. There is, however, enough evidence to suggest that such an approach may well prove fruitful in the future.

Writing blacks (and for that matter women and the working class) back into their rightful place in the story of America necessarily involves a highly eclectic approach. Faced with sources that are often opaque and intransigent, historians have borrowed from any number of other disciplines in order to tease meaning out of what they already have or to come up with new evidence. This is where much of the excitement and vitality of the historiography of African Americans lies. It is also an enterprise that can test the patience of others. Thankfully, though, historians have nothing so precious to the well-being of the future of American culture as the canon to protect, and history has suffered only a few cranky outbursts rather than the sustained assaults of Allan Bloom and his ilk that literature has had to put up with.<sup>9</sup> The potential for the continuation of this healthy process of interdisciplinary scholarship remains high, and it will be surprising if scholars of slavery and the African-American past do not hear a lot more from historical archaeologists and those using photographs as evidence in the next few years.

## NOTES

1. James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life*, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1977, pp. 138-54.
2. See Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1991.
3. A special issue of *Historical Archaeology*, xxiv, 1990, devoted to historical archaeology on southern plantations and farms, gives a good idea of some of the work being done. Theresa A. Singleton's essay, 'The Archaeology of the Plantation South: A Review of Approaches and Goals', pp. 70-7, in particular, is well worth reading.
4. Theresa A. Singleton, 'The Archaeology of Slave Life', in Edward D.C. Campbell, Jr. (ed.), *Before Freedom Came: African-American Life in the Antebellum South*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1991, p. 155.
5. Kenneth L. Brown and Doreen C. Cooper, 'Structural Continuity in an African-American Slave and Tenant Community', *Historical Archaeology*, xxiv, 1990, pp. 7-19.
6. Singleton, 'The Archaeology of Slave Life', p. 161. She is relying here on the work of Matthew Hill.

7. See, in particular, Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art: Vol IV From the American Revolution to World War I. Part 1, Slaves and Liberators and Part 2, Black Models and White Myths*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1989. For further proof that there are exhibition catalogues worth reading and for a notable incursion into this area by an historian, see Peter H. Wood and Karen C.C. Dalton, *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks: The Civil War and Reconstruction Years*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990.
8. Frederick Law Olmstead, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States*, edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1953, p. 28.
9. For some interesting comments on African Americans, the canon, and the controversies, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 'The Master's Pieces: On Canon Formation and the Afro-American Tradition', in Dominick LaCapra (ed.), *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1991, pp. 17-38.