

BLACK SCHOLARS, BLACK PASTS

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In April of this year, I attended my first nonarchaeological, nonanthropological professional meeting. Expecting to experience culture shock, I was nonetheless surprised by the form that it took. As I entered the meeting hall, I was struck by how many of the conference participants were black. The black person in me thought, “Excellent!” The anthropologist in me thought, “What does this mean?”

If my initial impressions were correct, and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) *did* have a greater black presence than I was accustomed to seeing at archaeology meetings, I speculated that it might have something to do with the prominence of African American history within the discipline. This led me to wonder: which comes first, black history or black historians? And, can we make any analogies between the historical profession and archaeology, which is predominantly nonblack but has demonstrated an increased interest in African American archaeology over the past few decades? Should I expect that in a few years, meetings of the SAA or the Society for Historical Archaeology (SHA) would come to look more like this year’s OAH meeting? I decided to pursue the answers to a few key questions.

WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY? Although “Black Lucy’s Garden” was excavated in the 1940s (Baker 1980:36), the archaeological studies of a slave quarter at Kingsley Plantation and of the free-black community of Weeksville, both in 1968 (Ascher and Fairbanks 1971; Bridges and Salwen 1980) are more often cited as the first wave of African American archaeology (Singleton 1995:120–121; Ferguson 1992:xxxvi–xxxix). To discover how the field has grown, I tabulated the number of articles relevant to African American archaeology published in the journals *American Antiquity* (*AA*) and SHA’s *Historical Archaeology* (*HA*). Although *African American Archaeology*, a newsletter dedicated to the subject, was first published in 1990, it was not included here. The number of articles published in *AA* was so small as to be unreliable statistically. However, when considered as a percentage of all historical archaeology articles in *AA* during the study period (1967–2001), articles on African American topics were published at the same rate in *AA* as in *HA* (10 percent in both cases), leading me to believe that the data from *HA* is a reasonable proxy for American archaeology as a whole. The summarizing chart in Figure 1 shows a gradual increase in the number of African American archaeology articles over time, starting in 1971 with the publication of the Kingsley Plantation project. African American archaeology has grown increasingly visible in a discipline that has few black professionals (Franklin 1997).

WHAT CAN ARCHAEOLOGISTS LEARN FROM AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY? Although the late 1960s saw a remarkable upsurge in African American history scholarship, it was built on a foundation set in the 1910s and 1920s (Franklin 1986). Notable landmarks include the founding of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (1915) and the introduction of its flagship journal, *The Journal of Negro History* (1916), as well as the publication of *The Negro* by W. E. B. DuBois in 1915 and *The Negro in Our History* by Carter G. Woodson in 1922. What distinguishes this effort from African American archaeology is that the majority of the early work was produced by black scholars working on the margins of their profession (Meier and Rudwick 1986).

The rest of the data summarized in Figure 1 comes from *The Journal of American History* (*JAH*), the journal of the OAH. The proportion of articles on African American topics was 12.5 percent for a study period chosen to coincide with the full run of *HA*. I had considered going back farther, to see what publication looked like before the boom in African American history in the late 1960s, but the number would have been negligible. Meier and Rudwick (1986:157, 152) report that between 1950 and 1960,

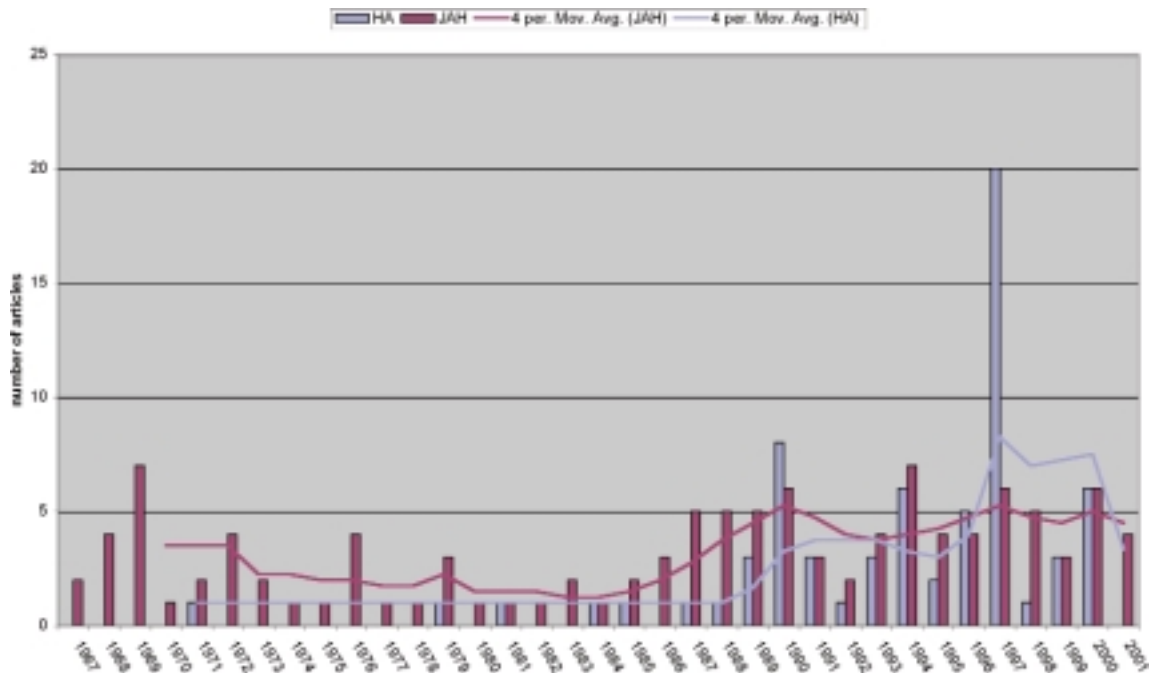


Figure 1: Articles were judged to address African American topics if they dealt substantially with the lives of people of African descent in the Americas or the study thereof. Articles dealing with such topics as abolition or plantations were not counted if they were concerned primarily with the experiences of other people or groups. A roundtable or forum on an African American topic that included multiple brief contributions was counted as “one” article.

only six articles on African American topics were published in *JAH* and its predecessor, the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. Compare this with the 14 articles published in the *JAH* from 1967 through 1970, including a presidential address on African American historiography (Vann Woodward 1969). The 1960s marked other watersheds as well, including increased participation by black scholars in “mainstream” national organizations like the MVHA/OAH (the Mississippi Valley Historical Association became the OAH in 1964).

To link these trends in scholarship with demographic trends in their respective professions, we need information about the make-up of these fields. What do we know, longitudinally, about black participation in these disciplines? Less than I hoped. The most detailed information on minority participation in archaeology and history has been gathered by scholarly societies themselves, mostly via membership surveys. However, much of these data only go back to the late 1980s. Governmental and nonprofit sources provide good time depth but tend to measure participation in different terms, usually by enrollment in graduate school or receipt of a postsecondary degree. Furthermore, available statistics often lump disciplines in nonstandardized ways; both archaeology and history are inconsistently counted as “humanities” and as “social sciences,” and the extent to which anthropology encompasses archaeology is often unclear.

In Zeder’s study of the 1994 survey of the SAA, she found that two of the 1,644 respondents answered the question “How would you characterize your ethnic heritage?” with the answer “African American” (0.1 percent; 1997:13). A 1991 survey of the membership of the SHA did not include information on racial or ethnic variables (Wall and Rothschild 1995), neither did the published report of a survey conducted in 1998 (DeCorse 2000), although, of a preliminary sample, 3 percent of respondents were Black/African American (DeCorse and DiSanto 1999:9). In a report on the status of minorities in the history profession, the OAH noted that of 488 new history Ph.D.s in 1988, eight were black (1.6 percent) (Hine 1989).

It is difficult to trace comparable statistics back in time. Available data show a slight upward trend in black humanities Ph.D. recipients from 1979 to 1997 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2001:Table 302;

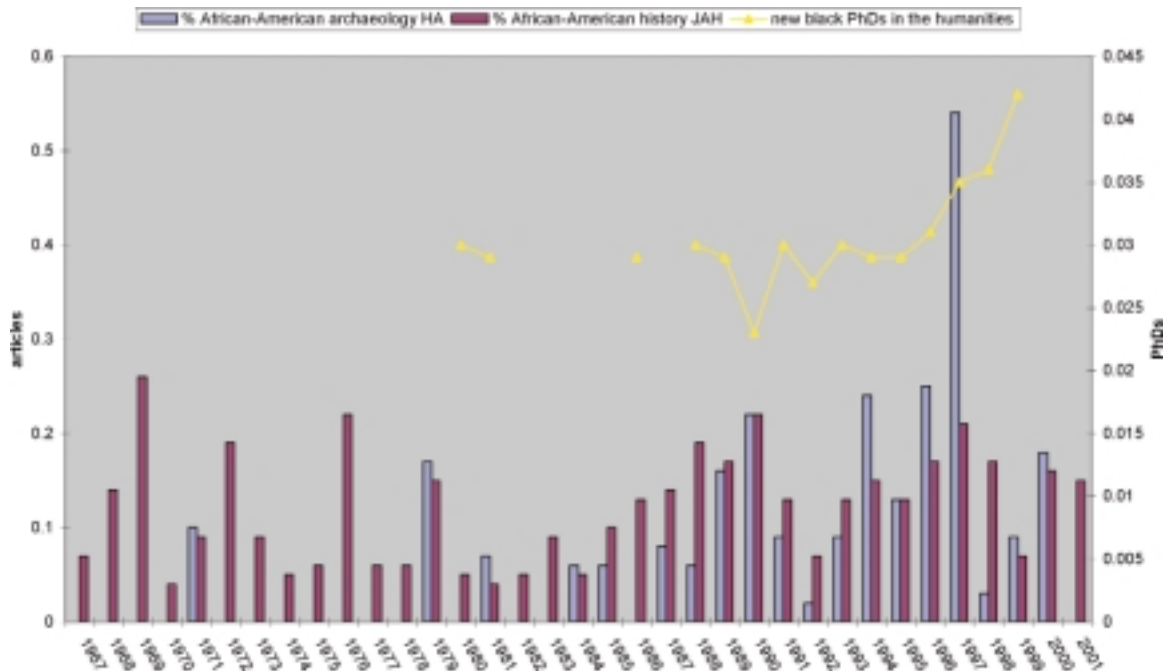


Figure 2: The percentage of Ph.D.s in the humanities awarded to black scholars, as reported by the NCES (2001), Table 302.

here, “humanities” encompasses archaeology and history, but not anthropology). This resembles patterns noted for history Ph.D. recipients and social science Ph.D. recipients, regardless of racial or ethnic background (NCES 2000:Table 297, Table 296; in this case, “social sciences” includes history, archaeology, and anthropology). Statistics from the Council of Graduate Schools indicate that between 1986 and 1997, enrollments of black graduate students in the humanities (including history) and social sciences (including anthropology, but without explicitly specifying archaeology) rose at a higher rate than that of their white counterparts, who comprised approximately 80 percent of the nearly 1 million students included in the study (Syverson and Bagley 1997:Table 2.5).

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to cross-reference the data on racial or ethnic background with the information available about specific disciplines. Furthermore, the trends cited above parallel a gradual increase in black graduate students and Ph.D. recipients regardless of field (Syverson and Bagley 1997:Table 2.5; NCES 2000:Table 271; *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 2001/2002) and may reflect nothing more than increased access to or interest in graduate-level education rather than changes within specific disciplines. When compared with the rates of publication on African American topics in the journals reviewed, the data coincide temporally (see Figure 2), but it is not possible to demonstrate cause and effect. Indeed, there are a whole host of variables that will have to be addressed by future versions of this research. If anything, one is tempted to say that both trends, scholarship and professional demographics, are responding to external social forces. So much for statistics.

WHAT DO ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND HISTORIANS SAY ABOUT BLACK PARTICIPATION IN THEIR RESPECTIVE DISCIPLINES? Within archaeology, the perception is that black participation is growing, if slowly (Franklin 1997:800; McKee 1994:3–4). Historians, on the other hand, are alarmed by what they describe as a “crisis” in which the number of black students entering graduate school for history and the number of history articles on African American topics actually declined during the early 1980s. New black-history Ph.D.s still do not seem to be changing the make-up of the Ph.D.-bearing populace at large (Freeman 1999; Hine 1989; Meier and Rudwick 1986:306). These trends are despite the presence of a small but prominent contingent of black historians—many of whom made their mark in African American history—as well as the growing popularity of African American history and a deliberate effort on the part of professional associations to integrate their power structures after the

1960s (Franklin 1988:167; Meier and Rudwick 1986:223–224).

In summary, it is difficult to demonstrate quantitatively that scholarly trends are either a “push” or “pull” factor in the demographic make-up of the archaeological and historical professions. The publication rates of the two disciplines are not so different despite the fact that anecdotal evidence suggests that history has a more prominent black presence, whereas the opposite is thought to be true in archaeology. External social dynamics may be as important for change in the disciplines as is scholarship on what we presume to be attractive themes. African American archaeology is a young field in which much of the early work was by nonblack researchers, and practitioners believe it is a key to encouraging black recruitment to archaeology as a whole. The experience of historians, however, suggests that this may not be enough to encourage racial diversity over the long term.

WHY ASK WHY? I can think of several reasons why the above discussion is more than self-indulgent navel-gazing. If one believes, as I do, that it would be ethically desirable to increase the diversity of our profession, it is important for us to know ourselves collectively. What are we, as a field, like; how did we get this way; where do we seem to be going? Only when we have an understanding of our own past can we begin to explain it (Schuyler 1970:406). We need to continue the recent trend of self-assessment to ensure that the information is collected in meaningful ways. If the archaeological profession values the participation of black men and women, it would behoove the profession to know whether its behaviors and structures encourage or discourage participation. What I have seen in the course of preparing for this essay convinces me even more firmly that the presumed lure of African American archaeology will not be enough to attract and retain black archaeologists. In fact, surveys by both the OAH and the American Anthropological Association discovered that a social science’s focus on minority groups can be a double-edged sword for minority social scientists, regardless of research interests (Hine 1989; Hsu et al. 1973; see also Agbe-Davies 1998)

A second justification appeals to archaeology’s and anthropology’s guiding principles. If we accept that culture (that is to say, social learning) is an important factor in guiding past behavior, it is reasonable to assert that it is an important factor in present behavior, including knowledge-producing enterprises like archaeology. And if we accept that an understanding of the variety of human experience is a foundation for understanding what it is to be human, could we then not argue that knowledge about and by humans that recognizes and takes advantage of that variety is preferable to knowledge that does not—not because it is more equitable, but because it is more honest, more likely to be critical, aware of its own limits (following Haraway 1988, see also Vann Woodward 1969:6–7)?

I’m going to keep going to the meetings of the OAH, not just because I admire their awareness of the social contexts of their profession and their tough stands on progressive issues (e.g., OAH 2000), though I do. I plan to stay on as a participant-observer because being there, and reading their *Journal*, makes me think more clearly about why I am an archaeologist and an anthropologist, what I want our profession to be, and how to get there from here. 📷

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