Part 1

Cultures in Contact

Melting Pots or Not?

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We have all heard America referred to as a melting pot of cultures from around the world. Each group of immigrants contributed customs and traditions to the ever-changing American culture and slowly or quickly lost their distinctiveness as they became American. Yet Americans today honor a multicultural heritage in ethnic celebrations held across the continent, in the varied foods that we all enjoy, and in the value systems we embrace. We see signs of this diversity everywhere. Is America a melting pot or not? Is there one American culture or many? What does it mean to be, or to become, an American? These questions lead to more general ones about what happens when people of different cultures come in contact with each other, and why. Anthropologists, historians, and archaeologists write of assimilation, acculturation, ethnicity, and the creation of creole cultures. But these terms have acquired a confusing array of meanings, particularly because of differences in the nature of these contacts. Some people immigrated to America voluntarily, others came forcibly. Some were enslaved, others conquered, and most expected women and children to submit to men's authority. All faced decisions, and factors that limited their choices, as they proceeded to redefine themselves and others in a new world. Historical archaeologists have the rare chance to explore these contacts, choices, and identities through time, from the unique perspective of material culture.

The heritage we study began when Europeans sailed west and met with diverse peoples living on the vast continent and island chains of North America. Beyond the mythic history of Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of America with support from the Spanish crown, Spain's important role in

colonizing North America is an oft-slighted chapter of American history. The Spanish and their Catholic missions introduced new ideas and ways of life to the peoples of North America, but they also brought new perils. We still live with the mix of Spanish and Native cultures in our southern borderlands, where corn tortillas and earthen pueblos coexist with Spanish placenames and Catholic churches. Archaeologists like Jerald Milanich have teamed with bioarchaeologists like Clark Spencer Larsen to learn more about those fateful encounters between Catholic clerics and Native villagers. Others have looked back to Spain, to understand the people, culture, and objects that traveled the Atlantic to New Spain. Florence and Robert Lister took an object-centered approach, studying the Spanish-tradition pottery used in the New Spain colonies. Florence Lister describes the ceramics as "fissured with global history." The Listers' efforts to tell the story of these ceramics and their makers spanned several decades and led them around the world to observe archaeological sites and contemporary potters at work in Morocco, Italy, Panama, Peru, the Caribbean, Taiwan, and the southern United States.

The spirit of the civil rights movement in the 1960s inspired other archaeologists, like Charles Fairbanks, to probe beneath the ground for a deeper understanding of slavery and the creation of African American cultures. Heading to the heart of the southern plantation—its slave quarters—Fairbanks began to write the story of the work and lives of enslaved Africans. The story emphasized enslaved people drawing upon their African heritage to make their way in a new and, for them, especially difficult world. A decade later, other archaeologists like Leland Ferguson were drawn to the task, bringing a humanistic perspective to a historical archaeology increasingly devoted to a scientific view of the world. Ferguson and a younger generation of scholars like Terrance Weik continue to help us see and come to terms with the pain, the inhumanity, and the creative cultural power intertwined in the institution of slavery. Their task has led them to plantations across the South, to colonial cities like Annapolis, New York, Charleston, and St. Augustine, and to the maroon communities built by escaped captives.

Other archaeologists like Roberta Greenwood have pioneered the study of immigrants arriving in North America across the Pacific rather than the Atlantic Ocean. Chinese sojourners helped East meet West as they laid mile after mile of railroad track and built the cities of the West. Greenwood recognized that the physical remains of past Chinese and other ethnic communities often survive just below city pavements. She has spent much of her career connecting these archaeological remains with the people who left

them behind, then linking the specific stories of these places to larger historical concerns. Her work and that of the urban archaeologists she has trained and inspired revealed a continentwide trend in the siting of immigrant communities on land of low value or high hazard, often nearest the place of first arrival. The sequence of ethnic groups moving into and out of these communities does not tell a happy story, chronicling as it does the history of the most economically and politically scapegoated groups. We cannot always celebrate the history that archaeology offers us, but neither can we ignore it.