

John L. Cotter Award in Historical Archaeology



Cheryl Janifer LaRoche

For her outstanding scholarship and stewardship as an archaeologist, conservator, public scholar, university professor, consultant to governments and institutions on exhibits and cultural heritage management, and excellence in humanist engagement, Dr. Cheryl Janifer LaRoche exemplifies the spirit of the John L. Cotter Award, which she received at the Society for Historical Archaeology's 44th Annual Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology in Austin, Texas. Most significantly, the body of her service and scholarship has helped bridge the philosophical and ideological gaps between the public and the archaeological profession.

The impact of Dr. LaRoche preceded her 2004 Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Maryland. Likewise, her commitment to community activism and service predated her archaeological career. Grounded in and influenced by the urban politics of the civil rights movement and its aftermath, Cheryl had already lived a full life of service to the community before she erupted onto the archaeological scene in the mid-1990s. Her career as an historical archaeologist began with the African Burial Ground Project in New York. She started in that project's basement archaeological laboratory, where she spent her days cleaning and conserving the artifacts associated with the bones of ancestors, and lecturing to an insatiably curious public about the importance of archaeology and its role in informing

African American history. She also simultaneously negotiated the public and private meeting spaces where members of the descendant community were asking difficult questions that demanded that archaeology become a better and a more accountable science to the larger society it serves.

In navigating among those spaces of field, laboratory, public education, and community activism, Cheryl laid the groundwork for her quest for both spiritual and scientific discovery in the pursuit of “truth and accuracy” about the African American past as part of the broad African diaspora experience. Through this commitment to reflexivity, Cheryl saw the significance and promise for the conservation and interpretation of material and ancestral remains, material life, and archaeological landscapes. She has therefore not only highlighted the “Ethical Dilemma Facing Conservation” (McGowan and LaRoche 1996), but has also contributed to a multifaceted programmatic agenda for the treatment and handling of human remains.

Staunchly believing in the emancipatory potentials of historical archaeology as a tool of social justice and of lifelong learning, Dr. LaRoche has advanced a conceptualization of historical archaeology of African Americans as an archaeology of living traditions. She envisions historical archaeology as engaged in the role of fostering an introspective understanding of self and community. The discipline thus serves as a conduit for spiritual rebirth, forging new knowledge and accounts of accomplishment and travail for the people who are the descendants of the subjective agents of the past that historical archaeologists study.

“Seizing Intellectual Power: The Dialogue at the New York African Burial Ground” (LaRoche and Blakey 1997) is a classic, challenging essay that has provided more than two generations of archaeology students with a framework for civic engagement and responsive stewardship. The issues that Cheryl and her collaborator raised in that article are as pertinent today as when the article was published in 1997. I suspect the article will continue to be relevant until the wide Boasian gaps between a scientific epistemology and the self-evaluation of descendant communities are fully bridged.

Dr. LaRoche herself has been at the forefront of bridging these gaps. As a scholar who spends most of her time consulting for diverse constituencies from government agencies to for-profit firms, and to academic institutions and families on a wide range of subjects—site interpretation, material analysis and conservation, exhibition, heritage management, and field research—Dr. LaRoche straddles a wide gamut of historical scholarship, and she is a collaborator in the true sense of the word. The body of her writings, public presentations, and publications jettisons that version of archaeological and anthropological praxis that merely writes of culture in abstraction with little to no attention paid to the self-representation of the subjects and their descendants. Crossing many disciplinary boundaries and writing for multiple audiences (LaRoche 2005), Dr. LaRoche has persistently advocated that the archaeology of African American life must be rooted in the broad African diaspora experience. She advances this view not only to attain a rich understanding of local histories, but also to develop a holistic comprehension of the complicated relationships between capitalism, democracy, and freedom in the modern world. In order to accomplish this, Dr. LaRoche has pursued a research approach grounded in the dialogic relationships between historical archaeology and the African diaspora intellectual traditions (Leone et al. 2005).

This dialogical approach between the authority of archaeology and the insights of African American memory, practice, and history shaped her 2004 dissertation: *On the Edge of Freedom: Free Black Communities, Archaeology, and the Underground Railroad* (LaRoche 2004). In this important study, now revised and under review for publication, Dr. LaRoche helps recover a different version of the hidden history of the Underground Railroad. It is a version of history that uncovers the spirit, the material culture, and the landscape history of five free black communities in the southern borders of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers that served as sanctuaries for hundreds of enslaved Africans fighting for their freedom at any cost. The study is an interdisciplinary process in which archaeology, oral and documentary sources, memory, genealogy, and cultural landscape are interwoven to unravel the ethos, ideology, and practice of the African American resistance against slavery and racial oppression. The study takes the African American quest for liberty and freedom outside the shadow of white abolitionist activities in order to show the independence of thought and action that defined African American initiatives and efforts in the process of their own liberation.

It is not a secret that archaeology, whether as a branch of anthropology, history, or sciences, has had its own fair contribution to the “demeaning distortions of the culture, biology, and history of the Africana peoples” in the name of instrumental objectivism (LaRoche and Blakey 1997:90). It is therefore not surprising that this history often caused distrust within an informed black public in regard to archaeology and its claims as agent of social transformations. Cheryl has significantly contributed to making historical archaeology accountable and open to the intellectual praxis, practice, and semantics of Africana peoples and the wider public. Due to her extensive and varied consulting work, from the New York Burial Ground Project, the National Park Service’s Harriet Tubman Historic Area Project, the Shawnee National Forest Service Project, the President’s House site in Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia, and Boston’s African Meeting House, to the Duffield Street Project in New York City, Dr. LaRoche has helped archaeologists win the trust of local communities and create the pathways for healthy partnerships between archaeologists and the public. She has demonstrated time and time again that it is this two-way exchange between scientists and descendant communities that will make historical archaeology achieve its potentials as an emancipatory social science. The discipline can thus develop as a science that seeks to make the world better than what it was and what it currently is, and to help to undermine the structures of domination that originally produced our earlier investigative agendas.

As was evident from her work on the President’s House in Philadelphia, such accountability and rapport between archaeology and the descendant community does not mean, according to Dr. LaRoche, that the science of historical archaeology must only confirm the self-understanding of the community. Rather, she has shown that those references of self-awareness, the experience, the folklores, the oral traditions, the memory, and the spirit of the community have important values for helping define questions that the expansive methods of historical archaeology can test and answer. Her articles and her community outreach projects also remind us that it is possible for the science of the archaeological community and the ways of knowing of the descendant community to share mutually intelligible language, which can then be subjected to critical analysis and interpretations. All of these, in Cheryl’s work, demonstrate the importance of archaeology in improving the self-understanding of the descendant community as well as the importance of the subjects in making archaeology a better science.

The uniqueness and impact of Dr. LaRoche’s contributions to the advancement of historical archaeology and African American heritage extend far beyond the halls of academics to the domains of service. She has twice been appointed by Maryland governor Martin O’Malley to the African American Museum Corporation Board of Directors. She also currently serves as vice-chair of the Commission on African American History and Culture, and is a board member of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum. In addition, Dr. LaRoche has served on the advisory board of the Seneca Village Archaeology Project in New York for more than 12 years. She has used those positions of service effectively to expand the knowledge of the public in the archaeology of African American life and to make strong case for cultural heritage management support in the corridors of power. Dr. LaRoche was notably instrumental in shaping Maryland legislation that provides capital funds to help preserve African American heritage sites. Truly, the breadth of her professional and public service impact is vast and is consistent with the spirit of the Cotter Award. Her outstanding stewardship has provided us with a successful model for the practice of archaeology of the African American experience as part of the African diasporic formations and as part of United States history.

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