



John L. Cotter Award in Historical Archaeology: Alicia D. Odewale

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Dr. Alicia D. Odewale is the 2024 recipient of the Society for Historical Archaeology's John L. Cotter Award, which was established in 1998 to honor Cotter, a pioneer in the field, and to recognize the outstanding work of emerging scholars. Dr. Odewale has made excellent contributions in her research and scholarship in historical archaeology during graduate studies, as an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma, and as an independent scholar and public intellectual. Her accomplishments and contributions to the profession are exemplified in antiracism initiatives, numerous peer-reviewed publications, teaching, and service (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Alicia D. Odewale, 2023. (Photo courtesy of the University of Tulsa.)

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Odewale earned her B.A. in classics and psychology from Westminster College in 2009. She then undertook graduate studies at the University of Tulsa, focusing on museum science and management for a master's degree in 2012, and anthropology and

archaeology for a doctoral degree in 2016. She was the first person of color to receive those advanced degrees from that university and the first Black faculty member to join its anthropology department. Her archaeological experience is far ranging and diverse in research questions while focusing on the experiences of African-diaspora communities. For example, she has participated in archaeological investigations at Montpelier in Virginia, the Levi Colbert Homestead in Mississippi, Taylor Plantation in Arkansas, the Christiansted National Historic Site in St. Croix (U.S. Virgin Islands), and the Creek Council House and Historic Greenwood District in Oklahoma. Odewale was a founding codirector of the Estate Little Princess Archaeology Project (ELPAP) in St. Croix and served in that role from 2017 through 2020. Through a collaboration with Archaeology in the Community, the ELPAP has worked with youth from the Caribbean Center for Boys and Girls and provided free training to Afro-Caribbean students and students from historically Black colleges and universities in the United States. Throughout these projects Odewale has placed an emphasis on the insights to be gained through community-rooted, Black-feminist, and anti-racist perspectives (Flewellen, Odewale et al. 2022).

In 2020 Odewale worked with Drs. Zoë Crossland, Justin Dunnivant, Ayana Flewellen, Maria Franklin, Alexandra Jones, and Tsione Wolde-Michael to convene an online forum discussion on “Archaeology in the Time of Black Lives Matter.” This excellent, insightful forum was watched live by nearly 2,000 people across the world and has been viewed over 5,000 times since. The webinar was sponsored by the Society of Black Archaeologists, Columbia University, and the Theoretical Archaeology Group. This vital discussion is now available for engagements internationally as an online recording (<<https://www.societyofblackarchaeologists.com/>>). The editors of the *American Antiquity* journal and *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* requested that Odewale and her colleagues write forum articles addressing the key issues from their panel discussions (Franklin et al. 2020; Flewellen, Dunnivant et al. 2021). She has become a leading voice internationally in the ways in which archaeology can be rooted in the quest for social justice by contributing to antiracism initiatives and the creation of more expansive understandings of African-diaspora histories.

Odewale’s latest project is an exemplar of courageous and activist social-science contributions to the understanding of African American pasts and the wrenching trajectories of racism in the United States. She launched the Mapping Historical Trauma in Tulsa, 1921–2021 Project (MHTT) with Dr. Parker VanValkenburgh in 2019 to undertake a systematic, archaeological, and historical investigation of the Historic Greenwood District. Separated from Tulsa by railroad tracks, Greenwood represents an historic Black town that was a thriving, affluent community of African American businesses and residences in the early 1900s. One of America’s most violent instances of racial violence erupted in 1921, as white Americans in Tulsa attacked the Black residents of Greenwood and burned to the ground at least 40 square blocks, with a hospital, library, and over 1,250 businesses, homes, schools, and churches. At least 300 people are believed to have been murdered in the rampage, and their bodies were buried surreptitiously in mass graves by the perpetrators. The remains of these victims are now being uncovered through an ongoing search for mass graves in a process conducted by the city and in which Odewale serves as a member of a public-oversight committee and a physical-investigation committee. A silence about the incident followed in Oklahoma, and little about the attack was mentioned in media, schools, or any public discourse for decades.

Odewale and VanValkenburgh were both born and raised in Tulsa, and they now bring their expertise as archaeologists to focus on uncovering the systematically erased histories of this vibrant African American community as it existed before the attack in 1921 and as it sought to recover in following generations. Odewale frames the MHTT Project as restorative justice, with a focus on multivocality, continual dialogue with members of local and descendant communities, understanding historical contexts, and dedicated community engagement and collaboration. As an activist project in the social sciences, this initiative also focuses on a visionary impact of the research to generate collaborative solutions with community members to address continuing inequities through broad-based educational efforts (e.g., the Tulsa Syllabus Project, <<https://tulasyllabus.web.unc.edu/>>). This is a grassroots project, with community members as stakeholders, fundraisers,

Fig. 2 The Mapping Historical Trauma in Tulsa Project field-school team with Dr. Odewale (*third from right*) in the summer of 2023. (Photo courtesy of J. W. Photography, Tulsa.)



and central voices in directing and designing the initiative's focus and priorities. Odewale's research in Tulsa has now gained international attention. She joined the National Geographic Society as a "live speaker" in 2021, traveling the world to share the story of Greenwood. She continued that work the next year as she was awarded an Azimuth Grant and became a National Geographic explorer. Odewale is now working collaboratively to build a new, archaeology-based curriculum as an extension of her work at Greenwood. She has emerged as a leading public intellectual, demonstrating the value of archaeology as a tool to counter racist narratives and practices of erasure (Fig. 2).

In 2021 Odewale was also appointed a material culture fellow for the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery hosted by Monticello Archaeology and funded with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. This recognition is an example of the excellence of Odewale's comparative scholarship in investigating the diversity of life experiences from African-diaspora sites across the Americas. Similarly, her 2019 article in *Transforming Anthropology* compared and contrasted robust data sets from the Montpelier plantation in Virginia with those from the Christiansted National Historic Site in St. Croix. In doing so, she investigates

the differences between tobacco and sugar industries, rural and urban African Heritage sites, plantation and non-plantation contexts (like jailhouses, schools, military sites, etc.), Danish and American governance, as well as the difference between island and land-locked environments in the lives of enslaved individuals. (Odewale 2019:115)

Through this ambitious analysis, she details the varying and context-specific ways in which African-descendant individuals constructed strategies of "volition" and self-determination while navigating the horrific dangers of a local "culture of coercion" (Odewale 2019:129); see also Odewale et al. (2017) and Odewale and Hardy (2019).

Odewale has made highly significant contributions to comparative historical archaeology in the United States and Caribbean very early in her career. Her publications provide a comprehensive resource for researchers and students in the field. We look forward to seeing Odewale's career develop to the great benefit of our profession, the Society for Historical Archaeology, and communities across the globe.

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