



(THE ARCHAEOLOGIST)

A scholar
at one
with the
elements.

YANA

(opposite) Flewellen is photographed in diving gear. They describe their work looking for sunken slave ships as “like the work of a crime scene investigator.”



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When archaeologist Ayana Omilade Flewellen is excavating a site, they are in pursuit not only of artifacts but also of signs of humanity. More precisely, they are looking for physical evidence left by enslaved Africans and their descendants of lives lived, love bestowed and fates crushed or graced with good fortune. For Flewellen, an assistant professor of archaeology at Stanford University, retrieving that evidence is about more than archaeological discovery. It is an exercise in dismantling dominant narratives about Black people in the United States. At former slave plantations, or in waters off the US Virgin Islands, their work holds up these fragments of the past and presents them as a challenge: *Claim the hurt you have inflicted, confront the humanity whose existence you had to deny in order to enslave an entire people.*

“As a Black nonbinary archaeologist who first and foremost centers Black life in my work, when doing archaeological work on sites of enslavement or freedom post-1865 in the United States, it becomes important to describe Black life and Black humanity, because in the past, African descendant people have been treated like chattel and have been quantified and abstracted to the quantifiable,” Flewellen explains, speaking from their mother’s home in Michigan.

Flewellen’s research focuses on exploring sites along the extended path traveled by Africans brought to America in chains. This means excavating at former plantations in the lush landscapes of the American South but also in the waters of the Caribbean, exploring the wreckage of sunken slave ships, which some estimates place at more than 1,000. As a child, they grew up snorkeling in the waters off Miami, but needed scuba dive training to be able to excavate on the ocean floor.

“I’ve always been drawn to water in the way that you spend all day at a beach. But never in my life had I thought about scuba diving until 2015,” they recall. The training was vital: “It’s one thing to carry your trowel, measuring tape, and shovel on land. It is something entirely different to have all of the measuring equipment you need underwater and keep things streamlined while you float with all of your gear, making sure not to damage the wreck or the sea life around you.”



Their first dive to a vessel used in the transatlantic slave trade was to the wreckage of The Clotilda, a ship that carried more than 100 Africans to Alabama in 1860, 52 years after the importation of enslaved people was banned. This expedition was thus carried out in secret, and upon arrival the ship was sunk to hide evidence of the (double) crime. Flewellen recalls what they found: “The Clotilda is the most intact vessel that we have access to today and part of that is because oftentimes wrecking events will quite literally tear these ships apart. So your wreck site is sprawled out over several hundred feet. But, because this wreck was done in a clandestine manner, the majority of the ship was intact. And because of that, it presents this real, tangible history, an acknowledgment of some of the most horrible aspects of the transatlantic slave trade, which is the actual space of confinement in the hull itself.”

Today, Flewellen is on the board of Diving with a Purpose, a nonprofit dedicated to oceanic conservation and the preservation of submerged heritage resources, and spends a lot of time in breath-taking waters. In fact, the formidable beauty of their dig locations on land and water sits in striking contrast to the horrors that took place there. That juxtaposition is not lost on Flewellen, nor is the salve that nature provides for work that can, at times, weigh heavy on the soul. “The great outdoors for me feels like freedom, the great escape. My work quite literally allows me to connect with land, soil and water

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in ways that remind me of the importance and interconnection of nature in our everyday lives.”

But what really buoys Flewellen is the material culture they encounter. Those objects become fodder for their entire body of work, from devising new narratives, to analyzing the world we have inherited from history, to inspiring their visual art in the form of sculpture, collage and performance. Sometimes, an object will speak to bigger truths. Take, for example, a discovery made while researching their current book on clothing and adornment practices among African American women between 1865 to 1900: “I was looking at a collection from the site of a Black land-owning family in Texas dating from 1871. There were small shoe soles and hooks used to button shoes, which I imagine were used by children. During enslavement, the rationing of clothing was so severe that people often had one or two pairs of trousers or shirts to last

the entire year. Oftentimes children went without shoes. So, there’s something about those shoe soles and button hooks for children that speaks to a desire that Black families had, and access Black families had post-emancipation to build a different kind of life.”

And it is here that Flewellen blows past the science of archaeology, anthropology and history into a colorful expanse of intimate knowing “as a storyteller and as an artist operating through a Black feminist framework.” Their whole person pours through the work.



(above) To descend to great depths while diving, Flewellen uses lead weights to help them sink through the salt water.



