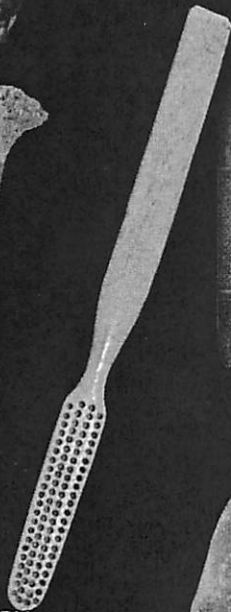


HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MATERIAL THINGS II



EDITED BY
JULIE M. SCHABLITSKY
MARK P. LEONE



SOCIETY FOR
HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

SPECIAL PUBLICATION SERIES

NO. 9



HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY
AND THE
IMPORTANCE OF MATERIAL THINGS II

Edited by

Julie M. Schablitsky & Mark P. Leone

The Society for Historical Archaeology
SPECIAL PUBLICATION NUMBER 9

2012

Paul R. Mullins

The Importance of Innocuous Things: Prosaic Materiality, Everyday Life, and Historical Archaeology

The everyday is platitude (what lags and falls behind, the residual life with which we fill our trash cans and cemeteries: scrap and refuse); but this banality is also what is most important if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived—at the moment when, lived, it escapes every speculative formation, perhaps all coherence and all regularity.

-Blanchot (1993:239)

ABSTRACT

Perhaps the boldest challenge of *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things* was its ambitious definition of material culture that could confront a vast range of social questions, but historical archaeologists continue to circumspectly define archaeological data, focus on the prosaic details of everyday life, and avoid anomalous goods. This paper examines the implications of a historical archaeology that answers many of the Ferguson collection's challenges, taking aim on materiality in broad terms addressing the profound social significance of apparently mundane archaeological material culture and crafting a reflective picture of everyday life and materiality.

Innocuous Things

In his introduction to *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things*, Leland Ferguson (1977:5) suggested that his goal for the 1975 symposium was to "concentrate on the importance of archaeological data—material things—and the undeveloped potential of those data." Ferguson lamented that historical archaeology was overly

descriptive and needed to focus on the social dimensions of material culture, a complaint that today seems simultaneously quaint and uncomfortably relevant. On the one hand, the critique of an empirical archaeology seems dated since the vast breadth of contemporary scholarship recognizes the cultural and social dimensions of things. Yet, on the other hand, the discipline remains firmly wedded to a fine-grained and highly focused picture of everyday material patterns that often is poorly or unconvincingly connected to ambitious social and cultural questions. Over 30 years later, nagging tensions between broad social questions and highly focused material analysis continue to trouble historical archaeologists who aim to craft a socially and intellectually relevant scholarship while preserving the discipline's distinctive material insight into prosaic everyday life.

This paper examines the vast breadth of materiality tackled by *The Importance of Material Things* and confronts how such a broadly defined materiality might change African American archaeology in particular and historical archaeology in general. My interest is in complicating the ways everyday material repetition, patterns, and routine are defined in historical archaeological theory. In particular, this paper explores the dual nature of everyday life as a realm of unconscious repetitive oppression as well as a potential space for creativity if not liberation. This mission depends on outlining a broad notion of materiality, and *The Importance of Material Things* provides a useful starting point. The volume outlined a more expansive and self-reflective notion of material culture—and, by extension, historical archaeology itself—than the discipline has subsequently embraced. Ferguson recognized the breadth of material things that might reasonably become the focus of historical archaeology, acknowledging that the last half millennium was

stocked with "an ever increasing proliferation of material items. Farm tools, ceramics, houses, furniture, toys, buttons, roads, cities, villages—the list continues almost *ad infinitum*" (Ferguson 1977:7). Indeed, the 1977 collection hosted a relatively unique and idiosyncratic range of things: banjos, old houses, plate scrapings, landscapes, cereal toys, a massive church, and ceramics are just a few of the myriad objects that found their way into the contributions. The papers did not seem especially concerned about narrow definitions of archaeological material culture as something distinct from broader materiality. For instance, Deetz (1977:10) ambitiously defined material culture as the dimension of the physical world that is shaped "according to culturally dictated plans," sweeping up a vast range of goods and arguing that material culture studies needed to become a central dimension of all anthropological scholarship and perhaps any social science. Henry Glassie (1977:32) similarly concluded that "artifacts can be transformed into a multitude of structures expressive of mind," and the limits on material interpretation "are drawn only by will and desire."

Despite such sentiments, North American historical archaeology's subsequent vision of materiality has been somewhat particularistic and persistently focused on, for lack of a better term, "everyday" material things. In archaeological usage the ambiguity of "everyday" materiality tends to invoke objects that are involved in broadly shared, patterned behaviors registered in quantitatively common material goods and repetitive practices, such as foodways. The discipline's focus on prosaic materiality paints everyday life as utterly quotidian, a smoothly functioning and rational daily existence registered in a backdrop of commonplace materiality and material practices. This everyday realm is composed of repeated but mostly implicit, unexpressed, and loosely codified practices.

Prosaic material things are certainly ripe for thick description, and celebrations of the everyday offer historical archaeology a powerful theoretical and political intervention against scholarship that focuses on elite material culture, reduces everyday materiality simply to ideological absorption, or ignores material culture entirely. Nevertheless, this requires a systematic theory of everyday life and materiality that situates prosaic objects within relations of power; ponders what

distinguishes the everyday (or to what it is opposed); defines everyday life in the last half millennium as something distinct from a universal sociality common to every historical moment; and encompasses a much broader range of material goods than the discipline has focused on yet. Historical archaeology risks overemphasizing the uniformity in everyday life, reducing everyday consumption to its barest empirical patterns and granting significance to quantifiably common goods. The everyday is truly repetitive, but in historical archaeology its banality risks being painted as apolitical or even reactionary by focusing on its apparent uniformity.

Everyday material consumption provides a focus that, on the one hand, demonstrates modernity's successful regimentation of citizens, the ways in which behavior is profoundly shaped by normative institutions and practices that Michel de Certeau (1984:48) referred to as "organizing discourses." Henri Lefebvre (1987; 1991) saw the everyday as a dimension of life people do not consciously apprehend and recognize, and Lefebvre argued that the everyday is lived through ideological lenses that make everyday life a space of absorption into dominance. On the other hand, material culture simultaneously reveals the ways consumers negotiate the breakdowns in structural codes and defy those organizing discourses (Upton 2002:714). The everyday constitutes mundane practices that inevitably are the scene of ideological domination, but those practices foster new desires and political aspirations that hold the seeds of intervention. Michel de Certeau approached the everyday as a constellation of obstinate practices that are never fully assimilated to dominant economic and ideological forces (Highmore 2006:106). By its very nature, everyday life is an "inchoate and heterodox mix of fluid, multiple and symbolically dense practices and thoughts" that is at least partially outside the gaze of power (Gardiner 2000:16). Certeau celebrated concrete instances of creativity and subversion within existing dominance, underscoring the limits of rationality and focusing on how they are constantly revealed in the most apparently mundane everyday practices (Gardiner 2000:164). This does not conceive of everyday life simply as "resistance," instead approaching the everyday as that which cannot be utterly reduced by dominant disciplines.

Raoul Vaneigem (1979) even more radically celebrated everyday life's potential spontaneity and pleasure, championing it as a complete rejection of the sacrifices required by and the contrived desires constructed in modern consumer society. Vaneigem (1979:4) argued that all consequential radical politics must come from subjective everyday experience, proclaiming that "People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have corpses in their mouths." Vaneigem (1979:74) sought to position radical politics in the subjectivity of desire and experience, asking "[w]ho can gauge the striking-power of an impassioned daydream, of pleasure taken in love, of a nascent desire, of a rush of sympathy? Everyone seeks spontaneously to extend such brief moments of real life; everyone wants basically to make something whole out of their everyday life." Vaneigem (1979:162) suggested that consumption inevitably revealed existing and potential desires that countered domination, indicating that consumers' capacity to embrace such desires revolves "around our ability to turn against capitalism the weapons that commercial necessity has forced it to distribute." This politics channeled everyday desire and experience against moral authority, artificial consumer needs, and class separations (Plant 1992:62-63). Vaneigem argued that a genuine revolutionary politics sought to capture what people have in brief moments of everyday life, but those desires were constantly commodified, ideologically restrained by dominant roles, or hollowly fulfilled in the world of consumption.

The everyday has often been perceived as a polar opposite to institutional and ideological frameworks for life, a realm of lived experience that cannot be contained by and is outside if not openly critical of those dominant structural frameworks (Poster 2002:743-744). Scholars that focus on everyday experiences typically consider it to be something informal, tactical, spontaneous, and without centralized organization, as opposed to organized institutional spheres with concrete strategically planned goals that unfold over time. In any complex society there is perhaps some basic dimension of life that remains distanced from, if not outside, state

and institutional controls, so there is perhaps something that might loosely be termed everyday life in any complex society. However, everyday life has little explanatory power for historical archaeology without recognizing the historical specificity of everyday life and materiality in the last half millennium, when the distinctions between everyday life and dominant spheres such as the state and workplace fundamentally reflect capitalism's routinized roles and commodification of human creativity and agency (Michael 2006:18). While there is some heuristic value to the basic polarization of everyday life and dominant institutional and ideological frameworks, everyday life is a complex and internally contradictory union of lived experience and reified structural frameworks (Kaplan and Ross 1987:3). Everyday life in Lefebvre's (1991:97) formulation, for instance, was perhaps less a polarized opposite than a totality of practices that was in part appropriated by structural ideologies even as it elided those structural influences in significant forms. Lefebvre still saw everyday life as fundamentally passive and characterized by banality, but it held the potential for political interventions that Mark Poster (2002:747) argues have moved politics from the workplace and state structures to broader public and popular realms.

Archaeological pictures of the everyday typically use dense material description to evoke a patterned and commonplace bedrock of things and practices. As the Program Chair for the conference that yielded *The Importance of Material Things*, Stanley South (1977) hoped that Ferguson's session would vigorously embrace theory that pushed historical archaeology beyond descriptive analysis, but by 1988 he was disappointed to conclude that the discipline "normally does not extend beyond particularistic, inductivistic exercises in identification and labeling" (South 1988:25). South lamented that historical archaeology 11 years after Ferguson's volume still persistently identified artifact patterns without linking them to cultural processes. Subsequent archaeological approaches to the everyday have often focused on pattern description and evaded anomalous things that do not seem to conform to functional artifact typologies, have not been defined as being especially significant, or are simply not considered appropriately "archaeological." Historical archaeologists generally have circumspectly

viewed contemporary objects, infrequently recovered goods, or idiosyncratic things as completely "archaeological." In 2001, for instance, Charles Cleland (2001:5) grouched that "much of what passes for historical archaeology is not archaeology. It seems perfectly acceptable to write or present papers that do not involve excavation or even artifacts." The result is that much of the 1977 Ferguson volume's call for a broadly defined materiality taking aim on any thing is accepted in theory but remains uncommon in practice.

The Banal Politics of Bric-a-Brac

Bric-a-brac is a class of artifacts that rarely plays a significant role in assemblage interpretations despite being constantly discussed in period literature and routinely fascinating to contemporary audiences and archaeologists alike. Ethnographic objects, items from nature, and craft goods were displayed in curiosity cabinets since the 18th century, and mass-produced curiosities joined those cabinets in the 19th century. Most of the archaeological artifacts classed as bric-a-brac are figurines, and while various sorts of miniature figures have been manufactured since prehistory they were most widely mass-produced in the 19th century. Figurines capture familiar dimensions of recognizable reality—people, animals, places, objects—but they reproduce that reality in aesthetically and ideologically distorted forms that distill the complicated symbolism of lived experience in a simultaneously spectacular aesthetics and utterly prosaic scale. In his study of miniatures, Ralph Mills (2010:11) argues that bric-a-brac's very scale and apparently familiar symbolism provide a circumspect security and a sense of order that invites consumers to imagine apparently alternative realities, which makes miniatures defensive mechanisms against experienced hardships. Bric-a-brac was innocuous in the sense that it was a commonplace, typically inexpensive, and very small object that rendered familiar subjects in apprehensible aesthetic forms, but that prosaic appearance encouraged consumers to project meaningful imagination and desire into those things.

Like almost all prosaic things, mass-produced knick knacks are material dimensions of life that are intrinsically elusive, largely inchoate, and obliquely brought into words and consciousness. The symbolic appeal of bric-a-brac was broadly defined, with some objects implying the class refinement of high art and others more firmly evoking cultural exoticism, relationships with nature, nationalism, and heritage. In 1867, for example, *The Albion* (1867:218) cast an exceptionally broad definition of bric-a-brac that revolved around its "artistic" dimensions, including "all that is precious and beautiful as well as mediocre in art, whether pictures, porcelain, ivory or wood carving, terra cotta, miniatures, jewelry, or plate." H. Byng Hall (1875:7) referred to such mass-produced goods as "industrial art," and much of the appeal of bric-a-brac was its deliberately liminal position between industrial commodities and high art. Hall argued that such objects, "if good specimens, [are] works of the most refined art," a position that confounded the notion of art as a product of unique creativity and admitted mass-produced objects into the realm of aesthetic authenticity and meaningful social symbolism. In 1853 one observer even hinted that mass-produced Parian improved on the natural materials artists used, indicating that the "colour of the Parian clay is beautifully adapted to statuary, and its softness of tone surpasses that of the finest marble" (Richards 1853:131). Parian porcelain statuary displayed at the 1851 Great Exhibition borrowed motifs from the Elgin Marbles and objects recovered at Pompeii, but other bric-a-brac examples did not so assertively fashion themselves as "high art" pieces, such as the many animal figurines on the market (The Royal Commission 1851; Barber 1893). When Henry Ward Beecher's massive bric-a-brac assemblage was auctioned in 1887, it included motifs as varied as a Ulysses S. Grant bust, a figurine of Shakespeare, hundreds of Chinese and Japanese porcelain vessels, and numerous figurines of cats, dogs, monkeys, turtles, and other animals (Kirby 1887). For decorative ideologues, bric-a-brac admitted select commodities to the realm of art, but in that sense it was ideologically incorporative because it did not threaten the status of art itself.

Despite rich period discourses on bric-a-brac, it is often archaeologically ignored. This is perhaps because

it is recovered in modest quantities, since most decorative material culture was not broken at the same rate as commonly handled goods like tableware; nevertheless, many other things that are recovered in very small quantities justifiably occupy archaeological attention. Archaeologists have routinely valued quantitatively prevalent materiality over the things and practices that are less common in the archaeological record. This has yielded a rich picture of everyday patterns but paradoxically provided little sense of the numerous idiosyncracies in everyday life. The modest quantities of bric-a-brac and its symbolic idiosyncracies defy easy analysis, so it often is buried in the depths of an artifact catalog or appears as a curious object whose picture adorns an otherwise dry technical report.

Bric-a-brac is typical of the everyday goods that largely fell outside materialist ideologies revolving around luxury items, high fashion goods, and novel styles, and it is those material ideologies that have driven Western historical narratives of consumer life, if not archaeological analysis as well (Owens et al 2010:213). Bric-a-brac is actually relatively similar to the flood of prosaic commodities that populate archaeological assemblages, but its rich symbolism and awkward fit in most archaeological typologies risks rendering it anomalous. Archaeologists often ignore uncommon material patterns and anomalous practices that provide idiosyncratic punctuation to everyday life, but such materiality that does not "make sense" on first glance harbors some of the discipline's most important insights. Amy Gazin-Schwartz (2001:266) argues that archaeologists' definitions of anomalies simply reveal our methodological, social, and disciplinary assumptions about the patterns we believe material culture should reveal. In the most rudimentary functional terms bric-a-brac is easy to define, but casting such goods simply as "decorative" objects ignores all their charged symbolism and fails to comprehend that a wide range of goods from tableware to seashells were aesthetic and ideological mechanisms in Victorian homes.

Archaeologists routinely ponder precisely what an object was meant to symbolize in the eyes of producers or consumers or reduce the objects to functional terms, but bric-a-brac's meanings and literal functions were intentionally ambiguous and idiosyncratic. Consumers

were perhaps invoking the cultural meanings of high art when they decorated their homes with Parian vases, and exotic mass- or foreign-manufactured goods evoked global locales and distant cultures, but precisely what those concepts meant to any household was quite fluid. The representational logic of bric-a-brac was akin to the simulacra, which masquerade as a faithful copy of something authentic but mask and pervert reality or represent nothing especially real at all (Baudrillard 1988:170). Bric-a-brac was most widely marketed at a moment when commodity aesthetics began to mass-reproduce images, clouding the distinction between reality and representation as well as the authentic and the commodity. That representational ambiguity was a central appeal of these things (and many other commodities), and that departs from the notion that consumers acquired goods to instrumentally "communicate" particular sorts of meanings. Bric-a-brac was routinely consumed for no especially concrete reason besides its capacity to evoke generalized symbolism its consumers considered empowering in their own imaginations, if not the imaginations of others. In this sense, like all material things, bric-a-brac's meanings could never be utterly contained by dominant symbolism and ideological frameworks. The meaning of things constantly was shaped by highly contextualized, spontaneous experiences and desires even as consumer culture's ideological frameworks and the boundaries of dominant identities pulled in the opposite direction aspiring to constrain everyday desires that might well upset material and social discipline.

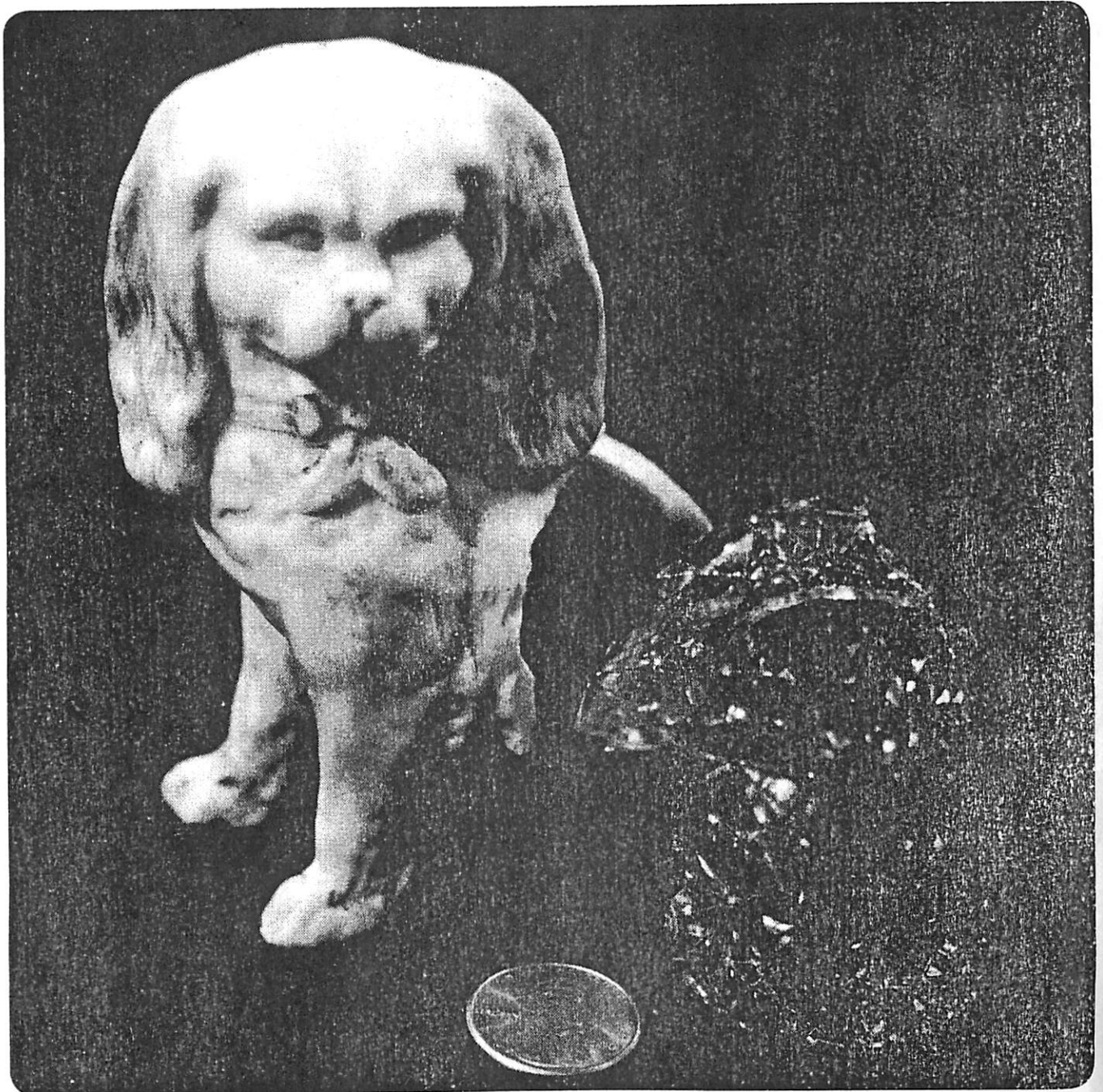
Bric-a-Brac and the Color Line

In the hands of African Americans bric-a-brac appropriated genteel symbolism that was routinely considered to be exclusively white, so it secured a circumspect foothold in consumer culture. In 1897, for instance, African American Bishop W.J. Gaines (1897:178-179) suggested that such goods had a "civilizing" effect, arguing that "The more intelligent of the negroes are beginning to recognize the influence of art as a factor in the improvement of

their homes. They are beginning to understand its educative effect, its refining and elevating tendency. ... I have been astonished and gratified by the exhibition of pictures, bric-a-brac and ornamentalions of various kinds which adorn these homes. This shows that the

Figure 1. This well-behaved dog was recovered with the accompanying glass hat. The dog was essentially a behavioral model for a turn-of-the-century Indianapolis household, with its dress, style, demeanor, and implied dignity posing as a model for its human consumers. (Photograph by author, 2010).

minds of the better informed of my race have passed out of the stage of the semi-barbarism in which emancipation found them, and are opening to the susceptibilities of civilized life." For Gaines and many genteel observers, "art" evoked education, cultural breeding, style, and class in ways that explicitly invoked dominant ideological standards, and artistic materiality implicitly distanced African American consumers from racist caricatures that lay at the heart of those standards.



Such modest goods drew African American consumers into a broad range of ideologies that were often considered color and class exclusive. For instance, the early 20th century Indianapolis, Indiana home of Ruben and Sallie Jones included a relatively typical cat figurine that used animals' domestication and discipline as a model for genteel households' own behaviors. The Jones' neighbors on California Street had a ceramic animal figurine in a late 1890s assemblage, and the dog was a similar disciplinary model, with impeccably combed hair, a stylish gilded bow, and an attentive pose that aspired to demonstrate the power of genteel discipline (Figure 1). Human figurines also routinely modeled the same genteel disciplines. For example, the ca. 1880-1920 South African farm site Vaal Krans included a figurine of a stylishly dressed sailor who breaks significantly from the stereotypical picture of sailors (Figure 2). The figurine's orderly blonde hair, beret, and kerchief underscored the civilizing effects of materiality and the disciplinary power of refined practices that could bring animals and sailors alike into Victorian culture. Such modeling invoked an ambiguous albeit largely undefined disciplinary ideal against which consumers

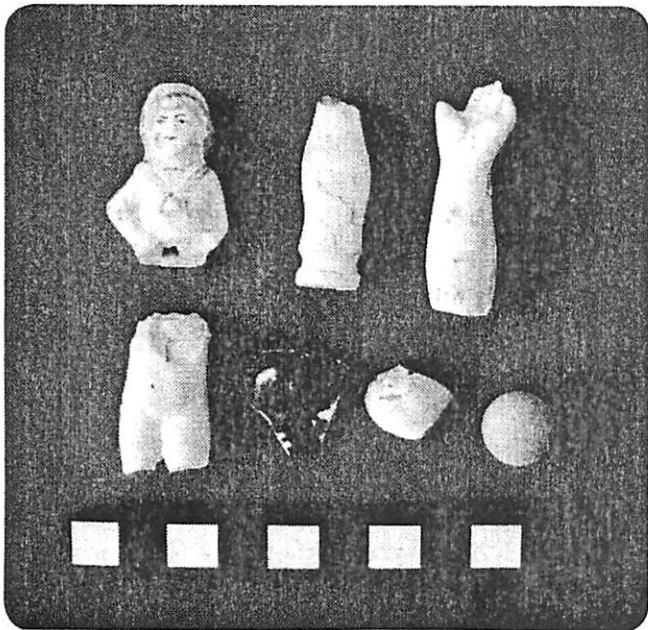


Figure 2. The sailor figurine shown in the upper left was among a modest assemblage of trinkets including dolls and toys found at the circa 1880-1920 South African farm site Vaal Krans. (Photograph by Gerda Coetzee, 2010).

measured themselves. In that sense, bric-a-brac obliquely posed a behavioral ideal that was "real" to consumers who recognized their distance from an idealized mainstream, but no especially clear ideal or mainstream actually existed in lived reality.

Some bric-a-brac was less a disciplinary model than an oblique critique of un-named social complexities. For instance, a ca. 1920-1940 figurine from the Wilson Farm Tenancy Site in New Castle County, Delaware combined the motifs of both a child sitting on a fence and a small playful kitten, doubly invoking an overly sentimental innocence that surfaced in figurines from the late-19th century onward (Affleck et al. 2010:7.28). In some hands this notion of childlike innocence was an indirect social critique of a public world many consumers saw as defamiliarizing, antagonistic, and not innocent at all. Pastoral images often performed a similar critique to such innocent figurines, attacking industrial society's material and social complexity with romanticized agrarian motifs in the somewhat incongruous form of a mass-produced commodity (Figure 3). If a consumer did not articulate that critique, the consumption of that object might be interpreted as ideological absorption rather than reflective critique. In most cases, though, such social symbolism skated along the boundaries between absorption and resistance as things assumed ever-emergent and relatively inarticulate meanings. This is typical of the tension within everyday material consumption, which is a symbiotic relationship between, on the one hand, an instrumentally rational ideology rooted in broad social and class structure and, on the other hand, an emotive, creative, and idiosyncratic symbolism that is vested in specific contexts, if not individual agents (Campbell 1987). Bric-a-brac's aesthetic novelty and ambiguous symbolism fueled creative longing that allowed consumers to imagine very different lives, yet it was simultaneously a mechanism of incorporation into unifying dominant ideological standards. Bric-a-brac was typical of the everyday practices that were firmly situated within dominant structural frameworks even as they held the seeds of interventions against those very frameworks.

By embracing dominant symbolism African Americans' bric-a-brac posed an oblique threat to racist ideologies. In 1906, for instance, Harry Stillwell Edwards (1906:212) expressed pleasant surprise at



Figure 3. This figurine was recovered from a ca. 1890 deposit at the Maynard-Burgess House, an African American home in Annapolis, Maryland. The romanticized image of a peasant girl was relatively typical of sentimental bric-a-brac aesthetics that contrasted with urban industrial life in Victorian society. (Photograph by author, 2003).

visiting an African American's Georgia home where "the floors were carpeted, the white walls were hung with pictures, the mantels and tables held bric-a-brac. In one room was a parlor organ, in another a sewing machine, and in another a piano, where a girl sat at practice." Edwards (1906:213) divined in such apparently mundane household materiality a picture

that racial ideologues feared, arguing that "The happiness of home-owning strikes the American negro with peculiar force. The centuries have taught him that the people who command respect are the owners of lands and homes; and once in his own home, the home itself begins to teach him higher things.... It has become the home of a self-respecting American citizen. And having secured for himself a permanent home, the possessor adds himself to the higher class and demands that the public around him share the respect he feels for himself."

For African American consumers these prosaic household objects were significant as shows of class ambition in defiance of racism. The implications of such goods certainly were not lost on white observers. An 1890 novel by William Henry Holcombe (1890:84-85) told the story of a woman visiting an African American's home, where she "was ushered into the negro's little parlor. ... Nicely papered walls, carpeted floors, comfortable sofa and chairs, centre-table bearing a big family Bible and a large album for family photographs, chromos over the mantel, and a profusion of china bric-a-brac everywhere, all told the story of ambitious and successful imitation of the white man. Given a race with the imitative faculty, conscious of its deficiencies, anxious to overcome them, and with a good model before it, and its future progress is certain." The commentary reduced African American consumption to "imitation" and inelegantly maintained white genteel superiority, but it acknowledged the power of such commonplace things to forge domesticity. African American consumers were always positioned in relation to racist representations that constructed black identity in particular ideological forms, and commodities provided a lived and concrete materiality that eroded if not defied those racist narrative conventions.

The ideological appeal of a proper genteel home was wide-ranging across class, color, and international lines alike. For example, Eleanor Casella and Sarah Croucher's (2010) analysis of farm cottages near Manchester, England illuminates how modest rural households were quite active participants in late 19th and early 20th-century consumer culture, seizing on commodities that fabricated particular ideological notions of domestic space. One of the working-class cottages Casella and Croucher (2010:123) examined

even had a piano in their modest parlor, and many of the neighbors' homes included Victorian goods like floor coverings, furniture, souvenirs, and decorative bric-a-brac that collectively materialized the ideological picture of a Victorian home. What such objects truly meant to the households who acquired them was inevitably idiosyncratic, dynamic, and highly contextualized, but bric-a-brac is less about concrete reflections of consumer identity and material symbolism than it is about desire; that is, figurines illuminate how consumers imagined themselves in relation to both their concrete experiences and the ideological notion of a Victorian social mainstream. Figurines positioned consumers within (and sometimes against) the dominant ideological vision of genteel Victorian society, and that position and the desires projected onto bric-a-brac reflected both consumers' distinctive lived experiences and their socially specific visions of broader social structure.

The symbolic richness of knick knacks is perhaps marked, but the mechanics of everyday material desire for bric-a-brac are not radically different from those projected onto any commodity. The symbolism of prosaic things is rarely articulate, and it typically has much less to do with function, the confirmation of narrowly defined identity or economic status, or the adherence to dominant styles than archaeological analysis suggests. Material assemblages are often indications of who consumers imagined themselves to be, rather than especially clear illustrations of an essential identity or dominant symbolism. Consumers do not normally have particularly instrumental understandings of how any given commodity will paint its possessor as wealthy, knowledgeable, cultured, or ideologically desirable. This does not mean that consumer desire is simply unfettered creativity disconnected from broader social contexts and dominant ideology (Wurst and McGuire 1999). Instead, it tends to be inchoate, idiosyncratic, and spontaneously negotiate and resist dominant practices even as it reproduces some of their underlying ideologies. Michael Dietler (2005:64-65) argues that consumption is "a process of structured improvisation that continually materializes cultural order by also dealing with alien objects and practices through either transformative appropriation and assimilation or rejection." In this

sense, consumer desire is a dynamic, creative process that is socially, culturally, and historically positioned.

The politics of bric-a-brac took complicated forms, even when portraying partisan motifs. For instance, a tin silhouette of President Grover Cleveland was recovered from an African American home in Montgomery County, Maryland whose residents outside Washington DC held modest jobs as domestic laborers (Furgerson 2011; Schablitsky, this volume) (Figure 4). The home's rich assemblage of decorative goods was sealed by a fire in about 1916, leaving an unusually complete assemblage that included 96 artifacts the excavators identified as knick knacks (which included flower pots and broadly defined decorative goods as well as figurines). The political artifacts in the assemblage paint an interesting picture of African American political ambition and optimism in the wake of Emancipation. The assemblage included an 1860 Lincoln-Hamlin campaign medallion, which was from an election in which African Americans could not even vote, but free blacks and captives alike certainly recognized their stake in partisan politics, and the African American household's attraction to Lincoln would not have been uncommon. In contrast, the Grover Cleveland silhouette is somewhat more problematic as a partisan political statement. Cleveland was a Democrat who carried Maryland and the South in 1884, 1888, and 1892, winning the national election in 1884 and 1892—Cleveland always carried the South while the Republicans always carried the North, and his undistinguished record on race and deference to Southerners' re-established racist codes in the wake of the Civil War certainly boosted his popularity in the South. If they had been recovered individually, the two objects might be interpreted in quite different ways linking the position of African Americans to contrasting sets of partisan, social, and color line politics. Alongside each other the Lincoln and Cleveland artifacts could be narrowly construed as conflicting statements of partisan affiliation, but they instead underscore African American investment in politics: African Americans had hopes in the potential of democracy, if not in its late 19th century practice or in the specific candidates political parties offered. It is perhaps telling as well that the 1860 medallion was still in the household over 50 years after the Lincoln election, and the Cleveland bust

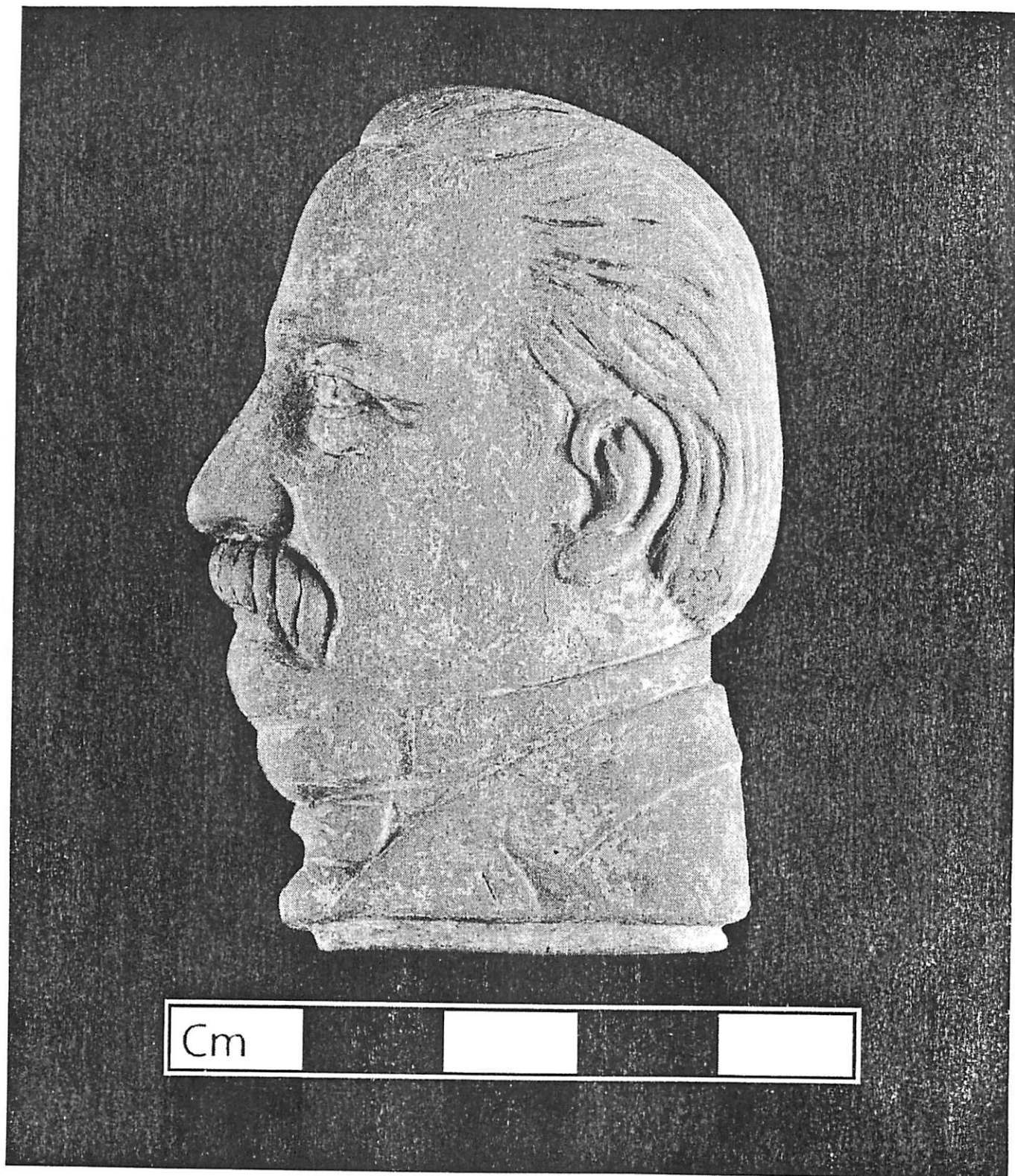


Figure 4. This tin silhouette of Grover Cleveland was recovered from a late 19th century African American deposit in Montgomery County, Maryland. Cleveland was a Democrat who carried Maryland and the South in 1884, 1888, and 1892, but he never supported positions that favored African Americans. (Photograph by Kathy Furgerson; courtesy of Maryland State Highway Administration, 2010).

was over 20 years old. Their long-term curation in the household suggests that they evoked the ideal potential of democracy more than any particular adherence to the platforms of a specific politician or party.

Certainly many consumers invested political and social ambitions in things, but like most everyday materiality the politics was tactical, relatively spontaneous, and ever-emergent, so it breaks significantly from the strategic politics of goal-oriented ambitions that unfold over time. Bric-a-brac underscores the social and political meaningfulness of banal and apparently trivial material culture, at once stressing the inchoate politics of desire projected onto everyday materiality while it compels archaeologists to rethink inherited notions of material significance and symbolism. Bric-a-brac consumption is not an especially powerful challenge to the ideological foundations of consumer capitalism, but if we take the notion of everyday desire seriously, it is significantly more meaningful and does hold the seeds of radical critique, if not intervention. The imaginative and spontaneous desire projected onto seemingly innocuous things illuminates consumer culture's power to subordinate consumers even as it risks embracing everyday desires that challenge the roles, ideologies, and structural alienation at the heart of that very society. Vaneigem (1979:91-92) hinted at the revolutionary potential of consumer desire, indicating that "the consumption of goods—which comes down always, in the present state of things, to the consumption of power—carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction and the conditions of its own transcendence." Yet he was skeptical of consumer revolution and wary "that, as they gradually free themselves from the imperatives of production, people should be trapped by the newer obligations of the consumer. By opening up the wasteland of 'leisure' to a creativity liberated at long last thanks to reduced working hours, our kindly apostles of humanism are really only raising an army suitable for training on the parade ground of a consumption-based economy" (Vaneigem 1979:111). In this vein an archaeology of consumer desire would circumspectly view the freedoms promised by consumption yet take seriously the highly contextual if not individual symbolism of things, stressing spontaneity, pleasure, and lived immediacy. Rather than frame consumer symbolism

only in terms of its relationship to dominant material meanings or societal identities, an archaeology of consumer desire would examine how people essentially lose themselves in things, always seeking a subjectivity based in their own experience and desires. Archaeology is of necessity a methodologically systematic analysis a step removed from such everyday experience and prone to distortions by dominant rationalized frameworks for knowledge, but Vaneigem (1979:113) counsels scholars to "try to incorporate an element of constant self-criticism, so as to make the work of co-optation a little harder than usual."

Historical archaeology has enormous power to dissect the details of everyday material life, those patterns that have become invisible yet are packed with social and cultural symbolism. Nevertheless, a fixation on the most prevalent patterns and processes, an arbitrary elimination of some materiality, and reluctance to embrace the inchoate but consequential politics of the everyday risk undercutting the rich picture of everyday life that archaeology can paint. Like all material goods, figurines were mechanisms of desire and not simply reflections of function and narrowly defined social position, so their consumption potentially holds insights into essential dimensions of everyday desire that ideology shapes profoundly yet can never utterly control or contain. A distinctive disciplinary niche has been carved out by archaeologists crafting highly focused pictures of commonplace material patterns, but like life itself those pictures risk being dull and irrelevant without clearly argued linkages to structural and global influences that simultaneously dissect the idiosyncrasies within every material assemblage. *The Importance of Material Things* most firmly underscored the richness archaeology can produce when its attention encompasses a vast range of material culture that is critically, rigorously, and creatively interpreted, and it is that expansive albeit long-ignored notion of materiality that may still harbor historical archaeology's most interesting insights.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Julie Schablitsky and Mark Leone for inviting me to contribute to the volume and providing comments on several drafts. Chris Matthews and Joe Joseph provided thoughtful guidance on a late draft. Thanks to the many colleagues who have shared their bric-a-brac data and discussed these ideas, including Richard Affleck, Varna Boyd, Geoff Carver, Gerda Coetzee, Pete Connelly, Jake Crockett, Sarah Croucher, Emma Dwyer, Jack Eastman, Kathy Furgerson, Erica Gibson, Ryan Gray, Amanda Haught, Lori Lee, Ralph Mills, Jeff Oliver, Jim Symonds, John Triggs, Mark Warner, Jane Webster, and Timo Ylimaunu. Preliminary versions of this paper were presented at and benefited significantly from comments at the 2010 Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory (CHAT) conference; the University of Aberdeen Northern Archaeology Research Seminar Series; the University of York Department of Archaeology Seminar; and the Newcastle University School of Historical Studies Seminar. Funding for those presentations was provided by an Overseas Conference Fund Grant from the Indiana University Office of the Vice President of International Affairs. Any shortcomings of the paper are entirely my own fault despite so much good advice.

References

- AFFLECK, RICHARD M., MERA KAKTINS, META JANOWITZ, PATRICIA MILLER, AND INGRID WUEBBER
2010 *At the Road's Edge: Final Archaeological Investigations of the Wilson Farm Tenancy Site (7NC-F-94), Middletown, New Castle County, Delaware*. URS Corporation, Burlington, NJ.
- THE ALBION
1867 Bric-a-Brac Hunting. *The Albion* 45(19):218.
- BARBER, EDWIN ATLEE
1893 *The Pottery and Porcelain of the United States*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, NY.
- BAUDRILLARD, JEAN
1988 *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- BLANCHOT, MAURICE
1993 *The Infinite Conversation*. Originally published 1969. Translated by Susan Hanson. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- CAMPBELL, COLIN
1987 *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Basil Blackwell, Cambridge, MA.
- CASELLA, ELEANOR CONLIN AND SARAH K. CROUCHER
2010 *The Alderley Sandhills Project: An Archaeology of Community Life in (Post-) Industrial England*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, UK.
- CLELAND, CHARLES E.
2001 Historical Archaeology Adrift? *Historical Archaeology* 35(2):1-8.
- COETZEE, GERDA C.J.
2011 Settlement patterns and material culture: A Historical Archaeological study of the farm Vaale Krans in the Venterstad district. Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of South Africa.

- DE CERTEAU, MICHEL
1984 *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- DEETZ, JAMES
1977 Material Culture and Archaeology—What's the Difference? In *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things*, Leland Ferguson, editor, pp.9-12. The Society for Historical Archaeology, Special Publication Series No.2.
- DIETLER, MICHAEL
2005 The Archaeology of Colonization and the Colonization of Archaeology: Theoretical Challenges from an Ancient Mediterranean Colonial Encounter. In *The Archaeology of Colonial Encounters: Comparative Perspectives*, Gil J. Stein, editor, pp.33-68. School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, NM.
- EDWARDS, HARRY STILLWELL
1906 The Negro and the South. *The Century* 72(1):212-215.
- FERGUSON, LELAND
1977 Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things. In *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things*, Leland Ferguson, editor, pp.5-8. The Society for Historical Archaeology, Special Publication Series No.2.
- FURGERSON, KATHLEEN, VARNA BOYD, CAREY O'REILLY, JUSTIN BEDARD, TRACY FORMICA, AND ANTHONY RANDOLPH, JR.
2011 Phase II and III Archaeological Investigations of the Fairland Branch Site and the Jackson Homestead Site (18MO609), Montgomery County, Maryland. Report to Maryland State Highway Administration, Baltimore, from URS Corporation, Gaithersburg, MD.
- GAINES, W.J.
1897 *The Negro and the White Man*. A.M.E. Publishing House, Philadelphia, PA.
- GARDINER, MICHAEL E.
2000 *Critiques of Everyday Life*. Routledge, New York, NY.
- GAZIN-SCHWARTZ, AMY
2001 Archaeology and Folklore of Material Culture, Ritual, and Everyday Life. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 5(4):263-280.
- GLASSIE, HENRY
1977 Archaeology and Folklore: Common Anxieties, Common Hopes. In *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things*, Leland Ferguson, editor, pp.23-35. The Society for Historical Archaeology, Special Publication Series No.2.
- HALL, H. BYNG
1875 *The Bric-a-Brac Hunter*. Chatto and Windus, London, England.
- HIGHMORE, BEN
2006 *Michel de Certeau: Analysing Culture*. Continuum Books, London, England.
- HOLCOMBE, WILLIAM H.
1890 *A Mystery of New Orleans: Solved by New Methods*. JB Lipincott, Philadelphia, PA.
- KAPLAN, ALICE AND KRISTIN ROSS
1987 Introduction. *Yale French Studies* 73:1-4.
- KIRBY, THOMAS E.
1887 *Catalogue of the Bric-a-Brac, Rare Oriental Rugs, Oil Paintings, Furniture, Fine Curtains, Large Collection of Fine Old Engravings and Etchings and the Valuable Library Belonging to the Estate of the Late Rev. Henry Ward Beecher*. American Art Association, New York, NY.
- LEFEBVRE, HENRI
1987 The Everyday and Everydayness. *Yale French Studies* 73:7-11.
1991 *The Critique of Everyday Life*. 2nd ed. Verso, London, England.
- MICHAEL, MIKE
2006 *Technoscience and Everyday Life: The Complex Simplicities of the Mundane*. Open University Press, New York, NY.

MILLS, RALPH

- 2010 Miniatures in Historical Archaeology: Toys, Trifles, and Trinkets Re-Examined. Master's Dissertation, School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK.

OWENS, ALASTAIR, NIGEL JEFFRIES, KAREN WEHNER, AND RUPERT FEATHERBY

- 2010 Fragments of the Modern City: Material Culture and the Rhythms of Everyday Life in Victorian London. *Journal of Victorian Culture* 15(2):215-225.

PLANT, SADIE

- 1992 *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in the Postmodern Age*. Routledge, New York, NY.

POSTER, MARK

- 2002 Everyday (Virtual) Life. *New Literary History* 33(4):743-760.

RICHARDS, WILLIAM C.

- 1853 *A Day in the New York Crystal Palace*. G.P. Putnam and Company, New York, NY.

SOUTH, STANLEY

- 1977 Foreword. In *Historical Archaeology and the Importance of Material Things*, Leland Ferguson, editor, pp.1-2. The Society for Historical Archaeology, Special Publication Series No.2.
- 1988 Whither Pattern? *Historical Archaeology* 22(1):25-28.

THE ROYAL COMMISSION

- 1851 *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, 1851, Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue*. Volume 2. Spicer Brothers, London, England.

UPTON, DELL

- 2002 Architecture in Everyday Life. *New Literary History* 33(4):707-723.

VANEIGEM, RAOUL

- 1979 *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Originally published 1967. Translated by John Fullerton and Paul Sieveking. Rising Free Collective, London, England.

WURST, LOUANN AND RANDALL H. MCGUIRE

- 1999 Immaculate Consumption: A Critique of the "Shop till you Drop" School of Human Behavior. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 3(3):191-199.

Paul R. Mullins

Department of Anthropology
Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis
Cavanaugh Hall 413B
Indianapolis, Indiana 46202