
review essay

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Thinker-tinkers, race and the archaeological critique of modernity *Shannon Lee Dawdy*

Martin Hall, *Archaeology and the modern world. Colonial transcripts in South Africa and the Chesapeake, London, 2000*

Paul R. Mullins, *Race and affluence. An archaeology of African America and consumer culture, 1850–1930, New York, 1999*

Charles E. Orser, Jr., *Race and practice in archaeological interpretation, Philadelphia, 2004*

Charles E. Orser, Jr., ed., *Race and the archaeology of identity, Salt Lake City, 2001*

Abstract

A new sub-field in the archaeology of race has been emerging among historical archaeologists based in the US and South Africa. A review of this literature, put into play with some thoughts from Ralph Ellison and Franz Fanon, provides several 'object lessons' about the state of archaeological theory and practice, and the difficulties inherent in framing a material study of race. The literature exemplifies how archaeology is fast becoming an anachronistic critique of modernity that may hinder our ability to see difference in the past. At the same time, a brave new project of comparison might position us to contribute a unique perspective on the spiral of history.

Keywords

Historical archaeology; modernity; race; subjectivity; South Africa; US

Yet when you have lived invisible as long as I have you develop a certain ingenuity... Though invisible, I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin. Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a 'thinker-tinker.' Yes, I'll warm my shoes; they need it, they're usually full of holes. I'll do that and more.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952, 7



Figure 1 Ralph Ellison and his wife Fanny touring collections at Colonial Williamsburg. Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

‘Dirty nigger!’ Or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’

I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Franz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks*, 1967 (1952), 109

The American novelist Ralph Ellison (Figure 1) and the Martinican philosopher–revolutionary Franz Fanon were contemporaries on a similar, if not parallel, intellectual journey in the mid-20th century. Their project was to tear down, or tear up, by minute dissection, ‘blackness’ from the inside out – to reflect viscerally on what it means to be a black man in a white man’s world – to make visible the subjective experience of being black. In both cases, they draw attention to the ways that others objectify them because of the colour of their skin, and how the heightened awareness of being both a subject and an object leads them to certain strategies, thoughts and actions – and to a double consciousness. In both, there is a frustration over the powerlessness to define one’s being at the most basic philosophical or psychological level. It is an anger in part about how much their own ontology rests in the hands and, especially, the eyes of others. Ultimately, and effectively, they switch the focus from themselves as objects to the ‘theory and concept’ of ‘race’¹ as an object, in order to deconstruct it, or at least to damage it beyond reasonable use.

Ellison and Fanon offer several ‘object lessons’ for archaeologists engaging with issues of race which I will try to elicit through the course of this essay. Recent work in the archaeology of race tells us something about the place of archaeology in the modern world, both intellectually and politically. Archaeology is becoming an anachronistic critique of modernity. I would like to reflect on the potentials and limits of this trend, and on race as an archaeological object.

Although I will utilize the work of colleagues in historical archaeology for this discussion, my final provocations are intended to push precisely at the intellectual vulnerabilities of a balkanized archaeology split up into regional sects (Mediterranean, Eurasia, Britain etc.) and metallic eras (bronze, iron and, eventually, the Spanish silver of colonialism and capitalism). Recent work in the archaeology of race underscores the failure to develop a comparative archaeology across continents and eras (both because it morally refuses comparison and because a comparative study of race might involve a critique of antiquity) until recently, an endeavour that interested few. Since the macro-scalar and *longue durée* view of humankind is precisely what archaeologists can offer that most historians and anthropologists cannot, this failure is symptomatic of the oldest problem in archaeology itself: the inability to develop a unique body of ideas that would be of interest, let alone explain something, to scholars in other disciplines. If archaeology is still the ‘handmaiden of history’ it is because it is too timid.

Historical archaeologists, particularly those working in the modern era since the 15th century, have been making race a significant object of their study over the last several years. Charles Orser has deliberately attempted to mark a watershed in this trajectory with his recent *Race and practice in archaeological interpretation* (2004). This work follows up on a volume he edited a few years earlier (Orser 2001), which featured most (though not all) of the American historical archaeologists who have worked either on ‘race’ or on African-American identity. The issues Orser and his co-authors bring up are worthy of reflection and I would like to consider some of them, in tandem with two other works in this sub-field from recent years: Paul Mullin’s *Race and*

affluence. An archaeology of African America and consumer culture (1999) and Martin Hall's *Archaeology and the modern world. Colonial transcripts in South Africa and the Chesapeake* (2000).

After providing a brief summary of these works placed in their textual constellation, I will explore four possible 'object lessons' to be learned from juxtaposing them with utterances of Ellison and Fanon:

1. *Political objects* What are the implications of making 'race' an object of archaeology? Or of making the subjects of racialization and racism themselves objects of study? How local are the politics? How American is the archaeology of race?
2. *Thinker-tinkers* Does archaeology currently offer any unique contribution to the theorizing of 'race' and racial subjectivities? What sort of ideas are being deployed? Are they at the level of invention or of 'tinkering'?
3. *Visibility* How visible is 'race' in the archaeological record? Are there inherently visual, or inherently material, elements to racialization and racism?
4. *The spiral of history* Is 'race' a modern evolutionary phenomenon, or is there a *longue durée* of racial thinking across humanscapes?

Synopses

Taking them in chronological order, Paul Mullins's first book, *Race and affluence. An archaeology of African America and consumer culture* (1999), represents the quick transformation of his award-winning dissertation from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst (Mullins 1996). Advised by Robert Paynter, Mullins also worked closely with Mark Leone to develop his doctoral project on several sites excavated as part of the ongoing archaeological exploration of historic Annapolis, Maryland. To address the topic of African-American consumer culture from 1850 to 1930, Mullins draws on archaeological material excavated from three residential sites in Annapolis, as well as a variety of archival documents notable for their breadth and depth. His interests lay not in treating African-Americans as a monolithic population identifiable with a particular pattern of consumption, but rather in the various discourses that directed consumption during this period, and on the mutual constitution of consuming subject and consumed object. Summarizing his project, he says,

Many African Americans viewed consumption as a significant symbolic and concrete privilege that augured a possible progression in African-American labor and civil privileges. In some cases the hope vested in consumption was idealistic or naive, yet consumer space offered precious possibilities for African-American socioeconomic self-determination.

Consumer ideologues viewed Black and American as profoundly incongruous identities, yet African-American consumers labored to demonstrate that they could be both Black and American. This book probes the illusion of essential racial subjects and examines the process by which consumers used material culture to see themselves as, or opposed to, racial subjectivities (Mullins 1999, 18).

Mullins demonstrates how American consumer space was implicitly constructed as a 'White' space into which African-Americans frequently trespassed. Their exclusion could be quite literal and physical. Under Jim Crow segregation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries people of colour were barred from 'White' department stores, and even arrested for window-shopping in downtown districts. They symbolically re-entered this space through the same department store's mail-order catalogues. Mullins offers interpretations of black simulacra such as Aunt Jemima (the model's real name was Nancy Green). Rather than inviting the participation of the black consumer, this kind of packaging advertised the proper relationship between black productive labour (a wage-enslaved 'mammy' preparing pancakes) and the pleasures of white consumption. At the level of the artefact, Mullins carefully excavates the complex, and sometimes contradictory, politics of individual acts of procurement, from cosmetics such as 'Black-No-More Cream' to wild-caught turtle meat and Victorian bric-a-brac. Chachkas and what-nots found in middle-class African-American households could include anything from a lithographic of Lincoln the Emancipator to a blond and white porcelain peasant girl made to sit upon a pedestal (see also Mullins 2001).

Martin Hall's *Archaeology and the modern world. Colonial transcripts in South Africa and the Chesapeake* (2000) is less explicitly about race, but it is inevitably one of the major 'transcripts' of colonialism that enables his comparison of Virginia and South Africa. In fact, race is the thread that runs through many of the other transcripts and discourses such as conquest, gentility, gender or capitalism: 'Race is implicated in all of these interactions and makes their interpretation even more complex' (Hall 2000, 20). Likewise, race is touched upon in each of his chapters, although it is most salient in the last four: 'Hidden voices', 'Bodily uncertainties', 'Emergencies of the moment' and 'Heart of whiteness'. This work of a senior scholar well known for his research on the historical archaeology of his own South Africa (Hall 1987; Hall *et al.* 1993) reads as a series of thought pieces built around several tensions and ambiguities – between text and artefact, global and local, regimes of order and resisting subjects. The texts structuring his exposition are not the documentary histories of archaeological sites, but four colonial memoirs written by European men in the 18th century (Kolbe, Valentyn, Mentzel and William Byrd II). Whereas Mullins tends towards an interpretation of a single artefact, Hall prefers to read landscapes and architectural façades. He spends a good deal of time interpreting the Cape's distinctive baroque gables as an expression of their male owners' 'position in the world'. He compares and contrasts this local vernacular to the near-global Georgian style employed by William Byrd and his Virginian contemporaries. Evidence from excavation is scant in this wide-ranging work, which might more accurately be described as grounded in materiality rather than archaeology.

Two women play central roles in Hall's discussion of race. Sartjee, or Sarah Bartman, was the Khoikhoi woman famously exhibited in Europe in the early 19th century and painfully archived in numerous pictorial representations. The museum display and eventual dismemberment of her eroticized, exaggerated body represents for Hall one of his central themes: 'A quality of violence that lies behind the arrays of salvaged and well-scrubbed

artefacts laid out in archaeological laboratories' (Hall 2000, 198). Krotoa, also known as Eva, was a bicultural Khoikhoi/Dutch woman who moved between the spaces of a European colonial fort and her relatives' village. As she did so, she deliberately changed her clothes along with her name and her religion. Hall reads her material performance as an example of the ambiguities and contestations of colonialism. Images of both women were used in the nervous repetition of racial stereotypes, as if the creation of easy clichés could naturalize a falsehood. Here Hall is respectfully critiquing Deetz's seminal work on the archaeology of colonialism (Deetz 1996) as well as Leone's work on capitalism and ideology, asserting, 'Rather than a neat cognitive system in which cultural expression and actions were predetermined by a mental template, or a regime of order in which false consciousness prevailed, this historical archaeology of colonialism reveals an inherently unstable system, constantly under challenge' (Hall 2000, 125). Hall sees race as one grid within this system, equally characterized by instability and resistance.

Orser's 2001 edited volume, *Race and the archaeology of identity*, resulted from a Foundations of Archaeological Inquiry round table held in late 1999 which followed his *American anthropology* article 'The challenge of race to American historical archaeology' (Orser 1998b). The essays create a conversation around Orser's assertions, demonstrating an expected diversity of views and approaches. Topics range from the diet of the diverse fur-trading community of Michilimackinac (Scott 2001) to 'Creole economics' (Matthews 2001), architectural segregation in 17th-century Virginia (Epperson 2001), the roots of soul food (Franklin 2001a), African-American 'spirit management' (or the archaeology of hoodoo; Leone 2001), mothering and midwifery under slavery (Edwards-Ingram 2001) and the economic standing of free people of colour in the antebellum south (Singleton 2001). Some theorize race and materiality explicitly (Epperson 2001; Mullins 2001; Paynter 2001; Wilkie 2001). Others deal directly with the conditions of 'coloured' subjects, either assuming or demonstrating the effects of racialization and racism on their material lives (Delle 2001; Edwards-Ingram 2001; Leone 2001). With the exception of Scott and Matthews, the authors for the most part focus on either whiteness or blackness as emblematic of 'race'. Another imbalance is regional. All but one of the authors are US-born, while all but two of the articles focus on the US and its earlier colonial formations. Delle's (2001) paper on missionary activity and town planning in Jamaica is an exception, while Edwards-Ingram (2001) also touches on evidence from Jamaica for her arguments regarding medical practices among the African diaspora. Elsewhere, Orser has attempted to foster a more international brand of historical archaeology (an agenda he puts forth in Orser (1996) and which he has put into practice by establishing the new *International journal of historical archaeology*), but this hoped-for expansion of the field is not evident here. The volume might better be titled 'Race and the archaeology of American identity'.

Still, there is some thought-provoking work here. I will briefly outline just two of the essays. Terrence Epperson should probably be credited with introducing the constructivist critique of race to historical archaeology with his impressive 1990 dissertation (Epperson 1990a; 1990b). This article is a

follow-up to his earlier work which was also precocious in its attention to 'whiteness' in 17th-century Virginia. He has two goals in this piece. The first is to subtly reverse Deetz's classic argument (Deetz 1996) about the increasing expression of a racial divide through architectural segregation. Rather than seeing the gradual separation of owners, European indentured servants and African-descended slaves as a reflection of racial attitudes, Epperson instead argues that increasing architectural segregation in an individualizing Georgian mode helped construct racial difference. It was a material sort of education. His second goal in the chapter is to warn against too much constructivism, or what he and others have called 'vulgar anti-essentialism', which is extending the argument to mean that our analyses should be 'colorblind', as if because race is socially constructed, it doesn't 'matter'. This line of reasoning has the potential of reinforcing the natural and generic quality of whiteness, while disregarding the quite real structural inequalities that racism produces. Robert Paynter (2001) follows one of Epperson's proposed solutions, focusing instead on the history of racial discourse and the 'invention of whiteness'. If landscapes can be silenced (or, perhaps better, 'shadowed'), then this is what has occurred in rural New England, the mythical 'white' centre of the nation. On the ground Paynter finds Native American and African-American communities that have persisted since the colonial era and contributed to local patterns of unacknowledged cultural hybridity. He also argues quite effectively that, by definition, racial identities are material (2001, 133).

The 2001 edited volume has no concluding essay. That role is filled by Orser's more thorough and programmatic treatment of the topic in *Race and practice in archaeological interpretation* (2004). The book is oriented towards a small circle of peers, challenging them with contemporary theory and some dense overviews. Orser's agenda has three main items: (1) to expose and critique 'historical archaeology's failure to confront the historical dimensions of race and racialization' (Orser 2004, 13); (2) to develop a workable theory for understanding race that avoids the pitfalls of essentialism and the whole-culture framework; and (3) to illustrate his model with a historical, archaeological and landscape study of 19th-century Ireland. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a useful contextual history of racialization and archaeology (or what he terms 'the prehistory of race'), from mound-builder theories to 'wrestling with ethnicity' in urban settings. The fourth and fifth chapters lay out his own practice theory for an archaeology of race, deploying the work of Bourdieu and Lefebvre and network theory. This last for him encompasses approaches as broad scale as world-systems theory and as small scale as the mutualism of individual social actors and their world of connections (*à la* Georg Simmel). Orser's own archaeological contribution does not appear until the last 20 pages, with a documentary and archaeological analysis of 19th-century Ballykilcline in central Ireland. Orser traces the 'racialized' history of colonial Ireland, in which native Irish suffered from demeaning stereotypes and a brutal economic regime perpetrated by British occupiers. He then goes on to sketch the socio-historical map of Ballykilcline, the most salient feature of which was a series of rent strikes by Irish farmers against British overlords in the 1830s and the 1840s, a political movement curtailed by the Great Famine. Against this backdrop, Orser shows how two

types of ceramic found on Ballykilcline domestic sites – locally made coarse earthenwares and refined British-made tablewares – trace the routes of two overlapping, but very different, social networks not apparent from written sources. Renters participated in both networks, making a simple reading of their ‘Irishness’ or ‘Britishness’ difficult, much less a straightforward understanding of the discourse of poverty and the reality of hunger: ‘The possession of objects like teacups within the cabins of the townland may have been a paradoxical reference to the English refinement at the same time that their acquisition represented the tenants’ ability to negotiate an avenue into the British marketplace’ (Orser 2004, 242). Orser concludes with a recommendation to study both whiteness and the racialization of people not usually considered ‘of colour’, such as the Irish.

Political objects

Fanon begins the discussion, ‘I was an object in the midst of other objects’ (1967 (1952), 109). Race as an archaeological object has evolved out of an archaeology of racialized subjects, in particular African-Americans and their antecedents. Although there have been a few notable exceptions in which the archaeological treatment of racialized Asians, Latinos or Native Americans has been the focus (Orser provides a thorough review of these works: 2004, 82–99), one potent critique of the field is that it is so lopsided towards blackness/whiteness that it currently lacks the comparative apparatus to consider race in anthropological terms. In fact what has been developing is actually an ethnographic archaeology of one particular formation – the biracialism of the antebellum south. Even when the locale is South Africa or the Caribbean, one senses that the work on ‘race’ is so heavily haunted by this particular apparition of slavery and lynching that local racial formations are seen through its bloody and much-publicized haze. This neglect of other racialized subjects is curious, especially in the case of Native Americans, where the body of work and number of practitioners involved in contact or colonial-period archaeology is much greater. The neglect extends to Latin America, where indigeneity and colonialism are finally becoming topics of interest, but where *mestizo* national rhetoric and the ideals of racial democracy make the study of past racialization an unfashionable, if not dangerous, topic (though see Funari, Hall and Jones 1998; La Rosa Corzo 2003). One result of this lopsided emphasis on African-America is that the emerging ‘archaeology of race’ is heavily indebted to, and imbricated in, the political concerns of this particular descendant community. Another result is that it reinforces the idea that African-descendant peoples are the essential racialized subject, to which all others must be compared. As Matthews wisely cautions, ‘there is a fine line between recognizing and reifying difference’ (Matthews 2001, 72). Perhaps at the beginning of the 21st century he is now on a pedestal constructed of emancipatory desires and apologies, but Fanon still does not escape being an object.

Each of the books reviewed here traces its genealogy to a body of archaeological work concerning life on southern US plantations in the colonial, antebellum and postbellum periods. Even Hall’s work in South Africa owes more to this heritage (via Deetz’s sojourn in Cape Town) than

to an Africanist archaeology, as his own engagement in the Chesapeake comparison illustrates. This line of enquiry is as old as the Society of Historical Archaeology itself, instigated in 1967 with Charles Fairbanks's investigation of Kingsley Plantation (Fairbanks 1972). Under the influence of Herskovits (1958), the work of Fairbanks and his early students at the University of Florida concentrated on a search for African cultural retentions, and gradually shifted to a focus on class and the institution of slavery itself (e.g. Otto 1984; Singleton 1985). By the mid 1980s the field began to expand rapidly, with work spanning the complex southern landscape, from northern Virginia to east Texas. New centres of activity arose around Deetz's long-term project at Flowerdew Hundred plantation in Virginia, Colonial Williamsburg's patronage of several tidewater projects, the University of North Carolina (Stanley South and students) and the South Carolina Institute of Anthropology and Archaeology (Leland Ferguson and students). In the late 1990s the field of African-American archaeology was rocked by the public controversy over the New York African Burial Ground, the results of which have been highly stimulating for scholarship. It would not be an exaggeration to say that work on African diaspora communities now represents one of the largest, if not the largest, sub-field within American historical archaeology (for comprehensive reviews of the literature, see, in addition to Orser 2004; Orser 1998a; and Singleton 1995). The pace of production has quickened in recent years, with several edited volumes and special issues, as well as monographs (Delle, Mrozowski and Paynter 2000; Franklin and McKee 2004; Singleton 1999; Wilkie 2000; 2003).

Not only is this perhaps the most prominent sub-field within the practice, it is also the most overtly, and unapologetically, political. Mark Leone *et al.* (1995) and Maria Franklin (2001b) have proclaimed the stakes with refreshing frankness, making clear they believe archaeologists have a responsibility to revise and publicly interpret historical narratives in a way that helps contemporary descendant communities. In their view, and that of most practitioners in this field, archaeology serves the present (see also Mullins 1999, p. vii; Wilkie 2001, 109). Orser holds that all types of archaeology should bear this responsibility; however, 'The onus of relevance is particularly strong on historical archaeologists because the history they study is still being enacted in various ways throughout the world' (Orser 2004, p. x). A similar sentiment causes Martin Hall to expand the confines of archaeology itself to analyse the present through a study of the recent demolition and commemoration of the Cape's 'coloured' neighborhood called District Six. He then closes with a consideration of the complex ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia, still unsettled at the time his book went to press.

Joffe (2003) argues that this commitment to the present arises from our current epistemological state in which claims to scholarly neutrality are no longer tenable. It is also nurtured by the conditions of archaeological practice in which archaeologists are trying to find a place for themselves in a world that cares little for their endeavour. Both he and Adam Smith (2004) worry about political presentism and the growing collaborations between archaeologists and those claiming descendant status vis-à-vis archaeological remains. In the context of postcolonial, post-Soviet Europe, the possibility that new

Kossinnas could gain a foothold seems imminent and ominous. Smith further worries that an archaeology in the service of the present will lead to false continuities and an ‘essentializing of the archaeological subject’ along new lines that obviates a constructivist understanding of identity. This echoes concerns I have about archaeologists’ willingness to presume we know how people self-identified in the past. On the other hand there are projections, and then there are living memories. The issue of time depth cannot be ignored. Projecting an Armenian identity upon a Bronze Age culture that occupied the same territory nearly 3,000 years ago is quite a different thing to the involvement of an oral informant who walks you through a site and tells you where their grandfather’s privy was while their body casts a shadow over your excavation unit. More philosophically, we cannot both accept a constructivist understanding of identity and reject the historical nature of constructions and totemic identities. Ethnic and racial grouping are in part defined by continuity with previous generations, or by reference to historical events such as migrations. To that extent, any society or subculture is a diachronic entity and cannot be sliced away from the dead and the archaeological. The sticky problem, I admit, is how to know when to cut it off (I am tempted by something on the scale of the seven generations of oral memory, but that is hardly defensible). The recent effort to repatriate and rebury Sarah Bartman’s remains in South Africa seems to be a different sort of case than that of the 10,000-year-old Kennewick Man. What fires the politics in both cases, however, is the context of a racial regime that specifically perpetrated the separation of a people from their past. The risks archaeologists might incur by repeating that detemporalizing violence seem to be just as great as the risks of feeding false origin stories. We need to be haunted not only by the ghost of Kossinna, but by the ghosts of slave raiders, conquistadors and ‘ethnic cleansers’. Ethnic cleansing has often meant, in fact, the denial and erasure of local or minority histories. I doubt many archaeologists want to return to a world view where there are ‘people without history’ (Wolf 1982). Our ethics, as well as our epistemologies, are going to have to be complex and locally situated. There are no comfortable stances.

The move of committing archaeology wholly to the politics of the present comes with some additional intellectual limits. Making the present the subject of archaeological enquiry has the effect of limiting the geography and time scale of archaeological enquiries. I will address the issue of time in the last section of this article. Here I want to bring attention to the fact that the current ‘space’ for an archaeology of race is extremely delimited. If ‘all politics are local’, perhaps it is not too surprising that we find studies of race in those locales with very active public discourses about race – namely North America and South Africa. It is quite implausible, given what we know about the Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism since 1450, that racialization is not a factor worthy of archaeological attention elsewhere. Although there is some movement in this direction, treatments of race in European, West African, Asian and Latin American archaeologies are hard to find. It would be absurd to claim that racialization in its material forms is any less relevant to understanding 19th-century Brazil or 20th-century Germany, yet archaeological work there has barely begun to scratch the surface (though

see Funari, Hall and Jones 1998 on maroons and Given 2004 on concentration camps). Fanon was not describing his experience as a black man in the US. He was a Martinican describing an encounter on the streets of Lyon, France. Particular racial categories and regimes may be locally constructed, but racial thinking is (regrettably) a worldwide phenomenon.

Thinker-tinkers

Like Ellison's protagonist, archaeology has been invisible on the intellectual stage, though full of ingenuity. As early as 1958 Willey and Phillips lamented that American archaeology stood in a 'dependent' relationship with anthropology (Willey and Phillips 1958; see also Terrell 2003). More recently, Joffe has reiterated, 'Archaeology, truth be told, has no theory of its own.' He further accuses archaeologists of 'philosophical shallowness and difficulty engaging other disciplines on anything beyond our own terms' (Joffe 2003, 86–87). Archaeologists are thinker-tinkers (and bad ones at that), rather than inventors; they are intellectual *bricoleurs*, a primitive sort of social scientist. This is a harsh critique of archaeology that many would object to, but the question needs to be asked: does it apply to the historical archaeology of race? Yes and no.

One particularly interesting movement in the field of Americanist archaeology as a whole is that archaeologists are more and more frequently bypassing anthropological theorists. Instead they are mining ideas from the same (largely francophone) group of philosophers and interdisciplinary thinkers (Foucault, Bourdieu, Lefebvre, Derrida – perhaps soon we will hear from Lacan) that their socio-cultural colleagues are consulting. This has two positive outcomes. The first is a subtle shift from dependent to interlocutor in archaeologist–anthropologist relations, as well as a convergence of disciplinary mentalities between American anthropological archaeology and theoretically inclined archaeologies of Europe, Latin America and so on. The second result is that, by going directly to the source, archaeologists are finding strands relevant for their own purposes that cultural anthropologists may neglect, particularly as regards objects and materiality. One may say, of course, that this is just a higher-order predation, but it at least it is one which may equally be levelled at peers in socio-cultural anthropology.

Orser, for example, has declined to utilize the Cliffsnotes© version of Bourdieu, and attempts to build a workable practice theory for archaeology that draws not only on *habitus* but also on Bourdieu's schema of social fields and the three forms of capital – economic, social and cultural. Putting these distinctions into focus has the potential to renovate not just how historical archaeologists think about class in a capitalist economy, but how all archaeologists think about their often unidimensional measurements of 'status' and 'eliteness'. In terms of what this may mean in interpreting artefacts on the ground, Bourdieu, channelled by Orser, elaborates a struggle elites engage in to maintain a controlled balance between 'high-culture' and 'low-culture' items of consumption. A consideration of these dynamics opens up new ways of interpreting old classes of data, such as variability in manufacture quality, the presence of 'copywares', and the rapid rise and fall of some style horizons.

Paul Mullins's work on Victorian bric-a-brac illustrates the often 'economically irrational' choices that result from this struggle, as well as the contradictory desires that different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural) stimulate. Whereas Orser provides a thick reading that may make theorists such as Bourdieu and Lefebvre more portable for archaeologists, he leaves much to the imagination about how to operationalize his adjusted model to dirt, sherds and bones. Mullins not only works fluidly back and forth between thoughts and things, he contributes to the understanding of the intersection between consumption and subjectivity in such a way that I believe would be helpful (and approachable) to readers outside the discipline. For example, a discovery that one of the African-American households he excavated owned several anti-abolitionist campaign trinkets prompted Mullins to offer his own definition of consumption, one which

departs from one that sees it as the reproduction of essential identities lying beneath the surface of material symbolism . . . the material world provides no self-evident reflections of individual consumers' internal identity attributes, as though 'who we are' is either mirrored or conferred by particular objects. Quite the opposite, consumers use material culture to imagine new social possibilities, mediate lived contradictions, and envision new personal pleasures, posing new relationships between consumers and society and portraying who we *wish* to be. Objects embody relationships between producers and consumers, future and past, and Black and White, but they are not mirrors for 'real' identities . . . Consequently, it is infeasible, on the one hand, to reduce objects simply to reflective or mimetic mechanisms or, on the other, to accord them absolute power to forge identity (Mullins 1999, 29; original emphasis).

With his analysis of trinkets and bric-a-brac, Mullins offers an inventive anthropology of ersatz and of desire, and of the complicated relationship between subjects and objects.

Martin Hall deploys a quite different set of theorists, from James Scott and Michel Foucault to Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. His application of colonial theory to the archaeology of colonialism is long overdue – it is a dialogue within archaeology that has been conspicuous by its absence until recently. His agile movements between these theorists, historical texts, contemporary events and architecture and landscape are impressive and literary. In his conclusion he summarizes six 'themes' he intended the book to illustrate with archaeology: (1) the world order formed by colonization and things, (2) tensions with local agency, (3) the multiplicity of meanings in material things, (4) material culture as a 'site of ambiguity' and the instability of power, (5) 'the persistent connection between the past and the present' and (6) the transcripts of resisting subaltern voices to be listened for in text and artefact (Hall 2000, 197–98). These are not propositions with which most historical archaeologists or colonial studies scholars would disagree, however, nor do they clearly form a unique theoretical argument. Hall achieves the goal of elevating historical archaeology to ethnography – a rare enough feat – and

introduces a rich body of thought to a provincial field. This is some very sophisticated tinkering – a seductive handmaiden to a postmodern history.

Visibility

Ellison titled his novel *Invisible man* with no little irony. ‘Blackness’ made him highly visible as he walked down the street, but his thoughtful, tinkering mind was out of sight, unknowable. While recent work is helping make archaeology more visible, the question remains whether race itself is visible in the archaeological record – do we have the tools to recapture that street scene? The issues at stake parallel those in the recent surge of literature on the archaeology of ethnicity (Delle, Mrozowski and Paynter 2000; Jones 1997; Shennan 1989). The main tasks in this work have been to define ‘identity’, ‘ethnicity’ or ‘race’ in current terms and then, if deemed applicable to past societies, to figure out how such structuring phenomena and their resulting subjectivities might look archaeologically. Although these archaeologies of identity are very much of the current political moment, and also hark back to fundamental problems in archaeological units of analysis, we are still at the stage of defining terms and identifying correlates (for thoughtful critiques of this literature see Joffe 2003 and Smith 2004).

Paynter’s (2001) proposition that race is, by definition, material gives us hope that it can be seen stratigraphically. On the other hand, nearly all of the archaeologists who have worked on the question have relied heavily on text-based history to establish the ‘fact’ of racialization which they then interpret as a grid affecting distributions of artefacts and features. A similar problem exists in the literature on the archaeology of ethnicity, where the most persuasive interpretations come out of some form of text-based historical archaeology that eliminates much of the guess-work with regard to historical subjectivities, in the form of race-based laws and policies, census returns and qualitative genealogies. This text-dependency is compounded by the fact that, politically and sociologically, the most acceptable definition of ethnicity privileges self-identification (Jones 1997). In many archaeological place-times, we have no direct access to utterances of self-identification, leading prehistoric practitioners to the conclusion that neither ethnicity nor race are topics they can deal with unless they fall back on some clumsy ready-made etic definition or, worse, focus on the physical anthropology of burial remains. There race may still be evident as a social construct, but it is one entirely in the mind of the analyst. However fascinating a particular combination of genes and phenotype may be when juxtaposed against our own racial imaginary (for example, the red-haired Tarim mummies of China), the remains are mute on the question of how these ancient people thought about human difference. Perhaps such cultural facts could be inferred from analyses of phenomena such as social conflict (or warfare), exogamy/endogamy or subcultural diversity within regional settlements. However, most archaeologists prefer to obscure their reliance upon inferential logic. The weight of a long history of economic and ecological determinism in Western thought makes the chain of inference from the ‘value’ of burial goods to an assessment of economic class appear more natural and transparent than other possible relations. This is nothing but

an inference backed by tradition. An archaeology of social constructions and categorical thinking requires a more forthcoming engagement with inference.

When one looks closely at the question of self-identification, it is a problem that at least philosophically exists within much of the historic period as well. For one thing, often the groups most adversely affected by racialization in the past (e.g., in North America, the slaves of African descent, Chinese immigrant railroad labourers, Native American trappers and so on) are those least likely to leave a documentary record of their daily lives and movements, much less memoirs containing reflections upon their identity and place in the social world. Our presumptions about their self-identification are also inferred – it may be a more informed inference, but inference nonetheless. Further, most of the literature on the social construction of race also emphasizes that labels and identifications are situational and that categories of possibility are constantly evolving. This is a significant aspect of social constructivism that archaeologists have not yet come to terms with. Assertions to the contrary (Epperson 2001; Singleton 2001), I am not sure that it actually is possible to know how individuals even as recently as the 19th century self-identified, nor to assume that the terminology they used had a stable meaning or can be easily translated into today's vocabulary (for a case study on the multiple and rapidly shifting meanings of the term 'Creole' in Louisiana see Dawdy 2000). One very simple way of pointing out the presumptions of self-identification made by archaeologists (and by many historians as well) is the avoidance of historical terminology – people do the archaeology of African-Americans (note late 20th-century hyphen), or the archaeology of 'whiteness'. They do not do the archaeology of 'Negroes', 'Colored Folks', 'Crackers', or 'Honkies'. These last two I do not mean simply in jest. How many people know that 'crackers' was a self-identified label for Scots Irish immigrants in the 18th century that appears to have acquired a derogatory connotation in the antebellum period? Or that 'honky' is a transformation of the self-identification 'hunky' used by Bohemians, Hungarians and Poles in Chicago's meatpacking yards in the early 20th century? Both terms now mean something else (and mark a transition from ethnic to racial category; see entries in Chapman 1995), while their historical referents have all but disintegrated as identifiable groups.

To return to the question of archaeological inference and archaeology, one of the most intriguing suggestions that Orser (2004) makes is to pay attention to 'poverty'. Relative and widely divergent economic status, in combination with residential segregation, should be something quite 'visible' through the two main sources of archaeological data – artefacts and landscapes. Orser takes archaeologists to task for ignoring poverty, which he defines as a deliberate structuring of economic deprivation. Overlooking impoverished sites neglects a significant component of racial regimes. He says, 'racialization often accompanies an identification with poverty, regardless of the perceived skin color of the person or persons being labeled' (Orser 2004, 31). Orser follows on work done by many historians and sociologists on the strong correlation between poverty and race. It also echoes current political science and activist attention to 'economic racism'. I do not believe these connections are simply polemical or only of the moment – I am quite willing to believe

that poverty is a historically consistent element of race-making. On the other hand, there is clearly not a 1:1 relation between race and economic status – otherwise, we would be speaking exclusively of a black ‘caste’. Otherwise, Mullins’s affluent middle-class families in Annapolis would have no colour label and there would be no socially relevant distinction between poor whites and poor blacks.

While we might agree that poverty has a strong correlation with racialization in many contexts, it brings up an awkward methodological problem for archaeology – a paucity of things. Martin Hall acknowledges this problem:

anyone who has searched for these hidden voices [of the colonial underclass] through the archaeological record will have found them frustratingly elusive. What seems at first sight to be the material trace of the ordinary person all too often turns out to be the debris of those with power and influence. Slaves were owned. They owned little of their own and by and large left as faint a trace in the material record as they did in the written documentation (Hall 2000, 19).

Perhaps this conviction is one reason that Hall’s work lacks much in the way of traditional archaeological evidence. On the other hand, the absence of artefacts is a form of negative material evidence – in this case of poverty, a significant social fact.

Orser leaves the connection between race and poverty relatively underdeveloped. However, the connection is inherent in his case study – the starving Irish of the 19th century. The poverty of the Irish (both on the island and as US immigrants) is both a cause and a result of their ‘denigration’ by others. Orser accepts the view of certain historians (Curtis 1968; 1971; Hechter 1975; Ignatiev 1995) that the Irish were the ‘niggers of Europe’ (a quote from the singer Bono of U2, cited in Orser 2004, 4).

‘Look, an Irishman!’ Does Fanon’s experience as a man marked by color speak to the Irish experience? Is ‘Irishness’ visible in the same way? Does it produce a similar, and inescapable, double subjectivity? There is certainly a way in which the structural inequalities and dehumanizing caricatures perpetrated against the 19th-century Irish made them, in Homi Bhabha’s terms, ‘not quite/not white’ (Bhabha 1984, 132). However, the oppression of the 19th-century Irish farmer or immigrant is only like racism; it is not racism itself. One needs contextual knowledge of the subject, rather than just visual signals, in order to classify him/her; Jonathan Hall (2002) calls this the distinction between criteria and indicia. I think that if archaeologists (or any scholars) are going to try to understand racialization and racism, they need to be careful not to vacate its powerful specificity – and its visual element. In fact, the ‘racial-like’ epithets that historical actors used to denigrate the Irish are evidence of this relation of simile rather than synonym. Charles Kingsley, a 19th-century historian and traveller to Ireland, has often been quoted: ‘to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours’ (quoted in Hechter 1975, p. xvi). Kingsley was obviously disturbed by

the primitive poverty of the white-skinned Irish – it was not a natural, or comfortable, connection. The dirt of poverty creates an appearance of racial difference – but it can be washed off. Although attributed with simian or dog-like features in political cartoons in publications like *Punch*, physical caricatures of the ‘Irish’ were intended as satirical hyperbole. The cartoons do not constitute a stable racial profile used on the street. Being Irish is not the same experience described by Franz Fanon and Ralph Ellison, nor was it ever.

That being said, it is impossible to do an archaeology of the interior psychological state they describe. However, the social organizations and political formations that create this state may be discernable and relatively distinct. There is a qualitative difference between a social structure based solely upon physical attributes and genealogical heritage and one based upon the comparatively more permeable categories of ethnicity or class. In the second case, individuals can move between strata through mimicry, entrepreneurship, marriage alliances and so on. In the first, movement is extraordinarily constrained. One of Fanon’s points is that he would have converted to whiteness, and in fact had observed many wealthy Martinicans attempt it, but that this is ultimately impossible. It depends upon a world full of others changing their trained eyesight – something no amount of agency will achieve.

The spiral of history

(Beware of those who speak of the *spiral* of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.) I know; I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness of lightness (Ellison 1952, 6; original emphasis).

The ‘spiral’ of history for Ellison is the narrative of a progressive climb – the evolution of society towards a higher, improved state. But do not talk of ‘progress’ to an invisible man trapped inside a black object. Yes, things changed between slavery and Civil Rights, but racialization and disenfranchisement persist, albeit in altered forms. Instead of its upward movement, Ellison emphasizes the circular, repeating, ‘boomerang’ effect of the spiral. Perhaps we should listen and pay more heed to this part of the historical story. Archaeologists, in fact, are unusually well positioned to see this dimension – patterns repeated over a long stretch of time.

The political presentism of the archaeology of race forces the enquiry into a relatively narrow time period – i.e. modernity, the period since the Portuguese foray into Africa in the mid-15th century. There are two competing definitions of historical archaeology – the first being text-aided archaeology (Moreland 2001) from any place or time with a written record, the second being the archaeology of modernity (Deetz 1996; Orser 1996). All those currently engaged in the archaeology of race hold to this second vision of the discipline. Since these same authors see their academic capacity as fulfilling the role of contemporary social critic, it is perhaps not surprising that they have a strong tendency to view race and racialization as peculiarly ‘modern’

phenomena. Paynter says it most plainly: ‘Recent research demonstrates quite convincingly that racial identities, as parts of social systems of oppression, are phenomena of our recent past and not a social principle extending back to time immemorial’ (Paynter 2001, 133).² Mullins grounds race firmly in capitalism. Martin Hall ties racialization to Atlantic slavery and the self-justifications of colonialism: ‘The creations of such stereotypes [of Khoikhoi as wild man/woman] was central to the discourse of colonialism – an attempt to fix the essential differences between the colonizer and the colonized’ (Hall 2000, 119). Interestingly, even in recent comparative studies of the archaeology of colonialism, ‘modern’ colonialism is set off from other types in prehistory and antiquity precisely by its racial schema (Gosden 2004; Van Dommelen 2002, 127–28; see also Hall (1989, p. ix) who says that biological racism was unknown in Greece and Rome).

Part of Orser’s motivation to write *Race and archaeological practice* is that he felt he had wrongly omitted race from his previous book (Orser 1996) as a defining feature of modernity (Orser 2004, p. xi). He quotes David Goldberg, saying that ‘race is one of the central conceptual inventions of modernity’ (Goldberg 1993, 3). However, in two brief parenthetical sentences, Orser does point to the possibility of a longer history:

Even so, bias against people with different skin colors was not unknown in the ancient world, and racist expressions occurred in India, China, and Egypt as early as the third century B.C. The Greeks classified the peoples in the known world as ‘Leucodermi: white-skinned; Xanthodermi: yellow-skinned; and Melanodermi: black skinned. (Orser 2004, 6; citations omitted)

Let us open up this parenthesis. What would it do to engage the possibility of an archaeology of race over the *longue durée*? To expand comparison across space and time and look at Greek or Chinese racialization in view of modern European forms? Is it so inconceivable that in the countless possibilities for social classification and regimes of power that a system based upon inheritable, visible physical attributes – the most facile and lazy type of human classification possible – has not been used before? In the case of other human actions distasteful to modern morality, such as murder, warfare, human sacrifice, rape and so on, we seem to have no problem accepting that these are cross-cultural phenomena as old as human society itself.

Clearly one worry, and the reason I suspect a deep comparative study of race has not yet been done, is that it would suggest to hasty readers that there was nothing particularly special about the suffering caused by racialization in the last 500 years – it is a type of injustice that humans have forever been perpetrating upon one another. Thus the historical claims of those pushing for racial justice (through reparations, reconciliation, war crimes tribunals and so on) would somehow be deflated. As we have seen, however, even within the bubble of modernity, there is great variation in racial regimes. Historical claims, when redressed at all, are quite local and within living memory. A further concern one can imagine is that any indication that racialization has a deeper history than previously thought may be used by some to legitimate or

naturalize it – to say that the categories themselves have some supra-societal validity. Obviously, we do not want to reverse social constructivism, nor in any way tie a *longue durée* study of racial thinking to the new (eu)genetics. But what is rarely acknowledged is a peril on the flip side – that granting modern racism an exceptional status implicitly ties it to modernity's own cant of rupture, progress and inevitability. It places racism near the apex of our current social evolution – buoyed by the upward thrust of the spiral. This is either extraordinarily dangerous (and itself naturalizing in a Darwinian mode) or extraordinarily disheartening. On the other hand, if it is possible that race has ebbed and flowed (circled round, boomeranged) through different human contexts over the millennia, then we have the possibility of getting beyond race long before we are thoroughly postmodern.

One way to embark upon this comparison would be to connect historical archaeology's critique of modernity to a recent trend towards a critique of antiquity. Opened up by the work of Edith Hall and others on the Greeks and their 'Barbarians' (Hall 1989; Hartog 2001 (1996)), some new work is now asking the previously impermissible: did the Greeks and Romans think in racial terms? Jonathan Hall (2002) argues that the basis for 'Hellenicity' changed over time, but did include criteria of 'blood' and genetic relatedness. Denise McCoskey (2004) argues that the 'Black Athena' controversy has blinded us with the modern colours of black and white, making it difficult to see the indigenous colours of antiquity. More boldly, Benjamin Isaac (2004), in a heavily researched tome, has claimed that the ancients 'invented' racism. These historians seem to suggest that Orser's aside regarding premodern racism deserves expansion into a truly comparative archaeology of racialization. Insights drawn from archaeology's *longue durée* perspective may then allow us to better understand under what conditions humans construct dangerous differences based on biology. We may be able to offer an explanation that transcends the monumental contingency of the modern era. We may then be able to show ourselves to be more than 'thinker-tinkers'.

Conclusion

The current florescence in the historical archaeology of race provokes both hopes and worries. It reveals the keenest vulnerabilities and most promising potentials of archaeology in this historical moment. It represents the 'balkanization' of archaeological practice, but also a unifying tendency to go directly to philosophical texts for theory-building. Developing along the lines of contested consumption, the architectural performance of colonialism, and the intimate politics of the subject-artefact relation, this sub-field of archaeology appears to be on the verge of creating a unique and translatable body of ideas about modern materiality. On the other hand, the literature underscores how self-consciously political and presentist archaeology has become, a politics that may delude us into thinking that we understand and are appropriately memorializing the experience of oppressed subjects. There is no archaeology that can undo the lived experience of Ellison and Fanon. It cannot at present even keep their experience 'visible'.

Colonial Williamsburg has been the epicentre of American historical archaeology since the 1930s, producing more studies and, in partnership with the College of William and Mary, training more historical archaeologists than probably any other entity in the US. Further, Colonial Williamsburg has been centre stage in a debate about how to use archaeology to interpret the history of slavery to the public. I have scoured the work produced by the group of archaeologists associated with Colonial Williamsburg (which includes myself), the literature on the archaeology of race and African America, as well as the contents of an important critical ethnography of Colonial Williamsburg (Handler and Gable 1997). Nowhere is it mentioned what seems to me a remarkable fact – that Ralph Ellison served on Colonial Williamsburg's board of trustees for 13 years (1971–84). Perhaps his motivation was to try to redirect the 'spiral of history' but, archaeologically, he is still invisible.

Watch out, here comes the boomerang.

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Notes

¹ For the sake of aesthetics, I will refrain from placing quotation marks around 'race' throughout. However, my position is that the place-holders of 'race' (African-American, white, black, Indian etc.) are in every historical instance social constructs, and that 'race' itself is a category of social thought.

² Paynter follows this with two citations for these 'recent' studies – Du Bois 1920 and Williams 1944. My view is that this comparative question of racial systems has not yet been seriously taken up – or at least not since 1944.

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