Commentary on Gilded Ages, Now and Then

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Introduction

The skyrocketing separation of the richest Americans from the rest amidst a political and cultural discourse that celebrates the individual and the unquestioned wisdom of the free market has many commentators comparing our time to the Gilded Age of 100 years ago. It is an apt comparison. W.E.B. Du Bois's (1935) assessment of this era, found in the chapter from his magisterial *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* titled “The Counter-Revolution of Property” could also describe our era, with lives lived amidst the products of mass production, the domination of politics by corporations, economic booms and busts, labor markets divided by race and gender, and misery in this world of plenty. Painter (1987, p. xx) reports that in pre-federal income tax 1890 the top 1 % of families owned 51 % of the real and personal property, a figure that resonates with today's 99 % Movement.

Given the contradictions and crises we face in the early twenty-first century it is not surprising that historical archaeologists are interested in this earlier period. This earlier “Gilded Age,” like ours, was comprised of complex array of forces shaping life. Symptomatic of this complexity is that different scholars of the first Gilded Age, including authors in this collection, provide different date ranges to encompass these processes, depending upon which they foreground: a short politically defined Gilded Age (1876–1914), a longer Gilded Age from slavery America to imperial America (1865–1914), or an even longer phase of the social and ideological consolidation of capitalism (1789–1914) (Wallerstein 2011). Among the forces a century and more ago were:

- the tremendous growth in the production and consumption of manufactured goods unleashed by the incorporation of America,
- a growing and increasingly urban population,

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- labor markets reorganized and segmented into hard lines of color/ethnicity and gender,
- struggles for citizenship that accompanied these hardening color- and gender-lines,
- classes differentiated by where one lived and worked as well as by the every-day etiquettes of mass consumption,
- a new phase of settler colonialism as the Native resistance in the U.S. turned from military confrontation to survivance,
- the demolishing of space by railways, steamships, and the telegraph,
- the struggles over the segmentation of time into work and leisure,
- the imagining of colonial pasts and futuristic utopias as ways to make sense of the interplay between competitive individualism and collective interdependence,

and, one could go on.

A number of the authors remind us of some of the enduring ideological fragments that resonate into our era, including that the phrase “Gilded Age” was coined by Mark Twain and Dudley Warner (1874) in their novel satirizing the superficiality of the period’s immersion in the cult of ostentatious display, activities akin to gilding the lily. In addition, the social sciences gained the concept “conspicuous consumption” in Thorstein Veblen’s (1899) study of the *arrivistes* of the era. The 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Illinois is mentioned by a number of the authors and Graff devotes an entire article to its symbolically rich materiality.

All the articles recognize the complexity of the era, and none seeks a single causal relation. However, each of necessity foregrounds one or two, which gives this issue a focus on three major themes: the tensions of capitalism, the tensions along the color-lines, and theories of materiality for this new age.

Tensions of Capitalism

Labor strife in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania is the focus of Shackel and Roller’s study of the Lattimer Massacre. In 1897, workers struck the Calvin Pardee Company, using among other tactics the time-honored resistance mode of a protest march. The sheriff and deputies fired on the strikers, immediately killing 19 and wounding 38 others, 6 of whom later died of their wounds. The lawmen were tried and acquitted. The strikers were immigrants from Eastern Europe, members of what Patterson (1995, p. 132) identifies as a not quite White buffer race. Thus, Shackel and Roller parse this confrontation as reflective of class and racial contradictions. Their discussion of this intersection of race and class allows them to provide the discipline with a very useful primer on Gilded Age xenophobia. The study also complements the Ludlow Collective’s remarkable work on the Colorado Coalfield War of 1913–14 (McGuire 2008, pp. 88–221; Saitta 2007). The two studies are archaeologies of coal-mining that use battlefield archaeology method and techniques to interrogate a highly charged documentary record. They are both models of Saitta’s (2007, pp. 8–17) insistence that a socially useful archaeology is explanatory about the past as a means to realize emancipatory futures for all. And someday as recognition plans move forward, Lattimer will have a place on the national historical landscape such as Ludlow has today.

The location of a strike is also the subject of Jane Baxter's paper on Pullman, Illinois, an industrial community planned and built by the railroad magnate George Pullman in the 1880s to address capitalism's inherent tension between workers and owners. Unlike Lattimer, Pullman has greater renown, enshrined as a federal, state, and local landmark. Baxter acknowledges the work of Beaudry and Mrozowski on the experiment in social engineering that led to the construction of Lowell (e.g., Beaudry 1989, 1993; Beaudry et al. 1991; Beaudry and Mrozowski 1989; Mrozowski 1991, 2000, 2006; Mrozowski and Beaudry 1990). The Lowell magnates initially had the problem of attracting workers to this new form of work, industrial capitalism, and so built a world that seemingly would be safe for young farm women. George Pullman had a different labor problem, namely to teach his workforce their place in the social order of corporate industrial capitalism through everyday practices brought about by conducive architecture and the town plan. Matthews's contribution to this issue refers to such a brand of social engineering as "positive environmentalism." Pullman must also have calculated the earnings his company would receive from housing and provisioning his spatially isolated workers. Neither positive environmentalism nor company managed consumption were enough to resolve the contradictions of Gilded Age capitalism. The town and Pullman's business of making railroad passenger cars grew throughout the 1880s; the archaeology describes an orderliness of the landscape that no doubt contributed to a suffocating paternalism. The worker-owner tensions exploded in 1894 amidst the greatest depression of the nineteenth century, the Depression of 1893. Baxter's article provides fruitful insights into the appeal and the limits to such planned communities. The appeal, especially in a world that fetishizes objects, is that materiality is coterminous with social and mental life. Affect one and you can have a desired effect on the others. But like so many social engineering schemes, it fails to grasp the lesson that archaeology knows well, namely that materiality is in a much more complex relationship with society and ideology, so that objects, buildings, and planned towns will always be reinterpreted and alternatively used. Graff's paper is fine contribution to this generally unlearned lesson.

Tensions Along the Color-Lines

The color-line, as manifested in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, is the subject of Barton's article about the ideologies of Gilded Age Whiteness. Philadelphia was known in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a refuge for African Americans escaping enslavement as well as one of the major centers of African American religious liberation. However, White Philadelphia was also intent on maintaining a racial hierarchy with themselves on top in the City of Brotherly Love. Barton presents three of these tactics, the craniometry of the American school of biologically reductionist racism (Patterson 1995, pp. 18–20; Smedley 1993, pp. 231–254), White violence aimed at denying African American men access to political power, and in an expansion of his own very interesting work on racial caricature in nineteenth-century toys, the use of minstrel shows for teaching White superiority. W.E.B. Du Bois's (1899) ground-breaking urban ethnography, *The Philadelphia Negro*, provides Barton with ethnographic detail and theoretical insight, the latter being that Gilded

Age White racism is deeply bound up in the competition of post-Civil War White and Black working classes for economic and political power. In the North, this competition has antebellum roots as late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century emancipation laws were accompanied by legal and political restrictions on African American life not unlike those of the Gilded Age Jim Crow South (Litwack 1961, p. 64). Barton does acknowledge that these ideologies and practices of White supremacy were met with resistance, from especially members of the African American community. But his main focus here is on the ideas and actions of the understudied racial group, the White community. As such his study joins a growing number in our field that focus not so much on the communities marginalized by White racism, but on the groups that benefited the most from the construction of racial lines, the usually unmarked White communities. Since the vast majority of historical archaeology's sites were those built by, inhabited by, and abandoned by Whites, we have the evidence to write material histories of White practices of inclusion and exclusion, once the discipline develops the methods needed to read their distinctively racialized ways of life from the material record (e.g., Epperson 2001; Paynter 2001).

Merritt, Weisz, and Dixon's article considers another understudied racial tension of the Gilded Age, the discriminations faced by Chinese railroad construction workers. They are particularly interested in the more than 6,000 immigrant men from China who constituted the majority of the workforce of the Northern Pacific Railroad in the late 1870s and early 1880s, one of two railroads that completed the tracks across the northern plains to the Pacific northwest. The article provides an informative background for readers unfamiliar with the history of the political economic contexts of Chinese immigration. And their preliminary analyses provide interesting and moving insights into the way these workers lived and died, as they accomplished the arduous task of creating miles of track grade under very difficult social and physical conditions. The Chinese camps, unlike those of their European and Euro-American co-workers, were located in more marginal areas rather than close by the rail line itself, a fact that resulted in their preservation, and in a twist of fate, in historical archaeology's ability to document their lives. Though the material culture related to their work is not ethnically distinctive, material differences are noted in the realm of foodways, folk beliefs and leisure—for instance, the use of cheap Chinese ceramic bowls for meals, the presence of Chinese coins, and opium paraphernalia. Another discovery from the documentary record was that some workers were buried along the railroad line so as to not slow the task of grade preparation and neglected, though some were reburied in a graveyard in Missoula, Montana, that is today covered by a housing development. Maybe historical archaeology and bioarchaeology will have roles to play in addressing this neglect as it has in other cases of burial desecration (Mack and Blakey 2004)

Matthews presents a fascinating study of the gendered and racialized ideology of Gilded Age elite White supremacy that resulted in the 1906 Antiquities Act and the historic house preservation movement, both of which are foundational for historical archaeology. Matthews notes that such nationally prominent figures as Theodore Roosevelt and Charlotte Perkins Gilman took up these banners. The article dissects how the archaeological remains of a prominent house museum, the King Manor in Queens, New York, and the neighboring house of Italian immigrants excavated as a contract project disclose the tensions associated with the Gilded Age's conservation and preservation movements. The processes of ideological domination through

positive environmentalism, its associated hypocrisy, and resistance by subterfuge and hidden transcripts are uncovered by playing the material and documentary records off one another at both these sites, providing a useful model for such study at other sites involved with immigration, Americanization, and ethnic persistence. More broadly, Matthews's history of the involvement of historic preservation with the Americanizing mission of Gilded Age elites provides the field with much needed context about the forces that preserved what have become the sites of some of our paradigmatic cases, forces that are often still at play, today.

Theories of Materiality

Materiality is one of the defining characteristics of the Gilded Age; the Atlantic world was awash in the mass produced goods of incorporated industrialization. In their study of the “small things” found in Gilded Age era excavations from London, England, Mullins and Jeffries parse the themes and ideology behind 100 or so pieces of bric-a-brac, that would have been displayed in the domestic settings of White households, an approach that Mullins has used to advance our understanding of African American Gilded Age consumption in other publications (Mullins 1999a, b, c; Warner 1998). In this study they add to present-day scholarship the voices of Gilded Age tastemakers, including Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman. The major theme of the figurines was the pastoral, a point that resonates with Raymond Williams's parsing of one of capitalism's earliest and most persistent motifs in his *The Country and the City* (Williams 1973). Other themes include depictions of events in the Bible and figurines of vaguely historic/mythological beings. The authors remind us that the residents of the Gilded Age were decorating their houses, not constructing academic arguments and as a result, bric-a-brac in their daily use was interestingly multivalent and subliminal. They recommend that room be left in our understandings of these past agents for this ambiguity and that we not push our analyses to be too neat. Instead, the figurines adorning mantelpieces as individual pieces, and as an assemblage in toto, should be allowed to not always make sense. This theoretical insight is an important one to add to our intellectual toolkit for studying symbols and ideologies, alongside the more coherence-seeking tactics of “the dominant ideology thesis,” “the index of social standing hypothesis,” or “structuralist hermeneutic methods.”

Graff dramatically changes the scale from the intimacy of the middle-class sitting room to the landscape of World's Fairs. In doing so she reminds us of the complexity of this period, emphasizing that though some scholars see the “gilt” in the Gilded Age, others track the social changes as the U.S. incorporates, industrializes, urbanizes, tours, and becomes transcontinentally mobile by train and steamship. As a result, the Gilded Age is much more familiar to us than many other times studied by historical archaeology, and especially more familiar than the world of the English, French, and Spanish invaders of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The era's World's Fairs, she argues, are best understood at multiple scales, within the individual, the nation state, and in the corporate competitions of the age. She does discover evidence of the shallowness of the age in the buildings of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair White City whose surfaces mimicked expensive authentic materials by using the impermanent

material called “staff.” She also importantly notes that a sturdy urban infrastructure lay behind /underneath this façade. In doing so, her work resonates with that of Palus (2011) about the need to give more attention to the infrastructure of the especially more recent world. The article begins to wonder about the present, and specifically about McMansions. This is a train of thought worth following out, because the Great Recession and its housing bust will surely result in future compliance projects encountering in their uppermost layers the remains of these icons of our Gilded Age.

Conclusions

In the introduction I suggested this special issue was a timely venture, a point that Orser makes persuasively in his introduction to this issue. This interest also provides an important opportunity for theory/history building by the field. The field of historical archaeology, like many other fields in our time, is suspicious of grand narratives, a sensibility captured in the title of Deetz’s (1996) paradigmatic book, *In Small Things Forgotten*. It is worth remembering that Deetz began the title with “in,” to remind us to use the small things to understand “the very fundamental differences between ourselves and our forebears of two centuries ago.” Deetz provided one of the most enduring narratives to accompany his small things, about the way Europeans became Americans. Notably he also forwarded the study of how people of African descent also became increasingly people of North America, too. In general, our field has made its best contributions to understanding the English colonial worlds that were based directly or indirectly on the enslavement of people of African descent and the Spanish and French colonial worlds that in addition made use of existing Native people and their communities. These worlds came to an end during the course of the 1800s, as industrialized capitalism increasingly became how European and European American culture spilled out over the world.

Coming to grips with the narratives of the Gilded Age is an important next step in the field’s development. This is so in part, because it is the next stage in the history of European expansion and its resistances. Also it is worth considering because the Gilded Age is when many of the structural pieces of our world came into view—the economy of mass commodity production and consumption, the use of petroleum fuels and electricity, industrial and financial corporations with legal rights that rival those of individuals, the colonialism of a transcontinental U.S. empire, enduring and continually redefined racial and gender lines, confounding financial instruments and boom-bust economies, and environmental degradation of increasingly global proportions.

These papers join an increasing number of publications that use the archaeological perspective to assess the material dimensions of these processes. It misses some points deserving of greater attention, such as the complex histories of the Red-Black and Red-White color lines, and women’s labor and citizenship struggles, but no single collection can capture such a complex age. In the many topics it does capture it furthers our understanding of this important era by providing new detailed studies that make us all more aware of the dazzling diversity we will encounter in the archaeology of the Gilded Age and provide useful interpretive frameworks as we construct narratives for this era. They deserve wide attention.

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