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Materializing Poverty: Archaeological Reflections from the Postcolony

Introduction: Perspectives and Positions

First, a confession that will double as a caveat. When Christopher Matthews invited me to pen a few comments for the conference session that inspired this issue of *Historical Archaeology*, I must admit having felt taken over by a nervous sort of enthusiasm. Surely, the thought of learning about new archaeological research and perspectives on a topic of undisputed salience—poverty in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries—was stimulating. Part of the excitement, however, also mutated into faint apprehension, stemming from the fact that the theme at hand orbits in the outer ring of my academic comfort zone, or that its literatures meet at their periphery the ones with which I am most conversant. By way of background and positionality, my scholarly home is francophone West Africa, and the questions I have been exploring involve the political experiences of rural communities in Senegal, as they negotiated the troubled times emerging in the wake of the Atlantic trade and French colonialism. Beyond the specificities of time, culture, and context, this research has been inflected by my interest in historical ethnography, postcolonial thinking, cultural geography, and political economy, and a commitment to mapping the short and long historical waves linking Africa's precolonial past to its postcolonial present.

Naturally, these different concerns have imparted shape and mood to the observations below, providing so many detours and slanted entries into the articles, their subject matters, and case studies. If this sideways approach imposes certain concessions, the abdication of authoritative commentary and expert knowledge being one, the case can be made that examining American society's economic margins from a more remote

margin still, located at the edge of the world economy, is not without some benefits. For one, my oblique expertise in matters of poverty and things U.S. mandates a certain dose of humility. More generally, situating the articles in broader geographic and cultural perspective opens the possibility for a comparative, synthetic outlook, one which may enable us to discern salient trends in the historical roots and conditions of poverty; the lifeworlds that constitute it; its relations to economic structures, state institutions, and ideological discourses; and ways to interrogate archaeologically different forms of impoverishment between the past and the present archaeologically. Informed by these considerations, I have refrained from grand critical pronouncements and traded a commentary on individual articles for a discussion of broad thematic threads and unities stretching across the papers. Specifically, my observations will take up four dimensions of poverty, as examined in the papers and elaborated by the authors: (1) histories and historicity, (2) materiality, (3) relationality, and (4) the value of poverty as an analytic. I will preface this examination with a few words on the study of poverty's material expressions, seen from the standpoint of global archaeology and anthropological research in Africa. Foregrounding the question of poverty and its historical channels seems to foster interesting epistemological possibilities in the archaeology of the past 400 years and create fertile areas of conversation—synergies, maybe—across the constellation of sites and places implicated in the rise of capitalist modernity and global connections.

Unearthing an Absent Presence: Africa's Imaginations, Global Capitalism, and the Archaeological Study of Poverty

Despite the disclaimers raised above, I would suspect that few historical archaeologists are insensitive to the problematic of poverty, and that many have, to different degrees, confronted its lived realities and human costs—whether in the material record they study, or amongst the communities wherein they conduct their work. After

all, as students of global processes and people who research traditionally silenced, oppressed, or disenfranchised communities—subalterns, “peoples without histories,” “those of little note” (Little 1994; Scott 1994)—impoverishment, marginalization, and economic inequalities are frequently imbricated into the edifice of our research, all the more resoundingly when descendants claiming historical or cultural connections to the sites we excavate continue to suffer the structural inequities and broken geographies perpetrated by capitalist development worldwide (Orser 1996; Leone and Potter 1999; Leone 2005).

It is certainly difficult to escape the sounds, sights, and embodiments of poverty for those of us working on the African continent. While by no means a generalized structural condition, and while certainly complex in its histories, sociologies, and localities, it would be hard to deny that poverty is a “social fact” in many African countries and an ordinary currency of conversations and representations about the continent. Crack open a newspaper or scholarly account, or click on most Web-based information sources, reports of nongovernmental organizations, or international financial institution fact lists, and “Africa” is painted in resolutely grim tones and morbid shades. It is a land of perpetual disorder, lawlessness, and crisis: its states are weak, undemocratic, or failing; its economies struggling, collapsing, or falling by the wayside of the global marketplace; its populations afflicted by poverty, hunger, crime, war, and disease. While these depictions are filtered through the chiaroscuro of economic liberalism, and while they are informed by a number of “success stories” (themselves backdoor affirmations of certain normative standards of “proper” governance and economic performance), there is much evidence “on the ground” in support of these portrayals; for lucid analyses, from different conceptual orientations, see Comaroff and Comaroff (2006), Englund (2006), Ferguson (2006), Mbembe and Roitman (1995), and van de Walle (2001).

In this light, the African continent offers a useful set of lenses into the phenomenon of poverty, as a particularly poignant illustration of the constitutive relationship between discourses of Otherness, the systemic effects of institutions, policies, and market forces, and their translations into the domain of experience and cultural

perception. As noted by Mbembe (2001), representations of Africa and its populations have often been deployed to denote an absence, a lack, an incompleteness; see Kaplan (1994) for a particularly sanguine exemplar of this trend. As a concrete image, knitting together the yarns of actuality and strands of imagination, Africa designates at once a “place in the world” and a “placeholder,” marking a deviation from Western templates of modernity and civility (Ferguson 2006:chap. 1). This geographic artifact, in turn, tells us more about what the continent *is not*, while capturing little about what it actually *is*.

Within this discursive configuration, poverty and Africa are metonymically linked, seen as mirrors and conditions for each other. Instances of mass poverty on the continent reinforce the image of Africa as absence, while the visual repertoire of suffering and deprivation in Africa supplies compelling material for the imagery, figuration, and analysis of poverty. By extension, this metonymic connection all too frequently dissolves into a closed circuit of explanation, wherein poverty and Africa become causally chained to a common natural destiny. According to this circular logic, it is as if African “social ecologies” were breeding grounds of abjection, penury, and loss, as if Africa’s missed rendezvous with globalization’s riches somehow inhered in something endogenous to the continent itself. In this regard, “Africa” also becomes a stand-in for analysis, a self-fulfilling prophecy for its own marginalization, often with disastrous consequences for the people who are the objects of such discourses, and assigned responsibility for their own misery. Of course, overlooked in the shallow horizon of these analyses is the fact that Africa’s awkward integration into the world economy and the poor hand it has been dealt in modern history’s house of cards are in large part a result of a long process of engagement with the encroachment of global markets, forces of imperialism, and post–World War II geopolitics. For instance, the past 60 years of capitalist reconfigurations have tended to relegate African countries to the marginal roles and functions they held at the height of colonialism, as suppliers of raw materials and labor. In fact, in a particularly cruel and pernicious twist of recent history, the soaring rates of unemployment, disastrous economic growth, widening wealth disparities, and disintegration

of social welfare, which much of the continent has been experiencing since the 1970s, can often in unambiguous ways be imputed to the very structural adjustment programs and International Monetary Fund/World Bank-funded stabilization initiatives designed to “fix” Africa’s ailing economies and broken structures of governance (Hibou 2004; Ferguson 2006; Klein 2007).

As a particular instance of a general social “imaginary” of destitution, the constitution of place, perception, and poverty in Africa synecdochically mimics characterizations of impoverishment elsewhere. As this issue’s articles lucidly show, in the United States, “the poor” also index an absence, dysfunction, or divergence from the unmarked norm of “middle-class” sociality. There, as in/for Africa and as applies for other forms of social difference, poverty is spatialized as well and made to inhabit loci at once metaphoric, moral, and real, nested in broader geographies of exclusion (Sibley 1995). One needs only think of the depiction of ghettos, slums, tenements, projects, and inner cities in popular culture and social policy as enclaves of crime, delinquency, abjection, and abnormality (Tonkiss 2005:30–58). Here again, the relationship between systemic forces, spatial structures, representations, and local modes of organization in the (re)production of inequality and social difference are complex and historically specific; see Harvey (1973) and Smith (1990) for general treatments of the “spatialization of injustice” and its relations to capitalist institutions across the scale spectrum, from the city to global geographies of “uneven development.” While they rest on a scaffolding of history and reality, discourses on poverty generate their own “truth effects” that recursively shape the social reality of impoverishment, how it is understood and acted upon, and the subjectivities of people dwelling in economic margins and spaces of discrimination. Echoes here of the “culture of poverty” argument (Lewis 1959), which had the merit of highlighting linkages between segregation, cultural setting, and destitution, but simultaneously exposed itself to reductionist explanations—a form of “ecological fallacy” inherited from the Chicago School of urban studies that conflates culture/race, urban forms, and social pathology, and entirely ignores the historical sociology and internal diversity of poor areas (Rosenblatt 2009). Once social

problems are identified with designated sites, it is an easy step to equate them with people and see the latter as responsible for the former. Translated into social policy, the “War on Poverty” declared by Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s became, in subsequent decades, a war on the poor, which connived to produce the conditions of “underclass” alienation and discrimination it sought to resolve in the first place (Tonkiss 2005:47,52–53). Again, the parallels with Africa are striking.

Trends in the scholarly examination of poverty in Africa can also be instructive for anthropological analysis beyond the continent. Despite poverty’s prevalence in many present-day communities, it is interesting that anthropologists have often had little to say about it (Booth et al. 2006). Surely, they have addressed the question of poverty, albeit indirectly, in the countless critiques of “development” discourses and practices that have sprung up in the wake of James Ferguson’s (1994) seminal study of Lesotho. In this context, ethnographers have soundly unveiled how quantitative profiles, development models and packages, and statistical fetishism distort our understanding of lived realities on the continent. Moreover, in a gesture of countering offensive portrayals and showing that appearances can be deceptive, scholars have often sought to complicate narratives of African crisis, misery, and erratic economy via their obverse: namely, by underscoring the alternative constructions of *wealth*, regimes of *valuation*, land arrangements, modes of solidarity/debt/(re) payment/redistribution, forms and division of labor, and politics of kinship/gender structuring economic interactions and conditions of living on the continent. To put it in the words of Christopher Matthews, anthropological analysis has sought to demonstrate that Africans might have poverty, but they have culture too, by outlining the vibrant logics, calculations, and moral economies effervescing below the placid facade of deprivation and destitution.

This research has done an invaluable job of revealing Africans’ cultural resilience, the ingenuity of making do in the face of adverse conditions, or the fact that the material signs and trappings of affluence (of what is right, of what makes a good living) take different forms in different places. At the same time, anthropologists have also left local or regional conditions

of poverty largely unaddressed, just as they have often failed to engage how local people apprehend and experience their poverty, and imagine a future beyond it (Booth et al. 2006). Ferguson (2006:21) astutely reminds us that

people find other ways of getting by, that they concoct “local” ways of both “coping” and asserting global membership, often through a brilliant inventive bricolage of scraps and leftovers, is a fact more likely to be celebrated by the cultural analyst than by the “locals” themselves, who may see such practices more as signs of weakness than strength.

This is something that I have found true for Senegal as well (Diouf 1996, 2008) (Figure 1). In effect, lost in the recuperation of culture and assertion of the relativity of cultural arrangements is a sense of the profound inequalities that stratify “cultures” and “communities” in a changing world and enable or constrain their ability to act in or upon it. In these analyses, poverty remains an *absent presence*, a salient social fact hidden in plain sight but seldom taken up as an object of study, but see Moore (2005) and Chance (2011) for important exceptions.



FIGURE 1. “Thug Life,” Gorée Island. Aesthetic forms and political imaginations associated with the global urban ghetto (graffiti, tagging, murals, rap, and hip hop) are selectively appropriated within material lexicons of youth subjectivity, especially in Senegal’s urban communities and low-income *banlieues*. (Photograph by author, 2008.)

Such is also true of historical archaeological research on the continent. In their efforts to complicate determinist readings of African history, researchers have often been impelled to write recuperative accounts of local pasts, highlighting the complex negotiations and emergent strategies of action developed by Africans as they were swept by the updraft of global circulations. While certainly aware of global forces of marginalization and their effects on African communities, archaeologists have yet to take up the question of impoverishment *in Africa's past* (its causes and conditions, its expressions, its realities) and undertake systematic investigations of the material genealogies/histories of poverty underlying contemporary situations; but see Wilmsen (1989). Given that many of us work on the Atlantic era and colonial period—the epochal crucibles that gave rise to modern geographies of dispossession, political management of social difference, and imaginations of otherness (Trouillot 2003)—perhaps we have missed an opportunity to expose poverty's specters in portrayals of local pasts and use archaeological evidence to shed new light on Africa's jagged trajectories of integration into regional and global political economies over the past 400 years.

Africanist historical archaeology might be trailing a bit behind other world areas in addressing these questions, but perhaps not so much. In effect, aside from a recent body of archaeological research explicitly targeting histories of exclusion and urban segregation (Mayne and Murray 2001; Horning 2004; Orser 2004; Leone 2005; Mullins 2007; York Archaeological Trust 2010), global historical archaeology has paid limited attention to long-term *experiences* of impoverishment and economic injustice, despite the saliency of poverty in the present and its association with people in the past. The cost, as mentioned by the authors in this volume (especially Chicone, Matthews, and Orser), is that the spectral conditions, discourses, and categories of poverty—what I have termed their absent presence—continue to float by unaddressed, even though they framed (albeit in different ways) the basic coordinates of experience and subjectivity for marginalized populations in the past, and continue to inform, quietly but effectively, historical understanding, community engagements with the world, and the terms of our research in the present.

By contrast, as the articles herein compellingly illustrate, one of the distinct advantages of a

more frontal engagement with poverty is that it permits us to situate our analyses of social life more squarely within the moving landscapes of inequality and difference fashioned by the agencies of capitalism, economic modernization, and political modernity's organizational frameworks. By studying head-on how structural conditions of scarcity or deprivation were experienced, perceived, embodied, and negotiated by people in the past, archaeological accounts can combine an appreciation for the poor's condition of life, coping strategies, and tactics of resistance, with an acknowledgment of the extreme inequality churning up the raw material out of which subaltern ways of belonging and being in the world are crafted. By confronting social difference with social injustice, such analytical strategy also demands that we archaeologists question how certain categories, imaginations, and assumptions constituted in the present might inform our understandings of poverty in the past. A more general set of possibilities seems to lie in the distinct "elective affinity" connecting archaeologies of poverty with a recent parallel interest in modernity's untold stories of ruins, devastation, and rupture (Benjamin 2002; González-Ruibal 2008; Dawdy 2011). As a supplement to this emerging critical archaeology of "modernity" concerned with exploring the repressed narratives, shadows, and undersides of modern configurations, the study of poverty stands to reinscribe impoverished communities at the very heart of the histories from which they have traditionally been evicted or from which they have supposedly deviated. It also provides a critical hyphen between past and present, a means of staging histories of oppression in deeper temporal perspective and in relation to contemporary communities' struggles with the realities of impoverishment, exclusion, and alienation. In doing so, the study of poverty constitutes a ground of relevance and accountability for archaeological interventions, one that ensures that our research and the past it creates contribute to a better understanding of the present (Buchli and Lucas 2001), while speaking to the concerns of living communities as they grapple with the blatant contradictions of "the affluent society" and imagine their social futures in the margins of modernity's promises. Let us now examine how the authors take up these challenges.

Poverty's Historicity: Histories of Capital, Histories of Difference ...

Articles in this issue examine the social relations of poverty in the recent past of the United States. All the authors take it as their task to challenge notions of poverty as a condition rooted in culture, a thing to be found, a bounded phenomenon with consistent material signatures. To do so, the analyses are carefully contextualized in regional histories of capitalism, associated with postemancipation economic transitions, urban expansion, rural industrialization, gentrification and real estate speculation, the policing of city space, and urban revitalization (Smith 1996; Davis 2006). The papers are equally careful in avoiding disembodied abstractions of "the poor" that dehumanize, desocialize, and depoliticize the histories of people confronted with the consequences of impoverishment. Instead, we are presented with material histories of communities, from Long Island and New York City to Appalachia, by way of Baltimore, from New Orleans to Colorado, from Houston to Indiana, situated in local practice, discourse, and memories. Many of these histories are those of African Americans (but see Orser and Gadsby [both, this volume]), illustrating the intimate entanglement of class and race in trajectories of uneven development, the kinds of representations that framed and resulted from them, and the subjectivities enabled or disabled by these processes. At the same time, all the articles are cautious to underscore the diverse composition—racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, sexual, political—of impoverished areas, thus complicating common reifications of the poor as uniform enclaves of abjection. By extension, while the case studies testify to the force of spatial segregation and social conscription along racial and class lines, they also make the point that the politics of exclusion did not enforce radical isolation from an imagined "sociological mainstream"; in fact, the working class, the unemployed, the destitute, or the homeless are inextricably, if unevenly and sometimes awkwardly, bound with other social fields and subject positions within a given social formation, as aptly articulated by Gray. These linkages can be mediated by the intimacies of labor, licit and illicit exchange, social relations of propinquity, coexistence, or avoidance, as well as forms of

transgression, repression, and discipline. They are also maintained by the poor's engagement with the normative "imaginaries" and ideologies of wealth, consumption, success, social aspiration, and individualism that regulate middle-class habitus, the bourgeois civil sphere, and capitalist progress (Barnes, this volume; Gadsby, this volume; Mullins et al., this volume).

Invoking Rolph Trouillot (1995), it can be said that the papers thus endeavor to examine the two faces of poverty's *historicity*: the *experienced history* of poverty and conditions that produced it, and the *stories* told about them; lived poverty and its representations, understanding that *both* narrative and experience are part and parcel of the production of history and must be studied "cojointly." As all authors underscore, not all pasts are created equal. Historical production is a retrospective and power-laden process, which, at all stages, selectively preserves elements that legitimize certain ideological programs, while editing out or silencing other dimensions of the past—generally the stories and memories of people who were not in a position to document their histories. As Maia Greene (2006) has noted, the same goes with narratives of poverty: once classified as poor, the poor, who by definition have limited means to define the terms of the debate, are thus forced into a story of predetermined causes and outcomes that essentially evacuates their experiences. They become the powerless objects of poverty.

The contributors, in pointed ways, marshal material traces of the past, recorded testimonies, and contemporary interviews to dissect the category of poverty, its correlates, and the subjectivities it indexes. They show that bounded notions of poverty, with their expectations of utter material lack, anarchy, and squalor, fail to capture the diversity of living conditions and organizational strategies amongst "the poor." Placed under the leaden sign of poverty, these alternative ways of meaningfully inhabiting and constituting the modern world are condemned as illegitimate, abnormal, or volatile, and perceived as external to society. In the same fashion, the essentialized identities and dispositions conjured by official discourse for the "underclass" miss much of the fluid social worlds that the latter created, the terms on which they operated, and the diverse subject positions from which they were negotiated. As Gray argues, echoing Foucault (2003,

2007), classifications of the normal and the pathological, and their crystallization in identity categories, are tightly bound with modern projects of governance, which are paced by increasing interventions in the domains of public and private life to regulate the conduct of populations. In this light, attempts to render “the poor” legible in the eyes of the state and other levels of government are constructed in dialogue with liberal thought about civics and citizenship, which means that the terms used to define marginal populations are far more congruent with bourgeois ideas of order than with the objective and subjective experiences of impoverishment.

Thus, rather than drawing on reified identities that may reflect little of what they purport to describe, the authors propose to interrogate critically subject categories in the past and present, so as to reveal the alternative forms of identification that structured the existences of the rural and urban poor. Operating at the societal scale, for instance, Orser addresses the dynamics of class structure in the United States and suggests that the history of poverty in the country has implicated a long-term project of racialization (Orser 2004). A salient part of the argument is that these historical constructions and deployments of race are not necessarily congruent with contemporary racial discourses and categories; they sometimes depart from them in that they were not always or necessarily tied to skin color. While acknowledging the strong correlation between race and poverty in U.S. society and recognizing that the argument is leveled at the effective scale of structural forces, some may question the value of Orser’s expanded definition/scope of racialization. For example, Dawdy (2006:157–158) has cautioned against conflating “racism” and forms of discrimination, segregation, social difference, and stereotyping that are only “like racism.” Further, she wonders whether the key to understanding racism and racialization lies less in assimilating their complex expressions into a single process than in acknowledging their “powerful specificities,” both with regard to discourse and experience. Having said this, Orser’s point about the dangers of anachronism—viewing past contexts through present-day categories—remains well taken.

The other authors switch analytical scale and gaze beneath the facade of structural forces to retrieve the asperities of difference within the

horizon of capital. For example, Gadsby, Matthews, and McDavid excavate the diverse commentaries generated by impoverished communities about themselves, their histories, poverty, and its categorizations. Their studies point to the dissonance of these discourses, which are often plural, redemptive, and against the grain of society’s normative ideals, just as they recuperate some of the moral and aspirational elements of bourgeois ideology. Moving to the realm of practice, Barnes, Chicone, Gray, and Mullins and colleagues examine how different marginalized groups, between town and country, evaded or recombined identity grids to form distinct modes of being that both participated in and contested the orderly geometries of liberal democracy and capitalist discipline; in fact, in her compelling analysis of the unstable terms of racial identification in Britain’s National Census of 1991, Jacqueline Brown (2009) has shown that taxonomies, and the contents of their categories, are often negotiated within the very enumerative or recording technologies of the state. The collective message here is that modern categories or assumptions of identity are not necessarily commensurate with past ones and thus cannot be applied uncritically to archaeological situations. Instead, material, written, and oral clues can be held in tension, and from the lines of stress emerging between them can arise critical insights into the two faces of historical production: first, by writing accounts of poverty more attuned to the phenomenal realities of those living in conditions of scarcity; and second, using the data of historical experience to map how lived subjectivities in the past diverge from those enshrined in archives, collective representations, and public discourse, whose legacies, of course, continue to impress on the vocabulary of contemporary disciplines (Trouillot 1995). In effect, one of the thorniest issues facing students of poverty, methodologically and epistemologically, is that the making of archives is fundamentally implicated in the “law-and-order” strategies of the modern state and intimately entwined with practices of governmental legibility and population control (Dirks 2002; Povinelli 2002; Stoler 2010). While recognizing this difficulty, the authors also make the important point—contra Spivak (1988)—that subaltern voices are not necessarily disfigured out of recognition in documentary records. Worse, completely avoiding written materials in

a quest for the unalloyed voices of the disempowered would fail to capture the seminal articulation of discourses of dominators and dominated in the making of subaltern experience.

Beyond charting the braiding of representation and experience in the making of subaltern histories, the turn to poverty also sheds light on the broader history of capital within which they are situated. More specifically, poverty can be seen as historical space articulating what Chakrabarty (2008:chap. 2), in a recent rereading of Marx's theory of labor, identifies as the two histories of capital: (1) the universal process of capitalist development, driven by the unfolding of its structural logic, and (2) the multiple antecedent histories that capitalism necessarily encounters and unevenly absorbs in the process of its becoming. In this perspective, any instantiation—global or local—of the history of capital is a compromise between its internal physics and the antecedent relationships it meets in its passage. Histories of impoverishment, in turn, crystallize this very process in time and place. They represent a series of “time-knots” (Chakrabarty 2008:112) entwining the “Global Time” of capital's unfolding (the actualization of the preconditions and presuppositions it posits for itself) and the mosaic of pasts, temporalities, and lifeworlds that are drawn into capital's life process but may or may not contribute to its reproduction. As Chakrabarty (2008:64,66) further remarks, rather than being prior or external to capital, these histories of *difference* “inhere” in the very flow of its development, at times partaking in the latter, at others “punctuating” and “interrupting” the totalizing thrusts of its universalism. In effect, while some elements of “not-yet” capitalist social formations can be coopted, subordinated, and transformed by the forces of capital, others may quietly coexist with capitalist structures, while still others will resist or subvert the conditions of capitalist felicity. In this light, the forms of difference congealed in the shifting lifeworlds of the poor also embody part of the profound uncertainty and ambiguous possibilities nested in the historical horizon of capital (Postone 1993). They provide so many “traces” (in a Derridean sense) of social configurations that can never be fully exhausted by the categories of capital, nor fully enclosed in the idiom of universal history, and sometimes indeed push against the contours of these totalizing narratives.

Because they embody capital's drive to commensurate, homogenize, and creatively destroy, as well as its vital need for difference (Mazzarella 2003:19–20), the histories of poverty in this volume sidestep, with great sobriety, determinisms of one kind or another, while resisting the seductive simplicity of pitting structure against practice, or globality against local intimacies. Neither dystopian accounts of political economy's “last instance” nor misty-eyed aestheticizations of the poor as modern adventurers transgressing the disciplinary apparatuses of law, police, and the state, the articles situate poverty at the point of contact between determination and possibility, while disentangling the intimate and plural relationships binding social difference to capital's life process (Appadurai 2002).

Poverty's (Theoretical) Riches: *Materializing Impoverishment*

Thus positioned at the nexus between lifeworlds and structural forces, the articles tend to take sides with E. P. Thompson rather than Althusser, though not without a twist. Rather than condemning the “poverty of theory” (Thompson 1978), the papers underscore poverty's potential as a significant source of conceptual insights into the regimes of power and economic systems that have historically shaped U.S. society. While primarily concerned with impoverished communities' confrontation of dispossession, the authors' analyses also permit the garnering of thoughts on the workings of capital, its constitutive uncertainties, its material effects, and its entwinement with lived worlds. These analytical possibilities in many ways inhere in the phenomenal experience and materiality of poverty, whose residual traces are partly preserved and encoded in archaeological documents.

All authors agree that *materiality*, by virtue of its very ability to exceed and subvert narratives, intentions, and signification, can help us to produce alternative histories of poverty—pasts that surprise, displace, and critically interrogate *conventional* imaginations and explanations of poverty in the ongoing history of the present (Buchli and Lucas 2001). Mr. Lewis (Matthews, this volume) captures this process with uncanny perspicacity. In a powerful moment of decentering, he notes that archaeology's politics are

perhaps strongest when we destabilize conformism and conventionality with “unconventional items or methods”—a practical pedagogy afforded by the nonverbal potency of artifacts. Hence, echoing Mr. Lewis’s hermeneutics of estrangement, the participants in this issue are engaged in what Gavin Lucas (2004) has called a process of *materializing*, by which he means *both* highlighting the material conditions and media of social experience *and* rendering visible dimensions of the past that may be sidelined in agreed-upon perceptions. This is what is at play, I think, in the use of archaeological places to mobilize the dialectics of learning and unlearning in Setauket (Matthews, this volume), reveal the cacophony of discourses over black urban experiences in Houston (McDavid, this volume), reclaim a place for labor struggles in the fashioning of narratives of the U.S. nation (Chicone, this volume), expose the informal zones of exchange, sociality, and order emerging in “back of town” urban districts (Gray, this volume), or investigate the historical links connecting black experiences and imaginations of wealth with the racialization of poverty (Mullins et al., this volume). Here, Mullins et al.’s essay should be read in dialogue with a broader project concerned with exposing the faint traces of slum life and racial segregation lingering below the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis landscape of modernity (Mullins 2007; Mullins and Jones 2009).

Materialities (whether glimpsed archivally, archaeologically, or architecturally) thus enable us to address the concern shared by all authors with the invisibility of the socially marginalized in the past and the erasure of their experiences and memories in the present. While the case studies train our eyes on processes of dislocation and the resulting severance of underprivileged people from their affective landscapes and cultural heritage (Barnes, this volume; Matthews, this volume), they also help us to retrieve the subtle strategies and forms of sociality developed by the economically disenfranchised. These, in turn, can be used as a foundation to challenge or complicate the ways the poor have been represented, or indeed have represented themselves—a creative interplay of sources well illustrated in the papers. One will recall, for instance, Barnes’s fascinating discussion of land ownership, architecture, and personal items in an effort to question the Richeson family’s apparent poverty and infer the

regimes of value and identity politics informing how family members understood themselves and their position the broader social world of Appalachia. Likewise, Chicone’s examination of foodways in Berwind offers a compelling illustration of how working-class women actively engaged the terms of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company’s ideology of domesticity and negotiated livelihoods and the necessities of homemaking to match the changing rigors of income, labor, and provisioning. Empirical clues about past social practice and historical agency within the constraints of impoverishment provide important opportunities to rethink (or qualify) the triumphal inevitability of narratives of capitalist development, nationalist history, and bourgeois morality.

This being said, archaeology is no panacea for the mosaic of problems of subaltern history, and the materialization of poverty, both empirically and analytically, is not without its methodological blindspots. One issue is the question of material invisibility sometimes associated with impoverished communities, or conversely, the presence of singular material features, such as the bottle dump mentioned by Gadsby. As the latter indicates, this presence/absence problematic can not only make the act of archaeological interpretation difficult, but it can also, in appearances at least, abet middle-class negative perceptions about the poor (alcoholism, material lack, isolation from “consumption society,” etc.). One should note, however, that archaeological research has fairly consistently countered assumptions of material paucity for urban residents of little means. Instead, this work demonstrates that the city poor nevertheless purchased and discarded a great variety of material culture and participated actively, though perhaps unevenly, in spheres of urban consumption.

Another set of problems, discussed in Orser’s paper, involves matters of sampling and representativeness of archaeological collections (particularly in the context of cultural resource management research), and equally troublesome questions of resolution. Because the archaeological record tends to amalgamate the actions of many material users over the course of years or decades, it is often difficult to match conclusively archaeological contexts/assemblages, social and residential units (such as families or households), and the social actors that resided in these particular places (Mayne and Murray 2001). This,

in turn, can impair our ability to infer exactly what kinds of social processes are represented in archaeological deposits and integrate the latter with the much finer-grained resolution of historical documents—though, as Orser argues, one advantage of archaeology’s analytical coarseness is to illuminate broadscale social phenomena, such as the homogenization of various aspects of lifestyle precipitated by the economics of mass consumption (Murray and Mayne 2001). In any event, and regardless of potential difficulties, most would agree that archaeology’s surprises can trigger pointed questions about commonly held scenarios of poverty and its political construction, and raise public consciousness about them.

Relationalities of Poverty

Another unifying thread binding all the papers is their uneasiness with the violence of abstraction (Sayer 1987) contained in the concept of poverty and its common usages in public and academic discourse, and in social policy. Far from an object or a singular condition, they collectively examine poverty as a shifting set of social relations, unevenly crystallizing in time, place, and history. Seen in relational light, poverty cannot exist prior to or outside the social relations that give it shape; lucid exposés on relationality can be found in Ollman (1993) and Harvey (1996), and archaeological applications in McGuire (1992) and Wurst (1999). This commitment to explore the relational foundation of poverty is perhaps most forcefully expounded in Chicone’s article. There, she stresses the need to examine poverty as a shifting project in difference-making, shaped at the nexus of materiality and representation by political, economic, and social contingencies. Placing poverty in long-term histories of power enables the participants to craft accounts that vastly complicate the flat concepts of culture of poverty, environmental pathology, and other “blame the victims” tactics that truncate our understanding of human action in underprivileged settings.

By extension, a relational perspective also mandates a *socializing* of the poor, rewritten out of the undifferentiated monolithic mass to which they have been relegated (Desai 2002); see also Hardt and Negri (2004) for an intriguing, provocative, and problematic account of “the multitude.” This includes recapturing social,

experiential, and historical heterogeneity among the economically marginalized, as the papers by Barnes, Gray, Gadsby, and Mullins et al. do. They do well to remind us that “poor” communities can also house wealthier or upwardly mobile people, and that the lines between the “poor” and “middle class” were often fluid in time and space, something which the aggregative nature of the material deposits may cause us to miss. Relational analysis also demands closer investigations of the variety of conditions and forms of political agency in impoverished communities. In these contexts, as Chicone and Matthews show, the image of poverty can be strategically deployed to serve the political purposes of the poor or create particular solidarities.

The important point here is that the poor, in all their diversity, are recuperated as *political subjects*. Many of the papers indeed are about claiming the “rights to something” and showing how these claims are spatialized in the material world (Low and Smith 2007). For instance, in her work in Freedmen’s Town in Houston, Carol McDavid is grappling fundamentally with contested claims over what Henri Lefèbvre (1968) has called the “rights to the city”—see also Lefèbvre (2003), Mitchell (2003), and Merrifield (2006:chap. 4)—something D. Ryan Gray also examines in the fluctuating boundaries of urban socialities of 19th- and early-20th-century New Orleans, and, as he puts it, the forgotten role of the urban poor as active placemakers. Likewise, Christopher Matthews investigates the rights to citizenship and dignity—the rights to culture—from which African American communities have been dispossessed by economic interest and capitalist encroachment. He outlines the conditions of possibility for political and civil action by showing that community building (or revival) entails fashioning a politics of culture, which itself finds expression in space or must be waged over material terrains (Mitchell 2000). In a more historical vein, Mullins et al. traces how during the 20th century middle- and upper-class African Americans confronted the realities of poverty, the vexations of race, and the promises of material affluence to construct political identities committed to the conflicted project of building black cultural solidarity, while claiming inclusion in the economic and legal space of the nation. Central to all these stories is the emergence of place and landscape as focal points—both props and stages—in the struggle for imaginations of belonging at the heart of liberal democracies’

national fictions (Stewart 1996; Appadurai 2002; Povinelli 2002).

Poverty as Analytic?

Let me venture a few brief remarks about the value of poverty as an analytic, in relation to more conventional relational categories, like class, usually mobilized in discussions of the economically disenfranchised. The two lenses are complementary and mutually embedded. Class is admirably useful in drawing attention to the political-economic construction of reality by contextualizing the experiences of impoverished communities in relation to processes of capital accumulation and circulation, and the ownership and control of labor and productive forces, as discussed in, e.g., Wurst and Fitts (1999), Saitta (2007), and McGuire (2008:chap. 4). Indeed, the presence of class is felt across the papers. Poverty, in turn, forces us to examine how economic forces are mediated and framed by particular *political* interests, agendas, and projects (Gramsci 1971). The various forms of disciplining, paternalism, and cultivation of civility discussed in the papers are important reminders of how modern political forces (often working along, but at times against, the agencies of capital) created and shaped the historical experiences of the poor (Foucault 2003). One could add that examining the social production of poverty also brings into salience the articulation of race and class in structuring the poor's experience. More generally, poverty enables the tackling of the *lived* dimensions of class experience by mobilizing individual and collective histories of economic marginalization and disengagement. But it also forces us to confront *politics*, not solely as a general process of power, but situated in specific discourses and programs. In this light, the "poor" and their material conditions were key targets for technologies of bourgeois government, as well as the site of contested discourses.

More speculatively, a focus on poverty—as both process and materiality—may offer a helpful entry into the difficult matter of "consciousness," perhaps one of the most slippery dimensions of the study of class (Reddy 1987:chap. 1). Such questions as: "Where does the line lie between class *in* and *for* itself?" or "How does one study the production of consciousness?" can be elusive for those working with rich historical

and ethnographic datasets, and especially intractable from the standpoint of the material record (Kolakowski 2005). These complexities arise in part from the productive paradox of class, which provides people with a conduit for the realization of collective identity, while presuming that the footprints of such identity must already be in place for the process to occur (Ross 2008:viii). Without abandoning class, the analytic of poverty can provide a fertile lens on the process of class experience, by reconstructing the conditions in which certain political identities become possible (or not), the aspirations motivating them, and the political ends towards which they are mobilized. It can also help us to gaze beneath the level of the self-affirming, transparent class subject; to examine the plurality of projects, desires, and dispositions constituting class identities; and restore class as a dialectical process of unity in difference negotiated between social and political fields (Marx 1963; Spivak 1988; Enstad 1998; Ross 2008). At the same time, as has already been noted, we should also realize that "poverty," as a concrete abstraction, is not immune to its own forms of reification. By providing a ground of analytical commensurability across contexts, poverty opens the possibility for insightful comparative work, but it can also lead to simplified assertions of similarity within/between different places and, thus, to the overlooking of critical differences among them (Rosenblatt 2009).

Despite its prospective downsides, this comparative dimension seems important, at least to me as an Africanist, in that the concept of poverty invites potentially interesting conversations *across contexts*, especially about the working of modern states and their relationships to capital and subject populations. In effect, although the articles dealt with settings stretching beyond my familiar backyard, they collectively evoked a very strong sense of déjà vu: a set of processes—forms of dispossession, ideological representations, technologies of power—eerily resembling those that were exercised on indigenous populations in parts of the colonial world, and those I have spent the past few years studying in Senegal. Despite obvious differences in their logics and workings, all empires, the United States included, drew from a shared portfolio of political technologies to manage subaltern populations at home and abroad (Calhoun et al. 2006; Stoler et

al. 2007). In effect, the strategies initiated in Africa and Asia to “civilize,” educate, and advance the colonial populations were also often perfected back in the *metropoles* to reform and domesticate socially the “savage within”—the poor, the criminal, the working class, the immigrant—in other words, the undesirable at home, who could endanger the sensibilities, designs, and security of rising bourgeois nations. If poverty is born out of local crystallizations of a broader history of economic inequities, uneven development, and reconfigurations of capital, then how it has been represented, diagnosed, and managed has shared roots in a common history of political modernity as well. In related fashion, and cultural differences notwithstanding, there is a “family resemblance” arising between the portfolio of practices which colonized populations developed in response to colonial governance and those crafted by the denizens of metropolitan

margins in response to the state. Historically, for instance, African agents have often proved exceptionally adept at crafting alternative modes of sociality, parallel economic networks, and strategies of subversion in the shadow of colonial order (Roitman 2005), strategies reminiscent of how slum dwellers altered or rearranged the formal spaces of the city to fashion unsanctioned modes of being (Holston 1989, 2008; Gray 2009) (Figures 2 and 3).

Conclusions: Writing History Backward and Forward

To conclude, the papers in this issue make a strong case for the use of materiality in developing more inclusive narratives of political communities. Rather than starting from the failures of the present, themselves the result of long-term processes of oppression and elision, and thus



FIGURE 2. “Dakar.—The Market Place,” early 20th century (Archives du Senegal 2011a). Note the spilling of social traffic and economic transactions beyond the formalized space of the market. These activities reinscribed African commerce at once within and outside the landscape of colonial order.



FIGURE 3. "Saint-Louis (Senegal)—Negro Merchants," early 20th century (Archives du Senegal 2011b). Another illustration of the material presence of informal economic activity on the fringes of the public square.

falling victim to the tunnel vision of "doing history backward" (Cooper 2005:18), the papers use eclectic methodologies to glimpse at the courses of action deployed by different impoverished communities over time. By charting changes in modes of practice at various points in time and their engagement with capital, the state, and the city, they document the process of their exclusion from these histories, while resurrecting the possibility for new forms of inclusion. In this sense, they are placing the poor in longer social histories of poverty that connect past experiences to present conditions and the kinds of futures that may arise from them. Perhaps, as some authors note, archaeological research can help to exhume narratives of experience that have been lost to posterity, narratives that can become the ground for new solidarities, for new claims to space, culture, and the good life in the present.

Exploring poverty, of course, also raises tough questions of positionality, of the long-argued perils of giving voice to the voiceless, of archaeology's success as a mode of political action and public

consciousness-raising considering its roots in *la pensée bourgeoise* (McDavid and Babson 1997; Matthews 2005; Pels and Meskell 2005; Hamilakis and Duke 2007). The authors are mindful of these difficulties, of course; and, as with any politically engaged scholarship, the force of the message and effectiveness of archaeology in delivering it will have to be evaluated in the arenas of practice and praxis (McGuire 2008). This is an exacting metric, to be sure, but I imagine that the authors would not settle for anything less.

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