

Archaeology of Identity and Dissonance: Contexts for a Brave New World

EDITED BY DIANE F. GEORGE AND BERNICE KURCHIN

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REVIEWED BY ANDREA KOCSIS

Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge

This volume explores a variety of identities in the context of environmental and social dissonance. As the editors state in the first chapter, which functions as an introduction, this book is concerned with “human adaptation to environments that are in some way dissonant with the familiar world” (2), and this adaptation largely relates to the production and reproduction of identity. Defining identity might seem to be an impossible task. However, Diane F. George in her chapter on the roots of American identity has solved this question effortlessly: “Identity means simply what we tell others about who we are: the groups we belong to, the belief we hold and the qualities and characteristics that define – or not – define us” (257). The book embraces a wide range of possible identities. If you thought that identity mostly concerns nationality, this volume might seem as something of a surprise. It covers racial, class-related, immigrant, colonial and indigenous questions, as well as identities of metropolitan versus rural, seaside versus forest. The volume is not for prudish readers either, since it bravely engages with questions of sexual identity such as promiscuity and prostitution. Several chapters touch on gendered spaces and material culture—masculinity is in question regarding the white Creole in Monserat or the Roman legions on Hadrian’s wall, while femininity is discussed in connection

to both dishware in post-revolutionary America and women labelled as witches at Dogtown.

The geographical set of the volume is borrowed from Shakespeare—the studies are located in a ‘Brave New World’. Ruth A. Maher and Julie M. Bond summarize what this brave new world means in the context of identity while talking about Viking travellers: “When our travellers reached their new worlds, they had to be creative in adapting to new landscapes, each very different from the other, and from their original environment” (201).

Moreover, not only the geographical framework, but also the book's approach constitutes a brave new interdisciplinarity—it combines studies from archaeology, historical archaeology, history, and even some non-genre essay writing. It also involves analyses of a wide range of data—historical records, excavated artefacts, burials, landscape, architecture and interviews.

What makes the volume special is the approach taken to Material Culture Studies, which is both applied to recent times and connected to more archaeological periods. Although North American archaeology frequently adopts historical archaeological perspectives to research its own past, the originality of this volume lies in eliminating chronology and treating the materiality of Viking Iceland alongside that of nineteenth century New York. This approach sheds highlights the potential power of Material Culture Studies, and how useful archaeological perspective can be in researching the recent past.

The book is written with a non-specialist audience in mind, yetbavoids oversimplifying complex ideas. However, this comes at the price of variable quality across the chapters. Some of the studies included felt more as though they were the blurb of a larger book. We should not forget that material culture is data. Nor does the bravery and originality of an idea forgive the lack of data analysis—describing data does not equate to actual results. Telling the story is just one part of

the job. It is a disciplinary necessity to introduce and analyse data, not just share the interpretation.

The overarching theoretical concepts of the volume are largely built on Bourdieu's *habitus* and Giddens' *practical consciousness*. The former refers to the unconscious practices and dispositions one acquires from being raised in a particular social milieu (5), while the latter describes the everyday practices which actors carry out as tacit knowledge. However, Foucault's spirit is also represented throughout the book. The first part in particular, titled *People*, is articulated around biopolitics and control through the body, and thus concerns of embodied identity. It is a central issue, for example, in the case of the Irish immigrants in New York who had to change their appearance to assimilate (Chapter Three), or the militarily organized and centralized inspection of Algerian prostitutes after the French occupation (Chapter Four). In this latter chapter, not only Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1990) but also *Discipline and Punish* (1991) are seen peaking through the lines during the discussion of lock hospitals designed for isolating prostitutes.

As mentioned previously, the organizing flow of the book is not chronological, but four scenes of identity: the body, the close environment, the broader landscape, and constant fluctuation—respectively titled as *People*, *Space*, *Place* and *Time*. The first part, *People*, grasps three different problems that link material culture and the body. Striebel MacLean's study (Chapter Two) shows how important it is to analyse materiality in context, as context defines and changes the identity connected to material culture. The chapter exemplifies this through the case of the maintenance of British material culture and expression of different morals by white Creole men in eighteenth century Monserat. One of the most impressive stories of the book is found in Chapter Three, by Meredith B. Linn. It discusses the image problem of immigrants and new-comers from rural places arriving in nineteenth century New York City—they had to take control of how others saw them. She analyses how they did so through excavating hair products and cosmetics used to alter immigrants' appearances from 'Irish' to 'Irish American'. The last

chapter within the *People* thematic is Geiger's work. It gives an insight into a less known topic, the social frames of Muslim prostitution in Algeria and how it was changed by French occupation. The military interfered with the traditional practice, controlling and centralizing it, which commodified the bodies of Arab women who had previously been more discretely divided between private and public spaces.

This leads towards the second part of the book—*Space*—which deals mostly with house histories. Spott's study (Chapter Five) briefly demonstrates the obvious difference between two houses built by the same person as expressions of his two identities—one being his native American heritage and the other his European education. Watson's chapter (Chapter Six) explains a traditional family's shift from supporting slavery to advocating abolition with the help of architectural heritage. Kurchin and Bianciardi's closing chapter about Roman soldiers on Hadrian's wall (Chapter Seven) points to an important angle of the relationship between identity and material culture. Namely, that this is a two-way street—identity is changing, adapting to location, while location forms identity in return.

The third part, enlarging the scale, interprets landscape as material culture. Rothschild and Linn's impressive chapter (Chapter Eight) tells the story of how Seneca village, inhabited by Free Black homeowners, was demolished in order to create Central Park in New York City. This study, unconsciously balancing Aleida Assmann's notions of passive and active forgetting, highlights an important consequence of the interaction between place and people—obliteration silences identity, because the silent community does not remember. As the authors summarize, "displacement and eviction had drastic consequences. The free black landscape, along with its community and its identity, disappeared" (175). Martin's study of Dogtown, Massachusetts (Chapter Nine) demonstrates how the present attributes identities to past people. "The interpreters are given the power to choose, to decide what happened, what did not happen, and as is the case here, the power to make tangible what they would like to have happened". She thinks the story of Dogtown is "a lesson embedded in the landscape" (195). This strong relationship between identity and

landscape evokes Simon Schama's (1995) *Landscape and Memory* and Tilley's (1994) phenomenological approach to understanding landscape in archaeology.

This discussion nicely leads from coastal to island identities in the following chapter. Mahler and Bond's elegant study (Chapter 10) points out an important dichotomy: "The Norse who settled these different landscapes made choices and decisions based on their new surroundings and ultimately – either reflexivity or deliberately – forged new identities through relationships with their environments" (201). The authors demonstrate this by comparing two different instances of Viking occupation. On the one hand, in Iceland burials adapted to display a new Icelandic identity, and material culture continued to indicate perceived power and economic status. On the other hand, in the Orkney islands the placements of burials in the landscape shows how the Vikings tried to impress their own identity onto a pre-existing Orcadian landscape. As the authors summarize, "the location of an agent and his or her surrounding environment will influence that agent's decision making" (209).

The last section of the book lacks a strong adhesive theme, since 'time' is quite an intangible notion. Firstly, Diaz' chapter on identity-based conflict in Puerto Rico (Chapter 11) touches on an essential point—while occupiers may try to form new and melted identities, it only works from the dominant perspective. The occupied resists merging identities and seek to reclaim the landscape. Secondly, volume editor Diane F. George's chapter offers up a list of interesting questions whilst searching for the beginnings of common American identity through the lens of ceramics and dishware (Chapter 12). The last chapter is more of a hobby essay thinking about time, rather than an academic study (Chapter 13). It attempts to sketch out time-related archaeological problems while summarizing the conflicts of three sci-fi novels. However, it does not add too much to this otherwise stimulating book. The problem of time in archaeology has already been studied from more reality-grounded points of view (e.g. Lucas 2004), something which is painfully missing from this essay.

For this reason, a concluding chapter would be of immense benefit to this inspiring book. It could pull the different aspects of the geographically and chronologically diverse volume together, and conclude how material culture is a universal tool for understanding the multi-layered aspects and conflicts of past identities. The volume is hugely topical, especially given today's rise of identity politics, as seen in the current uptick in nationalism and hostile extremism. These are not new phenomena, however, and this book is a timely reminder that identity is an intricate part of the human condition, and has played a crucial role in shaping past human experiences.

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