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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## Resistance and Insistence: Studying Identity Through Commodity Trends Review by Sarah Latham

*Broken Chains and Subverted Plans: Ethnicity, Race, and Commodities*  
by Christopher C. Fennell  
University Press of Florida, 2017

In *Broken Chains and Subverted Plans: Ethnicity, Race, and Commodities*, Christopher C. Fennell presents two communities that resisted oppressive forces by creating new responses to dominant capitalistic trends. The book is divided into two parts: “Ethnicity and Commodity Chains in Nineteenth-Century Virginia, and Racism” and “Land and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century Illinois”. The book opens with an introduction exploring foodways and racial dynamics in the Midwest, with the second chapter giving an outline of how his research and findings relate to current literature. Fennell sets the scene by describing the ‘consumer revolution’ writing, “In this trajectory, more and more households of modest economic means invested in the purchase of diverse amenities, such as refined ceramic wares for serving tea and meals, refined clothing and fabrics, spices, clocks, and mirrors” (24). This broad change in consumer habits allows Fennell, through the observation of historical material culture, to address the complexities of ethnicity and identity in the Northeastern United States.

Chapters three through seven are a dense and highly academic review of historical and archaeological information about the commodity chains of frontier regions in nineteenth-century Virginia. His central questions include, “Did the establishment of a government-sponsored manufacturing town in this region spur an accelerating development of the surrounding region as a market for manufactured commodities?” (40). Fennell’s methods aim to uncover to what extent social relationships and cultural identity disrupt or promote the consumer revolution. He does this by examining stylistic elements of ceramic ware. Specifically, he relies on two data sets, 1) newspaper advertisements published by local merchants in the area, and 2) “surviving account books, daybooks, and ledgers maintained by local

stores” (73). Fennell examines commodity supply chains beginning in Britain, their competitors in North America, as well as the transportation and distribution resources available at the time. He then moves his focus from the town of Harpers Ferry, Virginia to the surrounding countryside.

Fennell contends that comparing these two data sets reveals significant trends. “First, customers in more rural locations could purchase imported British ceramic wares from local stores if they wished to do so. Those goods were made available at affordable prices, could be purchased on credit, and were not scarce due to transport problems. Second, those rural customers nonetheless tended to purchase such imported goods at much lower frequencies than did their counterparts in the Tidewater region” (97). His analysis is able to establish that the ‘ceramic revolution’ was not spreading as successfully in the upper Potomac and Shenandoah region as it was in the Tidewater region. To address this discrepancy, Fennell considers ethnic networks in the area by focusing on German log-cabin architectural styles. He establishes the close-knit nature of German immigrant populations in the Virginia backcountry at this time in that “their use of material culture to convey their group affiliations was evident in several ways” (118).

In chapter 5, Fennell uses oral history accounts, archaeological excavations, and documentary evidence from the Demory site in Loudoun County to explore how ethnic, social networks can be consistent and well-established in a specific area for generations, and yet, as the result of a variety of environmental and social factors, then become porous, making room for new emergent identities. This portion of the book provides helpful photographs and diagrams for the reader to more fully understand the material culture referenced. Here, Fennell establishes, through the examination of symmetrical, central hall designs and frame construction, the existence of “a rather cohesive German-American enclave” (150), that dissipated by the mid-1800s. In the following chapter, he examines evidence of end-user waste from a variety of sites, including Demory. Excavations at Demory provide few examples of discarded cream or pearl colored wares, even though it’s well-established that these were readily available to consumers who wished to purchase them. Fennell closes Chapter 7 by saying, “part one of this book has thus illustrated how concepts of ethnicity, trade spheres and commodity chains can illuminate past social and economic trajectories” (188).

In part two, Fennell completely shifts tone and style. The narration and quality of information become significantly less academic and almost follow a narrative style. Part two of the book also shifts focus to free African-Americans in the town of New Philadelphia, Illinois. New Philadelphia was founded by Frank (Free Frank) and Lucy McWhorter, two formerly enslaved people who managed to purchase

their manumissions. Over time, Frank and Lucy were able to purchase the freedom of 14 of their relatives as well. New Philadelphia officially became a town in 1837 “open for settlement by other free African-American families as well as European Americans” (204). This town continued to grow through the 1860s. However, plans were made to construct a new railroad across Pike County. Due to what Fennell refers to as “averse racism,” the town of Barry, Illinois (six miles west of New Philadelphia) was chosen to have a train station instead; resulting in a slow and steady dwindling of residents from New Philadelphia. Today, new Philadelphia Illinois exists only as a state historical marker and a site for archaeological research.

Chapter 9 provides a mostly historical review of Frank McWhorter and New Philadelphia, shedding light on the often-biased omissions of racial hostilities that characterize histories of Illinois during the antebellum period. Chapter 10 presents other case studies of structural racism during a similar time period in Illinois. Fennell includes archaeological and historical analysis of Miller Grove, Brooklyn, and the short-lived settlement called Equal Rights outside of current day Galena, IL. He points out that his analysis contributes to the current literature by focusing on post-emancipation era communities. Fennell concludes in chapter 11 by providing an extensive review of historical, archaeological research dealing with race and ethnicity in the US and abroad. He also advocates for projects committed to civic engagement.

The two parts of the book feel and read like completely different monographs from two completely different authors. Part one is incredibly dense and is written in the format of a very long academic journal article. Part two is considerably shorter and is more easily digestible to scholars, like me, who are new to the field of historical archaeology. Perhaps it was the author’s intent to present research in multiple styles to engage readers in different ways. Overall, the book is a fascinating look into methods by which 19th-century ethnic groups were able to direct their economic power into their communities, and, in the face of often great racial hostility, also manage to take advantage of the broader capitalistic opportunities surrounding them.

**Sarah Latham** is a masters student in the Department of Geography and Anthropology at Louisiana State University. Her research interests lie broadly in place, belonging, and identity. Her current research involves plantation tourism, commodification of authenticity, and black diaspora identity.

