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Université Paris 3-Sorbonne Nouvelle, November 21, 2014

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# One-day symposium “Material Culture and the Writing of History: the Case of African Americans”

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- 1 This one-day symposium was organized as part of a larger, on-going three-year project entitled “Writing History from the Margins: the Case of African Americans,” funded by Sorbonne Paris Cité, with support from the Center for Research on the English Speaking World (CREW, EA 4399) and the Center for Research on North America (CRAN), and undertaken by Claire Bourhis-Mariotti (Université Paris 8), Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), Claire Parfait (Université Paris 13), and Marie-Jeanne Rossignol (Université Paris Diderot). Marie-Jeanne Rossignol chaired the morning session and Claire Bourhis-Mariotti the afternoon. Claire Parfait opened the symposium by welcoming the speakers and attendees as well as providing an explanation of the larger objectives of the “Writing History from the Margins” project. Over the last three years, their mission has been to bring together scholars who are interested in finding new approaches to historical sources in order to reexamine and recast the construction of African American historiography and its writing. Material culture fits within this larger endeavor as it plays a crucial role in refining and rewriting one’s understandings of the domain via the object. By casting a light on oft-forgotten or overlooked remnants of the past, the day’s talks used a variety of sources to attest to the different social, cultural, economic, and even physical conditions of African Americans at different times in American history. The symposium’s speakers came from both the United States and France, and spoke from a multiplicity of disciplinary backgrounds, offering insights into how the physical remains of clothing, photographs, subfloor pits, prescriptive literature, children’s books, and household linens can re-situate African American historiography by giving voice to African Americans’ objects—particularly those that have frequently escaped the attention of researchers—and thus, to African Americans themselves.

## Katie Knowles (Rice University/Smithsonian Museum of Art, Washington D.C.), "Fashioning Slavery: Slaves and Clothing in the U.S. South, 1830-1865"

- 2 From the start, Katie Knowles pointed out how clothing remains an understudied topic among historians. She contended that the study of the fashion habits of black slaves in *antebellum* America, and in particular the *antebellum* South, is a rich starting point for understanding relationships of obedience as well as resistance to the slavery system and racial hierarchization. She noted that even though very few actual artifacts have survived to this day—having already worked with a thirty-piece, and growing, collection at the Smithsonian—a preoccupation with fashion can be found everywhere from paintings to advertisements, in slave narratives and even in literary works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. According to Katie Knowles, the *cliché* of the poorly dressed enslaved person wearing factory-made cotton clothes turns out to be true. Slaves were dressed largely in "negro cloth," a cheap, rough fabric made to be worn thin and then tossed away, the cost of which was a tenth of a fancy dress. Marketed as a "race product," "negro cloth" was also worn by the working classes, particularly in Europe. Slave fashion was not entirely constituted of "negro cloth" though. A large difference in slave fashion can be seen in house servants' garb: their appearance was seen as a reflection of their owner's wealth. The house servant's attire then became a symbol of domination and obedience. The fact that the black servant's body was used to display a white family's fortune serves as proof of how well-crafted the system that excluded Blacks was, as one of the most basic forms of self-presentation, clothing, was controlled. Acts of resistance, however, were not a rare thing. For parties and weddings—although the latter were not recognized by the state, they were of considerable importance for those involved—slaves loved to dress up, sometimes with garments formerly owned by their masters, a frequent gift to lighter skin servants. The desire to dress in a Euro-American way was not necessarily an act of submission but could also be read as a rebellious act, an attempt to integrate on one's own terms through mainstream fashion. Later on, emancipated individuals hastened to buy "decent" clothes as a marker of higher social status. Another form of resistance through clothing for enslaved people was the introduction of alternate pieces, which would later have an impact on American fashion at large, the best example of this being the head kerchief, a fashion-piece imported from Africa, which grew in popularity in American and then in European fashion. Though such efforts tended to not have a noticeable effect on the everyday conditions of slaves, they do clarify how much clothing has to say about racial tensions, the daily lives of slaves, and the long, difficult journey towards emancipation, in what Katie Knowles called "fashion narratives."

## Rahma Jerad (Université de Carthage), "Charles DeForest Fredericks and the First Photos of Blacks in Nineteenth-Century Cuba"

- 3 After a brief reminder of the harshness of the slave system in areas where sugar cane was cultivated and slaves were treated as "disposable," Rahma Jerad focused on Charles

Fredericks's photographs of Cuba, in hopes of finding a black presence amongst images of exoticism and leisure. Fredericks, a tried and tested traveler, was the first to establish a photography studio in Havana in 1857, after displaying this brand new technology in South America, Paris, and New York. His clientele, wealthy locals and enchanted tourists, was white, which might explain the absence of Blacks in his studio portraits. Nevertheless, such an omission remains quite surprising when it comes to landscapes, an already well-established form in Cuba, where the abundance of nature and the good climate fascinated visitors. After an extensive study of the Fredericks archives, Rahma Jerad found few exceptions to what came to be a rule of absence: Fredericks hardly acknowledged any black presence on the island. When present, however, Blacks were rarely the focal point of the shot. Taken in the urban environment, Rahma Jerad presented one photograph of two wealthy white ladies whose horse-drawn carriage was being driven by a well-dressed, seemingly happy slave. This photograph attests to the best of enslaved peoples' conditions and is one of a very few that provides a cityscape with inhabitants. Fredericks depicted Havana through quiet and stillness when in reality it was a bustling, swarming city. Landscapes from rural environments did include slaves, but seemed more focused on animals or obedience than the conditions of slavery. One such photograph features a cotton-worker taking a break at the apex of the crop, another a tortured black man lying in leg stocks, asleep. These images give off the feeling of tranquility despite the frenzy of the sugar harvest, indicating that Fredericks's interest was in portraying the slave system as being made up of peaceful, docile slaves working in quiet and manageable conditions. Depicting the Cuban slave system as such can be seen as evidence that Fredericks had political and social interests in representing life in Cuba. The apparent social consensus depicted in Fredericks's photographs could in reality be looked at as a continuing fear of rebellion, by both slaves and slavers, who on the one hand were contending with memories of prior bloody repressions and, on the other hand, attempting to maintain their commercial importance despite the challenge presented by the United States in the market. Nevertheless, Fredericks's photographs depict Cuba as a tranquil nation, a neighbor on equal footing with the U.S., blessed with incredibly beautiful surroundings. Ironically, the white-washed image he presented would eventually stir up an American desire for annexation. Rahma Jerad pointed out here how what was left out in these constructions implicitly redefined history in the political, social and aesthetic meaning of the term.

## **Didier Aubert (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), "Pictures and Progress, from Frederick Douglass to Pearl M. Graham"**

- 4 Didier Aubert framed his analysis by looking at Frederick Douglass's ideas on the power and influence of photography in American culture during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Douglass believed that the daguerreotype would have a tremendous impact on the making of U.S. history, and he hoped, along with other black historians, that the visual representation of African Americans would contribute to their eventual uplift. Didier Aubert, rather than looking at the nature of black representation through photographs, decided instead to look at the economy of production and consumption of the daguerreotype as a way to discuss the full implications of Douglass's thoughts. Unlike

other art forms, the daguerreotype experienced rapid technological advances that made it affordable, which greatly contributed to its consumption. As such, photography became a truly "republican" instrument in that it was available nearly everywhere and increasingly commonplace. This democratization, however, presented a fundamental challenge to Douglass: photographic imagery fixed the subject, allowing the daguerreotypist's perception to define the subject. This presentation could determine how African Americans were included in and excluded from the visual record as well as whether or not these images were honorific or repressive. Finding a place in the visual record, then, became crucial for Douglass. The contributions that African Americans made to the archive itself were one way in which this was done (Martin Robinson Delany, 1852). Black daguerreotypists, like J. Presley Ball and Augustus Washington, were able to fix African Americans within the visual record, subverting the earlier fear that Blacks could not be represented without bias. Didier Aubert concluded that in spite of the efforts to lift African Americans away from essentialized photographic representations, the focus in visual culture seems to continuously return to how photographic works attest to racialized features and characteristics (Graham, 1961).

## Fraser D. Neiman (Monticello, Charlottesville), "An Archaeological Perspective on the Social Dynamics of Slavery at Jefferson's Monticello"

- 5 Fraser Neiman used trace remains to flesh out the story behind slaves' living conditions at Monticello. He focused on how artifacts and their residue can be read as testaments to one's social conditions. He took as an example the presence of subfloor pits—holes dug into the foundations of slave quarters in the Chesapeake Bay area—to demonstrate how changing agricultural methods and the ensuing shift in surveillance allowed enslaved people more power to determine their living arrangements. Throughout the different production periods—tobacco in the 1770s-1780s, and wheat in the 1790s-1820s—slave quarters changed. The earlier period manifested little trace evidence of structures, but featured subfloor pits. The latter showed more foundational remains and no pits. This made Fraser Neiman wonder how these remains could allow scholars to construct a story of what slave life was like between 1770 and 1820 at Monticello. He proposed two hypotheses based on fluctuations in slave dwellings, from big to small, and then big again. The first hypothesis posits that these larger buildings were living spaces for large groups of individuals, while the smaller buildings permitted family-based living arrangements. The second suggests that smaller buildings were an attempt to economize. Returning to the presence of subfloor pits, Neiman suggested that these were akin to "safe deposit boxes"—a strategy invented by enslaved peoples in the Chesapeake area to protect their private space and private belongings. If true, the subfloor pits would decrease over time. If false, however, then subfloor pits would have increased. At Monticello, and other areas in Virginia, they disappeared, indicating that slave housing was shifting in conjunction with changing agricultural methods. The move from tobacco to wheat required more specialized work on plantations; housing then became a site of negotiation for enslaved peoples to improve their living and working conditions in response to an increased need for surveillance. Plantations could either have more overseers or grant slaves greater autonomy, allowing for more privatized housing. Fraser Neiman concluded that trace remains attest to vital social

and ecological strategies during slavery, providing a more nuanced reading of how slaves interacted with one another and with their owners, as well as how slave owners interacted with their slaves and other slaveholders.

## Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), "Work, Class, and Respectability in African-American Prescriptive Literature and Cookbooks"

- 6 Prescriptive literature has played an important role in constructing a framework for household maintenance and management. In her talk, Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry pointed out that this type of writing, however, often neglects the presence of race and class in domestic work. In looking at Robert Roberts's *The House Servant's Directory: or a Monitor for Private Families* (1827), Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry focused on how race, gender, and class intersect in one book to attest to the construction of black manhood in the 1820s and 1830s. Roberts's book was remarkable in that it was written by an African American man and had such success that not only was it reprinted, but it also became a mainstay in the field of domestic management. The author's personal biography contributed greatly to this success: Roberts was literate, free, and worked for the powerful Bostonian Christopher Gore—all of which allowed Roberts access to a better position as a domestic worker and ensured him a better class position within his own community. One of the interesting aspects of Roberts's book, according to Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry, is how this latter element, class, combined with race and gender in order to create a black masculine identity. African American men at this time were restricted from accessing dominant white masculine values, which insisted manhood was based on physical prowess and strength, largely by being kept in domestic work. For Roberts, then, black manhood could be expressed through consistent employment, decent pay, refinement, and decency; all of which were aspects of domestic work. Attention to detail and possessing knowledge of etiquette would afford African American men middle-class status within their own communities. This type of work was consequently a means for African American men to better control their own survival and define themselves in both the public and private spheres. Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry pointed out that African American men were able to use these positions as a means of self-improvement and a way to define "black work" as respectable work. As living and economic conditions changed throughout the following decades, the status with which Roberts worked so hard to imbue domestic work quickly dissipated, especially as women from the working classes came to dominate the field.

## Maïca Sanconie (Université d'Avignon), "Faith Ringgold's Children's Books: History, Art, Legend"

- 7 In exploring the children's book as one of the various mediums that Faith Ringgold, as an artist, has used throughout her career to speak as a political activist for the freedom of African Americans and women, Maïca Sanconie talked about how the heritage and imagery of material culture participate in both individual and collective memory. Focusing specifically on Ringgold's *Tar Beach*, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*, and *My Dream of Martin Luther King*, Maïca Sanconie pointed to the author's use of

flying and dreaming as resonating themes not only for the author's childhood, but also for African American history. She suggested that flying was both a means for Ringgold, as a child, to travel into the unknown and, for African Americans, as a collective, to transport themselves back to a time when flight, escape, and an alternative reality to slavery left a permanent imprint on them as a people. Dreaming, Maïca Sanconie posited, has been used by Ringgold and African Americans as a way to access imagined alternatives. Ringgold's heroine in *Tar Beach* falls asleep and dreams of flying, which permits her to see the world, while, in *My Dream of Martin Luther King*, Ringgold uses King's "I Have a Dream" speech as a point of departure for King to paint his vision for a different future. Aesthetically, Ringgold uses a flat style, which Maïca Sanconie interpreted as a means for the artist to reach towards a shared African American culture. In combining African American aesthetics, history, and thematics, Maïca Sanconie positioned Ringgold's work as an attempt to (re-)write African American history through the creation of material culture.

## **Géraldine Chouard (Université Paris-Dauphine), "African American Quilts: Color, Creation and Material (Counter)Culture"**

- 8 Geraldine Chouard presented her subject as one where matters of identity, gender, race, community and aesthetics converge. Indeed, quilts are the product of long-term collective or individual work within many American communities; both the Amish and Hawaiians are known for their quilt work. Géraldine Chouard chose to focus on African American women through time. For them, this form of textile expression is as much an art as an illustration, thus telling a story through several layers. The themes chosen for their quilts are various yet coherent: for slaves, jazzy abstract motives symbolizing a longed-for, joyous disorganization were prominent (although few slave quilts remain today); biblical images characterized the quilts of dignified black ladies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and strong female role-models have been featured by more recent artists. The personal expression here doubles with the social. Making quilts personal yet collective is embedded in the very history of the medium. This is the case from the legendary coded quilts that gave clues to the Underground Railroad for slaves looking to escape North, to quilts advocating abolition explicitly, to feminist political messages in the works of Riché Rachardson, Kira Hicks, and Gwendolyn Magee, and finally to the Obama quilt trend in more recent years. Furthermore, the very moment when the quilting takes place is important. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, quilting parties were a time for women (black and white) to let out their feelings of subjection, away from men's attention. Today, quilt fundraisers take place. The Freedom Quilting Bee Cooperative (by the Gee's Bend Quilters Collective) is one such initiative that collects money in order to rehabilitate a number of women. Finally, the artistic dimension of quilting has been increasingly recognized as the work of prolific artists like Romare Bearden, Faith Ringgold, and even Sojourney Truth, has been exhibited in national museums all over the United States and collectors show growing interest in the medium. Géraldine Chouard underlined the strong historical and communal bond still maintained today through such ordinary items of expression. The multi-layered message conveyed by this traditional vector thus encourages spectators to question history and to think differently.

**Projection of *Gwendolyn Magee, Threads of History* (2012), a documentary by Géraldine Chouard (Université Paris-Dauphine) and Anne Crémieux (Université Paris-Ouest Nanterre), France, 33 mn**

- 9 The documentary film consists of a series of interviews, with the artist, with members of her family, with American folk art specialists such as Noel Polk and Diane Williams, as well as visitors at the exhibition of her quilts in the Mississippi Museum of Art (also on display at the Smithsonian American Museum of Art). Ms. Magee, a committed artist, presents her body of work, in which she describes “the horrific violence of African American history, from slavery to the present-day incarceration and death penalty,” including lynching in the South, a preoccupation at the heart of one of her most famous works, *Treading Our Path through the Blood of the Slaughtered* (2001). Despite the brutality of the topics, the political yet intimate dimension of her work is well received by both critics and visitors. Its artisanal high quality—each piece is hand-made from carefully chosen fabrics and ornaments—also acts to legitimize Magee’s quilts as artistic pieces. Curatorship is one of the ways to place material culture at the center of the history-making process, and to remind everyone that it is more than ever a topical subject.
- 10 The various range of objects presented at the day’s symposium put forward important themes in African American historiography across the centuries, such as master/slave relationships, the institutionalization of a race-based system and resistance to it, and the transmission of collective memories. In an era when the historiography is constantly being redefined, going “beyond words” (Auslander, 2005) ought to be of concern for researchers, in order to cast light on (not quite) forgotten everyday practices and beliefs that have survived until today through material remains. This one-day symposium was one step towards such a rich approach.

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