

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 6

Issue 3 October 1999

Article 6

10-1-1999

Race and Affluence: An Archaeology of African America and Consumer Culture

Paul R. Mullins

Patricia M. Samford

Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

Recommended Citation

Mullins, Paul R. and Samford, Patricia M. (1999) "Race and Affluence: An Archaeology of African America and Consumer Culture," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol6/iss3/6>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Race and Affluence: An Archaeology of African America and Consumer Culture

Paul R. Mullins, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York, 1999. xiv + 217 pages, figures, tables, references, index. \$59.95 (cloth).

Review by Patricia M. Samford, Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens

After Emancipation, African Americans found themselves supposedly full participants in a society where they possessed the legal rights to labor for wages and purchase the material amenities they desired. In reality, the emergence of African-American consumer culture was never a simple matter, as its participants strove to create economic strategies that circumvented racism while also securing for themselves social and material prosperity. Attaining these desires was made more difficult as Whites, in the wake of African Americans' newly freed status, strove to distance themselves using a variety of mechanisms that privileged the White experience. In *Race and Affluence*, Mullins explores the complex interplay between race and consumer culture during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of this century. Using a theoretical approach that focuses on material symbolism, he examines documentary and archaeological evidence from Annapolis, Maryland to explore how race and racism shaped African-American consumer experiences. This work, extending well beyond the confines of African-American consumer choices, also addresses the realms of work, production, and labor relations.

Mullins draws on a wide range of documents and other materials, including editorials in African-American newspapers, advertisements, racist propaganda, city directories, and archaeological findings, to examine a variety of topics associated with the politics of consumer culture as experienced by African Americans. In early chapters, these topics include the effects of racist advertising, the seeming contradictions of African-American participation in mass-produced "Western" medicines, and the interplay of gender and race in formulating what was considered appropriate behavior for women. One compelling section addresses the politics of African-American physical bodies and the restrictions placed upon them both mentally and physically by white culture. These restrictions ranged from the seemingly more benign world of cosmetics advertising and "standards" of beauty, to the more brutal actions of racial resettlement and the Ku Klux Klan.

As Mullins shows in this book, African Americans were not only acted upon by larger marketing forces, but also played important roles as entrepreneurs within the local community. A chapter is devoted to African-American market spaces in Annapolis, focusing on economic organizations that worked within and around the margins of the white-dominated market world. Another chapter examines the racialization of labor in the Chesapeake Bay seafood industry, linking the decrease in

African-American seafood consumption at the end of the nineteenth century to racial stereotyping and the social stigmatization by Whites of fishing and seafood as non-genteel.

In the final sections of the book, Mullins focuses on patterns of African-American consumption. He examines different acquisition strategies and tactics of African-American laborers, including redistribution of goods, theft, and gifting. He also addresses the roles of the African-American domestic labor force, from their unique positions within white households, in quietly shaping the American South, helping to undermine racism, and sparking material and social hybridization.

Mullins portrays the world of African-American Annapolitans as complex and often contradictory. They were often forced to make difficult choices between the conflicting realms of racial pride and the desire to follow white consumer mandates in a world where material affluence was equated with social empowerment. This focus on complexity and the contradictions that characterize human experience is a real strength of this volume. Racism is not given a simple treatment -- instead it is portrayed as having both constraining and enabling effects for African Americans.

Specific archaeological analysis focused on changing dietary patterns as revealed by faunal remains, the symbolic meanings of certain categories of consumer goods (such as campaign paraphernalia and bric-a-brac), and patterns of ceramic acquisition. The author does a reasonable job of integrating the archaeological data with his overall study, but I believe his documentary sources present more compelling evidence for his arguments. It will be interesting to see how his conclusions compare with future archaeological research in Annapolis and elsewhere.

Mullins has written a thoughtful and insightful study of broad significance. Because this work is important, from the standpoint of both African-American history and the emergence of American consumer culture, I hope that Mullins plans several popular publications based on his work. *Race and Affluence*, written for an academic readership, will not be easily accessible to a broader audience. There is much of interest in this book and it should be shared with more than a scholarly audience.

Here, the world of consumerism is viewed as a microcosm of race relations overall. In the decades following the end of the study period, not much has really changed in the United States. While the world we live in today has improved from that of the early twentieth century, many of the same issues of surveillance, stereotyping, marginalization, and moralizing are still with us today. At the end of the twentieth century, race is still a highly contested and politicized issue. Access to material goods and symbols of affluence are still controlled, but we've just gotten somewhat better at disguising the racist intent behinds these actions. The debilitating

effects of racism are still with us, however, and we would do well to read this book and examine our own world a bit more closely.