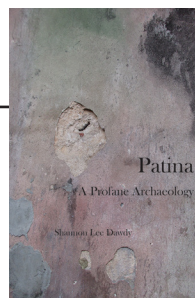


## BOOK REVIEW

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Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Patina: A Profane Archaeology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016. 216 pp.

**P**atina is a material layer that accrues over time on the surface of an object, congealing social values and a sense of the past. For many of the inhabitants of New Orleans, patina has come to signify both the emergence and submergence of the past in the present. As Shannon Lee Dawdy eloquently describes in this slim volume, patina indicates the lived experience of New Orleans space–time, a place where history lies on the surface creating economies of value, forging identities in place, as well as presenting and embodying moments of rupture and transition. From the surface of old wooden heirlooms through to the high water marks left on walls around the city by the flood surges of Hurricane Katrina, patina has become a vehicle through which people understand their relationships to the past and to place, and create new forms of value around them.

Dawdy theorizes patina as a form of “critical nostalgia,” “not only a political aesthetic but a political force flowing through alternative circuits of value that are both moral and material” (7). Drawing on Benjamin’s concept of “profane illumination,” Dawdy couches her study as a “profane archaeology”: one which highlights “the profoundly muddled relations between objects and subjects, in both psychoanalytic and Marxian terms...a way of understanding everyday objects that takes into account their shifting meanings over time and the way in which they can suddenly activate currents from the past that alter the present” (9).

The book draws on three research modalities: Dawdy’s many excavations across the heart of colonial New Orleans, the archival research that accompanied them, and a series of interviews with contemporary New Orleanians from across the city. We meet Isaiah, an African American

displaced by Katrina; Joe, a Creole now living on the East Coast; Agatha, an artist living in a historic Center Hall house. These conversational narratives co-produce Dawdy's definition of patina, although it certainly helps that many of her interlocutors are invested in activities that might be seen as parallel to Dawdy's own research: local historic preservation, antiques collecting, and tourism. Throughout the book, Dawdy presents snippets of conversations that patinate her own research. They discuss the idea of antiquity, the persistent fascination with all things "French," the significance of New Orleans as a space committed to the simultaneous commoditization of the past and the production of an affective nostalgia that bodily locates the citizen within a space-time that always moves beyond the present.

It becomes clear that this affective nostalgia was a crucial survival tool after Hurricane Katrina. Indeed, even though Dawdy focuses primarily on New Orleans' colonial history, Katrina is at the heart of the book, present in every chapter, in nearly every conversation. The focus of Dawdy's interlocutors on salvage, patina, inheritance, and history implicitly signals a way of domesticating Katrina, insisting on the local in the face of national betrayal, international scrutiny, and new forms of gentrification.

The book's chapters explore different narrative tropes that emerge in relation to New Orleans's material past. The introductory chapter introduces the framework of patina, critical nostalgia, and the backdrop of Katrina. Chapter 2 describes how ruins and archaeological sensibilities use the aesthetic and experience of patina to create a sense of heterogeneous time in which the past and the present blur and blend in the continual production and construction of the old. Chapter 3, "A Haunted House Society," focuses on local narratives around ghosts as a discursive patina in which people understand the past to materially remain in their environment. Chapter 4, "French Things," examines the production and consumption of all things French in New Orleans, emphasizing the entanglement of sexuality, otherness, and antiquity in the ways in which faience rouge pots, perfume, French wine, and bordellos have been marketed and continue to inflect the definition of the French Quarter and of New Orleans as a French place. Chapter 5, "The Antique Fetish," explores different theories of the fetish with regard to New Orleanian relations with old things.

Across all of these chapters, Dawdy draws on excavations of the Rising Sun Hotel reputed to be the original "House of the Rising Sun," of St. Anthony's Garden behind St. Louis Cathedral, and of the grounds of the

former Ursuline Convent. Her excavations highlight the compressed stratigraphy of New Orleans, and how mixed up the past and present are by water, fire, and subsidence. Plastic mardi gras beads lie just above older foundations which continue to make the structures built on top of them sag. Faience rouge pots and olive oil jars are dug out of the ground, and are also found in people's homes as family heirlooms. The people of New Orleans themselves are presented as archaeologists; many of them engaged in a perpetual form of excavation: of attics, yard sales, and antique stores. For many, owning a home is also understood as a form of historic preservation and many of Dawdy's interlocutors have been interested bystanders to her own archaeological work, as well as being engaged in their own historical, archival, and genealogical research.

The fetish, provides a mechanism for Dawdy to explain this investment in objects from the past. In Chapter 5, Dawdy summarizes three primary definitions of the fetish—the ethnographic (an account of the European projection of animism onto the colonial other), the Marxist (commodity fetishism) and the psychoanalytic. She consolidates all of these to present a fourth, drawing on Robert Stoller's description of a fetish as "a story masquerading as an object" (138). This approach emphasizes the ways in which objects become vehicles for narrative and the construction of the self. It is striking how the narrators in Dawdy's book share an investment in mainstream and historic narratives of New Orleans—following consensual definitions of the antique, of the meaning of French culture, and sharing the same affective experience of patina itself. There is little in the way of counter-narrative here—a poignant exception being Isaiah "who grew up in various predominantly black downtown neighborhoods" (152) and whose house, like many others in New Orleans is filled with objects handed down through generations representing the complex history of his family. Unlike Dawdy's other interlocutors, Isaiah struggles to use these objects as biographical objects or vehicles for storytelling: "My family isn't one for like, talking about history" (136). This is but a glimpse into some of the ways in which narratives and engagements with patina could be understood to be inflected by class, by race, as well as shared experience and history. I wished that Dawdy had given more time to exploring the hidden stories, counter narratives, and absences that are also part of the shared material experience of patina.

In another example, during the excavation of St. Anthony's Garden, the rector asked the archaeologists to be on the lookout for the missing

fingers of the statue of Jesus that had been lost during Katrina. A week into the dig, a student uncovered a marble finger to much excitement, but when brought to the statue it was apparent that it did not fit:

Later in an interview he [the rector] confessed, "I have to tell you this, those fingers were broken before and were re-glued on a couple of years before Katrina. So I'm not sure whether maybe a branch might have touched it and those weak little fingers are gone." (116)

Within these accounts, the practice of archaeology itself emerges as a form of patination—a nostalgic way of narrating the past in the present in order to produce a particular kind of affective experiences, suitable for mainstream consumption and working to produce shared narratives and consensual categories, for instance confirming in the eyes of passing tour groups the location of "The House of the Rising Sun." As in the case of the contemporary interviews, Dawdy's concept of "critical nostalgia" is under-developed as a form of narrative or a form of historiography.

The specter of Katrina haunts the book and demonstrates that patina is as much about absence as presence. Despite the green lines and mould left by the rising waters, Dawdy avoids a straightforward account of Katrina and its politics, and the book does not touch on broader ways in which patina mediates between disaster, national economy, and historic preservation. Rather, Katrina is the backdrop for the narratives provided by New Orleans residents. Reading their accounts of the antique and their own inheritances in the context of Katrina locates patina as a survival narrative, a presence of insistent continuity, on the affective power of old things to remain in the present, as these residents themselves remain in the city. Hence the poignancy of the pain of the eventual removal of a boat left stranded by the rising waters on a highway:

**SD:** Do you think our attachments to things all trace back to childhood?

**Jane:** Yes, but I also think traumatic experiences, things that happened with Katrina, that make us bond with elements of our environment here. It's an amazing thing...People have bonded with some strange things, like when they moved one of the boats that was stuck on Hwy 90, when they finally got it out of the way people were upset. They had bonded with that boat. (141)

The removal of the boat, suggestive of a clean-up that might also remove other patina, provokes because it mirrors other kinds of clean-up—gentrification, relocation, the overwriting of the past *without* trace. Again, I longed for the critique that this socio-material engagement could afford.

*Patina* is a rich book that brings new local voices to the archaeology and history of New Orleans. For me, its weakness lies not in the rich material that is unearthed, but rather in the theoretical framework that Dawdy locates it within. As I have described, the concept of “critical nostalgia” is flimsy and needs to be better developed. It could have been strengthened had Dawdy drawn on the rich debates around these issues that have emerged across many fields of scholarship beyond anthropology and which have been very influential within the anthropology of history and material culture. Dawdy’s primary reference points are classic anthropological paradigms including Durkheim’s conception of Mana (evoked in the concluding chapter which also makes a strangely sparse nod towards contemporary discussions of ontology) and classic social theory (Benjamin, Marx, and Freud are evoked throughout, and especially in Chapter 5, the Antique Fetish). Important as these concepts and thinkers are, they seem curiously out of touch with the specificities of Dawdy’s material—which, at least to me, demands a deeper engagement with (colonial) historicity and historiography, with richer theories of material culture and materiality, and with broader discussions of heritage.

I would have liked to see how Dowdy might position her work in New Orleans and the conversations she was having there in dialogue with the rich literature that insists on the materiality, affectivity, and presence of the past and has a rich engagement with the tensions within colonial peripheries.<sup>1</sup> I also wondered why there was so little engagement with critical studies of nostalgia and dialogue with a more nuanced account of the political economy of heritage and heritage/historical preservation, especially in the US context where understandings of the old and antiquity are inflected in very particular ways. Finally, a fuller engagement with material culture studies that have in recent years turned their attention to the affective, and sensuous surfaces of things would also have been welcome. For me, Michael Taussig’s (2008) work on Indigo, Natasha Eaton’s (2016) work on pearlshell, and Les Field’s (2008) *Abalone Tales*, which narrates the entangled colonial and indigenous histories of California through a sensuous engagement with the shimmer of pearl shell, provide a far richer

framework for developing Dawdy's understanding of patina as an affective surface bound up with the politics of both consumption and identity, than the much more generic framings of mana and the fetish that Dawdy utilizes in this volume.

I recognize it is impossible for any book to attend to every literature in every field, and nor would I suggest that any author turn towards a style of writing dominated by parenthetical referencing or endless endnotes. Rather, the texts I have mentioned here signal lively conversations that this book should have been a part of. Notwithstanding these lacunae, *Patina* is a rewarding read, bringing the politics of contemporary ruination into dialogue with the archaeological practices of both scholars and residents of present day New Orleans. ■

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>I'm thinking of the highly influential work by Hayden White (1988, 2000), Greg Dening (1996), Elizabeth Edwards (2001), Eelco Runia (2006), and Jonathan Lamb (2011), who have all unpacked colonial history in terms of materiality, narrative, affect, and presence and who are all absent from the bibliography as well as extensive work within the anthropology of history itself.

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