

**ADRIAN PRAETZELLIS**

Department of Anthropology  
Sonoma State University  
Rohnert Park, CA 94928

**MARY PRAETZELLIS**

Anthropological Studies Center  
Sonoma State University  
Rohnert Park, CA 94928

**Mangling Symbols of Gentility in the Wild West**

**ABSTRACT**

*Gentility (a.k.a., “Victorian culture”) was the preeminent model of propriety in mid- and late-19th-century California. Thanks to industrial production and an efficient supply network, the genteel mores of Victoria’s England came to be expressed in a suite of artifacts that became de rigueur for anyone who aspired to a position of respectability—even in the wilds of the American West. The trappings of gentility, however, were not used only by the aspiring white middle-class to achieve some kind of nervous social acceptance. In this essay, we present archaeological examples from the Mexican-California ruling class, a Chinese-American merchant, expensive brothels, and the home of African-American porters, to show that the symbols of gentility had power outside the parlors of the white middle-class and that other groups manipulated the powerful symbolic content of these artifacts for their own diverse ends. [Historical archaeology, gentility, California, African-Americans]*

Although it is a relatively young endeavor, historical archaeology has developed a multiplicity of approaches from the anthropological and generalizing to the playful and particular (e.g., Orser 1996, Praetzellis, ed. 1998, respectively). Some feel that this diversity represents a loss of focus and an intellectual dead-end (Binford quoted in Thurman 1998); however, we see it as a healthy dichotomy that has created a productive tension within the field. This paper is a study in contextualization in which we seek to understand mundane Victorian artifacts by reference to the circumstances of their use. Specifically, we will examine how the meanings of the material culture icons of “gentility” (Bushman 1992) were created and recreated by various social groups in 19<sup>th</sup>-century California. In so doing, we focus on “the local and the diverse as against the grand narratives of cross-cultural anthropology” (Hodder 1999:153). Our approach is unashamedly historical and contextual. Rather than beginning with an interpretive framework that is taken to be cross-culturally applicable (e.g., Winer and Deetz 1990, Deetz 1996), we establish a series of local contexts and then seek to understand how individuals used material culture to pursue their own political, social, and ethnic agendas

in these particular places and times. In this way, we hope to avoid what Gosden (2000) calls the “static and monolithic view of colonialism” in which hegemonic domination is presented as unchallenged and material culture is to be understood through the lens provided by a single ideology.

### **Artifacts as a “live information system”**

As Orser (1996) points out, it is an anthropological truism to say that artifacts carry meanings. Yet, since artifacts are constantly being recontextualized by their use in different social situations, their meanings are not fixed. They are part of a “live information system” (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:10) that is as essential a part of their character as the mundane functions of decoration, sustenance, and shelter that these items provide. This is the characteristic of material culture that concerns us here: Not merely the technology of their creation or the economics of their distribution but the way in which artifacts come to do social “work;” how they come to be invested with meaning, (Miller 1987). This distinctively anthropological interpretation of artifacts is something of an antidote to the taken-for-granted, materialist understanding which views the desire for goods in economic terms, as if things have intrinsic worth instead of socially constructed value (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:202).

Archaeologists have expended a great deal of energy over the classification of artifacts, and we will not recapitulate the battles of the past here. However, since our research involves the categorization of artifacts, it is necessary to set the conceptual stage. One frequently drawn distinction is between so-called luxury goods, whose main use is “rhetorical and social” (Appadurai 1986:38), and utilitarian artifacts that fill Binford’s (1962) technomic and sociotechnic categories. Strangely, there is no consensus over the analytical usefulness of this commonplace distinction. Working in the most remote recesses of human prehistory Hayden (1998), for example, finds it useful to emphasize a distinction between what he describes as “practical” and “prestige technologies.” In contrast, with a strong documentary and ethnographic record to draw upon, Douglas finds the Cartesian dichotomy unsatisfactory and arbitrary (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:72). By using the concept of luxury goods we create the impression that these artifacts are unnecessary, even frivolous. Yet, if artifacts are part of an information system, then so-called luxuries have an essential role in social relations and can be conceived of as “information goods” (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:79).

### **The Material Culture of Gentility**

The subject of this paper is the role of the material culture information system in personal social strategies in 19<sup>th</sup>-century California. Since an information system presupposes the passage of mutually intelligible messages, we begin by exploring the idiom employed by this shared system of meaning that allowed this communication to take place as well the historical and cultural context.

Some scholars call it Victorianism, while others have dubbed it the culture of gentility (Howe 1976, Grier 1988). Gentility was no total institution. Rather, it is nothing more

than an analytical model created by historians to help us understand the pattern of life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—a suite of values, behaviors, and material goods that were normative for many people but from which others borrowed as they saw fit. This set of practices was one of the key influences on the way in which many 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans thought and acted (Bushman 1992) and its influence was international, extending to South Africa (Ross 1999), New Zealand (Belich 1996), Australia (Lawrence 1999), and everywhere the British empire and economy held sway.

What were these values and how did they arise? Cultural historians have come up with a plethora of adjectives to describe the qualities valued by Victorians: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity in women; rectitude, thrift, sobriety, and hard work in men. To many in the mid-19th century, the strides that had been made in engineering, in science, and in material well-being generally were evidence that Progress, fueled by the engine of commercial enterprise and guided by Christian values, was the natural course of their country's social trajectory. In short, gentility is the name we give to the ideology that explicitly linked this social progress to moral rectitude with an almost religious zeal and certainty in the absolute rightness of its position (Howe 1976).

The Victorians fervently believed that Progress could only be achieved through order. Science had demonstrated that the physical world was governed by immutable laws; the Christian church provided a parallel set of moral strictures to maintain social order; and polite society set the rules about how these were to be expressed in everyday behavior. Among some groups it was a single articulated package and to reject the smallest conventions was tantamount to declaring one's self in opposition to all authority, both civil and religious. But to demonstrate to others that one had taken up the burden required not only appropriate behavior but also the right symbols. Nineteenth-century architects and arbiters of popular taste set out to translate these ideas into everything from houses to parlor decorations so that Victorians could communicate their respectable values to their peers and nurture them in their children (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1992). While earlier generations believed that human nature was largely set and unalterable, Victorians began to appreciate the role of environment in the formation of "character." If one surrounds children with morally uplifting influences, claimed contemporary wisdom, they will grow up with the appropriate values and attitudes. Artifacts and architecture were key elements in the creation of this moral environment, for the Victorians believed good architecture created good people. For much of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the Gothic style, which reflected the design features of traditional church architecture, had been the rage. Gothic arches and finials sprouted like weeds on everything from houses to pickle bottles (Downing 1850). But this was not mere fashion; rather it was art in the service of moral elevation. William Ranlett summed it up when he wrote in 1847 that "there is so intimate a connection between taste and morals, aesthetics, and Christianity that they, in each instance, mutually modify each other." (Ranlett 1847, quoted in McDannell 1986:21).

Houses changed dramatically in the scant 250 years since settlers built the first copies of traditional English dwellings on the Atlantic Seaboard. From the earliest Colonial times until the late-18<sup>th</sup> century most Americans lived in houses that had few internal divisions. Many family homes consisted simply of two rooms, the hall and the parlor, in which the

family ate, slept, and entertained guests. Personal privacy seems to have been neither a strongly held value nor much available to those who may have wished it. Since only the well-to-do had rooms with specialized functions, to have such a house signaled one's social position and aspirations (McDannell 1986:26). As divided space became the genteel norm, houses that lacked it came to be seen as morally corrupting. The working class and immigrants from traditional societies, who lived in the squalor of tiny apartments, were condemned partly because of their corporate living arrangements (Frykman and Lofgren 1987:128), a situation that would have been singularly unremarkable to the grandparents of most native-born Americans.

As we move into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the differentiation of spaces within middle-class houses became increasingly common. Whereas, in times past, the visitor would move from the front door directly into the family's living area, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans were demanding an intermediary space, the hallway, where visitors could be held before they were admitted to the protected area of the family's quarters (Ames 1992:9). The parlor became another essential element of the house plan. This was a room dedicated to the elaborate rituals of visiting, as well as the laying out of the dead and other important life cycle events, and thus the place where families chose to put on their best face to the outside world (McDannell 1986:98).

Mary Douglas has written that "goods are neutral, their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:12). It would be difficult to find a stronger exemplar of this point than the use of material culture in genteel society. Tea services (Wall 1987), knives and forks, clocks (Shackel 1993), decorative bric-a-brac (Mullins 1999a; 1999b), and hall and parlor furniture (Ames 1979; 1992), have all been credited with making a symbolic contribution to the domestic ritual of late-18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century genteel households. For many in 19<sup>th</sup>-century California, these items possessed a semiotic quality. They served both as public indicators of commitment to the era's genteel values as well as "weapons of exclusion" in the moving equilibrium by which membership was constantly being redefined (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:85).

### **Gentility and Hegemony**

The concept of gentility is not without its problems, for it may conjure up a seductive but ultimately unproductive vision about how the Victorian world worked—that of total cultural hegemony. In this model, the various segments of society are seen as buying into the notion of the intrinsic rightness of 19<sup>th</sup>-century power relations and accepting the attendant practices and symbols more or less wholesale (Gramsci 1971). According to Gramsci, the forces that sought to promote genteel values did not attempt to impose their hegemony by coercion or "rule" but by shaping common perception in order to make their power seem a part of the natural order. Leone's (1984) study of the Paca Garden is a classic example of the role of material culture in this process. And this role, it should be emphasized, is an active one in which material culture does not merely reflect values but plays an active part in creating social relations.

Yet caution is necessary. Powerful as this approach may be, it leaves no role for members of subaltern groups in the “discourse” that leads to the creation of their own culture (Beaudry, Cook, and Mrozowski 1991; cf. Orser 1996 167-173). Furthermore, taking this approach may end up with a rather mechanical interpretation of the meaning of genteel material culture. An interpretation that varies little with the specific contexts in which the items were used. Although the “taste makers” determined the idiom in which respectable taste was expressed (Lynes 1955), they did not control how it was used. So we assert that the presence of matched sets of dinner wares does not always mean that the household was striving for Victorian perfection any more than an increase in the proportion of Staffordshire pots over traditional Mexican or Chinese ceramics necessarily indicates that the users of these items were “assimilating” (cf., Elston, Hardesty, and Zeier 1982, Staski 1987). Potter (1994:151) expresses a frustration with the same approach, albeit at a slightly earlier period: “The problem, or limitation, however, comes in saying that coarse-bodied, slip-decorated earthenware plates signal an unsegmented, unstandardized worldview, whereas creamware plates always mean the opposite... what of the person who used creamware in a distinctly non-Georgian way?” Although cultural hegemony and its cousin, Althusser’s (1971) dominant ideology thesis, are useful in constructing large-scale generalizations, they are too inflexible and static to help understand the complex social dynamics of historical cases at the household scale.

In discarding aspects of the cultural hegemony model, we reject the notion that everyone who used genteel material culture employed these items to convey the same ideas and for the same purposes. Rather, we suggest that 1) these “incarnated signs” (Appaduri 1986:38) possessed powerful, conventional meanings understood throughout 19<sup>th</sup>-century California; and 2), in a society of diverse ethnicities, social classes, and political agendas, people used others’ knowledge of these meanings as “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1984:53) to pursue their own strategies, not merely to imitate the Victorian upper crust in some nervous attempt at social advancement.

### **Case Study: Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo**

It’s 1846 and California is still part of Mexico when a rag-tag band of American hunters, trappers, and runaway sailors marches on the pueblo of Sonoma capturing the Mexican Commandante, Colonel Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. The event is grandiosely christened the Bear Flag Revolt after the porcine rebel emblem. Vallejo, however, was up to the challenge. Inviting the group’s leaders into his home, he plied them with brandy and lively conversation until the remaining insurgents sent the sole teetotaler into the house to negotiate Vallejo’s surrender. The deposed Commandante emerged after two months captivity to find that much of his property had been stolen or destroyed. Undaunted, he shaved his whiskers into mutton chops—the latest Yankee fashion—and went to San Francisco to march in the American victory parade (Pitt 1970: 37). Vallejo has been described as the “foremost friend to Americans in California” (McKittrick 1944:266) and acted as a middleman between the forward-looking values of Victorian gentility and rustic Mexican-Californio society.

As a Mexican official, Vallejo had cultivated a genteel lifestyle. His gothic home *Lachryma Montis* [Tear of the Mountain], constructed in 1852, two years after California's statehood, is a very mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century building in form, floor plan, and decoration. However behind this Gothic veneer are adobe walls six inches thick in the Mexican tradition [Figure X]. Although his early residences, the Petaluma Adobe and the Casa Grande, were adobe buildings in the Mexican tradition, American and British guests during the 1840s were charmed by the European flavor and appurtenances of these accommodations. The Casa Grande was described as "comfortably furnished," as befitting Vallejo's reputation as "the most cultivated Californian in the country." And even the imperious Sir George Simpson, who did not conceal his disdain for the "bad tea and worse wine" that he endured at Vallejo's table, described a meal which, if not exactly to his taste, showed great concern with Victorian sensibilities in its presentation (Simpson 1847:62-63). For while many of his fellow Californios were eating stews from traditional, bowl-like *platos* made of majolica, the ceramic collections excavated from the Casa Grande site show that Vallejo's table was graced with English-made Spode from the Hudson's Bay Company in various patterns (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1976, Praetzellis 1987). The collections contain many of these transfer-printed vessels whose patterns include "Continental Views," "Standard Blue Willow," "Camilla," and "Botanical," in green, blue, dark blue, red, and sepia, indicating that the household had several sets of dinner ware. The high formality of dining is shown by the presence of plates, bowls, hollow vessels, and a platter—but no majolica whatsoever.

As a young man, Vallejo had been unofficially ex-communicated for refusing to go to confession or turn over the banned books he had been caught trying to smuggle into California (Pitt 1970:4). The older Vallejo was also willing to distance himself from the seat of authority, realizing that the interests of California—and his own—would be better served under American rule than under Mexico. His political re-alignment was supported by his adoption of genteel symbols in architecture [Figure X] and at the table.

### **Case Study: Yee Ah Tye and the Chinese District Associations**

Yee Ah Tye arrived in California from southern China in about 1852, the same year Vallejo built his Gothic manor. He was fluent in English and soon became a leader of the Sze Yup District Association, first in San Francisco and later in Sacramento (Farkas 1998). At this time, the Chinese District Associations' agents were the most visible individuals in their communities. They had to be sophisticated businessmen and bilingually articulate advocates for, besides taking care of their members' needs, they stood for the Chinese community against hostile local authorities. In Sacramento, Yee Ah Tye represented the Sze Yup Association and Tong Ahchick was the agent of the neighboring Young Wo Association. Josiah Gallup—an attorney and Sacramento City Alderman—worked with the Chinese agents to represent Chinese interests with local government and as an agent to buy everything that the association needed locally from wagons to eggs. Both district associations had boardinghouses for their members and offices on the same block in Sacramento. In the summer of 1855 the entire block was razed by fire, creating a

remarkable deposit portions of which had been Chinese boardinghouses and association offices (Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1987).

Although the remains of the Sze Yup Association did not survive, an excellent collection of artifacts associated with the Young Wo Association's agent was uncovered. The ceramics are an interesting mixture of traditional Chinese and English pots; significantly, some of the latter are incised with Chinese ownership marks (Figure X). Historical accounts suggest that these Victorian artifacts may have been used as props in the game of what Goffman (1959) calls impression management.

In the 1850s and 1860s, Chinese merchants regularly held open houses and banquets for influential members of Sacramento's establishment. One such event was hosted by Yee and recorded by a reporter from the *Sacramento Bee* (7 December 1861). Here, public officials and prominent businessmen were treated to a 26-course Chinese meal, which subtly fused Chinese food and environment with the familiar symbols of Victorian popular culture. The event took place in a room behind a store, decorated with Chinese paintings, sculptures, and hangings. The newspaper correspondent had looked forward to the pleasure of eating with chopsticks, but there were none to be seen. The dining table was set with a cloth, knives, forks, and celery in glasses "very much like ordinary tables."

Through dinners, open-houses, and other staged events which involved displaying items of popular Victorian material culture in their public rooms, Chinese merchants fostered an impression of themselves as "men of intelligence, ability, and cultivation" (California Legislature 1853:5, quoted in McClain 1994:26). Encouraged by ritual performances, this influential group was encouraged to recognize the class divisions within the Chinese population and the high cultural sophistication of the wealthy. Although they were overcome by the groundswell of anti-Chinese sentiment in the 1870s and '80s, many prominent Californians came to see Chinese merchants as quite Victorian in their devotion to hard work and social order.

From Sacramento, Yee moved to the little goldmining town of La Porte in the Sierra Nevada range. Here he supplied the Chinese miners who worked the Pioneer Mine with their day-to-day needs. The artifacts from the site of the Chinese miners' boarding house include Chinese gaming pieces, a large stock of opium paraphernalia, and traditional medicine containers. However, the site also produced large quantities of thin-walled, brown-glazed stoneware vessels that contained traditional Chinese food and drink. With the exception of an English saucer, every piece of ceramic tableware at the Chinese miners' boarding house was from China (Praetzellis and Praetzellis (1993). Yee Ah Tye came to consider himself an American and took on selected genteel values of the era. His daughters were well educated and, contrary to Chinese custom, Yee insisted on being buried in his new homeland (Farkas 1998). Men like Yee ah Tye were expert in manipulating genteel material culture yet they supplied their Chinese workers with exclusively Chinese food, clothing, and entertainment, effectively preventing them from following the path to self-advancement in the New World.

### **An African-American Home in the West**

In the early- or mid-1890s, a well in the backyard of 1774 Atlantic Street, Oakland was backfilled with soil and domestic refuse (Anthropological Studies Center 1998). The household that contributed to this collection of artifacts consisted, in large part, of African-American men who worked as porters in the Southern Pacific Railway's Pullman cars, including William Pettey, Albert Brooks, and Charles Bruce. In a blatant reprise of pre-emancipation social relations, only black men were hired as porters to serve the traveling public. Although the job was highly desired and Pullman porters were considered the aristocracy of African-American railroad workers, the workforce was organized to fight for better working conditions and, most significantly, "manhood rights" (Collins 1997, Spires 1997:228).

More than 12 feet deep, the well contained over 1300 artifacts including everything from sewing artifacts and alcohol containers, to personal accoutrements and lamp parts, as well as food bones that represent a staggering 2800 lbs of meat (Figure X). Many of the ceramic and glass vessels were discarded into the well whole or recently broken. With less than 10 years between the date of deposition and the mean ceramic manufacturing date, many of these vessels would have been relatively new when discarded. In keeping with the prevalence of tea wares, 26% of the ceramic collection is made of the more expensive porcelain and opaque porcelain fabrics. The high proportion of serving vessels (22%) and stemware/tumblers (14%) indicate a formal dining table at which meals were partitioned at the table in what was probably a toned-down version of the fashionable style known as *à la Russe* (Levenstein 1988:61) and alcohol served in matched stemware. While most of the plates are plain, pieces appear in several decorative styles: gilded, molded, handpainted, lustred, transferprinted, ribbed, sponge-banded, annual, and copper tea leaf. A common 'Rebekah at the Well' motif teapot would have served for everyday use, while the household's transferprinted English Copeland pot may have been reserved for special occasions. Parlor bric-a-brac includes porcelain figures of a jester and an individual in colonial-era clothing as well as five vases, including two matched sets: blue glass bud vases and porcelain vases with a gilded and handpainted design (Anthropological Studies Center 1998:285-287).

These materials summon up the image of a genteel dining room with all the formality for which that environment is known. Following the sociology of Veblen (1899), art historians such as Bell (1976), or the regrettably naïve position of archaeologists Praetzellis et al. (1988), a conventional interpretation of this discovery might be that the residents of this little house on Atlantic Street were emulating the taste of the middle class for the purpose of social advancement. Certainly, the "Palace Cars" designed by George Pullman and in which William Pettey and his housemates worked were luxuriously outfitted to resemble the dining rooms and parlors of upper-middle class homes of the era. In an era that equated poverty with the absence of consumer goods, the household seems to have followed the model provided by the splendor of Pullman's cars. Paul Mullins, however, makes a strong case that status among African Americans at this time had less to do with the ability to accumulate and conspicuously display consumer goods than in one's affiliation with organizations that espoused values such as "education, self-control, rational morality, [and] material denial" (1999b:27). West



Oakland produced too many prominent leaders in the black union movement to deny Mullins' point which, incidentally, is supported by Daniels (1990) with regard to nearby San Francisco. However, it does not seem too great a stretch to suggest that the aesthetic of Pullman's cars influenced the taste of those who worked in this sumptuous environment, if not their social values. There is some irony in the situation in which a black household outfits itself with the conventional symbols of Victorian gentility while working to subvert the racist system that supplies these same goods. Perhaps the answer lies not in the conventional meanings of these objects but rather in them as symbols of civility and personal dignity, qualities for which the men strived against the odds.

### **Case Study: From Genteel Home to Whore House in Los Angeles**

By the mid-1890s, while Yee Ah Tye was furnishing his workers with Chinese goods and William Pettey was enjoying the clutter of his parlor, the Victorian aesthetic was on the decline among the white middle class. A new sensibility, inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement, was sweeping into America's homes. Where Victorian houses had been strictly segmented, innovative architects were now abandoning the hallway and parlor altogether and allowing guests to walk straight into the family's intimate living space (Handlin 1979). Lofty ceilings, reminiscent of the church nave, were coming down, and the dark weighty furniture that anchored the Victorian parlor like elements of a mausoleum was being abandoned for the lightness of bamboo and wicker (Lynes 1980:171). Where the old style had been gaudy and ostentatious, the innovators lauded the simple and unadorned.

Councilman Felix Signoret and his wife, Catherine, bought the parcel at 125 Aliso Street, Los Angeles, in 1871 and constructed a substantial brick house for themselves (Costello et al. 1998:179-180). Like their sometime neighbor, Deputy County Clerk Stephen Mott, the Signorets would have experienced their neighborhood change from a solidly upper middle-class district to a blue-collar area. One can only speculate on their feelings about this shift. From what we can glean from historic sources, the Signorets' home was a classic of mid-Victorian architecture. First, it was built of brick. The French-born couple were surely influenced by the sturdy building tradition of their native country in constructing this solid and permanent home. No doubt they intended it to outlast the impressive, but wood-framed house erected a few years earlier by their neighbor, Dr. David Hayward. Only a few feet from the sidewalk and further emphasized by its wide front porch, the Signoret House would have presented a impressive facade to the street. Furthermore, the roof was hipped on all four sides in mimicry of the fashionable Mansard shape. Charles Crocker's mansion in San Francisco had such a roof as did many new public buildings throughout the United States erected since the end of the Civil War (Lynes 1980:98). So, for a while at least, the Mansard was both the epitome of cosmopolitan stylishness and a symbol of the new public spirit that was poised to propel the United States into a bold new future. It was an eminently appropriate symbol for the residence of one of the City Fathers. We will never know the actual arrangement of rooms in the Signoret House, for this was one of the mundane facts of life that no one thought to record. Yet one may venture that it would have conformed to the conventional

floor plans of its day. At 30 feet wide and nearly 1800 square feet, the dwelling would have had ample width for a standard entry hall flanked by a parlor and sitting room. In many houses of the era, the parlor was connected to a separate dining room from which led the kitchen passage, kitchen, and servants' quarters.

By 1888 the Signorets and their neighbors were long gone, and their genteel house was used as a brothel (Sanborn Map Company 1888). This up-scale 'parlor house' would have been a far cry from the cramped, one-room cribs that women rented by the day on nearby Easy Jeannette Street, for its residents were a small community that serviced regular clients in a inviting social atmosphere.

By the '90s, the old Signoret house was architecturally of another era and so, curiously enough, was its style of interior decoration. The artifacts used in the brothel's hey-day show few of the characteristics that one would expect in a modern household of the era (Costello et al. 1998:Table 426-1). The archaeological collection, which was deposited in about 1901, contains nearly 1,900 individual items. There is an unusually high proportion of items in the categories of Health, Grooming, and Social Drugs, including 'remedies' for sexually transmitted diseases and alcohol containers, as well as a large quantity of stemware, decorated ceramics, etched or pressed glassware, and decorative furnishings—such as vases and decorative boxes—and more than 100 lamp parts.

With its profusion of gaudy parlor decorations, formal dining sets, and oil lamps, the aesthetic was decidedly of an earlier era—as if the house had been purposefully decorated in an exaggerated Victorian style, although without any of the didactic touches for which that era is known. Archaeology suggests that the house's style of interior decoration changed little from the time of Felix Signoret to that of the 1890s brothel. Its architectural form was the same, as would have been its uses of public interior space. This continuity is a most telling conclusion, for although these material goods and spaces apparently remained much the same, in an Arts and Crafts influenced era the meanings that visitors attached to these artifacts would have changed. Although the house's business was to sell sex, its allure was more than just the act itself. The parlor house customer paid a premium not only for its high-class women but also for a leisured atmosphere that heightened his anticipation of the evening's culminating experience. It is as if the symbol of the Victorian parlor was evoked and recreated for its familiarity—a warm, decorous setting that would encourage regular customers, the kind who paid for the illusion of being engaged in something other than merely a business transaction.

### **On the Future of Global Archaeology**

One might expect that genteel ideology's international quality would make the topic particularly suitable for a broad comparative approach. Indeed, in recent years there has been a general call for the creation of a global historical archaeology that would emphasize the connections between peoples and influences on a scale that is appropriate to the study of the modern world (Falk, ed. 1991, Orser 1996, 1997). For James Deetz, historical archaeology is, by definition, a global undertaking as “the archaeology of the

spread of European cultures throughout the world since the fifteenth century and its impact on and interaction with the cultures of indigenous peoples”. He goes on to suggest that while many prehistorians do not have to operate on a global scale for their insights, “historical archaeology must adopt a global perspective on its data, for when the first European sailing ships set out for distant parts of the world, a chain of events never before seen in human history was set into motion” (Deetz 1996:5).

The highly contextualized case studies we offer in this essay exemplify a growing paradox in the practice of historical archaeology. Without doubt, the field is thoroughly international thanks to such innovations as the World Archaeological Congress, which brings archaeologists together from across the globe, and the establishment of the International Journal of Historical Archaeology. Yet while many practitioners tacitly agree to this agenda few seem to be using a broad comparative approach when it comes to actual archaeological interpretation. Just the reverse, for historical archaeologists are finding the program of “decontextualized global comparison” increasingly unsatisfactory (Beaudry 2000:1). Many now incline away from master narratives as the backbone of their interpretations, seeing these models as responsible for “flattening out” or homogenizing past societies in their grand unifying visions (Funari, Jones, and Hall 1999:17).

The case studies in this essay make the case for something historical archaeologists have known for years: our most effective work is often done at the small scale, emphasizing the commonplace and bringing the lives of the disenfranchised into focus. Although seeking patterns on a global scale is a laudable goal, it is not necessarily the only worthwhile objective nor one that is most accessible given the nature of the archaeological record. In fact, it is this very characteristic of our data—its placement in the realm of the small scale, mundane, and personal—that puts historical archaeology into a perfect position to “ironize” these same global interpretive schemes, for historical archaeology has access to “a space between often very powerful master narratives of cultural and social identity and much smaller, stranger and potentially subversive narratives of archaeological material” (Johnson 1999:34). Our case studies contribute to this process by focusing on tightly defined historical contexts to suggest how the very icons of class hegemony and orthodoxy were taken up by those on the margins of genteel society as strategies to pursue their own ends.

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## FIGURE ANNOTATIONS

Figure X. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo built *Lachryma Montis* [“Tear of the Mountain”] in 1852, two years after California’s statehood. It is a very mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Victorian

building in form, floor plan, and decoration. But behind this Gothic veneer are adobe walls six-inches thick in the Mexican tradition.

Figure X. Among the English ceramics in the mid-1850s refuse pit of the Young-Wo Association agent's house was this sherd of a "Willow" pattern plate, incised with a Chinese ownership mark. There is some irony in the merchant's use of this Chinese-derived icon of genteel popular culture to influence Euro-American society.

Figure X. Artifacts from an African-American household, 1890-95. The collection includes a variety of table wares and parlor bric-a-brac typical of genteel homes.

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