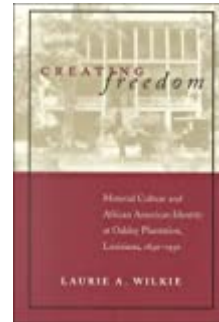


Laurie A. Wilkie. *Creating Freedom: Material Culture and African American Identity at Oakley Plantation, Louisiana, 1840-1950.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000. xxv + 294 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2648-6.



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Published on H-South (June, 2001)

The Use and Abuse of Material Culture Studies

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In reviewing John Michael Vlach's *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, William Van Deburg called attention to the problem that many historians have with the methodology of material culture: the idea that every artifact is "symbolic or emblematic," and the fact that those remains are obliged to bear considerable interpretive weight, often with little assistance from... literary sources.^[1] That was in the early 1990s. Since then, material culture scholars have attempted to rectify this problem by going to greater lengths to reconcile the written, oral, and material records, particularly in the field of African-American history.

As James Deetz has pointed out, it is difficult to gain an understanding of nineteenth-century African-American life without resorting, at some level, to artifacts. Much of the time, African Americans were absent from written records, and even when they did appear, the portrait was more a reflection of the recorder rather than the subject.^[2] Enter anthropologist Laurie A. Wilkie's *Creating Freedom*, an attempt to analyze the lived lives

of four African-American families by innovatively combining methodologies and sources in order to "achieve a more balanced and humanized understanding of [their] experience in rural Louisiana" (p. xv).

In concentrating her study at the household level, Wilkie is reacting to traditional approaches to plantation archaeology that she characterizes as "broadly comparative" (p.xv). She argues that this type of macroanalysis, while it can establish regional patterns of behavior, cannot provide the more nuanced picture of how African-American identity was constructed in and around the home. Instead, Wilkie's "microscale" analysis allows the reader to get an explicit idea of the everyday process of identity formation and negotiation.

Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "habitus," or the basic process of human socialization, Wilkie sets out to study the conscious and unconscious natures of interactions between her subjects and common objects. It is through this process, Wilkie asserts, that it is possible to gain that crucial understanding of what it actually meant to be an African American in rural Louisiana, and by extension, in the South as a whole (pp. xvi, 5-16).

Creating Freedom is, in many ways, reacting to the shortcomings of various approaches to African-American studies, and that is reflected in the book's simple, yet logical form. In fact, if prizes were given to scholars based on the structure of the argument alone, Wilkie would take top honors. The book is organized as an inverted pyramid; she goes from the general to the very specific. In chapter one, Wilkie lets the reader know how she is going to approach her study theoretically, again broadly relying on the work of Bourdieu and Sherry Ortner.

Then, in chapter two, she begins giving the "view from the great house" by setting up the "social-historical context in which Oakley [Plantation] existed" (p. xxi). Here she gives the reader a quick comparative overview of antebellum and postbellum plantation life in the South, in Louisiana, and specifically in West Feliciana parish (where Oakley is located), as it was recorded in the written record. Although the theoretical language is a bit thick in places, she builds her case for inclusion of the material record by arguing that the documentary sources, including oral testimonies taken by the W.P.A. in the 1930s, have far too many bias problems to be taken alone. All in all, she makes one of the strongest arguments that this reviewer has ever seen. For example, she points out that written documents tell only the story of white supremacy and its effects; they do not tell how African Americans were able to negotiate within that system (pp. 40-41).

In chapter three, Wilkie finally takes us down to the plantation level, in this instance making the case for Oakley's typicality at the local level. Although there are problems with the first two chapters of the book—mainly in the superficiality of Wilkie's approach to the historiography of slavery and post-slavery—this is where other, more serious troubles emerge.

Having begun in chapter two with the idea that Oakley's deteriorating slave cabins are emblematic of white attitudes toward West Feliciana's black population (p. 17), Wilkie then attempts to portray the plantation as typical, or "microcosmic" of the parish (p. 42). She recounts more of Oakley's specific history, including an exhaustive (and distracting) statistical analysis of the slave population, agricultural production data, and listings of tenants from the 1840s through the end of the nineteenth century. The data do not seem to diverge significantly from studies done of other plantations.

In this chapter, she argues for the dual economic and social nature of the plantation, natures that did not always correspond to one another. There has been work

done on the non-economic function of slavery – *Roll, Jordan, Roll* comes to mind immediately, however dated – that could have spoken more to this argument. However, Wilkie leaves off with this line of reasoning. She turns to glossing over the case for Oakley's atypicality. Women apparently dominated this plantation in both the antebellum and postbellum periods, although she does acknowledge the plantation's atypicality in a glancing blow in the last paragraph of the chapter.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "two spinster sisters" managed the plantation and apparently provided congenial enough working conditions so that it was the only plantation in the parish that "continued... to raise cotton through to the 1940s" (p. 79). As such, the gendered nature of Oakley's social function is something that should have been explored more in depth; instead, relations between the "big house" and the cabins remain almost solely a question of race for Wilkie. What she does successfully though, is begin to make her case for asking the proverbial large question in a small place.

In some ways, Wilkie redeems the disconnectedness of chapter three by focusing in the fourth chapter on what she does best: archaeology. By taking the reader down yet another level, she begins to give the view from the cabins (p. xxi). Although historians will have already had problems with her almost dismissive use of the written sources, this is, unfortunately, where they may begin to tune out completely unless they have a great interest in the science of the dig. Wilkie tells how they dug up everything, pure and simple, and she also introduces the reader to her African-American subjects and the objects that they left behind.

Again, the problem for many historians will be the methodological explanation and the multiple (and again, distracting) illustrations of the digs themselves. She comes to the conclusion that the families represented archaeologically are somewhat unrepresentative given their social and spatial proximity to the "big house," but argues that they are key to understanding African-American identity because of their need to negotiate and maintain multiple personas depending on the nature of their social interactions (p. 117).

Chapter five presents the two sides of Wilkie's manipulation of Bourdieu's concept of the "habitus" that she is using to analyze the lived experiences of African Americans who lived under the eye of the plantation house. This particular type of African American contended both with the "influences of African heritage" of their community, and with the pervasive "influence of the European

American planter family” (p. xxi). In other words, they, more so than other African Americans, moved constantly between the black world and the white, in some sense belonging to both and neither.

In this chapter, she makes another strong case for the importance of the material record of race relations, showing why certain artifacts are found in particular places and how this supplements, and in some cases contradicts, the written and oral records. The problem is that she relies heavily on ethnographies that have in many ways been refuted by historians. She emphasizes the essential unity of enslaved identity during the nineteenth century without giving much credence to the idea that there were deep ethnic, racial, and status tensions within that population (p. 133). She does not mention where the members of Oakley’s enslaved population originated, but makes an unproven connection between them and an Afro-French Louisiana cultural tradition.

This is where another of the book’s major problems emerges. The regional/cultural origin of the population is important given, for example, Wilkie’s emphasis on the apparent material connections to spiritual-magical practices, i.e. voodoo. She does not, however, spend much time talking about Christian religious practices that historians have successfully proven were so important to slave life. In some sense, if it does not show in the artifactual record, it is dismissed.

There is also a deeper theoretical problem: if one takes her argument regarding the importance of white “intrusion” on black life as true, then the short shrift that she gives to written records produced by whites is somewhat unwarranted. After all, historians have shown that the practice of mastery was just as important in affecting African-American identity as the condition of bondage.[3]

The remaining chapters (six through nine) are the “meat” of the book and the least problematic. These chapters focus on the way Wilkie’s four families constructed their contested identities through food, clothing, family

life, religion, and medicine. Through an intriguing analysis of what was essentially garbage, i.e. animal bones, broken plates, bottles, coins, etc., Wilkie provides what she promised in the beginning: an intimate look at these people’s daily lives and how their detritus illuminates their experiences in a more complete way. In chapter nine, true to the wonderful structure of the book, she comes full circle to discuss how these localized constructions of African-American identity answer a larger question of how ordinary African Americans lived under slavery and Jim Crow.

Leaving aside the frequently cumbersome theoretical jargon and statistical and archaeological analyses—as well as a disturbing overuse of “European American”—the question is, for this reviewer at least, does Wilkie ultimately dampen the criticism that historians typically make of material culture? Is she able to reconcile three distinct yet related bodies of evidence into a coherent and convincing whole? The answer is a tentative yes. Had Wilkie done it with more respect particularly to the written record and with a smoother narrative, it might have been overwhelmingly convincing.

[1]. William L. Van Deburg, rev. of *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, *American Historical Review* 99 (Jun. 1994), 971.

[2]. James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977; 1996), 187-252.

[3]. See, for example, Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987).

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Citation: J. Fred Saddler. Review of Wilkie, Laurie A., *Creating Freedom: Material Culture and African American Identity at Oakley Plantation, Louisiana, 1840-1950*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. June, 2001.

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