Material Culture
and the Performance
of Sociocultural Identity
Community, Ethnicity, and Agency in the
Burial Practices at the First African Baptist
Church Cemeteries, Philadelphia, 1810–41

John P. McCarthy

The concept of “performance” has recently been introduced by anthropologists studying the ways in which individuals manifest sociocultural identities such as ethnicity or religious affiliation. Individuals can be seen as acting, both consciously and unconsciously, to express their various sociocultural identities in everyday life. Such expression takes place through the manipulation of cultural traits, or traditions, that

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359
serve as symbolic markers for social identities in particular contexts. This concept is beginning to be applied to the analysis of material culture as well. Artifacts and their associated behaviors are seen as elements that individuals, as members of social groups, manipulate to form and express sociocultural identity through social discourse. In this sense, the social meaning of objects is found far beyond the description of an object's material composition or its technical function. The meaning of material culture can only be found in the context of the object's use by a particular group of individuals who share a common sociocultural and historical context.

This paper illustrates these concepts through the examination of the material aspects of what appear to be African-influenced burial practices observed at two cemeteries used in the first half of the nineteenth century by members of the First African Baptist Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (fig. 1). The role of burial practices and related material culture in the performance of social identity and in social process in Philadelphia's African American community during the first half of the nineteenth century is explored, arguing that African-influenced burial practices reflect an active expression of an explicitly African ethnic identity—an identity that may have served as an important social resource for Philadelphia's ante-bellum African American community. Beginning with a consideration of ethnicity, social identity, and social agency, the development of current concepts of ethnicity are outlined, a performance approach to the expression of social identity is developed, and the importance of social identity as a form of social agency is discussed. The development of the study of African culture in America provides a cultural context for the examination of African-influenced burial practices among nineteenth-century African Americans in Philadelphia. The historical and social context of African American life in ante-bellum Philadelphia and the history of the First African Baptist Church from its founding in 1809 through the 1840s provide a specific context for the study of burial practices at two cemeteries associated with the church. The nature of the burial practices revealed in the excavation of the cemeteries and their relative occurrence at each cemetery are reviewed. Assimilation and African American ethnicity and agency in ante-bellum Philadelphia is considered in light of the observed burial practices. Finally, the implications of this study for understanding the role of material culture in defining and expressing sociocultural identities are considered.

Ethnicity, Social Identity, and Social Agency

It has been said that ethnicity involves ways of thinking, feeling, and living that constitute the essence of cultural behavior. In his now-classic

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study, Fredrik Barth defines an ethnic group as a population having four characteristics: 1) it is largely biologically self-perpetuating, and its members share certain physical characteristics such as race, 2) its members share fundamental cultural values expressed in overt cultural forms, 3) it comprises a community of communication and interaction, and 4) its members identify themselves, and are identified by others, as constituting a social category distinguishable from other similar categories.2

Ethnicity was initially conceived as being based in a primordial link of individuals to the cultural traits of their country of origin, acquired in early childhood socialization to form the primary elements of personality. The salience of ethnicity for an individual could be measured by the extent of the retention of ethnic traits such as language. However, the foundation of ethnicity entails more than the survival of ethnic traits alone suggests. Ethnicity can be seen to be affected by local conditions including a population's geographic concentration, political influence, social and economic adversity, and the nature and history of inter- and intraclass relations.3

Variability in ethnic identity began to be recognized as individuals identified themselves, and were recognized by others, as ethnic to a greater or lesser degree in response to contextual forces, resulting in a subjective understanding of ethnicity. While remaining consistent with Barth's definition, this understanding placed greater emphasis on the fourth element of that definition—self-definition that is shared by others—rather the group. Ethnicity can be seen as a symbolic identity rather than an all-encompassing normative culture. It is developed, displayed,


Sociocultural Identity

manipulated, or ignored in accordance with the demands of the particular situation. While it is complex, it is context dependent: forces such as colonialism, nationalism, and internal migration have been identified as affecting the experience of ethnic identity at a level beyond the control of the individual.4

Cultural traits, or traditions, such as foodways, festivals, and folklore are taken up and used as symbolic markers for ethnic identity in various contexts. Accordingly, the importance of cultural traits lies beyond their specific content and is found in the social identity that they represent. In this sense they are signs and symbols that may be used by both ethnic and nonethnic groups to "perform" various aspects of ethnic identity in at least three ways: 1) to express adoption of "Americanism," 2) to communicate maintenance or adoption of ethnicity, and 3) to communicate the acceptance of an ethnic group or the pluralistic aspects of American society.5

An ethnic group marshals an array of such signs and symbols (and underlying related values) to maintain boundaries and to survive as a distinct entity consistent with the second aspect of performance identified above. To be effective these signs and symbols must exist in opposition or contrast to the larger society to help define a sense of "other." The conscious or unconscious use and manipulation of such signs, symbols, and values can be seen as constituting the performance of ethnicity as a social identity. The salience of symbolism as a means of defining and legitimating social groups or structures is a well-recognized phenomenon. "Traditions" are invented or manipulated for many reasons, including both the legitimation of a ruling class and social resistance.6

6On signs and symbols, see Royce, Ethnic Identity, pp. 7-8. On traditions, see Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence
Social power, derived from a combination of material and ideological components, is an important factor affecting the application of ethnic identity. While the power of dominant groups is obvious, subordination does not result in powerlessness. Subordinate groups have access to certain kinds of power that dominant groups often ignore or overlook, the application of which constitutes resistance, or agency, in daily life. Strategies of resistance can include outright refusal to abide by the dominant groups' rules, outward acceptance coupled with deeper resistance, use of subordination to inspire guilt, and the viewing of situations as more complex than members of the dominant group do. Thus, the performance of ethnicity as a social identity can constitute a form of social resistance, or agency, in everyday life.

African Culture in America

While African American culture is now recognized as a distinct cultural entity that formed from the unprecedented sociocultural interaction of peoples from three continents, this was not always the case. A people without a past, without history, can easily be looked upon as commodities or tools to be used and exploited. Accordingly, the study of African American culture has been, and continues to be, politically charged.

The modern study of African American culture has centered around the Herskovits-Frazier debate. Melville Herskovits's pioneering study, The Myth of the Negro Past (1941), emphasizes the importance of West African cultural carryovers in the formation of African American culture, relying primarily on data from the Caribbean and continental South America. This work stands in dramatic contrast to the earlier stated, and generally prevailing, view that African American culture is an imperfect imitation of European American culture. The scholarship of E. Franklin Frazier symbolizes this second position. Frazier argues that the experience of slavery was so devastating as to have stripped enslaved Africans of all aspects of their culture, resulting in the forma-


On social power and strategies of resistance, see Royce, Ethnic Identity, pp. 3-4.

Sociocultural Identity

While weaknesses in several aspects of Herskovits's study have become evident with the passage of time, subsequent research in anthropology, folklore, history, and sociology has tended to support his notion of the continuity of various aspects of African culture in the Americas. Early studies set out, and generally succeeded in documenting, aspects of African culture in African American religion, the arts, and language. Eventually, researchers recognized that African influences had resulted in a distinctive African American culture. Most recently, research has looked beyond that culture to examine the contributions of African culture to America more broadly, focusing largely on music, language, and the arts. The impact of this research has been to bring many aspects of African heritage into focus in the study of African American communities.

Research in the area of African American material culture has also sought to document and understand the importance of links with Africa. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson pioneered this area of study when he documented aspects of Central African carving and sculpture in the


folk art of African Americans living in coastal Georgia and South Carolina in Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds and Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy. More recent work by Thompson is included in Africanisms in American Culture, where he argues that the Kongo culture of Central Africa, as opposed to West African cultures, has had central influence in the formation of African America artistic culture. He cites parallels between the African American and Kongo practices of the creation of cosograms, patterns of body language and gesture, creation of bottle and plate branches/trees, and practices of adornment and decoration of graves. Two recent studies concerned with African American material culture also warrant particular mention. John Michael Vlach has documented the survival and maintenance of African traditions in a wide range of folk arts and crafts including basketmaking, ironworking, boatbuilding, textiles, musical instruments, grave decoration, gravestone carvings, and architectural forms and the organization of space. He notes that these various art forms possess a cultural unity in their African heritage and that stylistic consistency in design and the process of creation (or style and performance) appears to be a major aspect of ethnic integrity in African American material culture. While some artifacts represent the uninterrupted survival of African traditions—such as coiled grass baskets produced in the Carolina Low Country—others such as quilts incorporate African themes into a European American object. 10

Leland Ferguson has focused largely on the ceramic earthenwares termed by archaeologists as Colono or Colono-Indian wares. This ceramic is often recovered on sites associated with enslaved Africans from Virginia and throughout the Southeast and is very similar to ceramics made in West Africa. Ferguson applied the concept of “creolization” to describe the cultural interactions of European-descended masters, enslaved Africans, and, to a more limited extent, Native Americans that took place as New and various Old World peoples and cultures came into contact. From this process, Ferguson argues, African Americans formed a unique culture having material and ideological components distinct from those of European American culture. 11

Building upon the work of Herskovits, researchers interested in the formation of African American culture have overcome the view that such a culture developed as an imperfect imitation of European American culture. Rather, African American culture is recognized as a distinct entity that formed from the interaction of peoples from three continents. The material aspects of African American culture have been recognized as representing the important documentation of African culture in America and the processes contributing to the formation of African American culture. However, there has been no real opportunity to examine change in African influences in material culture across time within a single community.

Antebellum Philadelphia and the History of the First African Baptist Church

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Philadelphia was transformed from a colonial port into the most important industrial center in the new nation. Population growth, ethnic diversification, and social distinction were part and parcel of the social and economic changes that transformed the city at that time. The population grew from approximately 81,000 in 1800 to 408,000 by 1850 as German and Irish immigrants flooded the city in the 1830s and 1840s. Philadelphia became the largest and most important center of free African American life in the United States during this period as well, with the African American community growing from approximately 4,200 in 1800 to nearly 11,000 in 1850. Most of the city’s new African American residents were former slaves who migrated from the South. 12


This population increase and the transformation of Philadelphia’s economy were not without their difficulties. The growth of both immigrant and African American populations led to competition for the same low-skilled, low-paying jobs. In the economically difficult years surrounding the Panic of 1838, many workers were reduced to part-time employment and as many as one-third are estimated to have left the city to seek work elsewhere. The glimmer of the Enlightenment ideal of the equality of humankind, seen as Pennsylvania took the lead in abolishing slavery in 1818, was extinguished as nativist and racist sentiments resulted in the rescinding of voting rights of African Americans in 1837.15

Philadelphia’s Irish and African American communities were both subjected to mob violence in the 1830s and 1840s, but the African American community suffered much more so. Major racially motivated riots occurred in 1829, 1834, 1835, 1838, and again in 1842. These violent outbursts, which included beatings and house and church burnings, seem to have reflected widely held resentments due to economic competition. This trend may have been exacerbated by the conspicuous visibility of the ten percent of African Americans in Philadelphia who controlled seventy percent of that community’s wealth. The vast majority of less conspicuous African Americans, including the membership of the First African Baptist Church congregations, were underemployed in menial occupations and were “crammed into lofts, garrets, and cellars, in blind alleys and narrow courts,” as George C. Foster noted in 1848. Between 1838 and 1847 Philadelphia’s African Americans are documented to have suffered a ten percent decrease in per capita wealth. In the first half of the nineteenth century, free African Americans in Philadelphia, and throughout the urban North, became what Leonard Currey has termed “a wholly-distinct and outcast class.” Yet the African American community of Philadelphia continued to grow, developing its own means of dealing with a hostile social environment. Their success prompted Frederick Douglass to write, also in 1848, that Philadelphia was “more than any other (city) in our land, holds the destiny of our people.” In fact, in 1845 six African Americans were among the city’s several dozen wealthiest people. The African American community formed separate institutional structures to assist in their own struggles. These included not only churches but also mutual aid societies and chapters of the Masons and other fraternal organizations.14

It was in this context of increasing social distinction, discrimination, and racism that thirteen African American members of the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia joined together in 1809 to establish the First African Baptist Church. While this church was separate from the white-dominated First Baptist Church, the congregations remained connected through mutual membership in the Baptist Association of Philadelphia. In 1810 the new church reported a membership of thirty, and in that same year a lot on the east side of 9th Street south of Vine Street, on the then-northern outskirts of the city, was purchased by members of the congregation. A frame building was apparently erected to house worship services by 1813, when the congregation had grown to sixty-one members.15

In 1816 a division occurred in the congregation, resulting in the establishment of a separate church on 13th Street, south of Vine. Both groups continued to be known as the First African Baptist Church, although the group at 9th Street was the only one formally recognized by the Baptist Association since it was in possession of the meeting-

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house. Both congregations subsequently lost their properties in sheriff's sales in 1822. By 1824 the 13th Street group had established a new church on Smith's Alley near 8th and Vine streets on property owned at least in part by their leader, Rev. Henry Simmons, one of the founders of the original First African Baptist Church congregation. Philadelphia Board of Health records indicate that a portion of the property was used as a cemetery from 1825 to 1842, and it was cited as a nuisance to public health on several occasions. The Smith's Alley group seems to have disbanded shortly after the 1848 death of Rev. Simmons, and his widow sold the property in 1851 despite legal challenges by remnants of the congregation. The 10th Street congregation survived and is now located at 16th and Christian streets in South Philadelphia.  

Burial Practices Revealed at the Two First African Baptist Church Cemetery Sites

Cemeteries at two of the church's nineteenth-century locations were the subject of archaeological investigations by John Milner Associates, Inc. (fig. 2). In 1983–84 a team directed by Michael Parrington excavated the site of the cemetery located at the 8th and Vine streets church property—used from about 1825 to 1842—under contract with the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia with supplemental funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT), Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the William Penn Foundation. The site was scheduled to be affected by the construction of ramps for the Vine Street Expressway and a new office building (the construction of which was subsequently abandoned). This cemetery contained the remains of approximately 140 individuals. In


17The results of the 8th St. cemetery investigation are reported in Michael Parrington et al., "The First African Baptist Church Cemetery: Bioarchaeology, Demography, and Acculturation of Early Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia Blacks. Volume I (Historical and Archeological Documentation) and Volume II (Catalogue and Analysis of Faunal Remains Unrelated to the Cemetery/Catalogue of Artifacts Unrelated to the Cemetery)" (Report prepared for the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia, John Milner Associates, Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.). Jennifer Olsen Kelley and J. Lawrence Angel, 1990 a second cemetery, used from about 1810 to 1822, was excavated for PennDOT and FHWA under this author's direction near 10th and Vine streets, directly in the proposed path of the Vine Street Expressway. The remains of approximately 85 individuals were excavated at this second site. The purpose of these excavations was the recovery of information concerning the health, demography, and culture of free African Americans in nineteenth-century Philadelphia in accordance with federal historic preservation legislation. In addition, the excavations ensured the complete, careful, and respectful exhumation and eventual reinterment of the remains of these pioneering members of Philadelphia's African American community.
In the course of the excavation of the two cemeteries, a number of non-Western burial practices were observed that appear to derive from creole slave culture and/or West African sources. While the literature on African American culture has addressed death and its associated rituals under the conditions of slavery in the South to some extent, much less is known about this important aspect of life in northern, free African American communities. Sterling Stuckey observed in his examination of the formation of slave culture from a variety of West African sources that being on good terms with the spirits of the ancestors was an overarching concern of enslaved Africans throughout the New World. Enslaved Africans in the South, and later free blacks as well, often decorated graves with food and other objects such as broken bottles, cups, and mirrors for the use of the spirit of the deceased in the afterlife. Such offerings are widely documented in West and Central Africa. These objects may also have served to symbolically "ground" the spirit of the deceased or, in being broken, may represent the loss of the deceased. Such practices have been documented in the urban North as well. There is a late eighteenth-century account of slaves from Guinea living in Philadelphia "going to the graves of their friends early in the morning, and there leaving them victuals and rum." In addition, the "ring-shout" or "shot" dance evolved as a devotional directed toward the ancestors. This ceremony was reportedly performed in Philadelphia from the late eighteenth century through as late as the 1870s. No evi-

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tian tradition, the practice is associated with the idea that the deceased should be facing the east so as to witness Christ’s second coming on judgment day.

While the practice of placing coins on each of the eyes of the deceased is documented in many cultures, this practice was observed in only two instances at the First African Baptist Church cemeteries. More common was the placement of a single coin inside the coffin, often near the head of the deceased. This may represent an association of death with a journey to the afterlife, the coin being provided to pay for passage. The placement of monetary offerings in graves is widely documented in West Africa, where it is associated with passage over the river of death. Shoes, as well, can be seen as part of a related symbolic system—that is, as required for a journey. In several cases the remains of a single shoe were found placed on top of the coffin. In addition, shoes are also associated with southern folk beliefs concerning power over evil spirits.20

Finally, two burials contained ceramic plates that were placed on the stomach of the deceased: one of blue edge-decorated pearlware and another of Chinese hand-painted porcelain (fig. 3). While the archaeological literature on Old World and Native American sites is replete with examples of the inclusion of ceramic vessels and other “grave goods” in burials—apparently for use by the deceased in the afterlife or as a form of social display of wealth and/or power—the recovery of ceramics from historic period burials is far less common. A white salt-glazed stoneware saucer and a feather-edge creamware plate were recovered from two separate eighteenth-century English graves in Jamaica. A shallow redware bowl was found in the grave of an enslaved African at Newton Cemetery in Barbados. An ironstone plate was recently recovered from the grave of a female of unknown race at Quaker Cemetery in Alexandria, Virginia.21


Fig. 3. A full-size, Chinese, hand-painted porcelain dinner plate in situ on the stomach of an individual interred in the 8th Street First African Baptist Church cemetery site, 1983. (John Milner Associates, Inc.) The plate was probably crushed by the weight of earth pressing down on the coffin and its contents.

The purpose and meaning of these objects is ambiguous. Ray Fremmer documents that plates of salt were often placed on a corpse in parts of Ireland and England to control odor and/or bloating. He concluded that the inclusion of a ceramic vessel in the Jamaican graves might have been due to oversight rather than an intentional act. He also notes that in isolated parts of Jamaica it is traditional to place a dish with a mixture of coffee and salt on the stomach of the deceased.
throughout the wake and burial. The widespread African practice of pouring of "libations" for the ancestors is another practice that may have resulted in the accidental inclusion of a ceramic vessel in the grave. It is also possible that plates were deliberately placed in the graves for use in the afterlife. The burial of the plate last used by the deceased may also have been meant to prevent the deceased spirit from harming the living in that, in parts of the South and Africa, the "energy" or "essence" of the dead was believed to be embodied in objects last used by the deceased. 22 Whether accidental or deliberate, the presence of the plates on the stomach of the deceased may be associated with African-Indian or cradled practices.

The distribution of the burial practices between the two cemeteries is central to the consideration of ethnic identity in this segment of Philadelphia's free African American community. Only two burials in the earlier 1810 to 1822 cemetery at 10th Street exhibited clear evidence of African burial practices. In those cases a single coin was found inside the coffin. In two additional cases two coins were recovered near the head or in the eye sockets, but both of these burials had been disturbed, and the coins may have been placed at the time of reinterment. In addition, a single shoe was found buried in the 1810 to 1822 cemetery. However, it was not found in direct association with a coffin, and it may simply have been lost by its owner.

In contrast, the later 1824 to 1841 8th Street cemetery included eight coffins containing a single coin. In six cases, remains of a single shoe placed on the coffin lid were found, and the two burials containing ceramic plates were both found in the later cemetery as well. The relative occurrence of African-influenced burial practices in the 1810 to 1822 cemetery is between 2.4 and 5.9 percent, depending upon the interpretation of the evidence, with the lower number being by far the more likely. In the 1824 to 1841 cemetery, the relative occurrence is 11.4 percent. In absolute terms, clear examples of African-influenced burial practices are eight times more common in the later of the two cemeteries. At first glance, these results seem counterintuitive, given an understanding that assimilative processes operate through time to reduce outward social and cultural differentiation.


Sociocultural Identity

Assimilation and African American Ethnicity and Agency in Antebellum Philadelphia

Early in the twentieth century, models of assimilation were developed to help explain the experiences of immigrant groups as they were absorbed into American society. While these studies recognized some changes in American culture due to the influence of first-generation immigrants, the major thrust was toward how the immigrant adapted to, or assimilated, the dominant Anglo-centric culture of the United States. This position was softened somewhat in the development of the notion of a cultural "melting pot" in which various cultural traits were contributed by immigrants to create a unique American culture. Ethnic revitalization movements in the 1960s revealed that assimilation was not a uniform or permanent sociocultural process. In the context of shifting economic and social conditions, ethnicity could be reconstituted. Such flexibility and change imply that both groups and individuals have choices or can negotiate at least some aspects of their social identity. This does not mean, however, that there are no limits. 23

Since the physical characteristics of race defined African Americans in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, choice in ethnic identity was rather constrained. The dominant European American society was not ready to accept African Americans as equals. Racism was ingrained into the political, social, and economic life of the New Republic. 24 The United States constitution defined enslaved Africans as only three-fifths of a white man. The question is more one of how the African American community was able to manipulate ethnic signs and symbols for its own purposes.

At the end of the eighteenth century, people of African ancestry comprised just under 10 percent of Philadelphia's population; earlier,


in 1780, the proportion may have been as low as 3.6 percent. Enslaved Africans in Philadelphia lived in close proximity to their masters, who often held only one or two Africans and seldom more than four. While continued importation of enslaved Africans helped to renew African-based cultural practices, the preponderant pressure on enslaved Africans in Philadelphia was to outwardly adapt to the culture of the European-descended majority. By the 1830s however, in-migration of former slaves from the South and the growing resentment and racism of much of the majority society may have served to revitalize certain signs and symbols of African ethnic identity within Philadelphia’s African American community, and particularly within the community’s various institutions. The maintenance, or revival, of African-influenced burial customs at the 8th Street First African Baptist Church congregation fits into an overall pattern of in-migration, economic stress, and growing racism as a reactive expression of the community’s vitality and resistance to domination. In this small way, the members of this congregation acted to define their community and shape their everyday sociocultural reality.

Material Culture in the Performance of Social Identity

Social identities such as ethnicity are flexible structures that rely on various cultural traits to act as signs and symbols to establish social meanings that can be important in social agency. Aspects of material culture play a role in such processes, and, accordingly, these processes constitute an important interpretive context for material culture. Such concepts have been illustrated here through the examination of African-derived burial practices at two cemeteries used by members of the First African Baptist Church in the first half of the nineteenth century. Placing the results of this study in the context of Philadelphia’s growth and industrialization in the first half of the nineteenth century and combining them with an understanding of the complexities of ethnic identity suggest that the maintenance, or revival, of African-derived burial practices may have been associated with the creation of an explicitly African

ethnic identity as part of the African American community’s response to the pressures of in-migration, economic stress, and growing racism. Members of the 8th Street First African Baptist Church congregation made uncommon use of common everyday objects, giving those objects socially charged meanings based upon a context of common experience represented in the formation of an explicitly African identity with its roots in the creation of creole slave culture from a variety of African and non-African sources.

John Sweeney has noted that “(objects) are documents to be read by the informed student of material culture.” While Sweeney’s view may be somewhat overstated, material culture does constitute a code holding many messages. Our efforts to analyze and understand material culture, to decode it, are dependent on multiple contexts, one of which can be the object’s role in the creation and performance of social identities such as ethnicity or class. Material culture is not merely a passive product of economic behavior. Through its manipulation, material culture allows individuals to take an active part in the creation of meaning and the formation of their sociocultural environment, thus allowing the researcher access to what Raymond Williams has called “the whole substance of lived identities and relationships,” which have implications for our understanding of the present as well as the past.

American Material Culture

The Shape of the Field

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Contents

Shaping the Field: The Multidisciplinary Perspectives of Material Culture
Ann Smart Martin
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American Difference Revisited: The Case of the American Axe
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The Bricoleur Revisited
Bernard L. Herman
Associate Professor
Department of Art History
University of Delaware

Material Culture as Rhetoric: "Animal Artifacts" as a Case Study
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Assistant Professor
Department of History
University of Utah