

The Anthropology Department Fall 2012 Colloquia Series



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Antiques and the Old Idea of the Fetish

To the informed viewer, local antiques embody a social history -- a tradition -- whether familial or learned. They often reference a deep past linked to totemic ancestors such as colonial founders, indigenous ghosts, or enslaved craftsmen. The past matters, one is reminded over and over again while negotiating the store fronts, private interiors, and littered streets of "old" cities like New Orleans. Artifacts -- 'signs of what was' -- are tools of the social present at the same time that the social stratigraphy they reference is not entirely invented. And archaeology shows that they have been doing this sort of work since at least the Spanish colonial period. People in New Orleans have been collecting and displaying antiques and curios since the late 18th century. Understanding the efficaciousness of antiques requires taking the old anthropological idea of fetishism seriously as a meaningful and powerful displacement of social forces, rather than as a pathology or mis-identification. I argue that in secular capitalist societies the enchanting of objects is essential for the possibility of social belonging.

SHANNON LEE DAWDY (PhD, U Michigan 2003) Associate Professor of Anthropology and of Social Sciences in the College, is a historical anthropologist and archaeologist whose fieldwork focuses on the American South and Gulf of Mexico (esp. Louisiana, eastern Mexico, Cuba, 17th c.-present). Her first single-author book, *Building the Devil's Empire*, offers 'rogue colonialism' to explain how French New Orleans, and many colonies like it, functioned outside state controls. Current themes of research and teaching include: piracy and informal economies; aesthetics, affect, and sensoria; temporality; gender and sexuality; fetish and thing theory; death and disaster. She also continues to advise on earlier interests in race and ethnicity, food, colonialism, and urbanity. Recent fieldwork has focused on garden, market, and hospitality sites in New Orleans (Pitot House, Rising Sun Hotel, St. Antoine's Garden, Ursuline Convent). This work informs Dawdy's current book project called *Patina: A Profane Archaeology of Romantic Things*, which reconsiders the intimate relations of capitalism -- between people as well as between people and things -- with attention to temporality, gender, and affect. For a review of the archeology project at St. Antoine's Garden in New Orleans, go to: <http://home.uchicago.edu/~sdawdy/stantoinesarh/>

Monday, Oct 29th
3:30 - 5:00pm
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