Transnational Artifacts: Grappling With Fluid Material Origins and Identities in Archaeological Interpretations of Culture Change

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Abstract

There has been a gradual shift in historical archaeology towards interpretive approaches to material culture, including recognition of the potential for multiple functions and meanings in local contexts. It is argued here that artifacts can also maintain multiple, fluid origins and identities that affect our understanding of the nature of cultural persistence and change among migrant, indigenous and other ethnic groups. However, predefined classification schemes are often rigid and do not allow for this kind of fluidity, including the potential for artifacts from one culture to be indigenized into another. Data drawn from recent research on Japanese migrants in British Columbia, in conjunction with an approach rooted in transnationalism and diaspora, are used to highlight the nature of these ambiguities and to suggest methodological and theoretical means of overcoming them. These solutions include the need to develop contextual classification schemes that incorporate multiple artifact identities and to conduct detailed material culture histories that trace shifting origins and identities both before and during periods of migration or displacement.

Introduction

In his critical analysis of the concepts of culture contact and colonialism in archaeology, Silliman (2005, p. 68) notes how predefined material culture terminology (prehistoric/Native vs. historic/European) can cloud complex identities and material practices among North American indigenous groups. He advocates approaching material culture as much from the perspective of use contexts and negotiated meanings as from cultural origins. Likewise, in conjunction with the expanding popularity of approaches rooted in creolization and hybridity, archaeologists are drawing increasing attention to the potential for artifacts as well as people to possess multiple simultaneous and fluid identities, reflected in a recent conference and edited volume dedicated to hybrid material culture (Card, forthcoming). These perspectives focus less on cultural ‘mixture’ and more on indigenization and shifting or ambiguous cultural identities among objects or material practices that are ostensibly identical. Furthermore, rather than creolization or hybridity per se, my discussion seeks insight in the related concepts of transnationalism and diaspora.

The examples cited above reflect broader shifts in the realm of material culture studies, and in historical archaeology specifically, away from quantification and generalization towards interpretive and contextual object-based approaches (Beaudry, 2006; Claney, 2004; Cochrane and Beaudry, 2006; Loren and Beaudry, 2006; White, 2005). An early argument in favor of such an approach was articulated by Beaudry et al., 1991, which in the years since has increasingly become a standard part of the historical archaeologist’s toolkit. In part, these efforts are an attempt to overcome the limitations of rigid classification schemes that place objects into single, universal functional categories that do not allow for multiple functions and meanings in specific local contexts or between discrete users. Beaudry and colleagues note that interpretive approaches are hindered by such schemes and by the fragmented nature of much post-excavation analysis in which objects are studied in isolation from one another by material specialists, because they effectively decontextualize them (Cochrane and Beaudry, 2006; Loren and Beaudry, 2006). Likewise, Silliman (2009) challenges the traditional tripartite classification of artifacts from indigenous sites into “Native,” “European” and “hybridized” identities, which most students, fieldworkers, lab analysts, and interpreters have been trained to accept uncritically, because it
does not allow for object types that are shared across cultural or ethnic boundaries. Beaudry and her coauthors add that, despite the increasing recognition that people negotiate multiple, shifting and conflicting identities in colonial contexts, archaeologists tend to perceive identity as a single variable and emphasize only one aspect of this multiplicity in any given study.

This problem is particularly apparent in archaeological studies of the Asian diaspora, the subject of my ongoing research and the case study I present here. Voss (2005) argues that, despite the large volume of archaeological literature on cultural exchange among Euro-Americans, African Americans and aboriginal peoples, very few studies have explored such cultural interactions and transformations between Asian and non-Asian communities. Instead, Chinese immigrants have long been cast as insular, segregated, resistant to change, and characterized by strict adherence to a static traditional culture. In this context race and ethnicity are typically granted primacy in interpreting the material record, and their inherent conservatism excludes members of the Asian diaspora from the dynamic multiplicity of culture and identity afforded other groups. According to Upton (1996), cultural tradition and ethnicity are so inextricably linked in such cases that any evidence of culture change or adoption of Western behaviors or material culture is perceived as a sign of acculturation or loss of identity. Fortunately, the situation is changing and archaeologists researching the lives of both Chinese and Japanese diasporas are beginning to recognize that objects and identities can be fluid, contested, and multiple (e.g., Williams, 2008; Skiles and Clark, 2010), but essentialist tendencies still linger in the discipline (Mullins, 2008).

I would like to argue here, along with Silliman (2005, 2009), that archaeologists often do the same thing with objects, which not only possess multiple, shifting meanings in local contexts but also multiple and shifting origins and identities. Although many archaeologists have questioned the existence of materially-based ethnic markers, there is still a widespread sense that artifacts can be linked to particular cultural traditions, and that their use by other cultures or ethnic groups constitutes a form of subversion or ethnically distinct recontextualization. This kind of interpretation is at the heart of much recent research on the nature of cultural dynamics in the context of culture contact and colonialism, particularly (but not exclusively) as it relates to issues of structure and agency among racialized and other minority communities. By categorizing artifacts according to single cultural origins we deny the possibility of multiple origins or identities and, as Silliman argues, cloud some of the complexities of cultural persistence and change in colonial contexts. The recognition and study of hybrid artifacts that combine elements from multiple cultural sources addresses one aspect of this issue, but does not account for objects or material activities that maintain their essential characteristics but whose cultural affiliations shift over time. The following discussion will explore the significance of this issue for archaeological analysis and interpretation, with particular reference to my own research, and suggest how theoretical approaches and methods of classification and interpretation can be modified to ameliorate it.

Case study: archaeology of Asian labor migration in British Columbia

For my Ph.D. research I conducted archaeological excavations at the site of a turn-of-the-twentieth century industrial salmon cannery along the Fraser River in British Columbia approximately 20 km southeast of downtown Vancouver (Ross, 2009a) (Fig. 1). The Ewen Cannery (1885–1930) was located on two small islands (Don and Lion) in the river and comprised an industrial complex at the western end of Lion Island along with seasonally-occupied camps for workers spatially segregated along racial and ethnic lines. Fieldwork focused on the all-male Chinese bunkhouse immediately west of the cannery on Lion Island and the Japanese fishing camp located on adjacent Don Island, comprised largely of single men but including some families. My research questions focused on identifying factors affecting everyday consumer habits of these two communities of first generation Asian migrants in terms of how each coped as racialized minorities in a new and largely foreign socio-cultural and economic environment. As such, my data collection and analyses focused on contexts and artifacts associated with dress, diet, recreation and other individual and communal household activities. A particular interest was in examining the degree to which members of each camp relied on Western style consumer goods (i.e., those originating in North America and Europe) vs. commodities imported from China and Japan by Asian merchants for sale to co-ethnic migrants. Emphasis here, however, will be on the Japanese material, which best exemplifies my arguments, although occasional reference will be made to the Chinese site.

Given the geography of the islands and conventions of the industry, the two labor camps were spatial distinct from the cannery and from one another, creating discrete assemblages attributable to known ethnic groups. The Japanese camp, focus of the current discussion, was occupied between 1901 and ca. 1930 by a fluctuating population of 70–100 migrants from Miyagi prefecture founded and headed by an entrepreneur named Jinsaburo Oikawa. It comprised a core cluster of wooden buildings elevated on pilings including Oikawa’s family home, a communal dining/recreation hall and a bunkhouse for single men, plus a series of single-family dwellings for married couples and children spread out along the island. Although affiliated with the cannery, the Japanese camp organized its labor internally within the group and engaged in extramural entrepreneurial activities like production and sale of agricultural produce, saké and salmon roe. Archaeological data for this study comes primarily from a single large midden feature (a purpose-dug pit) and a smaller secondary midden, both associated with the community core and containing a range of domestic and work-related artifacts. Given the nature of these deposits, data resolution is at the scale of the community as a whole and covers its entire thirty year span, with no finer temporal subdivisions. In conjunction with my analysis I created a digital artifact database designed to accommodate and distinguish between Asian and Euro-Canadian material culture. Like many such databases, it includes a field labeled ‘Origin’ with standardized options including ‘Chinese’, ‘Japanese’, ‘Euro-American’, ‘Asian’ and ‘indeterminate’ intended to facilitate quantitative analysis. Given the fragmentary nature of the assemblages I anticipated a degree of ambiguity in attributing many artifacts to specific cultural origins. However, I assumed that others would be relatively unambiguous regardless of condition, at least in terms of distinguishing Asian vs. non-Asian items. What I did not anticipate was the extent to which Western-style consumer items manufactured in Asia would confound these categories and complicate cultural attribution and interpretation of consumer habits at the island camps. A central problem revolves around the distinction between place of manufacture and cultural origin, which I did not account for in designing my database. Particularly revealing was material recovered from the Japanese camp on Don Island that forms the focus of the following discussion.

Transnationalism and diaspora

One of the principal factors leading me to recognize and confront these material ambiguities was my adoption of a theoretical approach rooted in the related concepts of transnationalism and diaspora (Anthias, 1998; Azuma, 2005; Brighton, 2009; Butler, 2001; Lilley, 2004; Glick Schiller et al., 1992). A recent development
in the wider study of Asian and other international migrants is the replacement of concepts of uprooting and assimilation with the recognition of their transnational character, emphasizing maintenance and negotiation of simultaneous physical and psychological relationships between home and host countries. Such relationships include back and forth movement of people, along with social, economic, familial, and religious networks and multiple political allegiances. Diaspora theory explores the processes by which communities of people dispersed from a common homeland form and maintain collective identities rooted in ties to that homeland. Like transnationalism, recent approaches emphasize the role of both the place of origin and the place of settlement in the emergence of diasporic identities. Together, transnationalism and diaspora highlight what Hall (1990) refers to as the ‘becoming’ of ethnic identity that results from the simultaneous influence of, and dialogic relations between, cultural continuity and rupture. Their value as an interpretive framework lies in their ability to highlight central factors affecting the ways migrants responded to life abroad and offer a valuable means of facilitating dialog between scholars in separate fields or subdisciplines. Although groups defined by race and ethnicity vary widely in the circumstances of migration. From this context it was possible to begin separating out some of the factors influencing the material choices of Chinese and Japanese cannery workers, and to what degree local vs. transnational circumstances and connections played a role in cultural persistence and rupture. By examining the nineteenth and early twentieth century histories of politics, social life and material production and consumption in China and Japan I was confronted with the problems inherent in failing to distinguish between cultural and manufacturing origins. For example, classifying archaeological artifacts in my assemblages as ‘Japanese’, ‘Asian’, or ‘Euro-American’, or assuming a cultural identity for others simply by virtue of my preconceived notions of what was and was not ‘Asian’.

A question central to this discussion is when do objects from one culture become incorporated into another to the extent that they can no longer considered foreign or be cited as evidence of active culture change; i.e., at what point do they become indigenous? This is not simply a philosophical question. European colonialism in North America has extended over hundreds of years, and material patterns from the sixteenth century cannot be understood in the same terms as those of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. For example, horses, iron tools and other commodities introduced to North America by Europeans in the sixteenth century, and incorporated into many indigenous cultures over the next two centuries or more, cannot be assumed to represent foreign elements when studying archaeological remains dating after this period; in many cases they had become indigenized into these local cultures (e.g., Carson, 1995; Hämäläinen, 2003; Keddie, 2006; Silliman, 2009). This is true for a range of material goods and technologies introduced to different regions at different times and incorporated into

Fig. 1. Map of the Vancouver area showing the location of Don and Lion Islands.
local cultures in unique ways. This issue does not begin with the first physical arrival of explorers, migrants or other displaced people into a new region. For some indigenous people it began prior to or after the turn of the twentieth century, when the host country. Timing is also an important variable; such changes unfolded in Japan over a number of decades, and migrants arriving in North America in the 1880s will have experienced very different prior exposure to Western goods than those arriving in the 1920s. Unfortunately, little archaeological data exists in Japan for this time period that can provide specific details of the kinds of items used in individual households and associated with families of different social status and in different regions. How were the loci and contexts of these changes fundamental to the theoretical models and relationships of power we invoke to explain them. It makes a difference to our understanding of ethnic identities and culture change whether objects recovered archaeologically are a product of choices or structural conditions in the homeland as opposed to the host country. Timing is also an important variable; such changes unfolded in Japan over a number of decades, and migrants arriving in North American in the 1880s have experienced very different prior exposure to Western goods than those arriving in the 1920s. Unfortunately, little archaeological data exists in Japan for this time period that can provide specific details of the kinds of items used in individual households and associated with families of different social status and in different regions. However, archival research on international trade and merchant networks, along with local production and consumption, could further clarify the situation for the regions from which migrants originated.

Westernization and consumerism in Japan

Since the 1630s, the Tokugawa shogunate had maintained strict control over external relations by forbidding most Japanese from traveling abroad and excluding all foreigners from the country, with the exception of a small number of traders received at strategically located peripheral ports (Jansen, 2000). Rationale for this policy was to centralize control of trade and minimize European religious and political influence, which the shogunate considered a threat to the stability of its rule. In 1868 political instability, partly derived from (and certainly exacerbated by) forced opening of trade relations with the US and European nations in the 1850s, led to the deposition of the shogun, a return to imperial rule, and a move towards representative government. During its period of isolation, Japan had fallen behind Western nations both technologically and economically, and modernization in emulation of these Western countries was promoted as a means of strengthening the foundations of the new government and making Japan competitive in the global marketplace. Among the reforms instituted during the Meiji period, leaders sought to industrialize the economy by sending students abroad and bringing foreign specialists in various fields of science and technology to Japan.

The new central government of Japan began the process of modernization and industrialization by spearheading importation of Western infrastructure and technology, including railways, telegraphs, mining, factories and military hardware (Morris-Suzuki, 1994). The government also played a key role in promoting an ideology of technological change through compulsory education with emphasis on scientific inquiry, and establishment of technical schools. At the same time, local and regional production centers incrementally adapted foreign technology to existing industries and economic structures. By the turn of the twentieth century, these local and national efforts were linked by multiple channels of communication that played a key role in spreading technological innovations across the country at all levels of production.

Hanley (1997) argues that, despite dramatic political, economic and intellectual changes in Japan during the Meiji period (1868–1912), material culture of everyday life reflected considerable continuity with the Tokugawa period until after the turn of the twentieth century. Instead, change was characterized by diffusion and homogenization of material goods between upper and lower classes, combined with selective adoption of imported materials and technologies to existing categories of objects. As part of the process of eliminating formal class and caste distinctions, in 1871 the Meiji government rescinded sumptuary laws regulating physical appearance and domestic architecture (Geiger, 2006, pp. 55–66). While this did not eradicate social hierarchy and prejudice, it paved the way for widespread consumption of mass-produced goods. Such domestic stability aided people in coping with the dramatic changes in public life going on around them.

Significant modernization or Westernization occurred first in cities, and did not become common in rural areas and among lower classes until the Taisho period (1912–1926), much of it inspired by changes in diet and dress wrought by the military (Hanley, 1997; Moeran, 1998). Widespread use of Western clothing was inspired by changes in military dress, although women continued to wear kimonos through the Taisho period. Other changes that appeared first in major urban areas and gradually spread throughout the country include modern oil lamps and electric lights, railways and electric trolleys, and long-distance communication via telegraph. Increase in national communication networks made it possible for rural people to produce goods for urban markets and to purchase many daily consumer goods they previously made themselves.

Prior to the Meiji period Japanese ate very little meat, and tea and saké were the principal beverages (Ishige, 2001, pp. 58–62, 177, 265; Perez, 2002, pp. 71–72; Cwiertka, 2006, pp. 25–29). However, in the late nineteenth century the government and military began encouraging the population to consume meat and dairy in emulation of Western industrialized nations, which were held up as the model of a strong, healthy, civilized society (Ishige, 2001, pp. 142–153; Cwiertka, 2006, p. 64). Likewise, a variety of foreign beverages began to accompany tea and saké as popular drinks, including coffee, soft drinks, and beer. During the 1870s and 1880s, Western food became fashionable among Japanese elite and it became a sign of social prestige, which also made it attractive to lower classes (Cwiertka, 2006, p. 21–23). Although acceptance was slower in rural areas, by the turn of the twentieth century most Japanese were open to eating small quantities of meat. Cow’s milk became available in most provincial towns by the 1870s, although it was not part of the daily diet until the 1950s (Ishige, 2001, pp. 153–155). British and American enclaves in treaty ports and Western-style restaurants in urban centers offered a range of imported foods, facilitating diffusion of Western cuisine to the general population (Cwiertka, 2006, pp. 40–49). Despite the introduction of these foreign foods, Ishige (2001, p. 158) emphasizes the continued importance of traditional meals of rice, miso soup, pickled vegetables and fish, especially amongst rural and lower class households.

The overall pattern in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century is one of considerable cultural continuity, combined with selective adoption of Western technology and consumer goods gradually diffusing from urban trade centers to more isolated rural communities. As a result of this process a number of these products and the customs and habits associated with them were being incorporated, or indigenized, into Japanese culture prior to and during the period when Japanese began migrating to North America. This raises important questions regarding how to interpret these categories of objects when they turn up in archaeological assemblages associated with Japanese migrants in Canada and the United States. In one sense, they are still evidence of culture change linked to Western capitalism and imperialism whether or not it occurred before or after migration. However, identifying the loci and contexts of these changes is fundamental to the theoretical models and relationships of power we invoke to explain them. It makes a difference to our understanding of ethnic identities and culture change whether objects recovered archaeologically are a product of choices or structural conditions in the homeland as opposed to the host country. Timing is also an important variable; such changes unfolded in Japan over a number of decades, and migrants arriving in North America in the 1880s will have experienced very different prior exposure to Western goods than those arriving in the 1920s. Unfortunately, little archaeological data exists in Japan for this time period that can provide specific details of the kinds of items used in individual households and associated with families of different social status and in different regions. However, archival research on international trade and merchant networks, along with local production and consumption, could further clarify the situation for the regions from which migrants originated.
Indigenizing material culture

Several categories of material culture recovered from the Japanese camp on Don Island serve as examples of the kind of ambiguous and fluid cultural identities objects can attain, including beverage bottles, hygiene products, smoking paraphernalia, ceramics and pharmaceutical bottles. Perhaps the clearest evidence of these shifting identities surrounds the development of the Japanese beer industry (Ross, 2009a, 2010). Among the glass beverage bottles recovered from the Chinese and Japanese camps were a number of marked specimens for Western style beer imported from Japan, including Dai Nippon, Kirin, and Teikoku brands; additional brands have been identified from other Asian sites in Western North America and the Pacific Islands (Fig. 2). Production and consumption of beer in Japan is a product of Meiji industrialization and Westernization outlined above. The first commercial brewers in Japan were an American and a German operating out of the Yokohama foreign settlement at the beginning of the 1870s, and these and other foreigners were responsible for teaching local merchants how to brew beer and helping them open their own breweries (Laker, 1975). In the early years, virtually all machinery, barley malt, yeast and hops were imported from Germany and the US; even empty beer bottles and wine barrels from imported beverages were used. It was not until after the turn of the twentieth century, however, that beer gained widespread popularity in Japan, and local companies approached self-sufficiency by sending technicians abroad and gaining increasing control over production of machines, bottles, and raw materials. A number of beer companies also expanded into production of soft drinks and other non-alcoholic Western beverages, which had begun appearing in Japan in the 1870s. Between the 1870s and 1930s beer production and consumption went from being dominated by foreigners to a national industry owned and operated by Japanese entrepreneurs, and with local brands gaining widespread popularity and becoming incorporated into Japanese social customs. During this interval beer essentially became Japanese.

As a practice, alcohol consumption was deeply embedded in Japanese social and ritual life, both before and after the introduction of Western beer and other products. In particular, alcohol has long played a central role in strengthening social bonds and in the negotiation of business deals and labor contracts among adult men, through the medium of all-male drinking parties (Laker, 1975; Ben-Ari, 2003; Moeran, 2005). Prior to the late nineteenth century saké was the principal beverage in these social engagements, but beer was gradually incorporated into them over the course of the twentieth century and is now the most popular alcoholic beverage in Japan. It is evident from archaeological data from Don Island that alcohol’s social role was transferred overseas with migrant communities. The Japanese camp employed a professional brewer and cooper to make and barrel saké, which was consumed on site and sold to other Japanese migrants. Nevertheless, beer, both local and imported, was among the most abundant beverages documented at the site (Ross, 2010) (Fig. 3). Although the bulk of alcohol bottles was recovered from the large core midden, the secondary midden adjacent to the community hall was dominated by beverage bottles (49 bottles representing 79% of all artifacts), suggesting that migrants engaged in drinking in social contexts outside of regular meals as in Japan. Recovery of saké decanters and small porcelain liquor cups supports the retention of social customs surrounding saké consumption, including the promotion of conversation and male bonding via the traditions of serving one another from heated decanters and exchanging cups (Moeran, 2005). Beer and liquor, while part of this socialization process, were probably consumed from the bottle or in glass tumblers (also recovered from the site). Alcohol played a parallel role in Chinese social life and a strikingly similar pattern was identified at the Chinese bunkhouse, where liquor cups were also present and one of two spatially discrete middens was dominated by alcohol and other social/recreational (e.g., smoking, gambling) artifacts.

A number of interpretive implications arise from this indigenization of Western style beer. First, beer cannot be unilaterally categorized as a Western product and the recovery of beer bottles from early twentieth century Japanese sites cannot be interpreted solely as evidence of culture change linked to choices and conditions encountered in Canada (although some patterns of alcohol consumption can, Ross, 2010). Second, because Japan adopted bottle manufacturing technology from North America and Europe it is not necessarily possible in the absence of marked specimens to differentiate Asian and Euro-American-manufactured bottles in an archaeological context, especially when they are recovered in fragmented condition (Ross, 2009b). The same argument can be made for soda, which was indigenized in Japan on a similar timeline as beer, and imported Japanese soda bottles were also recovered from Don Island. Together, these factors make it extremely difficult to quantify beverage bottle assemblages according to distinct cultural origins.

Similar challenges are found in analyzing other object classes recovered from the Japanese camp. Toothbrushes, for example, have a complex cultural pedigree: while the modern toothbrush was invented in England in the late eighteenth century, the original concept was introduced to Europe from China in the mid-1600s, and toothbrushes were being manufactured in Japan by 1840 and exported to China (Mattick, 1993). The Japanese assemblage contains marked toothbrush handles from France, Japan and a local
It is clear that Japanese fishermen and their families acquired functionally equivalent hygiene products produced locally and imported from different parts of the world, and it is not necessarily possible to characterize them according to a single cultural origin. By the time the Japanese camp was established in 1901, toothbrushes had been present in Japan for over half a century. In a similar fashion, Western style patent medicines gained popularity in Japan during the Meiji period, and local manufacturers subsequently developed many of their own (Kaukali, 1974; Stearns, 2006, p. 103). It is not surprising, then, that both Japanese and North American medicine bottles were recovered from the camp on Don Island and, once again, we cannot necessarily cite the presence of toothbrushes or medicine bottles as evidence of culture change rooted exclusively in the migrant experience. Instead, medicinal practices and personal hygiene must be examined in the context of larger international processes and, depending on the temporal scale (discussed more below in the context of Silliman's work), these items could be used to argue in favor of continuity as much as change.

Even earlier, pre-Meiji evidence of European influence in Japan is reflected in the custom of tobacco smoking. Tobacco was introduced to Japan via European traders in the late sixteenth century, and pipe smoking was firmly established by the mid-seventeenth century (Suzuki, 2004). The practice was often linked with tea drinking, and was indigenized through the development of the *kiseru* (a pipe comprised of a metal bowl and mouthpiece connected by a bamboo or wooden stem) and associated smoking paraphernalia. In this instance, while pipes themselves are culturally distinct, the practice itself is not. In Japan smoking was a thoroughly social activity, and although different segments of society had unique practices, tobacco smoking cut across boundaries of status, age, and gender. Cigarette smoking became popular in Japan in the 1880s, but did not replace pipes until after World War II (Goodman, 1993; Suzuki, 2004). The social context of smoking suggests it was probably a regular accompaniment to all-male drinking parties on Don Island and similar camps in Western North America, although it cannot be categorized as an exclusively male activity. As with pharmaceutical bottles, remains of both Japanese and Western style tobacco pipes were recovered from the Japanese camp, and archival evidence confirms residents also smoked cigarettes (Fig. 5). Regardless of which method they chose, tobacco smoking cannot be characterized as either Japanese or Western, and its ultimate origins in North American indigenous culture adds a further layer of complexity to the mix.

Another class of artifacts relevant in this context is ceramic tablewares, which comprise one of the largest categories recovered archaeologically, both of English and Japanese manufacture. They include Japanese porcelain rice/soup bowls, small plates/dishes and teacups in traditional forms, along with English semi-vitreous earthenware plates, bowls, cups and saucers (Fig. 6). Porcelain was introduced to Japan from China in the early seventeenth century, but during the Meiji period Japan incorporated many Western industrialized production and decorative technologies. It also began producing Western style vessels for the export market, although major export centers continued to manufacture ceramics for local use (Jahn, 2004). Most Japanese households continued to serve traditional meals using customary table settings, but the increasing presence of European and North American foods and production of Western style tablewares from the late nineteenth century complicates interpretations of the material patterns on
Don Island (Ross, 2011). Curiously, while a large number of English and traditional Japanese tableware forms were recovered from Don Island, the assemblage includes only two vessels that can be identified as Japanese export wares (a teacup and an egg cup). This raises the question of whether Japanese migrants noticed or cared, or if these ceramics were essentially interchangeable with other Western style wares.

One unique aspect of analyzing Japanese porcelain in traditional vessel forms is that through a combination of form, decoration and ceramic body most sherds were diagnostic to cultural/manufacturing origin in a way not possible with most other artifact classes. As a result, it was possible to develop quantified proportions of vessel forms that demonstrate a heavy reliance on traditional Japanese meals of rice, miso soup and pickled vegetables (Fig. 7). The concentration of these vessel forms in the large core midden adjacent to the community hall indicates these meals continued to perform integrative social functions as in Japan but, unlike alcohol, included all community members. Together with matched sets of English ceramic tablewares, Western condiment bottles, food bottles, cutlery and archival evidence of foods purchased from the cannery store, these wares demonstrate the community as a whole consumed a combination of traditional and Western style meals (see Ross, 2011 for detailed supporting data and contextual analysis). This includes Japanese teacups and English cups and saucers that, combined with store records, reveal a preference for both Japanese and Western traditions of tea (and coffee) preparation and consumption. However, these patterns cannot be interpreted solely as a response to life in Canada and must take into account the growing adoption and indigenization of Western customs in the homeland prior to and during the period of overseas migration.

Returning to the concerns of Beaudry, Silliman and Voss, the complexity of artifact origins and identities outlined here reaffirms their critique that the material lives of Asian and other minority groups should not be excluded from the potential for dynamic multiplicity. Both individual artifact categories and broader material patterns need to be seen as fluid and multiple, rather than a product of a single unified identity. As I argue above, several classes of objects can be interpreted simultaneously as both Asian and Western or in the process of becoming one or the other. Likewise, while some aspects of the larger material assemblage are strongly influenced by the ethnic identities and cultural traditions of the community of Japanese migrants, others are a product of ongoing socio-cultural, demographic and political circumstances in both home and host countries. In related publications I have shown how patterns of dining and recreational drinking are as much a product of Westernization in Japan, along with racist exclusion, labor organization and community stability and composition in Canada (including class and gender), as of the group’s ethnic origins (Ross, 2010, 2011). In what follows, I extend my arguments on artifact identities to other ethnic groups and to the discipline of archaeology as a whole.

**Discussion**

The implications of these observations for archaeological interpretation are subtle, yet significant. Recent studies documenting adoption of European material culture by indigenous peoples and other minority ethnic groups commonly emphasize cultural persistence over loss of cultural identity, and propose that many introduced objects are incorporated into established behavioral and belief systems using an internal cultural logic (e.g., Agbe-Davies, 2007; Cusick, 1998; DeCorse, 1992; Rubertone, 2000; Silliman, 2001, 2005; Wilkie, 2000). This process of recontextualization is typically cast as a response to or set against the backdrop of unequal power relations rooted in racism and negotiations between structure and agency in particular colonial settings. The problem arises when ambiguous artifacts like the ones described above are interpreted as evidence of this kind of subversive or negotiative process at a particular time or place, when they may be more properly linked to processes and relations originating in another. For example, smoking and beer consumption by Japanese migrants is
as much a product of the European trade in Asia and of internal political and economic circumstances in Meiji Japan as of proximate influences and pressures in Canada and the US. Nor can these things necessarily be considered culturally ‘European’ or ‘North American,’ but have already been (or are in the process of becoming) indigenized into Japanese culture in the homeland. A similar argument can be made for North American indigenous peoples, who may have incorporated certain classes of material objects into their culture centuries before the period that is under archaeological investigation and should no longer be considered foreign.

These complexities surrounding artifact identities are not limited to Japanese or other Asian migrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but are of potential relevance to all migrant and other displaced peoples, along with indigenous groups. One of the best examples is the African diaspora in the Americas and its roots in the European slave trade from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Archaeologists of the African diaspora in the Americas have promoted a transatlantic, globalization narrative of the African American, but have already been (or are in the process of becoming) indigenized into Japanese culture in the homeland. A similar argument can be made for the African diaspora in the Americas, just as they were shaping cultural sensibilities in Europe more broadly.

Of particular interest to this discussion, Ogundiran and Falola (2007, p. 22) argue that “the results of archaeological investigations across western Africa during the era of the slave trade show that most Africans who entered slavery were already aware of some of the commodities that were circulating in the Atlantic world or were inspired by the Atlantic encounters before their capture, and many had owned and used some of these commodities (such as beads, cowries, copper/brass products, pipes, tobacco, rum, European and Asian ware and cloth) in their daily lives. These objects played important roles in the production of African symbols, aesthetics, and tastes in the Americas, just as they were shaping cultural sensibilities in Atlantic Africa.

For example, archaeological research by DeCorse (1992, 2001) and Kelly (1997) documents the adoption of European consumer goods by African communities in the wake of European contact in the fifteenth century. Kelly’s work focuses on the seventeenth and eighteenth century African trading town of Savi on the coast of Benin, where several European nations maintained trading lodges. DeCorse excavated the remains of Elmina on the coast of Ghana, comprising a fortified European trade outpost successively occupied by Portuguese, Dutch and British traders between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, along with an adjacent African settlement involved in the slave trade. These items reflect some new and changing behavioral patterns but were often used in traditional contexts, and DeCorse emphasizes overall cultural continuity. He cautions, however, that Elmina, which experienced earlier and more direct European contact than other areas, should not be taken as typical of contact circumstances throughout West Africa, especially the hinterlands; the same is true for Savi. Detailed patterns of change in the reliance on imported goods are not available, but the data suggest such goods were present in varying numbers throughout the postcontact period.

For the hinterland, Stahl (2001, pp. 183–184) reports small quantities of European objects at Makala in central Ghana from contexts dating from the early eighteenth to early nineteenth century, perhaps acquired via elite trade networks. Excavation of the remains of a coastal plantation in Ghana indicates that by the nineteenth century the everyday lives of slaves in western Africa exhibited similar material patterns as found on American plantations in terms of the range of European goods present (Bredwa-Mensah, 2004; Ogundiran and Falola, 2007). It seems likely that, as in Japan, communities across western Africa were exposed to (and adopted) European material culture to different degrees at different times, and that slaves transported to the Americas in the sixteenth century in general had less direct experience with European goods than their counterparts from the nineteenth century. This should be taken into serious consideration when interpreting evidence of recontextualization among diasporic communities of African slaves.

There are certain parallels between the cases of African and Japanese migrants as racialized diasporas in the Americas, but also key differences, both of which inform the nature of archaeological interpretation. Members of both groups were exposed to European material culture to at least some extent prior to leaving home, and some of these items were incorporated or indigenized into everyday life in certain local communities over a period of decades or centuries. An obvious example is the European introduction of tobacco smoking to both regions at an early date. The most obvious difference is that Africans were transported to the Americas against their will and for the most part had no further contact with established and evolving beliefs, habits or material patterns in the homeland except perhaps via later arrivals. In contrast, Japanese migrants had more liberty to travel back and forth between home and host countries and set up large-scale mercantile networks that transported a wide range of consumer goods between Japan and North America. Consequently, Japanese migrants not only maintained direct transnational connections with cultural traditions in the homeland, but were also able to keep up with ongoing changes that were in the process of transforming Japanese culture. Members of the African diaspora had to rely on incomplete memories of limited aspects of the cultures they had permanently left behind, with no contribution by material goods from the homeland except what they chose to replicate from memory. This undoubtedly affected the ways transnational connections influenced (and could influence) the construction of ethnic identities and material practices in the New World setting.

As a complement to these migrant examples, Silliman (2009) offers a nuanced discussion of how these issues relate to North American indigenous peoples, using a case study from the Eastern Pequot community in Connecticut. He argues that conventional, inflexible artifact identity categories do not allow for complex cultural entanglements that incorporate both persistence and change, and permit only two interpretive options: indigenous cultures must either change significantly or remain essentially the same. Thus, the adoption of a range of “European” material goods by indigenous groups guarantees they will always be interpreted as having fundamentally changed no matter how long ago these adoptions took place. This problem is exacerbated by relying on a fixed baseline of indigenous culture rooted in the immediate pre-contact period in the early seventeenth century, even when examining sites dating to the nineteenth century. In contrast, by adopting a shifting baseline, whereby nineteenth century sites are compared with sites from the eighteenth rather than the seventeenth century, evidence of considerable continuity and persistence can emerge.

From Silliman’s perspective, traditional artifact categories mistakenly favor cultural origins, rather than focusing on the unique ways everyday objects were used in local contexts. In reality, knowing where objects originated is far less important to our
understanding of the meanings and significance of material culture than identifying who used them and how. In this sense, if the social and functional use-context of a material assemblage can be identified and directly linked to a particular ethnic or cultural group, then the origins of the individual objects are often irrelevant. A useful alternative can be found in focusing on practice and social memory, because it is in the context of everyday practice, rather than origins per se, that objects intersect with agency and take on meaning, including functional, social and symbolic significance. Social memory from preceding generations is central because it is a basic resource on which social agents draw in determining how to behave in society. However, they did not all draw on the same pre-contact baseline of cultural knowledge, and individuals living in the nineteeth century, for example, would have accessed memories of practices long after periods of rapid material transformation associated with initial culture contact. In this sense, these moments of what we might call change did not repeat with each and every generation. That is, each successive generation of children did not have their parents adopting these market goods, such as ceramics and metal implements. Instead, these already comprised part of household practices and perhaps even family or community traditions, and they could be inherited, so to speak, through basic socialization and everyday use. In some sense, they were grounded in household experience and in the land itself, and they became part of what it meant to be Eastern Pequot, although perhaps not in any emblematic way (Silliman, 2009, p. 223).

Cultural exchange is not unidirectional, and it is also possible to cite examples of external material influences on the everyday lives of Europeans and Euro-Americans that are germane to archaeological interpretation, including the adoption of New World domesticates like potatoes, maize, and tobacco. A classic example is the considerable influence of Chinese export porcelain (and the associated practice of tea consumption) on European material culture beginning in the sixteenth century, both in terms of its popularity among consumers and European potters’ fervent attempts to reproduce it, both technologically and stylistically (Barker and Majewski, 2006). Other ceramic examples include the Americanization of Rockingham ware in the mid-nineteenth century (Claney, 2004), and the Japanese stylistic influence on the Aesthetic art movement in England and America during the 1870s and 1880s, inspired by the opening of international trade with Japan in the 1850s (Majewski and Schiffer, 2001). Of course, these examples differ somewhat from the Japanese and African examples in that Chinese and Japanese ceramics were designed for export, but they do demonstrate how foreign styles and technologies influenced and were incorporated into European and North American culture. This does not exhaust the list of potential examples, and researchers focusing on Euro-American sites should consider how the cultural origins and influences of objects in their assemblages affected how any why consumers acquired and used them and what meanings they held.

Theory and method

Certainly not all material objects lead mysterious multiple lives deeply interwoven with the mechanics and dynamics of ethnic identity and culture change, and requiring sophisticated investigative tactics to uncover. However, some do, and we need to adopt analytical methods and theoretical models that draw them out so they do not mislead us into producing straightforward models out of complicated realities. I described above how transnationalism and diaspora led me to identify such material ambiguities in a domestic artifact assemblage from a Japanese work camp in Western Canada. I also indicated how this approach is appropriate and adaptable to multiple circumstances involving culture contact and colonial entanglements among a range of indigenous and migrant groups. The critical point, however, is that whatever theoretical model or perspective one adopts, it should include the recognition that objects, as well as people, can have multiple, fluid identities and origins. This is particularly true when these origins form the basis for assumptions and interpretations about the nature of cultural persistence and change in colonial settings. A central issue in any study is whether the cultural origins and identities of objects are analytically meaningful or relevant. Silliman (2005, 2009) claims that in many cases artifact origins are far less important than use contexts, and an uncritical emphasis on origins can often mask important cultural continuities. Nevertheless, as I hope I have demonstrated, there are also many circumstances in which artifact origins and identities are of crucial significance in archaeological interpretation.

Method-wise, the approach I advocate involves developing long-term histories of the relationships between people and individual object classes that span decades or centuries and international borders, many details of which already exist in the historical or archaeological literature. This approach is very much in the spirit of Stahl’s (2010) work on material histories and her central observation that objects are not stable, essential entities. For migrant groups, it is also necessary to develop detailed contextual studies of material production, consumption and trade networks in the homeland, if possible localized to the regions and communities from which migrants originated. Archaeologists of the African diaspora have been attempting to develop such a context for western Africa for decades, with variable success owing to data limitations. However, archaeologists of the Asian diaspora have only just begun this process in earnest; very little use has yet been made of archival and material data available in Japan and China, and no North American historical archaeologists have active field projects in these countries.

The case of European migrants in the Americas is interesting. An abundance of archival and archaeological data is available on a wide range of sites and consumer goods from many parts of Europe, and they have been put to a myriad of uses in interpreting the everyday lives of migrant communities the Americas. However, few explicit and systematic attempts have been made to examine domestic sites and assemblages in Europe that coincide with times and places producing the bulk of North American migrants, for the purpose of identifying continuity and change in patterns of material consumption. One recent exception is Brighton’s (2009) work on cultural persistence and change within the Irish diaspora from a transnational perspective. While he does not focus specifically on the issue of artifact origins and identities, Brighton notes that recent archaeology in Ireland has begun to overturn the popular historical conception of the Irish peasantry as lacking much in the way of material culture or a connection to the modern world. Archaeological data demonstrates that the rural poor had been involved in the globalized capitalist economy and ideology since the eighteenth century: The Irish did not arrive [in America] as cultural blank slates quickly adopting new social values and material culture. They immigrated with entrenched social dispositions, sociocultural values, behaviors, and allegiances, which were not lost after resettlement. Understanding the material culture in Ireland as expressing identities of the rural poor classes provides a basic comparable foundation to identifying the diachronic material transformations worldwide (Brighton, 2009, p. 9).

This cultural legacy should be recognized to include recent additions to the material repertoire of rural Ireland, including the foreign imports noted by Brighton, which should not necessarily be considered evidence of locally-inspired culture change when encountered in North American contexts. This example is also important because it highlights the fact that, not only is the issue
of artifact identities relevant to European cases, but that certain sub-groups of European migrants in North America were cast as racialized minorities in ways that suggest the potential for productive comparisons between the Asian, African and Irish diasporas.

In conjunction with the need to adequately account for the transnational histories and identities of objects, analysts and interpreters must also develop context-specific classification and recording strategies that clearly differentiate between cultural and manufacturing origins. Ideally, analysts and interpreters should be the same person or should work closely with one another to design tools that can draw out these ambiguities that are at the heart of stimulating research and are one of the core strengths of archaeology. However, as is clear from my research on the Japanese fishing camp in BC, these ambiguities make it difficult, if not impossible, to quantify entire assemblages and most artifact classes by origin (cultural or manufacturing). Instead, delineation of patterns via quantification should be largely limited to functional analyses of artifact forms and activity areas and evidence of artifact origins should be marked specimens, in a qualitative way, using marked and other diagnostic specimens to identify everyday activities influenced by inherited and adopted cultural patterns.

Conclusions

Much recent scholarly attention has been given to issues of cre- olization, syncretism and hybridity in contact/colonial contexts, but much less to cultural and material fluidity and dynamism in home- lands prior to migration and its impact on the migrant experience. A key observation derived from the examples drawn from Africa and Japan is that migrants (willing or otherwise) did not all arrive in North America and elsewhere completely ignorant of local material culture, and in some cases had indigenized elements of it prior to leaving their homelands. Likewise, indigenous peoples and some migrant groups adopted Euro-American material patterns early in colonial history and fully incorporated them into their ethnic reper- toires in the following decades or centuries. As archaeologists, we must factor these considerations into our models and interpreta- tions of how and why culture change occurred. Like people, mate- rial culture is not static in cultural identity, but is fluid and constantly evolving. Consequently, we must build flexibility into our identification and analysis of the origins of objects rather than freezing them into a single monolithic identity. Perhaps, as Silliman argues, we should focus more on contexts of use rather than getting bogged down in questions of origins, especially when attributing cultural origins is so fraught with ambiguities. At the same time, these ambiguities are gateways to just the kinds of questions that are the bread and butter of archaeology and represent its greatest contribution to our understanding of the recent past. We may never be able to divide entire assemblages along cultural lines in a way that makes quantitative measures of persistence and change possible. However, by zeroing in on instances of shifting meaning and identity among individual objects, marked specimens and particu- lar material categories, we can enrich our understanding of how individuals and identity collectives entangled in webs of colonial- ism negotiated and enacted aspects of their daily lives.

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