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'Unrelenting Toil': Expanding Archaeological Interpretations of the Female Slave Experience

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Archaeological excavations conducted at the site of a former washing place in Cape Town, South Africa, resulted in the recovery of thousands of artefacts, many of which constitute the material signature of washing. In this paper, it is argued that clothing-related artefacts, such as buttons, buckles, and beads, should not be viewed merely as objects of personal adornment, but more broadly, as the by-products of women's labour. When considered as such, these artefacts not only help to engender archaeological interpretations of slavery, but can be used to explore the social, cultural and economic significance of slave women's work.

When walking along the banks of the Platteklip Stream, Otto Mentzel, a Prussian soldier stationed at the Cape of Good Hope in the 1730s, encountered 'more than one hundred slave women busy with the family washing.'[1] Intrigued by what he saw, he spent some time with these women, later documenting the peculiar way they washed clothes:

> At first, all the washing is placed in the flowing stream and held down by stones until it has become thoroughly soaked. Next, each piece is pounded against a rock so as to knock the dirt out of it . . . Thereafter soap is rubbed on the articles which are then spread out on the grass to bleach in the sun . . . After a couple of hours, the washing is immersed once more in the stream, and each piece is beaten against the stones to cleanse it of the soap; there is a final rinsing and then each piece is once more spread out and allowed to dry in the sun.[2]

More than a century later, in 1861, washerwomen again captured the attention of a visitor to Cape Town. From the account of 'A Lady,' we learn that the women who washed along the Platteklip were 'obliged to be up very early indeed in the morning to secure the best pools for washing,' and that in order to do so, they would on occasion,

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walk 'sometimes three miles upstream,' where they spent 'the livelong day in the open air up to their knees in the water . . . accompanied by their little ones and by a tame goat.'[3] At the end of a long workday, they returned to town 'with enormous bundles on their heads, their hands on their hips, their faces hidden under their yielding burdens, but their tongues a merry pace.'[4]

The accounts of Otto Mentzel and 'A Lady' are among but a handful of historical references to women washing in the Platteklip Stream. When pieced together, these provide a narrative framework that spans the course of three centuries, straddles the transition from slavery to freedom, and extends well into the modern era. To date, however, the washerwomen's story has received little attention from social historians.[5] This oversight is not specific to Cape historiography but is symptomatic of studies of female slavery more generally. The triple burden of race, gender and class has rendered slave women all but invisible in the documentary record, creating a serious impediment for the writing of their history.[6] Archaeology, however, offers a partial solution to this problem of sources.[7]

Over the past 30 years, archaeologists have explored a variety of topics relating to slavery in a number of different geographical regions including North America, the Caribbean and South Africa.[8] While this work has greatly enhanced general historical understandings of slave culture and life, until recently there have been few attempts to engender these interpretations.[9] As a result, the female slave experience and the social, cultural and economic significance of their work have remained largely unexplored.[10]

For the reasons cited above, the women who spent their working lives in and along the banks of the Platteklip Stream were chosen as the subject of a comprehensive historical archaeological investigation. Excavations conducted at the site of a former washing place in Cape Town, South Africa resulted in the recovery of thousands of artefacts, many of which constitute the material signature of washing. In this paper, it is argued that clothing-related artefacts, such as buttons, buckles, and beads, should not be viewed merely as objects of personal adornment, but more broadly, as the by-products of women's labour. When considered as such, these artefacts not only help to engender archaeological interpretations of slavery but can be used to explore the social, cultural and economic significance of slave women's work.

Slave Women in Cape Town

The first European settlement at the Cape of Good Hope was established in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) at the site of present-day Cape Town. The first slaves were imported to the Cape by the Dutch in 1658, and this tradition continued throughout British rule until the abolition of the slave trade in 1808.[11] While the slave society that developed at the southern tip of the African continent was in many ways similar to those of the New World, it differed from them in three ways. First, whereas the majority of individuals enslaved in the New World originated in West Africa, most of the Cape slaves came from India, the East Indies, East Africa and Madagascar.[12] Second, Cape slavery unlike that of the New World was decidedly urban in nature, with many of the enslaved living and working in Cape Town.[13] In

1731 slaves comprised 42 per cent of the population of Cape Town, and as late as 1767, more than 40 per cent of all the colony's slaves resided in the urban centre.[14] Finally, while it was common for slave women to be put into the fields in the New World, slave owners at the Cape both acknowledged, reproduced, and imposed a European division of labour on those they enslaved.[15] This gendered division of labour is particularly clear in the context of colonial Cape Town.

In Cape Town, privately owned female slaves worked as domestic servants within their masters' homes where they were charged with the tasks of cooking, cleaning, caring for children, and laundry. Within the confines of the household many slave women were subject to close supervision, seemingly endless workdays, and physical abuse.[16] The work of male slaves, in contrast, drew them into the streets, where they hawked goods for their masters, loaded and unloaded cargo, hauled water, and collected firewood. Many of these 'fortunate slaves' worked in trades that not only allowed them to earn money, but also to 'live out' in rented rooms in town.[17] Few slave women could be counted among the 'fortunate,' as there was little opportunity for them to be hired out, nor were they given separate sleeping accommodations. In fact, many slave women slept nightly on the very same hearths where they laboured daily.

In general, the type of work assigned to slave men not only afforded them greater physical mobility than slave women, but provided them with opportunities to meet with others, in public and on a daily basis. These interactions facilitated the slaves' integration into the broader underclass community, which consisted of free blacks, Chinese merchants, European sailors, and soldiers stationed in Cape Town.[18] While participation in this underclass cultural world allowed slave men to blur the lines between slavery and freedom daily – and even over the course of a lifetime – the everyday experiences of their female counterparts were far more circumscribed. Isolated within their masters' homes, few slave women enjoyed the daily physical and social freedom afforded slave men, excepting washerwomen. Although their work emanated from the household, it was done in the freshwater streams on the slopes of Table Mountain. The washing places, therefore, provide a unique opportunity to explore the experiences of urban slave women.

The Material Signature of Washing

The washing places along the Platteklip, and the women who worked there, were the recent focus of a comprehensive historical archaeological investigation. Today, the upper reaches of the Platteklip Stream are preserved within Van Riebeeck Park, a small neighbourhood park which is managed by the South African National Parks system. A walking survey here revealed extant washing features including a set of concrete washtubs built by the Cape Town City Council in 1877, and the Platteklip Municipal Washhouses, opened to the public in 1888. In addition, small pools ringed with large boulders were observed within the Platteklip itself. These closely resembled the washing pools depicted in historical sketches. While material indicators of the washerwomen's work were easily traced on the physical landscape, locating them in the archaeological record required a more systematic effort.

In May 2001, a total of 313 shovel test pits were dug throughout the Platteklip Stream Valley. Although most of the areas tested either had been disturbed or were devoid of historic period artefacts, shovel tests excavated in Area F – located just downstream from the Platteklip Municipal Washhouses – produced an assortment of clothing-related items including buttons, shirt studs, a hasp, a snap, and several beads. Additional testing here resulted in the recovery of more clothing-related items, as well as coins and ceramic fragments. Importantly, this testing showed that these archaeological deposits were intact.

Two years later, Area F was the focus of a six-week archaeological excavation, during which a number of unexpected discoveries were made. The most significant find was a buried streambed which contained a series of interconnected washing pools (Figure 1). All of these had been cleared of cobbles and one showed evidence of having been

Figure 1 The excavated streambed, facing south

dammed.[19] Moreover, the bottom layers of each of these pools were laden with eighteenth and nineteenth-century artefacts, detailing more than 100 years of intensive use. The washing pools were abandoned sometime in the late 19th century, after which the streambed filled in naturally. Survey maps confirm these archaeological observations, showing that the modern course of the Platteklip had replaced the abandoned streambed by 1900.[20]

The majority of the more than 32,000 artefacts recovered during the course of this archaeological investigation were found in and along the banks of the abandoned streambed (Figure 2). While all of these finds have been processed and catalogued, analysis has not yet been completed. However, it is clear that washing made a very distinct impression on both the landscape and the archaeological record. For discussion purposes, the artefacts have been divided into four main categories: items that fell off clothing, items that fell out of pockets, the washerwomen's personal items, and artefacts indicative of non-work activities. This general pattern constitutes the material signature of washing and as such, can be used to identify women's work in archaeological contexts elsewhere.

Given the destructive manner in which washing was done at the Cape, it is not surprising that clothing-related artefacts comprise a large portion of the assemblage (Table 1). Among these items, fasteners such as buttons, straight pins, hooks, eyes, and buckles predominate. More than 1,200 buttons were found in the bottom

Figure 2 An assortment of artefacts excavated from the bottom layer of a washing pool

Table 1 Number of clothing-related artefacts found at the washing place

Artefact	Washing pool contexts	All contexts
Aiglet	5	12
Beads	53	85
Buckles	33	49
Buttons	1273	2056
Button fasteners	21	21
Clothing eyes	40	41
Clothing hooks	204	211
Cuff links	8	12
Straight pins	1753	1787
Shirt/collar studs	18	39
Snaps	4	8

layers of the washing pools, representing 46 distinct button types. While the majority were made of copper alloy, small white ceramic buttons comprise nearly a third of the total assemblage. Most were broken and show clear evidence of having been damaged when repeatedly beaten against rocks during the washing process. Significantly, very few of these buttons appear to have come from the same garment. A wide assortment of dress accessories were also found, including collar studs, cuff links, watch fobs, and decorative ornaments such as beads. As these constitute only a small portion of this category, it appears that most owners were careful to check their garments prior to handing them over to their washerwoman.

The second category of artefacts appears to have fallen out of the pockets of clothing when washed. These include coins, slate pencils, marbles, gunflints, lead shot, and pocket knives (Table 2). While objects such as these – when found on sites occupied by slaves in the American South – have been interpreted as direct evidence of slave consumerism, literacy, childcare practices, and hunting, a consideration of archaeological context precludes similar conclusions being drawn here.[21] Although washerwomen were ultimately responsible for the loss of these objects, there is no

Table 2 Number of artefacts that may have fallen out of pockets during the washing

Artefact	Washing pool contexts	All contexts
Coins	43	111
Gunflints	8	16
Lead shot	5	8
Marbles	3	34
Slate pencils	149	342
Pocket knife	3	19
Tokens	5	11

indication that their connection to these objects was anything but indirect. Therefore, the activities these artefacts represent must be attributed to those for whom the washerwomen washed, rather than the washerwomen themselves.

The third and smallest category of artefacts consists of items that may have belonged to the washerwomen themselves. Most of these are personal items including rings, bracelets, pierced coins, and pendants (Figure 3) that may have slipped off the washerwomen's fingers, wrists, and necks, while they worked, knee-deep, in the cold mountain stream. However, as individual attribution is a problem in this archaeological context, these too may have belonged to those for whom the washerwomen worked.

The last category of artefacts reflects ancillary activities. Most prominent among these are the large quantities of ceramic and bottle glass found littering the banks of the stream. Nearly 10,000 ceramic fragments were recovered during excavations, representing a minimum of 2,200 vessels, the majority of which are bowls.[22] With the exception of willowware, which is ubiquitous to nineteenth-century sites at the Cape, few of these vessels share the same pattern, which suggests they were acquired individually, and not as matched sets.[23]

It is possible that these ceramics represent a type of pan-toting, in which washerwomen carried food from their masters' homes to the washing places where it was consumed, and possibly shared, among women working there. Unwilling to return their masters' ceramics for fear of being caught, the washerwomen used them until they broke, subsequently discarding the pieces along the rocky banks of the stream. If this were the case, then the quantity and diversity of ceramics found at the washing places may reflect the many and varied households from which the washerwomen were drawn. Moreover, these ceramics might provide material evidence of the domestic networks formed among and between slave women in Cape Town.[24]

Bottle glass fragments, many of which came from wine and beer bottles, suggest that the washerwomen made time for leisure, while the recovery of gaming pieces fashioned on site from broken pieces of ceramic may indicate that the 'tavern culture' of town was not confined to the streets of the urban centre (Figure 4).[25] Furthermore, the recovery of unusual objects such as a silver-plated writing pen

Figure 3 A small brass ring with a cut glass stone that may have belonged to a washerwomen

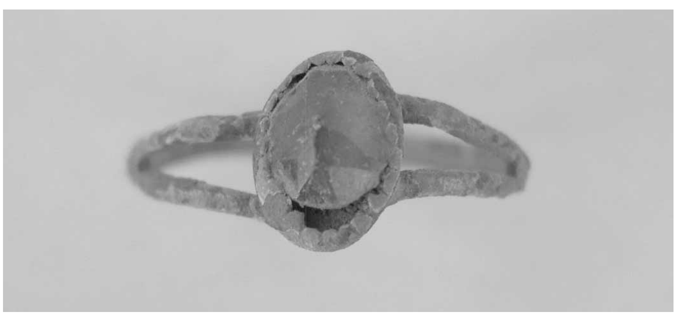

Figure 4 A gaming piece fashioned from a broken piece of ceramic

and a copper-alloy salt spoon may point to petty theft among washerwomen, or their involvement in illicit trading networks. As much of Cape Town's black market trade was in 'clothing and accoutrements', slave washerwomen would have perfectly poised to participate in it.[26] They not only had easy and direct access to goods, but the large bundles they routinely carried on their heads provided a means for secretly conveying items to the washing places, where they could be sold or exchanged. In addition, artefacts such as thimbles and pins suggest that women may have repaired some of the clothes they damaged in the wash, or alternatively, that they might have sewed in their spare time as a source of legitimate income. Finally, marbles, doll parts, and fragments of miniature tea sets, remind us that childcare would have been a substantial benefit of this line of work.[27]

The material signature of washing, therefore, consists both of the by-products of slave women's work and the residues of their daily lives. Although many of the artefacts recovered from the washing place seem to tell us more about the people for whom these women washed than about the washerwomen themselves, when considered together they offer unprecedented insight into the lives of slave women. Large quantities of clothing-related items attest to the difficulty and intensity of their daily labours, while fragments of ceramics, bottle glass, and toys remind us that work was not the sum total of their daily existence. In Cape Town, it is clear that washing not only provided these women with a means to assert control over their lives, but the opportunity to forge bonds of friendship and community which transcended those of their enslavement, and ultimately carried them to freedom.

Buttons, Buckles and Beads Reconsidered

Archaeologists have found many of the artefacts that constitute the material signature of washing on sites once occupied by African Americans. However, few consider artefacts such as buttons, buckles and beads to be the by-products of women's labour.[28] Instead, most clothing-related items are relegated to the category of 'personal adornment,' thereby serving as a basis for discussions of identity. Until recently, ethnicity – specifically that of an African heritage – has dominated these discussions.[29] However, by placing so much emphasis on ethnicity, archaeologists not only have homogenised the experiences of African American men and women, but inadvertently obscured black women's labour. This is apparent in the two examples discussed below.

The first concerns excavations conducted at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest in Virginia, where a large quantity and diversity of buttons were recovered from the slave cabins.[30] As many of these buttons mirrored contemporary fashions in men's clothing, Barbara Heath attributes this pattern to the 'episodic purchase' and piecemeal acquisition strategies of fashion-minded male slaves.[31] But, in light of the material signature of washing, it is possible that these buttons represent the work of slave women, rather than the consumer choices of slave men.

Although Heath lays the groundwork for an archaeological discussion of slave women's labour, she toes the dominant interpretative line of the culturalist paradigm.[32] For Heath, the buttons, buckles, and beads found at Poplar Forest underscore the important symbolic role that clothing played in the slave community, 'helping slaves to cross the lines between work and leisure, routine and holiday, secular and sacred.'[33] While interesting, this discussion does little to further historical understandings of slavery, as the historical record speaks volumes on slave dress and adornment.[34] One area in which archaeology can make a significant contribution, however, is that of slave women's paid overwork. For while the historiography offers little evidence of it, the archaeological record appears to be teeming with it.[35]

Within this context, the buttons, buckles, and beads found scattered across the yards of the Poplar Forest slave quarter not only detail slave women's work for their master, but document their efforts to generate income for their families. Washing, cooking and sewing were not merely domestic chores performed for the family, but skills through which enslaved women created access 'to material and social capital within the bounds of slavery.'[36] As Jillian Galle's work on seamstresses has shown, this capital provided slave families with many of the things that the planter did not, including clothing, medicines, and a variety of non-essential items associated with appearance and recreation.[37] Carter G. Woodson similarly argued years ago, that the income generated through washing ensured the survival of many slave families, and in some cases, allowed slave washerwomen to purchase freedom for themselves, and their family members.[38] Given Heath's propensity to ascribe agency to slave men, it is somewhat surprising that the work of slave women, and its broader social, cultural, and economic implications, are left unexplored.

Laurie Wilkie missed a similar opportunity to explore the economic implications of black women's labour in her discussion of African American tenants at Oakley Plantation in Louisiana.[39] Excavations conducted at one of the cabins here detailed the post-emancipation experiences of Silvia Freeman and her daughters, who collectively worked for the planter families residing at Oakley, from the mid-1880s to the 1930s.[40] As Wilkie recounts, this was a turbulent and uncertain time for many African American families and there were definite benefits to be derived from steady employment in the big house. Indeed, excavations revealed some of these benefits, as fragments of ceramics and glassware matching those owned by the planter were found at the Freeman's cabin. Wilkie explains this material connection in terms of pan-toting, petty theft, gift-giving, and favouritism, all of which helped the Freemans to meet their daily needs.[41]

Given the historical context, the Freemans' socio-economic and marital statuses, and their patterns of employment in the big house, it is not surprising that large quantities of buttons and other clothing-related items were found at their cabin. What is surprising, however, is Wilkie's failure to make any connection between these artefacts and washing, especially since it was an activity known to occupy 'much of black women's time and energy as they transformed their slave skills into paid labor.'[42] Instead, these objects propel Wilkie to the conclusion that the African Americans living at Oakley 'took pride in ornamenting their clothing with lace, feathers, beads and the finest possible buttons.'[43] Wilkie, like Heath, too considers buttons, buckles, and beads solely within the context of personal adornment, and as a result, she similarly misses an excellent opportunity to explore black women's labour.

While washing may not account for all of the clothing-related items recovered from archaeological contexts, it is an activity that deserves more careful consideration. As Carter G. Woodson wrote of washerwomen more than 70 years ago, 'whether as a slave or a free woman of color in the antebellum period or a worker in the ranks of an emancipated people, her life without exception was one of unrelenting toil for those whom she loved.'[44] The archaeological record is replete with the by-products of women's 'unrelenting toil.' The task then is for archaeologists to recognize them as such, and to seize the interpretative possibilities they present.

Conclusions

In a recent publication, Amy Young discusses the ways in which some slave women in the American South were able to capitalize on the gender and kinship roles assigned to them by their masters, for the protection and provision of their own families.[45] She suggests that kin terms, such as 'Mammy' or 'Aunt,' not only entailed familial obligations, but structured relationships in ways that could be used to the slave woman's advantage. A parallel argument can be made with regards to Cape Town's washerwomen, who worked within the parameters of the master–slave relationship to create lives for themselves and their families.

Although laundry has long been considered one of the most difficult and arduous of all household chores, it had its benefits.[46] It was one of the few domestic tasks that could be done outside of the master's home, affording washerwomen an unprecedented degree of independence. It required no special skills or tools, just strength and determination. As such, it was one of the few occupations through which slave women could earn money.[47] Significantly, washing was something that could be done over the course of a lifetime, or at its various life stages. Single women often washed until married, and widows turned to it after their husbands passed on.[48] Importantly, children could be cared for while washing, and even involved in the process. They hauled water, collected firewood, and delivered fresh linen.[49] Finally, laundry 'encouraged women to work together in communal spaces within their neighborhoods, fostering informal networks of reciprocity that sustained them through health and sickness, love and heartaches, birth and death.'[50]

In Cape Town, the washing places were sanctioned work spaces where large groups of women gathered to lather, wring, and bang the family linen clean. But as the archaeology clearly demonstrates, they also served as meeting places, where slave women – temporarily freed from the constraints of household routines and the direct supervision of their masters – were able to create lives of their own. Here they exchanged news, information, goods and services, and shared the responsibilities of childcare. Importantly, they established and maintained the ties of friendship and community essential for surviving their enslavement.

As it appears that washing sustained generations of slave women and their families in Cape Town, the buttons, buckles, and beads found at the washing places not only represent the by-products of this industry, but serve as tiny testaments to the social, cultural, and economic significance of this work. When considered as such, these artefacts can be used by archaeologists to explore and expand historical understandings of the female slave experience worldwide.

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Notes

[1] Mentzel, *A Complete Geographical and Topographical Description*, vol. III, 141.
[2] Ibid., 141.
[3] A lady, *Life at the Cape*, 27.
[4] Ibid., 27.
[5] In the past couple of decades some excellent works have been written on Cape slavery. See Bank, *The Decline of Urban Slavery at the Cape*; Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection*; Worden, van Heynigen, and Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town*; Van der Spuy, *Slave Women and the Family*, 50–74.

[6] For a good discussion of this source problem, as well as for an excellent example of slave women's history see White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* See also, Morgan, *Laboring Women*, and Beckles, *Natural Rebels.*

[7] For a good general discussion of the archaeological potential to contribute to broader historical understanding see Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten.*

[8] The field of African American archaeology has burgeoned over the past 30 years. For a comprehensive overview and bibliography of this work, see Singleton and Bograd, *The Archaeology of the African Diaspora.* For specific studies in South Africa, see Markell, Hall, and Schrire, *The Historical Archaeology of Vergelegen*, 10–34; Cox, Sealy, Schrire, and Morris, *The Isotopic Signature of the Underclass*, 73–97; and Jordan and Schrire, *The Historical Archaeology of Cape Town's Washerwomen*, 147–58.

[9] For recent work on the engendering of the slave experience, see Galle and Young, eds., *Engendering African American Archaeology.*

[10] Exceptions include Galle, *Designing Women*, 39–72; Young, *Risk and Women's Roles*, 133–50; Wilkie, *Granny Midwive*, 73–100.

[11] It is estimated that between 40,000 and 63,000 slaves were imported into the Cape during this time. For a good demographic overview see Armstrong and Worden, *Slaves*.

[12] For detailed discussions of slavery at the Cape see Armstrong and Worden, *Slaves*; Shell, *Children of Bondage*; Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa.*

[13] For a discussion of the urban nature of Cape slavery, see Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 138–43.

[14] Worden et al., *Cape Town*, 60; Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 139.

[15] Bank, *The Decline of Urban Slavery in Cape Town*; Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection*; Worden et al., *Cape Town*; Van Der Spuy, *Slave Family.*

[16] The abuse of domestic servants is described in Dudden, *Serving Women*; Hunter, *To Joy my Freedom*; Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*; Malcolmson, *English Laundresses*; and White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*

[17] For a discussion of 'fortunate' slaves, see Madison, *Social Resurrection*, 118–22. Although Andrew Bank has credited washerwomen with having the greatest autonomy of all urban slaves, Mason does not consider them among the 'fortunate', who are largely skilled and male.

[18] See Bank, *Decline of Urban Slavery*, 98–141 for a detailed discussion of underclass culture in Cape Town. Bank argues that by the end of the 18th century, a vibrant underclass culture had emerged in Cape Town, and that slaves were integrated into it 'through ties of intimacy with Europeans and free blacks, through secular and religious networks of Islam, and most of all, through the multifaceted culture of popular leisure', 127. According to Bank, these interactions helped to break down barriers of status, ethnicity, and race, while reinforcing those of class, 128.

[19] In 1789, Hilletje Smuts, mistress of the garden estate Nooitgedacht, complained that the washerwomen were damming the Platteklip Stream above her house (described in Harris, *Layering Nooitgedacht*, part I, 109–23). During excavations a dam was identified in one of the washing pools. It consisted of medium-sized boulders stacked upon one another across the downstream side of the pool.

[20] The surveys of William B. Snow and Walter Thom, dated 1862 and 1900 respectively, were digitized and corrected by Elliott Jordan for this project. The original survey maps are on file in the Archives of the Survey and Land Information Branch of the Cape Town City Council, Cape Town, South Africa. It appears that this stream diversion was related to the construction of the Platteklip Municipal Washhouses in 1887/8.

[21] See Thomas and Thomas, *Gender and the Presentation of Self*, 101–31; Singleton, *The Archaeology of Slave Life*, 155–75. For a more detailed discussion of cultural deposition with specific reference to processes of loss and discard, see Michael B. Schiffer, *Formation Processes*, 47–79.

[22] The minimum number of vessels (MNV) for this collection was calculated from rim sherds and handles.

[23] For a discussion of Cape ceramics see Klose and Malan, *The Ceramic Signature*, 49–59.

[24] See Stack, *All Our Kin*; Young, *Risk and Women's Roles*, 133–50.

[25] The term 'tavern culture' was coined to describe an underclass culture at the Cape characterised by 'drinking, gambling, street-brawling and music making that thrived on the weekends, outside of places of work', in Bank "The Erosion of Slavery at the Cape." In *Breaking the Chains: Slavery and its Legacy in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony*, edited by Nigel Worden and Clifton Crais. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994, 79–98, 91. See also, Van der Spuy, *Slave women and the Family*. She has critised Bank for failing to engender his interpretation. As she rightly points out, this reconstruction of culture holds few opportunities or benefits for slave women.

[26] According to Robert Shell, the most frequently promulgated regulations at the Cape forbid Company soldiers and slaves from buying 'clothing and accoutrements' from slaves. Interestingly, Shell refers to this black market trade as a 'button economy.' Shell's discussion can be found in *Children of Bondage*, 184–5.

[27] Childcare is often cited as one of the greatest benefits of laundry work. See Bochert, *Alley Life*, 169; Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 62–3; Katzman, *Seven Day a Week*, 83–6. Note: As with other artefacts discussed in this section, the activities implied by the presence of thimbles and toys cannot be attributed to washerwomen with any certainty. However, these artefacts can be used to open archaeological discussion of slave women's labour.

[28] An excellent exception is Jillian E. Galle's work on seamstresses at Andrew Jackson's Hermitage. She considers many clothing-related items, as well as pins, thimbles, and scissors as part of the seamstresses' tool kit. See Galle, *Designing Women*.

[29] Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground*; Singleton, ed., '*I, Too, Am America*'; Wilkie, *Creating Freedom*.

[30] See Heath, *Buttons, Beads, and Buckles*, and *Hidden Lives*.

[31] Heath, *Engendering Choice*, 19–38. In this publication Heath expands on previous work, providing a detailed analysis of the consumer patterns of male and female slaves. Although she links the purchase of cloth and clothing-related items to sewing, the broader implications of this work are not explored. Significantly, gendered mobility, which would affect the consumer patterns of slave women, is not addressed.

[32] In her various publications, Heath lays the groundwork for good discussion of slave women's labour. For instance, she acknowledges slave efforts to generate income through the sale of the vegetables and poultry they raised, the handicrafts they produced, and the odd jobs they performed in their spare time. She also recognises that slaves participated in an informal economy with neighbouring plantations where goods and services were exchanged for cash, store credits, or some form of recompense. Furthermore, she has spent considerable time investigating the purchases slaves made at local stores, finding that buttons, thread, ribbons, and cloth ranked high among them. Finally, Heath notes that the number of buttons found at the Poplar Forest slave cabins alone 'argue for a fairly substantial sewing industry.' Unfortunately, Heath leaves these lines of enquiry virtually unexplored.

[33] Heath, *Hidden Lives*, 53.

[34] Heath herself relies extensively on documentary references to slave dress, specifically fugitive slave advertisements.

[35] For example, the large quantity of military buttons found during the excavations of the slave quarter at Kingsmill Plantation near Williamsburg, Virginia, may also be evidence of slave women's paid overwork. Kelso attributes the presence of these buttons to the distribution of surplus uniforms to slaves after the American Revolution. However, these buttons may reflect the business dealings of slave women and soldiers. See Kelso, *Kingsmill Plantations*, 200–04.

[36] Galle, *Designing Women*, 67.

[37] Galle, *Designing Women*, 61.

[38] Woodson, *The Negro Washerwoman*, 269–77.

[39] Wilkie, *Creating Freedom*.

[40] Ibid., 98.

[41] Ibid., 123–33. Wilkie's explanations, which are drawn straight from the historiography, in my opinion, render these women passive.

[42] Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, caption beneath the photo of washerwoman at work with her family, between pages 144 and 145 (no pagination).

[43] Wilkie, *Creating Freedom*, 231.

[44] Woodson, *Negro Washerwoman*, 270.

[45] Young, *Risk and Women's Roles*.

[46] For a discussion of benefits of laundrywork see Dudden, *Serving women*, Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, Katzman, *Seven Days a Week*, and Malcolmson, *English Laundresses.*

[47] Woodson, *Negro Washerwomen*. See also, Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 98. For a discussion of the post-emancipation experiences of laundresses see Borchert, *Alley Life*, 68–74; Mullins, *Race and Affluence*, 137–140. Significantly, Mullins makes an archaeological connection between buttons and laundresses' labour within the context of an African American, working class neighbourhood in Annapolis, Maryland.

[48] This was evident in my own archival and oral historical research. Although some women washed over the entire course of their lifetimes, many left it and came back to it when money was needed.

[49] Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 57.

[50] Ibid., 62.

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