

Review of DAWDY, SHANNON LEE. *Patina: A Profane Archaeology*. The University of Chicago Press, 2016, 195pp., \$27.50 paper.

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Patina is an interdisciplinary exploration of the aesthetics of agedness in New Orleans.

Though the book uses this particular city as its focal point, Shannon Lee Dawdy believes that the lessons we learn there can illuminate our relationship with old things more broadly (p. 5). Dawdy's ultimate aim is "redeeming nostalgia and the category of the fetish" (p. 143), but she does so with a nuanced concern for the ways that this attention to the past also serves to challenge dominant forces of the present. She concludes that patina, the appearance of age, "does two powerful things. It critiques and it bonds" (p. 143).

Although Dawdy is an archaeologist, she is explicit that in this book her "approach is unapologetically humanist" (p. 8). She uses ethnographic interviews and the material traces from archaeological digs as tools for probing and shaping theories; even on the page, you can tell that she is a scholar who works with her hands. The book is replete with rich examples to puzzle over, and it raises a host of fascinating questions for further inquiry. Philosophers may find the balance between description and theory skewed too much toward the former for their liking, but it is the intimate engagement with the objects and places of New Orleans that grants this book its distinctive insights. The argument of the book does not proceed in a strictly linear fashion. The chapters are organized in roughly topical manner, addressing in turn archaeology and ruins (Ch. 2), architecture, tourism, and historic preservation (Ch. 3), perfume and prostitution (Ch. 4), and souvenirs, heirlooms, and antiques (Ch. 5). None of these topics is confined exclusively to the relevant chapter, and themes of colonialism, capitalism, and authenticity are consistent touchstones.

In Chapter 2, "Ruins and Heterogeneous Time" Dawdy introduces a theoretical framework that she employs throughout the text. This is the principle of *heterogeneous time*, an idea she develops

from Walter Benjamin, one of the thinkers to whom she is most indebted. The idea is that objects, in particular patinated ones, can “induce” different kinds of temporal associations that can contrast with any linear historical narrative that might be expected to be consistent across different subjects. Indeed, she is explicit that her invocations of “pastness” refer to a temporal quality that is sensed, in contrast with being narrated or remembered (p. 25).

Dawdy focuses on two different ways in which we have “experiences of pastness”: *social stratigraphy* and *the social relativity of time* (p. 25). The social relativity of time refers to the idea that the speed of temporal progress, and consequently what seems old, will be relative to people in different social positions, and based on different social disturbances. Dawdy couches this observation in Einstein’s theory of relativity, one among a few examples where the theoretical trappings of the book may serve to obscure rather than illuminate the central point. Indeed, philosophers of a more analytic persuasion may be irked by the frequent employment of “space-time” throughout the book, where Dawdy is really just referring to how age is perceived in a place. The central idea is that the perception of age is influenced by culture (or socially constructed, as some might prefer to put it), where this seems to come apart from any objective hold on how old a place really is. As Dawdy recounts: “The city has been figured as old, stained, and charming for a very long time. Within ten years of its founding, colonial writers were depicting its buildings as shoddy and decaying” (p. 31).

Dawdy uses the ideas of heterogeneous time and the social relativity of temporal experience to explain away apparent contradictions in how local denizens experience parts of the city. For instance, one of her interview subjects describes the French Quarter as both renovated and timeless, old and new. Because of heterogeneous time, Dawdy asserts that there is no inconsistency here, just varying temporal experiences that are indexed to different social features (p. 36). The social relativity of time is thus a powerful tool for critically interrogating assumptions about authenticity. The fact that the French Quarter has been gentrified does not necessarily render it inauthentic with respect to

the variety of social intercourse that occurs there. Authenticity may be less about a certain material history than about particular processes of socialization that grant objects and practices the feeling of age.

To be clear, however, Dawdy is not a member of the anthropological camp “in which the deep past is rejected as irrelevant to understanding the present, except rather cynically as a resource to be mined for tacitly inauthentic claims” (p. 45). In contrast with the mercurial social relativity of time, Dawdy explains that social stratigraphy concerns the “structural inheritances that we take for granted, both material and social” that influence our engagement with the present (p. 40). We don’t simply construct the present from whole cloth: rather, it “is constructed out of inherited materials” (p. 45). We may be influenced by the deep past in ways that we are not conscious of or that are practically unavoidable. As an example, Dawdy notes how the structural inheritances of slavery influence the experience of African Americans today: as she puts it: “one could call these the social ruins of the past in which we dwell” (45). She skips rather abruptly from these metaphorical ruins to the very literal ruins of post-Katrina New Orleans, many of which persist ten years on. She notes that these ruins are not so much past but present, perpetuating the “rupture” of the hurricane. “They reproduce trauma” (p. 47). The link between these two kinds of ruins is clear; indeed, the power of social stratigraphy leads one to push back against accepting the consequences of the social relativity of time. This latter concept may indeed describe the mechanism by which, for instance, a tourist views contemporary urban ruins as quaint or nostalgic, but that facile relativity founders on the objectivity of suffering that ruins represent and reproduce (Cf. Scarbrough, Elizabeth. “Visiting the Ruins of Detroit: Exploitation or Cultural Tourism?” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (2016)). Thus the social relativity of time and social stratigraphy come to appear not just as complementary instances of the principle of heterogeneous time, but as normative antagonists. One wishes Dawdy might have explored this tension more explicitly.

Indeed, the next chapter, “A Haunted House Society” pivots right back to the “aestheticized decay” of historic preservation efforts in the French Quarter. Dawdy cautions that we should not be too quick to adopt the cynical view that historic preservation is merely a ploy for tourism. On the contrary, she explains that the patina aesthetic is important to residents as well (p. 59). Historic preservation is classified as a “political act” that resists and critiques aspects of the modern world (p. 58). This critical nostalgia is not confined to the French Quarter, but extends to aspects of post-Katrina preservation as well. Dawdy describes the efforts of “Isaiah” to save his grandmother’s shotgun house in the Lower Ninth Ward from demolition. His nostalgia for the house is also critical of the “forces of white gentrification” and “bureaucratic roadblocks” that led to its demolition: to preserve the house would have been an act of resistance against these forces (p. 65). These examples serve to emphasize the importance of not painting historic preservation with a single brush, but they also highlight the disparities in the availability of resources for and interest in historic preservation in less affluent areas (which Dawdy acknowledges in passing at p. 79). It indicates that the uneven ways in which nostalgia is evoked should itself be the subject of criticism: critical nostalgia needs to be reflexive as well as outwardly directed. Dawdy seems more inclined to associate differences in the experience of nostalgia with heterogeneous time. She notes that the “historical unconscious” of the city is not experienced positively by all: “It depends upon which elements of history come to the fore, or how one’s family fits within the city’s social stratigraphy” (p. 77-78). We see here a descriptive mechanism capable of explaining different responses to the past, but it also prompts the relatively unexamined normative question of whether there is something profane, as Dawdy might put it, about nostalgia to live in an old New Orleans house built by slaves.

As the title suggests, this chapter is also deeply concerned with ghost stories, and the sense that objects and places have a certain spirit or *mana* that they are imbued with by the past. Influenced by Durkheim and Benjamin, Dawdy leans heavily on the religious-cum-fantastical association with

the idea that the draw of old places and things is somewhat mysterious and spooky, concluding that “in our heavily secularized society, we seem to be returning to a form so elementary it verges on the profane—everyday objects and their ghosts” (p. 80). The idea that there is something fantastical about the aura of the genuine that calls out for explanation is not unfamiliar in philosophical aesthetics. In a series of recent papers, in particular “Touch and the Experience of the Genuine,” (*British Journal of Aesthetics* 52, no. 4 (2012)) Carolyn Korsmeyer asks whether the value we place on the genuineness of objects is just “magical thinking.” She defends the value of genuineness by arguing that aesthetic experience is cognitively penetrable by the belief that something is real: if she is correct, then there’s not actually anything “magical” about magical thinking. Likewise, having so adeptly motivated the concern with aged things in her book, we might wonder whether it makes sense for Dawdy to invoke the seeming mystery of it. To be sure, she documents how the residents of New Orleans themselves read these associations in terms of *mana* and ghosts, but from the vantage point of Dawdy’s own arguments, these fantastical mechanisms seem otiose, and thus it’s unclear whether there’s really anything “profane” about them.

However, Dawdy rescues the profanity of patina, at least in one sense, in the following chapter, “French’ Things,” by charting the entanglements of “the good patina of faded beauty with the bad patina of mold and decay associated with unkempt morality” (p. 83). She notes that “the look of age is not unconnected to its sultry allure” (p. 82) and in this chapter, Dawdy explores the “orientalist aesthetics” (p. 87) of exoticized and eroticized age that haunt New Orleans’ storied brothels, and is bound up in their somewhat apocryphal “Frenchness”. Focusing on small things (souvenirs, rouge pots, perfume, etc.) Dawdy’s archaeological credentials come to the fore, but she also uses the associations of scent and memory conjured by perfume to reflect on broader features of New Orleans’ “patinated landscape of desire” (p. 91). In a particularly evocative passage, she discusses the “sentimental focus on the flora of New Orleans,” particularly post-Katrina, writing:

“There is something about the longevity of trees on the landscape as witnesses (and sometimes victims) to events over and beyond the human life span” (p. 99). These poetic reflections are not uncommon in Dawdy’s writing, and they imbue the book with a melancholy charm of its own.

In the fifth chapter, “The Antique Fetish” the relationship between patina and authenticity receives its most focused treatment. Dawdy is clear that material authenticity, a genuine connection with the past, is often less important than the look of age and the associations it engenders. As she puts it: “that fake patina works just as well in some cases highlights the fact that it is the qualia of the material appearance of age that is the relevant signifier in the present” (117). This chapter thus holds the most relevance for contemporary discussions in philosophical aesthetics about the value of authenticity and its relationship to aesthetic experience. Dawdy’s remarks, heavily informed by rich interviews with residents, are consonant with Korsmeyer’s discussions of the aesthetics of “age value” and the way in which Yuriko Saito has discussed the temporal associations of objects with aged appearances (*Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2007)). But the emphasis that Dawdy’s subjects place on the look of age itself breaks with the emphasis on genuineness with which these philosophers tend to be occupied. A particularly revealing exchange with an antiques dealer named “Tom” indicates how the right patina can be elevated over a genuine one. As Dawdy summarizes: “A ‘real true collector’ likes patina—and knows how to fake it” (p. 133).

Dawdy goes on in this chapter to discuss how the antique fetish can operate as a critical check on commodity fetishism (p. 137ff). The way Dawdy sees the aura of heirlooms and antiques challenging the commodification of objects, turning them into things that we steward rather than really own (p. 152), is familiar in recent work on cultural property. But as that literature has revealed (for example, Wylie, Alison. “The Promise and Perils of an Ethic of Stewardship,” in *Embedding Ethics*, ed. Lynn Meskell and Peter Pels. Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005) the stewardship model can introduce its own ethical problems. In the context of cities and historic preservation, the elevation of

houses and landscapes to an historical treasure that must be stewarded into the future can challenge the benefits of property ownership and autonomy for those most in need of it.

In the introduction, Dawdy imagines the argument of her book “unfolding like an artichoke” (p. 19), but in the conclusion, she observes, “the central argument of this book has built up like patina itself” (p. 143). Far be it from me to criticize an author for employing two different metaphors to illustrate the same thing; indeed, there is something ultimately appropriate about the image of a patinated artichoke, though no doubt not what Dawdy intended. Decay can indeed be beautiful, but not if you have to eat it. The critical nostalgia that Dawdy defends needs to be turned not just outward, but inward as well (p. 143). She does acknowledge at various points the ways in which a traumatic history can lead to a negative patina (p. 149), but the ubiquity of historical injustice and the misuses of nostalgia to reinforce it deserve to be incorporated into the conceptual framework of critical nostalgia itself. A nostalgia that risks insufficient attention to these legacies would be truly profane. Nevertheless, I ultimately favor Dawdy’s latter metaphor. This book is a richly layered text that will warrant frequent excavations, “chipping away,” as Dawdy would have it (p. 143) lest a further fascinating artifact be missed.