The Social Environment of the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

In 1852, Karl Marx wrote, “Men make their own history but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted.”¹ He may as well have been describing the American South and the social environment within which the Mann-Simons family members made their lives. The problematic nature of social relations in South Carolina (and the South in general) was indeed structural, centered on issues of African American entitlements, cultural citizenship and structural violence—often played out through the material world in the form of commodities.

Entitlements hinge on a person's ability to acquire different 'sets' of commodities—like property, but also like furnishings, clothing, food and shelter. Changes in legal and social structures that affect an individual's ability to acquire different commodities – one of the objectives of Jim Crow segregation – alter that individual's entitlement. While entitlements hinge on access to resources, access to resources is a function of cultural citizenship. Cultural citizenship defines levels of access to resources for different categories of individuals—be it in terms of race, class, gender or any other way a society divides itself. This is why Booker T. Washington wrote in 1899 that “The material, visible and tangible elements [of civilization] … teach a lesson that almost nothing else can.”²

The Mann-Simons family’s experience was part of this larger pattern of power, control and materiality in southern history; a historical pattern that can be understood today as subjugation or as self-determination. Both existed and both defined each other. The type of site, varieties of artifacts recovered, degrees of preservation and so on can influence whether we understand the story of the past through subjugation or self-determination. But perspective also depends on what the interpreter wants the focus to be. The focus of this essay is self-determination within the culture of subjugation that existed in the South from the end of Reconstruction (late 1870s) to just before the Great Depression (late 1920s). This is done for two reasons: first, the vast majority of artifacts recovered during archaeological excavations were deposited during this period; and second, stories of self-determination – success stories – are somewhat rare but much needed. The question thus becomes: what history did the Mann-Simons family’s members make for themselves within the circumstances they inherited?

During the early 18th century, plantations dominated South Carolina, socially and economically. And not surprisingly, social categorization was defined by race. This was a period characterized by great material differences between black and white individuals, but also a time with few legal distinctions—except, of course, that one person could own another. Material differences are found in quantities of items, but more significantly, difference was in terms of types of materials – wattle-and-daub dwellings

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versus frame construction or Colonoware (a coarse earthenware vessel type) versus English ceramics, for instance – that visually and symbolically differentiated black slaves from white planters. Starting in the early 19th century and continuing through the mid-19th century, difference in the types of materials possessed by black and white individuals decreased. This change was coupled with a radical increase in the number of legal distinctions and controls on behavior placed upon enslaved and free African Americans. Slave houses were increasingly of frame construction, arranged along “streets,” and rested on brick piers; Colonoware production decreased while English and American produced ceramic dishes became more common. This is not to imply that these material changes in any way altered social status or threatened the established hierarchy. Quite the contrary; this is simply the observation that as material culture came to share more commonalities in terms of types – as difference between types decreased – there was an increase in legal differentiation.

This is an important correlation to note, because at the end of the Civil War, the South was left with this material commonality, but the legal distinctions were wiped away (in theory if not practice). Reconstruction had begun. In South Carolina, 124 delegates (67 of whom were African American) wrote a new state constitution in January, 1867, granting suffrage rights to African Americans. Two months later, resistance on the part of white South Carolinians was great enough that the U.S. Congress abolished the state's government. By April 1870, African Americans had succeeded in holding the majority of all Richland County and Columbia City offices. But seemingly, not all white South Carolinians were overly worried: “We can control and direct the Negroes,” wrote South Carolina planter Wade Hampton in 1867, one of the wealthiest individuals in America, “if we act discreetly, and in my judgment the highest duty of every Southern man is to secure the good will and confidence of the Negro. Our future depends on this.”  

Hampton’s efforts to control the African American vote failed, but political control was quickly returned to white southerners just 10 years later, when President Rutherford B. Hayes kept his campaign promise to remove federal troops from the South and adopt a hands-off policy if he were elected. On 1 May 1877, he made the order and Reconstruction ended.

Post-Reconstruction was a time of African American disenfranchisement through official and unofficial discrimination. Prevalent racist thought in the South is evidenced in the way some white historians wrote about the end of Reconstruction. “After the desolation of the war, interest in art naturally suffered for some years,” wrote historian Harriet M. Salley of Columbia in 1936, “but with the restoration of white control, the indomitable spirit of Columbians soon asserted itself and gradually there was a revival of interest in” art and music (emphasis added).  

W.B. Nash, a prominent African American member of the South Carolina Republican party, observed that Reconstruction and military rule in South Carolina had little effect on dominant white ideology—white Southerners were “not conquered—not changed.”

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5 Moore, *Columbia and Richland County,* 1993:253.
This period of post-Reconstruction also marks the nationwide acceleration of consumerism and the beginnings of a national culture of consumption. As the variety and availability of consumer goods increased throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, so too did the opportunities for more people to consume a greater variety of goods in ever greater quantities.

The commonality of the material world was increasing at an exponential rate—an acceleration of the pattern already noted. In the American South, this democratization of goods, a new social potential – part reality, part fantasy – threatened to further erode the markers of social hierarchy and blur racialized boundaries. Completely ignoring the Civil Rights Act of 1875 (the 'separate-but-equal' act) and upheld by the United States Supreme Court, the reaction in the South was a tidal wave of ever-more restrictive 'Jim Crow' laws designed to restrict freedom of movement and curtail access to goods and services. All of these laws had a basis in the material world, designed to limit African American entitlements to schools, public facilities, public transportation, voting, employment, and free association.

Beyond formal laws was the 'etiquette' of Jim Crow. David Pilgrim, curator of the Jim Crow Museum in Big Rapids, Michigan, lists some of these rules of etiquette:

- Blacks and Whites were not supposed to eat together. If they did eat together, Whites were to be served first, and some sort of partition was to be placed between them.

- Under no circumstance was a Black male to offer to light the cigarette of a White female – that gesture implied intimacy.

- Blacks were not allowed to show affection toward one another in public, especially kissing, because it offended Whites.

- Jim Crow etiquette prescribed that Blacks were introduced to Whites, never Whites to Blacks. For example: "Mr. Peters (the White person), this is Charlie (the Black person), that I spoke to you about."

- Whites did not use courtesy titles of respect when referring to Blacks, for example, Mr., Mrs., Miss., Sir, or Ma'am. Instead, Blacks were called by their first names. Blacks had to use courtesy titles when referring to Whites, and were not allowed to call them by their first names.

- If a Black person rode in a car driven by a White person, the Black person sat in the back seat, or the back of a truck.

- White motorists had the right-of-way at all intersections.6

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Consumer space became a site of uneasy contention because at the same time white southerners proclaimed their superiority over African Americans, these same white business owners needed African American customers. This contention between white oppression and African American aspiration was evident in advertising: African Americans were more often than not the objects, and not the subjects, of consumer desire.  

By the early 20th century, the goal of advertising had shifted from a means of providing product information to an attempt to influence buyers. On regional and national scales, the advertising industry presented product advertisements that blatantly caricaturized, demeaned and disrespected African Americans. Products were marketed with names that included such derogatory terms as “mammy,” “pickaninny” “coon,” and “nigger.” Advertisements commonly featured African Americans with exaggerated physical features, ridiculous clothes and speaking in dialect. Marketers often portrayed African Americans in servient positions and ridiculed African Americans with social aspirations as mimicking white people or misusing technology. Although this disregard for human sensibilities did not extend to all products and companies – Kellogg’s, for example, began an aggressive campaign in the 1930s to attract more consumers to Corn Flakes by widely advertising in African American newspapers and periodicals—by and large, advertisers had turned the stereotype of African America into a commodity to sell other commodities.

Although marketers attempted to reach a broad cross-section of American society through advertising, most Americans at the turn-of-the-20th century still bought unlabeled goods such as sugar, flour, salt, soap and vinegar from bulk containers at local stores. African Americans were routinely subjected to second-class treatment in retail establishments. Conducting research on African American consumer behaviors in 1932, Paul Edwards noted:

In purchasing foods in bulk she [the African American female consumer] often not only suspects short weight, but has no way to assure herself as to quality. North and South the Negro all too often has been victimized by unscrupulous merchants. Brands have come to be relied on to provide protection in buying.
The growth and spread of a national mass-market brought with it branded goods, individual packaging, a one-price principle, mail-order retailers and chain stores.\(^{14}\) Brand name goods were standardized products produced by companies to win consumer trust and sell more products. As a result, brand name goods offered African American consumers a new kind of control over local discrimination and an effective strategy for evading the racism of local marketers.\(^{15}\) While consumer space was never free from racial bias, this growth and spread of a national mass-market forever changed the nature of the relationship between consumer and retailer.

African Americans also frequently used chain stores to avoid second-class treatment from local marketers. In the South, chain stores were commonly associated with somewhat more equitable treatment, since,

> It was traditional in the South, particularly in small cities, for Negro customers, upon entering a store, to wait until all white people were served before advancing to the clerks to make known their wants. The chains came along with a standard service for all customers and changed this condition overnight.\(^{16}\)

Likewise, by the late 19th century, mail-order outlets served to integrate individual consumers into the mass market and provided African Americans with an effective strategy for evading the racism of local marketers. Sears, Roebuck, and Company and Montgomery Ward provided a large array of products and gave access to the national market and a national identity without racial deference or a storekeeper’s prerogative in determining the quality of goods a consumer would receive.\(^{17}\)

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