Opening

In April of 2014, I stood with a team of archaeologists at the side of a landfill at the edge of the town of Alamogordo, New Mexico. We were joined by a film crew, contractors, consultants, minor celebrities, and a crowd of enthusiastic onlookers as a massive bucket loader tore into the stratigraphy of a abandoned landfill and extracted loads of household discard from the 1980s. The goal of this excavation was to confirm the urban legend that the video game maker Atari dumped truckloads of game cartridges in the Alamogordo landfill in 1983 as it struggled to remain solvent. The excavation attracted international attention and was the climax of a documentary film that framed the dig for the Atari games as the excavation of an era in both video game development and American consumer culture.

Some 350 miles to the west lies the Sonoran Desert. Each year hundreds of undocumented migrants attempt to cross this arid and unforgiving terrain to enter the United States. Jason De Leon’s Undocumented Migration Project documented and analyzed the material culture and forensic evidence for migrant border crossing. He interweaves the archaeological evidence with ethnographic accounts of the harrowing crossing of this lethal landscape. The goal of this work is both to humanize the cost of national borders and immigration policies which relies, in part, on the Sonoran desert as a deterrent. By documenting traces of immigration across this landscape, De Leon’s work reveals how U.S. policy and deeply seated attitudes push to the margins of American consciousness. The resulting book, the Land of Open Graves is a penetrating and vivid critique of U.S. border policy and demonstrates how material culture reveals both movement and policies that are meant to be invisible.

In Shannon Lee Dawdy’s study of contemporary New Orleans, in contrast, considers the visible evidence for time’s circuitous route through the city’s past. Her book, Patina, unpacks how residents of post-Katrina New Orleans understand the multiple temporalities visible in the historical fabric of the city, in heirlooms, and in the rituals present throughout the city. In Dawdy’s hands, the value of visible patina offers a material counter argument to modern, linear progress and consumer culture that speaks to the complicated and recursive history of New Orleans. Some 1,500 miles to the north, in the Bakken oil patch of North Dakota, oil patch workers gather for a Southern style meal in the dinning hall of a temporary “man camp” built to house the influx of people during the 21st century Bakken oil boom. Some of the units across the region installed to house temporary labor had sheltered families in Louisiana who had lost their homes from Katrina. In many ways, the contingent, boom-time Bakken reflects a quintessentially modern landscape shaped by the flow of people, capital, and fossil fuels.

If Dawdy’s sense of patina in New Orleans emerged from decades of careful work in that distinctive city and revealed narratives that exist outside of the flow of modern
time, the archaeology of the contemporary Bakken oil boom represents a necessarily more ephemeral undertaking designed to capture the moment of boom and a landscape defined by the global flow of people and capital. The archaeology of undocumented migration in the Sonoran desert speaks to the transnational tragedy of the global refugee crisis. The Atari excavation, for all its sensationalism and frivolity, reflects the key role that technology - particular video games - played in both our collective experiences of childhood and subsequent sense of nostalgia. These contexts and the many others archaeologists of the contemporary world produce a past in the present which goes beyond the ephemeral, the hidden, and the overlooked, to include the visible, material features that define the contemporary American experience. As Richard Gould observed in one of the earliest arguments for an archaeology of the contemporary world: “modern material culture studies have shown us that we are not always what we seem, even to ourselves.”

This introduction will set out some of the basic ideas that inform the archaeology of the contemporary American experience. In doing so, it will weave together four things. First, the introduction will highlight to contributions of American archaeology and archaeology of the American experience in the development of this global subfield in the late-20th and early 21st century. Second, the introduction will try to distinguish the goals of this early work and more recent efforts to define an archaeology of the contemporary world from ethnoarchaeology and traditional American historical archaeology. Third, among the defining features of archaeology of the contemporary world is its critical attitude toward time and the concept of contemporaneity in understanding how the past and the present coexist in the discipline. Finally, this leads to the complex issue of defining the archaeology of the contemporary world in a way that is chronologically, topically, conceptually, and geographically meaningful in an American context.

The phrase “archaeology of the contemporary world” or, as some have framed it, the archaeology or archaeologies of “the contemporary past” strikes many as oxymoronic. After all, the study of archaeology is the study of the “archaios” or the ancient or, more literally, the origins or the beginnings. In contrast, the term “contemporary” means at the same time (con+tempus). Combining archaeology and contemporary, to say nothing of the word “past” would seem to offer a temporal mishmash. The study of the past, of ancient things, or even origins explicitly would seem to mark the object of archaeological inquiry as fundamentally different from the contemplation of the contemporary. This tension, Harrison has argued has trapped archaeology of the contemporary in a “continuous cycle of self-justification” (Harrison 2011: 142). These effort to articulate and explain the field has done little to diminish interest in applying archaeology to the contemporary world and the last 30 years has seen a growing interest in both material culture and the archaeology “of and in the present.” This work, however, has not conclusively resolved the tension between archaeology as a discipline concerned with revealing the material culture of a the past and a discipline embodied in a set of methods that scholars can apply to their own world to produce new meanings. The definition of contemporaneity in an archaeology has created a new temporal framework for the production of archaeological knowledge. Locating the archaeologist and the object of study within the same time offers new opportunities to understand both archaeology as a method, but also the dynamism and diversity of the contemporary world.

A Short History of the Field
In recent years, here have been a number of efforts to survey of the field (Harrison and Schofield 2010; Harrison 2011; Harrison and xxxx 2018; Gonzalez-Ruibal 2019). These works have recognized the distinctive development of the field in an American context starting in the late 1970s, when American archaeologists took the lead in exploring archaeological approaches to contemporary material culture. Perhaps the earliest efforts in the U.S. to conduct field work on the contemporary world was Bill Rathje’s Tucson-based Garbage Project. We will return to this significant and long-standing project throughout this volume. Rathje made an important contribution to Michael Schiffer and Richard Gould 1981 effort to articulate an archaeology of contemporary American society. Subtitled “the archaeology of us” (1981), this edited volume, included contributions that situated the field amid a diverse range of perspectives from historical archaeology (Leone 1981) to anthropology (Eighmy 1981), and Wilke and Schiffer reflection on how the archaeology of the present can positively impact the teaching of the discipline (1981). William Rathje’s “manifesto on modern material-culture studies” stands as the most influential and widely cited article in this volume. It emphasized how an archaeology of the recent past could make four contributions to the field: “(1) teaching archaeological principles, (2) testing archaeological principles, (3) doing the archaeology of today, (4) relating our society to those of the past.” Rathje developed these ideas over the course of his “Garbage Project,” which started in 1973 and sought to document the garbage from a number of neighborhoods in Tucson and by the mid-1980s had started to conduct systematic excavations of landfills. This work both allowed Rathje to make a wide range of conclusions regarding modern discard and household behavior and popularized archaeological approaches to assemblages of modern material that were adapted from in well-established principles, methods, and practice. For Rathje, archaeological methods and principles could be separated from their focus on the past and applied to understand the present in new ways. In many ways, his approach framed the contributions in the second part of the Schiffer and Gould book. This consisted of a number of case studies that applied archaeological approaches to contemporary America from the discard of pennies to racial graffiti in Hawaii (Blake 1981), the archaeology of supermarkets (Bath 1981), the use of space in modern houses in Texas (Portnoy 1981), and patterns of household reuse in Tuscon, Arizona (Schiffer et al.). As a general rule, these projects also recognized the ethnoarchaeological potential in the study of contemporary behaviors and formation processes, but rather than using modern material culture to explain past actions, they turned their conclusions on contemporary society.

In the decades following the inauguration of Rathje’s garbage project and the publication of Schiffer and Gould some work continued to appear in an American setting, such as Michael Schiffer’s study of transistor radios (Schiffer 1992) or Larry Zimmerman’s archaeology of homelessness (e.g. Zimmerman 2000), but in relatively small numbers. Two books published at the turn of the 21st century, stimulated renewed interest in the archaeology of the contemporary world. P.M. Graves-Brown’s Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture (2000), drew heavily upon works central to the so-called material turn and the late-20th century interest in material and consumer culture (for a summary see: Hicks 2010). Intriguingly, Michael Schiffer’s contribution to this volume looked to behavioral archaeology as a way to critique the various interpretations used to understand the history of the early-20th century electric car. He showed that by studying of the design of the cars, the advertising material related to their sales, and the
history of their consumption, we could come a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of their histories. In the case of the decline in the electric car, Schiffer argued that gender and class shaped the function of the electric car in early-20th century society and accounted for their early-20th century decline more than technological change.

The second fundamental early-21st century work is Buchli and Lucas’s landmark 2001 publication. It included articles by Schiffer, Rathje, Laurie Wilkie and the Ludlow Collective. Schiffer and Majewski describe their efforts to document modern material culture as an expansive archaeology of consumerism which explicitly linked life-history of modern objects to their place within the social and technological relations. They offer a case study grounded in historical archaeology, late-19th century ceramics, to situate the archaeology of consumerism at the production, distribution, consumption and discard of these household goods. The contributions by Wilkie and the Ludlow Collective likewise locate their interest in the archaeology of contemporary American society in early 20th century material and non-textual artifacts served to articulate notions of race, memory, and resistance. Rathje’s article, in contrast, looks to the recent past with his “garbology” project, and, echoing Schiffer, strikes a multidisciplinary and inclusive tone arguing for an “integrated archaeology” that brings together many of the key trends in archaeological thought of the late-20th century from new archaeology to post-processualism. That being said, Rathje’s approach remains grounded in new and behavioral archaeology and stressed the rigorous, quantitative analysis of contemporary garbage from Tuscon could reveal behaviors that other forms of documentation would not.

Until recently, however, American contributions have remained relatively rare and distinct in their grounding in the American forms of historical archaeology. In the United States, historical archaeology developed in the 1970s and 1980s and remains deeply indebted to processual practices and the new archaeology. This has established the archaeology of the contemporary in the U.S. on a rather different trajectory its world counterpart (see Gonzalez-Ruibal 2019). The archaeology of the contemporary world in Europe has tended to draw on post-processual approaches inspired by Ian Hodder and Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley (1987) or the sociological studies of Daniel Miller and the so-called “material turn” (for a history of this see: Hicks 2010). Shanks and Tilley’s famous study of contemporary British and Swedish beer cans, for example, did less to consider the economic character of the beer cans, their contents, or their function, and more to consider the symbolic and social meaning of their design in the history of brewing, alcohol marketing, and social discipline in British and Sweden. This historically divergent trajectory manifests itself in the recently published Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World (Graves-Brown, Harrison, and Piccini 2014), which included fewer than ten of the 49 contributions from an American context.

Despite the divergent history of archaeology of the contemporary in the U.S., there are signs of convergence with its global counterparts. In practical terms, the emergence of venues that support the archaeology of the contemporary and a growing awareness of the global scope of contemporary culture informed the founding of the Journal of Contemporary Archaeology in 2014 and the publication of the Oxford Handbook in the same year, Oxford University Press inaugurated a series in Contemporary and Public Archaeology, and a steady stream of edited volumes, surveys, and well-regarded monographs on the topic. These works both demonstrated the potential of this kind of work to produce nuanced views of the contemporary situation and attracted growing
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attention to the work in an American context.

A Global and Historical Context

The growing number of outlets interested in the archaeology of the contemporary world reflects the expanding interest in this field and a willingness to embrace more expansive and diverse definitions for the recent past. In an American context, the archaeology of the recent past has always been part of the broader project of historical archaeology. Historical archaeology in the U.S. sought to study the period from the early 16th century until 50 years before the present, which coincides with the “50 year rule” that marks monuments and sites in the U.S. eligible for “archaeological” designation (Yoder 2014). While the term “historical archaeology” emphasizes the growing prevalence of texts during this period, the field itself has tended to focus on four interrelated areas that extend beyond the textual work: capitalism, colonialism, modernity, and Eurocentrism (Orser 1996). These areas, of course, remain significant in American society today, and, in many ways, have defined the experience of being American and living in the 21st century world.

The work of Mark Leone and Marxist archaeologists, who have prioritized class conflict and capitalism in the archaeology of the last two centuries. For Leone, this extended from research on Colonial Williamsburg to thoughtful critiques of contemporary Mormon culture and eventually a deeply engaged archaeology of 18th and 19th century Annapolis. All of this work sought to disrupt contemporary views of a triumphalist and sanitized image of America’s past, and demonstrated how capitalism produced the inequalities that shape 21st century American life. The interest in the tensions created by capitalist class conflict has shaped the work of Charles Orser, Paul Mullins, Paul Shackel, Christopher Matthews and others to explore the intersection of race, class, consumer culture, and identity in the 19th and 20th century. Their work has generally challenged studies of material culture that emphasized the autonomy of consumers and their ability to create identities for themselves. Instead, these scholars have scrutinized the ways that access to goods promoted ideologies across race, gender, and class that, in turn, structured relations within society. While this is generalizing a diverse and expansive body of scholarship, it reflects a theoretical and conceptual positions that distinguishes historical archaeology from the broader range of modern material culture studies.

Historical archaeology, in recent years, has experienced an expansion in scope to include global perspectives as well as the more recent past. Some of this emerged from a realization that the “haunts” of historical archaeology are global in scope (see Voss 2010) and the commitments to Marxist and critical theory invites comparative and synthetic perspectives (Hicks 2004). Matthew Johnson’s work, for example, reveals the interconnectedness of the landscapes on the Atlantic coasts in North America and Britain (Johnson 1996) and Martin Hall’s comparative archaeology of the Chesapeake and South Africa reinforces the global applicability of approaches. Historical archaeology has also recognized parallels with projects like “industrial archaeology” in the U.K. which shares an interest in the ruins of industry left behind by post-war de-industrialization. Likewise, an interest in the archaeology of cities as dense assemblages of material culture, economic forces, race, and history, has emerged in both the U.S. and the U.K. driven in part by national heritage legislation and the fraught opportunities presented by post-war development and urban renewal efforts (Dawdy 2010; Staski 2008; Rothschild and Wall 2016).
The trends toward a global historical archaeology has anticipated archaeology of the 21st century. The archaeology of the contemporary American experience in some ways must follow the expansion of the United State’s influence in the post-war period, and trace the increasingly global flow of capital and culture in a world in which national boundaries are less definitive expressions of provenience than the place of artifacts and individuals within the global supply chains. [Liquid modernity Bauman 2000]. Moreover, historical archaeology’s longstanding interest in the effects of capitalism and the historical roots of contemporary inequality in challenges like climate change, ecological degradation, war, migration, and poverty do not respect national boundaries or lend themselves to national solutions. These challenges are both part of the American experience and transnational phenomenon. Archaeological approaches to understanding or contributing to the amelioration or resolution of these crises whether through policy or social change reminds us that archaeology is globally situated and that daily life reflects the constant interplay our experiences as local and global denizens. This is not to subordinate the persistence and significance of local and indigenous expression (e.g. González-Ruibal 2014; Gnecco 2013; Matthews 2007), but to suggest that an archaeology of the contemporary recognizes that our concept of the local is increasingly defined by the ubiquity of a global culture. In short, an archaeology of the contemporary American experience and the archaeology of the contemporary world find ample common ground in the need to negotiate the challenges of globalization in post-war era and 21st century.

**Time and Contemporaneity**

If the roots of historical archaeology, the various interests at the core of this field, and its increasingly global scope provides a clear framework for the development of archaeology of the contemporary world in an American context, the issue of contemporaneity offers a point of departure between the two subfields. Among historical archaeologists there exists strong interest in using the past to inform and reform the present by laying bear the foundations of racial, economic, or broadly social inequality. This approach, however, recognizes that the past and the present exist as separate, if related times and places, with the former informing the latter. A similar approach to bridging a gap between the present and the past comes from ethnoarchaeology, which studies of contemporary practices to understand the practices in the past. This effort to bridge the gap between the present of the archaeologist and a time that was both separate from and in some way similar to the present. The recognized barrier between the past and the present often appears to be self-evident in archaeological practice. For example, excavation works to reveal a past that was otherwise hidden from view. In many cases the application of archaeological methods separates archaeologists from their objects of study. In fact, with Rathje sound to justify the archaeology of “us,” he described how archaeological methods even applied to contemporary trash from suburban homes, allowed the archaeologist sufficient distance necessary for archaeological interpretation.

The separation between the past and the present is fundamental to how archaeologists view time. In general, archaeologists regard time as linear or at very least sequential. This coincides the archaeology’s modern roots and the idea of progress and resonates with archaeological practices that seek to seriate objects, to arrange strata temporally, and to understand the development and diffusion of cultures over time (Thomas 2004). This same commitment to linear time, however, often presupposes that
past civilizations culminated in the modern present. This encourages a view that past societies are incomplete, “other,” and, in many cases, inferior to the present time of the archaeologist. This view of the past also reinforces the relentless pressure for innovation within modern capitalism, the view of certain parts of the globe as part of the “developing world,” and a distain for obsolescence. In this context, our understanding of the past becomes an opportunity to celebrate the triumph of the present and the potential of the future.

This understanding of modern, progressive, linear time has problems, of course. Not only has it formed a justification for various exploitative colonial encounters around the world which claimed to elevate or accelerate the development of non-Western people, but also undermines how we understand our place as archaeologists in producing the past in the present. Gavin Lucas significantly stresses the difference between contemporaneity and synchrony with contemporaneity primarily indicating “a relation between objects” (Lucas 2015) rather just existing at the same time. The archaeology of the contemporary world implies that the archaeology and the archaeologists exist at the same time and have a relationship to each other. For Lucas and most archaeologists of the contemporary world, the concept of contemporaneity articulates the past in the present in a way that resists stratigraphic sequencing or the linear ordering of time. The tension between archaeologist’s interest in seriation and synchrony and the experience of contemporaneity served as a useful challenge to linear views of time, progress, and modernity.

An emphasis on contemporaneity has inspired archaeologists of the contemporary to think more broadly about how we frame our work temporally. For example, Shannon Lee Dawdy’s work on post-Katrina New Orleans demonstrated how patina physically inscribes the past in the contemporary world and offers a challenged modern views of obsolescence and progress that seek to erase the past. Laurent Olivier has similarly argued that archaeological time has parallels with the working of memory (2015). The irrationality of objects and time within the unconscious causes events, objects, and places to appear and disappear from our memory driven by stimuli that we do not control or understand. The ability of the past and the present to co-exist in the contemporary world has led to increasing scrutiny of the very idea of pastness. Dawdy stressed that objects with patina need not be particular ancient or valuable. Patinated objects might carry personal significance for an individual or represent a critical moment for a community. Cornelius Holtorf suggested that pastness nevertheless remains a key element in establishing the authenticity of the archaeological object. The pastness of an object is not simply an material or chronological function. An object need not look old, or even be old, to embody pastness. Significantly he argues that how we narrate the past and its relationship to the present plays a key role in producing meaningful pasts.

As we have noted, archaeologists often establish the relationship between past and present through a series of methodological moves that define our object of study. Excavation, for example, establishes the pastness of objects by revealing them beneath the very ground of the present. The careful scrutiny of objects and attention to signs of use, wear, and patina produces narratives that locate the object in relation to other agents to separate it from the present and to create a sense of pastness. The ironic work of archaeology seeks out the occluded to reveal the hidden reality of objects and our experiences.

If we also assume that an object is contemporary with other objects, the present, and, of course, the archaeologist, and not essentially of the past, then we complicate the
traditional narrative and methodological strategies of archaeology that seek to locate objects within the linear time of the modern world. If an object can be both past and present, can exist and be revealed by archaeology, and be contemporary with our own experiences, this challenges notions of progress, obsolescence, and relentless pressures to innovate inherent to capitalism. This, in part, explains the goal of archaeology of the contemporary world to embrace the ruin, patina, the persistent, and the marginal. As Buchli and Lucas noted at the turn of the 21st century, archaeology of the contemporary world can “constitute the unconstituted.” In other words, it is not simply the work of alienating the familiar through methods, but also the work of articulating the uncanny, the abject, and the traumatic, and even the ephemeral and banal.

To do this, however, archaeology of the contemporary world has developed more experimental practices, methods, and forms of recording. Rodney Harrison famously suggested that we embrace the surface assemblage as the method and model for an archaeology of the contemporary. The lack of stratigraphic distinction between the deposits insists that we consider the objects as all existing in the present and the assemblage itself the product of sampling strategies established by the archaeologist. Other archaeologists have explored the potential for different narrative structures that abandon the linearity of the modern novel, for example, or the ironic posture of 19th century history in exchange for different ways to understand the relationship between us and objects. Archaeologists of the contemporary world have looked to poetry, more experimental narrative styles, and the use of images, photographs, and mixed media projects to explore the relationship between objects, places, and the archaeologist. This experimental approach to narrative often combines genres to achieve parataxis, for example, juxtaposes different images, narratives, and descriptions and creates the potential for different understanding of time, agency, and objects.

**Toward a Definition**

The archaeology of the contemporary American experience exists at a dynamic intersection of traditional practices and innovative ways of understanding our relationship with the past and present. This means that any definition of the archaeology of the contemporary must be both provisional and flexible enough to reflect the range of contributions present under this broad banner. The chronological definition of the contemporary world will have less to do with some narrow period centered on the present, and more to do with the predominant economic, political, and social conditions of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This period saw the ascendance of neoliberal economic programs, the development of the internet and greater access to digital technologies, an accelerated pace of globalization with the end of the Cold War, and a growing anxiety surrounding the human wrought changes in the environment. Moreover, many archaeologists working in the second decade of the 21st century experienced these changes first hand. It also coincides with material that falls within the last 50 years and outside of the conventional (and legal) definitions of protected heritage in the United States. This chronological definition, of course, does not limit our interest only to objects manufactured over the last 50 years or identified closely with this span of time. This book will also follow the lead of Shannon Lee Dawdy, Laurent Olivier, and Alfredo González-Ruibal in recognizing the role of the most distant past in the present and how the interplay between the past and the contemporary complicates the persistent linearity of the modern narrative.

As for the geographic definition of this work, most of the examples will derive from
North America and the United States more narrowly. In this way, the book recognizes and seeks to trace a distinctive character of the American experience which in large part reflects the priorities present in the field of historical archaeology. At the same time, trends in globalization and the increasingly fluid movement of goods, capital, and individuals over the last 50 years has introduced significant complexity to traditional definitions of historically constituted regions. The concept of “late sovereignty,” for example, articulates the increasingly blurred boundaries that define the authority of sovereign states in the 21st century. The political and economic power of multinational corporations and the reach of the internet across national boundaries contributes to a declining sense of geographically defined cultures and experiences. The rise of non-descript non-places at a global scale and the mass movement of populations displaced by political and economic forces has further eroded a sense of provenience and distinctly national experience. This book will still focus on the United States and North America, but it will also be attuned to the various courses of influence, capital and movement that transform the contemporary world.

This Book

Despite the innovative practices of narration associated with archaeology of the contemporary world, this book will be rather more conventional in its approach. At the same time, the book will alternately survey the field and delve deeply into particular case studies to contextualize the archaeology of the contemporary American experience within the traditional of American historical archaeology, global perspectives on the archaeology of contemporary world, and recent considerations of the role of time and narrative in archaeological practice. Specifically, this book has two parts. The first part considers the recent attention to things and objects and considers the changing character of archaeological context and is anchored in an analysis of the excavation of the famous Atari dump in the Alamogordo landfill. The second part of the book explores contemporary landscapes and situations with particular attention to time and movement. It concludes with a case study of the archaeology of the 21-century North Dakota oil boom and the Bakken oil patch.

The first chapter considers the context for the Alamogordo Atari excavation. This irregular excavation was organized by a documentary film company and funded by Microsoft for distribution over their Xbox console. The larger project sought to “prove” the well-known urban legend that Atari had dumped thousands of games in landfill of the desert town of Alamogordo in the 1980s (Reinhard 2015). The excavation itself of the landfill produced over a thousand Atari games as well as a wide range of household trash. The archaeology of the contemporary world recognized that the interest in these games was simultaneously a product of the 21st century American culture with its accelerated sense of nostalgia, and also within a distinctive 20th century assemblage of domestic and consumer waste. The method of documenting this excavation was similar to many salvage excavations, but also more complex as the objects that we recovered from the landfill were both media themselves and objects of significant attention in the national media.

Chapter 2 reframes the Atari excavation within a larger discussion of garbology, discard, and trash. From its origins in William Rathje’s garbology work in Tuscon, Arizona (Rathje and Murphy 1992) to the recent interest in landfills, scavenging, and recycling, the study of the archaeology of trash opened the door to new critiques of consumer culture, the formation of contemporary assemblages, and environmental
history. Recent work on discarded material culture involves sociological studies on scavenging, scrounging, and informal recycling and curation that produced distinctive assemblages of material and practices (e.g. Stickle 2017; Ferrell 2006). This chapter returns to the roots of archaeology in its interest in middens and trash and shows how contemporary American garbage presents the distinctive insights into consumer culture and values.

Chapter 3 returns to one of the most famous essays in archaeology of the contemporary world is C. Tilley and M. Shanks’ (1987) analysis of beer cans from Sweden and England. They famously urge archaeologists rely less on empirical methods and engage objects through the lens of cultural studies and as part of a more complex system of meaning making. In recent decades the rise of a distinctive “material culture studies” informed by new concepts of agency has provided approaches for studying objects as part of networks of human and material actors. This chapter reviews the diverse ways that archaeologists of the contemporary world have continued to reflect on our entanglement with objects in creating the experiences of life in New Orleans (Dawdy 2016), homelessness (e.g. Zimmerman 2011), American childhood (e.g. Wilkie 2010), and the anthropocene.

The final chapter of this section explores one of the more dynamic and compelling hybrid spaces for archaeology of the contemporary world: media archaeology. Originally framed by work in media studies, media archaeology considers the materiality of media and the relationship between technology, form, content, and culture. Archaeologists, for their part, have come to recognize the significance of digital objects and media for their own work in both a practical sense and as a conceptual problem for unpacking contemporary culture (e.g. various authors, JCA 2015). The materiality of an Atari cartridge or a Grateful Dead long-playing record (Parkman 2014), only tells part of their significance in an archaeological and cultural context. Michael Schiffer’s interest in portable radios (Schiffer 1991), for example, anticipated recent studies of the archaeology of computers and the internet. The development of digital archaeology and archaeogaming recognizes the extension of American culture into virtual worlds and digital spaces complete with digital objects that require documentation, curation, and preservation (Reinhard 2018). This chapter, then, explores approaches to objects and media that have shaped American culture.

The second part of the book examines particular landscapes and situations in 21st century American culture. Starting along the margins and emphasizing the growing precarity of certain groups in America and proceeding to examine the institutional and industrial landscapes, this section will explore case-studies that trace the contours of archaeology at a scale intended to reflect the expansive and complex problems facing American society. The focus on assemblages that

Chapter 5 documents groups and individuals who produce particularly ephemeral artifactual signatures or fall to the margins of traditional documentation practices. Larry Zimmerman’s archaeology of homelessness (Zimmerman 2013; Zimmerman and Welsh 2011) and Jason De Leon’s detailed study (2015) of the distribution of objects associated with migrants demonstrate how archaeological methods can produce significant new understandings of historically and socially marginal groups. Similar interest in the material traces of short-term events ranging from the Occupy movement encampments (e.g. Singleton 2017; Simms and Riel-Salvatore 2016) to the remains of the Burning Man festival (White 2013) offer case studies for how archaeology can tell complicating stories that challenge and enrich conventional narratives. This chapter will demonstrate that objects, landscapes, and precarious places can reveal otherwise overlooked, marginal,
or ephemeral events that constitute modern forms of community.

Chapter 6 moves from ephemeral and marginal spaces of the contemporary landscape to more persistent institutional spaces where archaeological landscapes often dominated by deeply inscribed expressions of authority or influence. University campuses (Camp 2010; Miller 2017, Webmore xxxx), military bases (Myers 2010), and public spaces and infrastructure define significant spaces in the American landscape that both function as markers of power, authority, and ideology and preserve traces of subversion, resistance, and re-interpretation. The archaeology of contemporary campus life, for example, leaves intriguing traces in abandoned buildings and in discard patterns along well-manicured campus walkways. The archaeology of military bases and outposts negotiates the tension between visible projections of power and the hidden work of military authority often best documented through satellite and remote images. This chapter emphasizes how the archaeology of contemporary institutional landscapes offers a critical and subversive approach to our manicured and manipulated material surroundings.

Chapter 7 considers the emergence of ruin porn and the photographic documentation of extractive landscapes as a particularly visible critique of the detritus of the modern world. The well-established field of industrial archaeology with its distinctive place in American historical archaeology overlaps with the tradition of mining archaeology in the American west (e.g. White 2017; Hardesty 2010). These fields are increasingly infused with approaches developed by environmental historians, landscape archaeology, climate criticism, and petroculture. This chapter focuses on recent work on how industrial and extractive landscapes— from the toxic Berkeley pit mine of Butte, Montana (LeCain 2009) to the archaeology of space (O’Leary and Capelotti 2015) — excavate the roots of both our everyday modernity and our hopes (and fears) for the future.

The final chapter returns to a more in-depth treatment of a case study. The North Dakota Man Camp Project (2012-2017) documented workforce housing in the Bakken oil patch of North Dakota during both the height and decline of the Bakken Oil Boom. The rapid increase in drilling for oil and infrastructural improvement in the relatively remote and sparsely populated Bakken counties led to a significant influx of workers from outside the region. To house these workers, a wide array of short-term settlements emerged from prefabricated workforce housing units to motley camps of RV trailers towed to the region by the workers themselves. The penultimate chapter will consider the intersection of extractive landscapes, precarity, and a 21st century sense of home.