

Strategic consumption: Archaeological evidence for costly signaling among enslaved men and women in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake

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Presentation Draft

Slides Attached

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(Slide 1) The past two decades have witnessed a growing consensus among social and economic historians that the "consumer revolution" was among the most significant developments in the history of the early-modern Atlantic World. **(Slide 2)** The availability and importance of material culture at all scales, from houses to ceramic wares, **(Slide 3)** accelerated throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries. **(Slide 4)** During this same period, the Atlantic region was transformed by the influx of people who spoke unfamiliar languages and employed different social customs. As they came together in living and working situations, old ways of identifying status were no longer easily identified or universally understood. It was in this new world that the acquisition and use of consumer goods played an essential role in the strategies invented by people to communicate shifting social identities and conceptions of self.

(SLIDE 5) By the 1760s, residents across the English-speaking Atlantic sought artifacts made in newly fashionable styles to adorn their bodies and their tables. Primary sources, such as store and plantation account books, demonstrate that even slaves found ways to earn money which they then used to purchase items such as sugar, alcohol, tools, ceramic wares, and adornment items such as buttons and buckles. In addition to shopping in stores and markets, slaves traded and bartered with other slaves, free blacks, and their owners for items that were not part of weekly or yearly rations.

(Slide 6) Archaeological evidence from eighteenth-century slave quarter sites confirm that slaves found ways to earn money and that they spent a portion of what they earned acquiring fashionable consumer goods **(Slide 7)**. However, few historical or archaeological studies have sought to measure systematically these consumption patterns or to understand the contextual factors underlying these consumer activities. **(SLIDE 8)** Using archaeological data from 13 slave dwelling sites located in the greater Chesapeake region of Virginia, I demonstrate that the use and discard of costly goods, especially fashionable metal buttons and refined ceramic wares, increased dramatically among slaves during the last half of the 18th and first quarter of the 19th centuries. Signaling theory, as most recently discussed by Rebecca Bliege Bird and Eric Alden Smith in *Current Anthropology* and by Kelly McGuire and William Hildebrandt in *American Antiquity*, helps in understanding the factors that gave rise to this explosion in consumer activity among slaves and is particularly effective in providing expectations for how consumption-based costly signaling should pattern across sites.

Signaling theory is grounded in the idea that material and physical displays function as forms of communication among individuals and social groups. Such displays, especially those that involve economic or physical risks, can provide a range of essential information about an individual, from a person's economic and social standing to more intangible qualities such as psychological character, physical skill and stamina, and esoteric and cultural knowledge. Signaling theory contends that the successful communication of these often difficult-to-observe personal attributes is vital to establishing and maintaining relationships, especially with strangers or new acquaintances.

(SLIDE 9) Honest and costly signaling facilitates personal and group relationships by convincing receivers of the signal that social, economic, or political benefits can be gained through interaction with the signaler. A successful signaler is also the recipient of many benefits, some of which may include increased social status, the establishment of lucrative trading partnerships, and the selection of reliable long-term mates, all of which can be turned into resources that influence a person's short- and long-term fitness. The signaling model used here is based on the contention that the sacrifices, comprises, and physical risks required for the acquisition of non-essential goods made them ideal costly signals for enslaved people. I contend that slaves in turn used costly, non-provisioned items in a strategic manner to communicate effectively their abilities and achievements, attributes that made them valued social allies and mates as well as formidable competitors.

Here is how I plan to proceed: First, I use signaling theory to offer expectations about change in two classes of expensive, imported artifacts: metal buttons and refined ceramics. I then use an abundance index measure to estimate the discard rates of these artifact classes from plowzone contexts at 13 slave quarter sites. Negative binomial regression and principal component analysis are used to test my signaling expectations.

Metal Buttons and Refined Ceramics

(SLIDE 10) Although they may not look like much when they emerge from the archaeological record, metal buttons possess a number of compelling attributes that made them ideal for use in signaling displays. First, metal buttons are one artifact type introduced during the consumer revolution whose acquisition by slaves incurred substantial costs and conveyed little practical benefit since wood and bone buttons were readily available on

provisioned clothing and could be easily made. **(Slide 11)** Metal buttons were also portable and easily displayed items whose form and cost were finely tuned to shifting fashions thereby making them ideal signals of a person's ability to participate in the market economy. **(Slide 12)** Second, buttons are one of the few artifact classes that can be associated primarily with male social and economic activities. They featured prominently in 18th century male attire and were rarely found on women's clothing until the mid-19th century **(Slide 13)**.

Barbara Heath's analysis of store accounts in Virginia indicates that buttons ranked among the most popular items purchased by slaves (Heath 1999, 2004). **(SLIDE 14)** Metal buttons were not only decorative and easily displayed; they were also attached to attire not usually provisioned to male slaves, such as frock coats and vests. Buttons, and the clothing to which they were attached, were ideal signaling media for enslaved men.

(Slide 15) Costs linked to displayable fashions were also important determinants in the acquisition of ceramic vessels made in what I call "refined wares" -- porcelain, thin-bodied stonewares, and refined earthenwares. New vessel forms associated with the consumption of exotic and costly beverages such as punch, tea, and coffee were introduced in the mid-18th century and other forms—mugs, cups, and plates, replaced functional equivalents that had traditionally been made in wood, pewter, and coarse earthenware (Smart 1989, 1994). The shift in popularity to refined ceramic wares, and their constantly changing forms and decorative designs, represent an increase in the costs paid by consumers.

Refined imported ceramics dominate the slave quarter assemblages and the diversity of forms and ware-types indicate that not all were provisioned. Again, Heath's work with

store account books from Bedford and Campbell Counties in Virginia demonstrates that slaves purchased ceramics (Heath 1999:51). Plantation records also suggest that the preparation and presentation of food was the domain of enslaved women. If enslaved women had some control over the ceramics they used, high discard rates of costly ware-types and vessel forms may point to a woman's economic strength or position within the plantation.

Expectations

Signaling theory helps in predicting the contextual variables in the 18th century Chesapeake that may have influenced a slave's ability to acquire and display metal buttons and refined ceramics. **(SLIDE 16)** Agricultural and economic diversification during the last half of the eighteenth century, characterized by a shift from tobacco monoculture to the cultivation of wheat **(SLIDE 17)**, not only brought with it greater opportunities to earn cash but it also increased the range of technical skills among slaves. Documents tell us that slaves used their new skills to earn tips and make items to sell. **(SLIDE 18)** The mobility of skilled male slaves also increased as they were hired off plantations or given jobs that required them to travel. Demographic changes, such as the growth of urban centers, accelerated in the last half of the eighteenth century. Urban centers and markets also provided larger audiences, filled with potential mates, allies, and competitors, which increased the payoffs for signaling.

(SLIDE 19) Signaling theory predicts that people should invest more in costly goods when they interact more with larger numbers of people and when they interact with people who know little about them. We should expect to see greater discard of costly goods as

opportunities to interact with a more people on a regular basis increased and as the training in specialized trades provided slaves with better access to goods, cash, and mobility. We should therefore see greater intensity of signaling throughout the 18th century as plantations diversified and towns and cities grew.

(**Slide 20**) I used an abundance index measure, as seen here, to estimate discard for metal buttons and refined ceramics from 13 slave dwellings whose occupations span 100 years and that were located on plantations spread over a 100 mile radius. This measure was developed through a series of statistical tests which I'd be happy to discuss with anyone after this session. Having established a proxy for discard rates, I used negative binomial regression to test the effect of time on the index scores for both artifact classes. (**SLIDE 21**) As anticipated, the discard of metal buttons increased dramatically during the 18th and early-19th centuries.

Abundance indices were also calculated for all refined ceramic wares. (**SLIDE 22**) Again, we see a similar spike in refined ceramic use and discard. When the Pearson residuals from both regression models were used in Principal component analysis (**SLIDE 23**), it became clear that metal button and refined ceramic consumption are in fact correlated. These temporal trends and correlations are compelling and they suggest that economic and demographic changes during the last half of the 18th century *did* contribute to increased consumption of expensive and fashionable goods among enslaved people during the same period.

In this biplot we see the emergence of three different consumption groups when time is held constant: **(Slide 24)** this group of sites clearly under-consumed both metal buttons and refined ceramics, **(Slide 25)** these site consumed buttons in greater quantities than expected and **(Slide 26)** these sites consumed refined ceramics in greater quantities than anticipated by the temporal model. I suggest that these clusters indicate that individuals and households choose between two signaling strategies: one that focused on male signaling displays through clothing and one that concentrated efforts on signaling with ceramic wares used in dining and tea rituals.

As we might expect, signaling theory also anticipates that individuals should be anxious to acquire novel forms of material culture, such as new button styles and ceramic wares and vessel forms, as soon as increased availability or lower costs makes them affordable. Discard patterns that acknowledge an attention to changing fashions may point to men and women who were intent on maintaining costly displays by keeping up with the rapidly changing market. **(SLIDE 27)** For example, a silvery or “white” appearance to metal buttons was the most popular button fashion until the last few decades of the eighteenth century. By the late eighteenth century, however, fashions had shifted to favor yellow-colored buttons. **(Slide 28)** Button size was also a factor in regards to both cost and visibility. Large buttons, greater than or equal to 18mm in diameter, were worn primarily on overcoats and jackets and were highly visible. Small buttons, less than 18 mm, were mainly worn on vests and shirts, clothing items that were frequently covered with other garments. Acquisition and display of large yellow metal buttons in the last quarter of the eighteenth century would have signaled both financial resources and knowledge of current fashions.

(**SLIDE 29**) Principal component analysis that uses residuals from temporal models for specific button and ceramic ware types further highlights these groups and reveals some striking patterns. Where before we saw positive correlations between all metal buttons and all refined ceramics, we now see that the most costly large metal buttons are not correlated with the consumption of the most expensive refined ceramics: pearlware and Chinese porcelains. (**SLIDE 30**) In fact, pair-wise scatter plots of the residuals for large yellow buttons and Chinese porcelain show that no households consumed both Chinese Porcelain and large yellow buttons at levels greater than those predicted by the temporal model. The same holds true for Pearlware and all large metal buttons. These patterns suggest that most enslaved people chose or could only afford to maintain one type of costly signaling strategy: either an investment in the most fashionable buttons or the most current and costly refined ceramics.

(**SLIDE 31**) Going back to the biplot, we can tie these groupings to the historical variables outlined earlier. All of the sites with greater than expected quantities of metal buttons were located on agriculturally diversified plantations. (**SLIDE 32**) One was located within 1.5 miles of an urban center and (**Slide 33**) all three are within a two hour walk of a major town or city. (**Slide 34**) A separate logistic regression model also demonstrated that a button found at the Poplar Forest Quarter were percent more likely to be complete when it was made from white metal than when it is made from yellow metal indicating that enslaved men at Poplar Forest were consciously discarded usable but out-dated white metal buttons in favor of more expensive large yellow metal buttons that would have been clearly displayed on overcoats and frocks.

(SLIDE 35) These dwellings with high use and discard of fashionable buttons may have been lived in by young, mobile, unattached men whose desire for high quality mates or social allies spurred expenditures on costly and displayable goods. These results may also point to kin-groups in which the fashionable displays of adult males helped smooth economic transactions or created social ties with other slaves or free blacks in the area. Finally, it is possible that the consumption of fashionable buttons points to men in established relationships that developed mating strategies that extended beyond their wife or partner.

(SLIDE 36) All sites with greater than expected quantities of pearlware and Chinese porcelain, the most costly and fashionable refined ceramics in the last quarter of the 18th century, were located either within sight of Thomas Jefferson's house at Monticello or were lived in by members of the Hemings family, a large and extended family of skilled slaves who held prominent positions in Jefferson's house and craft workshops. **(SLIDE 37)** The Elizabeth Hemings site was inhabited by the matriarch of the family, who lived alone during her final years at Monticello. Households that consumed these ceramics to the exclusion of metal buttons may well point to kin-based households anchored by women who held a position in the main house or surrounding dependencies, jobs that at times rewarded their skills and provided them with access to goods not usually available to other slaves. These households may well have also included men, and together they worked extraordinarily hard to establish a foot-hold in a culture and economic system that sought to exclude them in almost every way. Located in close proximity to each other, signaling among individuals at these sites may have taken on a more intimate form of costly displays through small group dining and tea rituals.

(Slide 38) Slaves living in these households displayed their skills and their personalities through two different costly signaling strategies. Their ability to maintain costly and fashionable signals over time through dress and dining would have served them and their families well in social relationships and economic ventures. These household environments were fluid, however, and an individual's desire and ability to participate in the market economy were most certainly altered as children were born, as people aged, and as spouses or children died or were sold. Signaling theory and archaeological data provides an opportunity to understand these shifting states in a way previously unavailable to scholars.