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## Absence

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## Abstract and Keywords

Archaeological methodologies direct our attention towards the study of present, material things. This is frequently praised as its greatest contribution to social theory. But humans cultivate relationships with absent things as well, and these absent things can be marked and assertive, exerting a powerful influence on society despite their immateriality. How, then, to engage in an archaeological study of absent things? And how might we undertake this project without slipping into the romantic notion that absences are necessarily mournful, in the sense that so many authors now write of the absence of the past as tragedy of the present? Here, it is argued that this issue has a special relevance to the archaeology of the contemporary past, and the authors draw upon recent excavations at the New Buffalo Commune—a 1960s and 1970s hippie commune in New Mexico—to explore the shifting relationships between modernity and absence on the one hand, and between absence and desire on the other.

Keywords: absence, counterculture, hippies, primitivism, voluntary simplicity

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## 13.1 Introduction

INCREASINGLY, one encounters two quite different images of the modern world and its material condition. The more common presents modernity as a quantum proliferation of things, the implication being that the world is heavier now than ever before, stuffed cheek-to-jowl with an ever-expanding clutter of toasters, iPhones, baseball caps, skyscrapers, Styrofoam cups, and so on. ‘Humans are no longer by themselves,’ writes Bruno Latour (1999: 190), by which he means that modern society has come to be defined by the radical interdependence and intimacy of people and artefacts. To be modern is to

participate in material collectives of unprecedented scale, to delegate one's actions to non-humans like never before, to build one's self through a continuously unfolding web of alliances with things (Knorr Cetina 1997; Dant 2006: 290; Olsen 2010: 9–10; Olsen, this volume). 'The history of goods', writes Smail et al. (2011: 220), 'cannot help being a history of more and more stuff.' There is nothing particularly new about this claim. For centuries, dominant Western scholarship has portrayed social evolution as a great amassing of material possessions in which primitive things do not so much disappear as become relics and ruins, buried beneath the inexorable avalanche of new creations. From this perspective, industrialization and advanced global capitalism simply intensify a process of accumulation that began in the Neolithic (Hodder 2012).

But there is a second image of modernity in which industrialization and the mass production of things—rather than signifying material fullness—instead signify the profound emptiness and poverty of our current condition. Here, the logic is subtractive, and the focus is on how much has been lost in the course of modernization. There are many variants. Certain theologians and philosophers mourn the spiritual vacuum at the heart of the modern subject in the wake of secularism, the Bomb, and the rise of unbridled consumerism. Environmentalists decry the vanishing forests, shrinking ice caps, and the loss of 'nature' itself. Art historians and literary critics, for their part, entertain lengthy discussions of the alleged 'dematerialization of the world' as images replace objects and as signs eclipse their referents. And social commentators of many different stripes accuse capitalism of alienating us from the sensuous world of things. For them, modernity seems less a progressive accumulation of things than a tragic proliferation of losses.

Can we resolve these two opposed images? Is modernity any more or any less material than premodernity? Are we moderns really entangled with things more intimately than (p. 179) ever before? Conversely, are we really more alienated from the sensuous world than our predecessors?

The archaeology of the contemporary past is one of the few disciplines that might be interested in these sorts of questions. Archaeologists, of course, have already devoted a great deal of effort to tallying up and typologizing the material artefacts of the premodern world, and work by Rathje and Murphy (2001) and others (see Harrison and Schofield 2010) has demonstrated the great promise of applying archaeological methods to the study of the modern world as well. In this sense, a critical analysis of the relative 'materiality' of human history up to the contemporary moment would seem in reach. But even if archaeology were to take up this project, it would still be deficient in one key respect: whatever abilities we, as archaeologists, may have in the documentation of present things, we have yet to develop comparable techniques for the enumeration of the many absent things that also fill up the world around us. Archaeologists, not surprisingly,

have little taste for absence. Most ignore it altogether. Indeed, those archaeologists who do express an interest in the subject inevitably talk about absences as mournful and alienated from the start, like silent subalterns waiting to be ‘presenced’ through the gift of archaeology’s material evidence (e.g. Buchli and Lucas 2001; Harrison and Schofield 2010: 285; Olivier 2011). It goes without saying that there is no comparable enthusiasm within archaeology for absencing presence. Absence is inevitably treated as a problem to be solved.

In privileging presence, archaeology has plenty of company, of course, but there is something distinctive about the discipline’s methodological materialism that makes rigorous engagement with the problem of absence seem especially difficult (see Fowles 2008, 2010a). Evidential claims within archaeology traditionally depend on the mobilization of tangible objects or traces. Archaeology is the ‘discipline of things’ (Olsen et al. 2012); it is a mode of inquiry that stands ‘in defense of things’ (Olsen 2010), we are told. Missing things, that which is conspicuously not found, the non-occurrence of sites or shellfish or suntan lotion—absences such as these often possess at least as much cultural significance as the solid objects that get photographed and written up in reports. Most, however, would regard it as absurd to attempt an inventory of the crowds of things *not* encountered while in the field.

## 13.2 The New Buffalo Commune



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Figure 13.1 New Buffalo in 1967

(reproduced with permission from Lisa Law)

Here, we seek both to redress this methodological omission and to offer preliminary thoughts on the special relationship between absence and modernity through a brief consideration of the case of the New Buffalo Commune in New Mexico (Figure 13.1), which since 2008 has been the site of archaeological and oral historical research. New

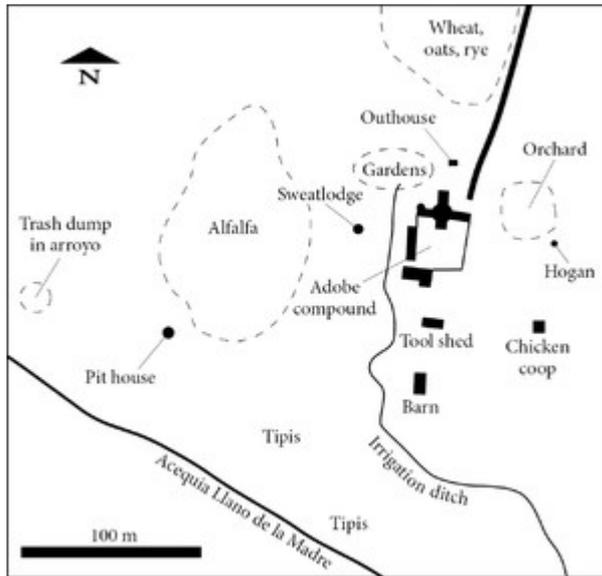
Buffalo was established in 1967 by a small group of young idealistic expatriates from

urban America, who fled to the sage-covered mesas of the Southwest in an effort to rebuild American society without the violence, inequality, and perceived artificiality of modern industrial life. 'Old way, good way' is how Robbie Gordon, one of the New Buffalo's early members, sums up the simple philosophy that guided the commune's early years. Such themes were common among 1960s hippies, of course, but New Buffalo was distinctive in that its version of the 'old way' was explicitly modelled on the nearby indigenous community at Taos Pueblo, which by the (p. 180) mid-twentieth century had come to be regarded by many Euro-American outsiders as a spiritual centre and a bastion of native non-modern ways. In fact, Taos Pueblo already had a venerable countercultural pedigree by the time long-haired drop-outs drove their painted school buses into town and dubbed the pueblo 'America's original commune'. Since the early 1920s, scores of bohemian artists and intellectuals had relocated to Taos, most hoping to find spiritual reinvigoration in the pueblo's 'ancient' ritual traditions and 'primitive' lifeways (Rudnick 1996). New Buffalo participated in this neo-primitivist tradition, but in a far more proletarian manner: most were there to retrain themselves in the lost arts of sustainable agricultural production, peaceful cohabitation, political equality, and spiritual exploration. They were, in their own words, 'a lost tribe who had forgotten how to live—to plant, dance, sing, raise children—and how to die' (as quoted in Houriet 1971: 140).

There are plenty of reasons to be interested in New Buffalo as an archaeological site. For those who lived through the revolutions of the 1960s, New Buffalo represents a quintessential locus of American counterculture, a place where a rural back-to-the-land strategy was pursued as an alternative to the violence and aggression of urban protest movements. Visited by the likes of Dennis Hopper, Timothy Leary, and Alan Ginsberg, and popularized in the film *Easy Rider*, New Buffalo has become a beloved icon of the hippie generation and an increasingly memorialized heritage site (for tributes, see Law 1987; Keltz 2000; Kopecky 2004). But it also provides a remarkable setting in which to investigate the politics of absence in the modern age. How did anti-capitalism, anti-materialism, and voluntary simplicity—central themes in the 1960s back-to-the-land movement—unfold in the material practices of day-to-day life? How might we undertake an archaeology that gave full analytical weight to all those things that the commune aggressively sought to do without?

(p. 181) The available evidence comes in three forms: archival materials (photographs, film clips, newspaper articles, personal journals), oral histories, and the material remains of the site itself, which continues to be run as an intentional farming and artistic community but also contains a number of ruins of the late 1960s and 1970s occupation. Among the latter are the crumbling remains of a large pit house, numerous tipi clearings, and a trash dump, all of which were excavated as part of our research, resulting in an

assemblage of artefacts now being used to structure object-oriented interviews with former commune residents.

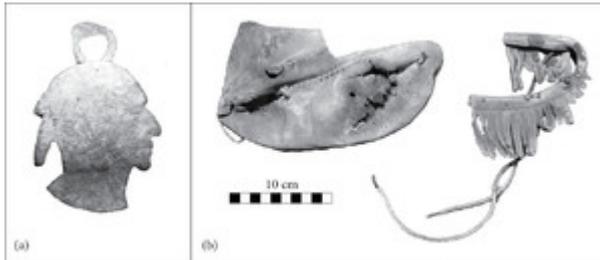


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Figure 13.2 Map of central New Buffalo, as it would have looked in 1973 (based on a drawing of the site by Tony Sommers in Kopecky 2004: xviii)

Needless to say, much can be learned about the practices and aspirations of the commune by attending, in a traditionally archaeological mode, to what is materially present. One is immediately struck, for instance, by the obvious use of architecture to signal the community's desired solidarity with American Indians. New Buffalo drew heavily on native symbolism, in name (as the buffalo sustained the Plains tribes, so was

'New Buffalo' supposed to sustain the hippies) and in form (the main compound was explicitly designed in the shape of the sacred sun symbol of Zia Pueblo) (Figure 13.2). Adobes were made on site, Ponderosa trees were gathered in the mountains, roofs were made of dirt, and elders from nearby Taos Pueblo were consulted for architectural guidance. Summer visitors typically resided in Plains-style tipis, or in the commune's Navajo-style hogan, or the Pueblo-style pit house. Rituals took place in peyote lodges, sweat lodges, and a large circular commons area alternately referred to as the Buffalo Room or the Kiva. Following Deloria (1998), all of this can be read within a long-standing Euro-American tradition of 'playing Indian'; however, at New Buffalo this project was undertaken with unusual gravity and purpose.



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 13.3 Excavated evidence of 'playing Indian' at New Buffalo: (a) = a silver Indian head pendant (approx. 3 cm tall); (b) = a leather moccasin

(photograph: Severin Fowles and Kaet Heupel)

(p. 182) Our archaeological research has added intimate detail to this picture. Certain personal effects pulled from the ground, for instance, reveal that hippie bodies were regularly decorated with Indian signifiers: moccasins, beads, an Indian head pendant (Figure 13.3).

Excavation of the New Buffalo pit house proved especially revealing (Figure 13.4). Mentioned only in passing in the surviving documents on the commune, the pit house nevertheless marked the commune's most concerted effort to align modern Euro-American domestic life with precolonial native practice. Architecturally, it was very much like the pit houses produced in the region a thousand years ago: the floor was composed of packed earth with a central basin hearth as the only evident feature; the walls were finished with a thin coat of simple clay plaster applied directly to the native soil; and a ventilator extended from the structure's eastern wall towards the rising sun. To dwell within this subterranean space, as members of the commune did for over a decade, was to commit to the flickering firelight, to the insects, and to an unmediated contact with the ground that had been part of Native American daily life for hundreds of years.



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 13.4 The pit house at New Buffalo, after excavation. Note the ventilator in shadow at upper right, the central basin hearth, and the two large rocks, apparently used as primitive furniture

(photograph: Severin Fowles and Kaet Heupel)



[Click to view larger](#)

*Figure 13.5* Select mass-produced commodities from the New Buffalo trash dump: (a) = 'Holsum' white sandwich and French bread bags; (b) = beer cans

(photograph: Severin Fowles and Kaet Heupel)

Many of the other artefacts recovered during our excavations complicate the image of New Buffalo as a back-to-the-land, neo-primitivist enterprise, however. Sustainable agriculture and, later, on-site dairy production figure prominently in the journals and oral histories of many former occupants, but actual consumption patterns—as evidenced in the trash left behind—point to a complex relationship with industrial, mass-produced commodities. Should it be at all surprising to

discover that an early 1970s trash deposit in the United States includes packaging debris for Hormel Vienna sausages, Minute Maid frozen limeade, Johnston's low-fat yogurt, and Bel-air unsweetened frozen blueberries? Only, perhaps, if those who discarded the trash expressly built their identities on an assertive non-engagement with such mainstream commodities. Indeed, a strange dissonance arises when one attempts to resolve the back-to-nature ethos of the community with deteriorating plastic fragments of a Holsum Enriched plain white sandwich bread bag (Figure 13.5a). (Holsum, not wholesome.) (p. 183)

(p. 184) That said, our informants regularly stress that New Buffalo's broadly anti-capitalist stance was of the waste-not-want-not variety that never looked a gift horse in the mouth. If someone brought industrial mass-produced commodities into the commune, they would surely be consumed. It is significant, in this respect, that our evidence reveals almost no commitment to particular brands, which would have been expected had the occupants been regular supermarket shoppers. Instead, an almost random pattern prevails with, for instance, eleven different brands represented in the group of seventy-nine rusted beer cans recovered from the trash deposit (Figure 13.5b). Such high variability signals a community that was quick to accept gifts, and readily partook of whatever came its way, but that never sought to define itself through stable brand commitments. As non-participants in the wage labour economy, most lacked the monetary resources to be regular shoppers anyway.

Much more could be said about the present material things of New Buffalo, but let us turn to the many absent things that also clutter the site. The commune, as we have noted, was built on a countercultural discourse of absence. Indeed, while there is no question that some residents sought to appropriate Native American traditions by wearing moccasins, living in tipis, taking peyote, and building with mud, others did not. Buddhism, acid, music, guns, subsistence farming—any of these might have served as the cornerstone for one's personal identity. The common thread that drew so many young people to the commune, then, was not the act of 'playing Indian' per se, so much as it was their unified rejection of certain restrictive or offensive aspects of mainstream American society. Like other countercultural experiments of the time, New Buffalo was characterized by its assertive absence of middle-class commitments to private ownership and rampant consumerism and by its elimination of conventional rules governing health, sex, spirituality, family structure, and drug use.

This resulted in a variety of conspicuous absences. The early construction of the commune's buildings, for instance, was nothing less than an anti-modern collective ritual, focused on doing without industrial products, tools, and conveniences; adobes were fashioned by hand and logs were laboriously stripped without the use of heavy machinery. Wood was chopped for heating and cooking, a daily labour that rehearsed non-reliance on coal, gas, or oil and the industries that supply them. The original buildings were purposely not wired for electricity. In time, the central kitchen and Buffalo Room were electrified, but individual sleeping areas and structures like the pit house were always off the grid during the commune years. 'No electric lights here', wrote one occupant in 1973:

only candles and kerosene lanterns illuminate dim figures in this great house lit by the night. We are people living in the earth—to be stumbled upon—in the great desert. This is the picture of being close to the earth. My window is right at ground level. I am actually underground...

(Kopecky 2004: 112)

The commune's ambivalent relationship with electricity paralleled—consciously, most likely—a similar ambivalence at nearby Taos Pueblo. After much debate regarding the balance between native tradition and Western conveniences, Taos finally accepted electricity during the 1970s with the proviso that no electricity be permitted in the sacred eastern half of the pueblo. It is the assertive absence of electricity (and plumbing and cars) in this sacred precinct that was of greatest cultural importance to the tribe. The same might be said of New Buffalo: that some spaces came to be electrified was probably less important than the fact that other spaces, like the commune's pit house and tipis, were not.



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 13.6 Unlikely artefacts from New Buffalo: (a) = men's clip-on tie; (b) = bra fragments

(photograph: Severin Fowles and Kaet Heupel)

(p. 185) Most things at the commune simultaneously marked a presence and an absence in this way. Consider another of New Buffalo's iconic structures: its communal outhouse, built in the late 1960s with an infamous row of eight cheek-to-cheek toilet seats. Beyond contributing to an unfortunate outbreak of hepatitis, the outhouse

materialized the residents' desire (1) to foreground, rather than hide, 'natural' processes, (2) to literally dismantle the walls separating female and male activities, and (3) to do so in a collectivist setting. At the same time, however, one must acknowledge that it was less the presence of the communal outhouse than the intentional absence of private bathroom facilities that would have been especially jarring to ex-suburbanites who joined the sixties revolution at New Buffalo. Again, 'doing without' was a conscious and creative act of self-fashioning.

This simple observation also helps us interpret the more unexpected artefacts uncovered during our excavations. What, for instance, is one to do with a men's black clip-on necktie (Figure 13.6a) or a women's high-heel shoe, both of which were among the remains in the trash dump? Such objects are wildly at odds with the aesthetics and, indeed, the politics of those who lived at the site, as conventionally understood. The tie that constrains the neck making it hard to breathe, the high-heel shoe that imprisons the foot making it difficult to walk—these were precisely the tools of middle-class bodily discipline that had supposedly been so roundly rejected. Were some hippies at New Buffalo really wearing ties and high heels?

The problem with the last question is that it is phrased entirely from a presentist perspective. Certainly the high-heel shoe in the trash dump has many potential meanings. But so too does the absence of the shoe on the foot of the woman who has thrown it away. In fact, the most plausible explanation for such an artefact is not that it was regularly worn on-site, but rather that it was discarded by one of the many women who were seeking escape from the confines of middle-class America. Identities are remade in the New Mexican desert every day, and in the sixties, the act of throwing away the trappings of one's former life was regarded in many circles as a productive act of voluntary non-

consumption. This was as true for neckties and high-heel shoes as for toiletries and televisions.

(p. 186) And it was especially true for another politicized category of objects that emerged from our trash dump excavations: bras. Here too, it would be wrong to focus solely on the presence of bras and bra fragments in the trash and not also on the absence of bras on the bodies of the women who discarded them. Photographs and oral histories suggest that women at New Buffalo generally did not wear bras; bralessness appears to have been both a matter of personal freedom and a statement of solidarity with broader feminist critiques of the bra as an instrument of oppression. We are again led to imagine the situation of a recent arrival to New Buffalo who soon decided that bras did not have a place in her new life. The objects ended up in the trash, only to be indiscreetly extracted by archaeologists four decades later (Figure 13.6b).

Similar events, needless to say, were taking place across the United State during the late 1960s. An organization known as the New York Radical Women (NYRW), for instance, famously coordinated a protest of the 1968 Miss America Beauty Pageant in Atlantic City in which the theatrical trashing of bras, high-heel shoes, hair curlers, and make-up was intended not just as a critique of the objectification of women but also as an indictment of the pageant organization itself, which, among other things, used women as instruments of consumerism to promote product lines. In concert with the protest, the NYRW organized a boycott of the pageant's sponsors. This critical stance became even more central to the group's identity when it reorganized in 1969 as the 'Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell' (WITCH) and started performing anti-capitalist hexes on Wall Street (Brownmiller 2000).

### 13.3 The Gods Must Be Crazy

The case of New Buffalo underscores the observation that an archaeology defined solely as 'the discipline of (present, material) things' is always bound to be blind in one eye. This is true whether we are talking about an archaeology of ancient remains or the study of the contemporary past. All species, needless to say, dwell in a world that is seamlessly filled with present things. Fish may not reflect upon the water they swim in, nor worms the dirt they dig in, but the water and the dirt, as material presences, are there all the same. With humans, it is a bit different. Our worlds are seamlessly material as well, but we always find ingenious ways to squeeze more in by surrounding ourselves with a proliferation of absent things that only exist and hold power as a consequence of human perception. There were plenty of female coyotes in northern New Mexico during the

1960s who went about braless, but it is safe to say that, for them, bralessness was nothing at all. Women on communes like New Buffalo, however, experienced bralessness as an absence that was strongly marked and influential in the same way that the cardboard and ink of a protest sign can be influential. Humans occupy worlds filled with present *and* absent things, and they build their lives using both. For those who grow up wearing bras, bralessness becomes a thing to contend with. In a society inundated by cars, computers, and cell phones, doing without such technologies becomes an act of rejection that one must constantly defend. Absences, no less than presences, can be expensive.

Absences frequently also require substantial construction projects. We have seen this in the countercultural rejection of industrial lifeways at New Buffalo, but the tradition of (p. 187) consciously labouring to 'do without' has a far deeper heritage. Indeed, counterculture is surely as old as culture itself (Fowles 2010b). Anthropology in the late 1960s was, in its own way, awakening to this idea just as protests were taking place outside classrooms and students were dropping out to join communes in rural New Mexico. Perhaps the most potent anthropological commentary produced during this period was by Marshall Sahlins (1972) who offered a re-reading of the ethnography of 'simple' hunter-gatherer societies that is now a common reference point for many anarcho-primitivist writers. For Sahlins, it is entirely misleading to interpret the hunter-gatherer's lack of agriculture, land ownership, surplus, fixed residences, technologies, and the like—in short, the hunter-gatherer's lack of property—as an inherently undesirable state of primitive poverty. On the contrary, argued Sahlins, such absences were actively protected precisely because they afforded a 'richer' life with greater freedoms and larger amounts of leisure time. Sahlins famously portrayed this as a Zen road to affluence in which material satisfaction is attained by wanting less rather than consuming more. In contrast, the capitalist's road to affluence—the quest for ever more things to sate a limitless desire—only began to spread during the early modern period, firstly through what Graeber (2011) refers to as the 'privatization of desire' and secondly as a consequence of the expansion of capitalist markets.

Sahlins' key contribution was to flip our understanding of 'primitive' societies from negative to positive. Shortly afterwards, Pierre Clastres (1989) published *Society Against the State*, which radicalized Sahlins' inversion by petitioning for the complete elimination of any image of primitivity as a 'pre-state' condition. All societies are haunted by the spectre of the 'state', he suggested; all societies imagine and defend against worlds of domination in which the few control the many. Consequently, there can be no meaningful anthropology of 'pre-state societies', nor even of 'non-state societies', but only an anthropology of state and *anti-state* societies, the latter defined by their assiduously preserved absence of political domination and wealth inequities to the same extent that

the former are defined by their aggressively institutionalized presence of political domination and their insatiable hoarding logics.

For the general public, the most iconic, quasi-anthropological image of a 'primitive' society defined by its rejection of the state came in 1980 with the wildly popular film, *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (dir. Jamie Uys). Drawing upon documentary-style voiceovers in staged ethnographic scenes of daily life among the Ju/'hoansi tribe of the Kalahari Desert, *The Gods Must Be Crazy* was a comedic, anti-modern parable informed by both Sahlins' depiction of the 'original affluent society' as well as the neo-tribal, back-to-the-land movements at communes like New Buffalo. The film's premise was memorable: while flying over the Kalahari, an airplane pilot tosses away a Coca-Cola bottle, which falls from the sky and into the lives of Xi and his fellow foragers who live in blissful innocence, entirely naïve to the modern industrial world. The Coca-Cola bottle—the quintessential mass-produced commodity—ironically creates havoc precisely because it is singular; it can be neither duplicated nor easily shared and so becomes the object of competition as well as the source of strange new desires to possess things. The social fabric begins to tear, and Xi is forced to undertake an epic journey to the ends of the earth where, in the final scene, he finally succeeds in eliminating personal property once again through the picturesque act of throwing the Coca-Cola bottle off a cliff.

These days, most anthropologists recoil at the slightest whiff of neo-primitivism. And anti-consumerist arguments are considered, at best, acts of overly simplistic, (p. 188) non-scholarly activism and at worst, an elitist romanticization of poverty. Neo-primitivist experiments of the 1960s and 1970s as well as popular films like *The Gods Must Be Crazy* did much to solidify this disciplinary cynicism. Both used anthropological knowledge in ways that made anthropologists very uncomfortable. A fair number of the hippies at New Buffalo, for instance, had books by Carlos Castaneda and Margaret Mead in their back pocket, and they knew enough about Native American ethnography to engage in what most academics would stigmatize as the disrespectful appropriation of indigenous culture. *The Gods Must Be Crazy* went even further in claiming a kind of anthropological knowledge base, yet it did so in the service of what anthropologists roundly regarded as thinly veiled racism—not just because it perpetuated dehumanized images of child-like primitives but also because these images were paired with absurd portrayals of black politicians and guerrillas that came straight out of the insidious logic of apartheid (Volkman 1985).

There are two issues to consider here. First, the fact that anthropologists may not want to personally endorse the statements or actions of neo-primitivist and anti-consumerist movements in no way means that such movements aren't themselves worth studying. Communes like New Buffalo have always been especially awkward objects of inquiry for

anthropologists, of course, precisely because their residents are so uncannily similar to anthropologists themselves. Again, a fair number of the hippies in the New Buffalo scene had taken anthropology courses in college. One, in fact, had originally come to New Mexico as a Ph.D. student, with intentions of writing an ethnography of a neighbouring commune. He eventually dropped out of graduate school, 'went native', and joined the hippies. In his case, 'going native' operated on two registers, insofar as it involved adopting the lifestyle of hippies who were busily adopting the lifestyle of American Indians (very loosely conceived). Hippie communes of the 1960s and 1970s, then, were peopled by rogue anthropologists, and this heightens their inauthenticity in the eyes of many scholars.

Second, scholarly cynicism about popular anti-consumerism has resulted in a reactionary embrace of popular consumerism, and this has left a strong mark on the material culture studies of both anthropologists and archaeologists. Daniel Miller has been quite explicit in this respect, attacking what he considers to be the dominant 'myth of the past, or of the primitive' in which an original lack of possessions is valorized as a form of 'true unmediated sociality' (1995: 21). A haughty disdain for consumer goods has gone hand-in-hand with this position, he suggests, perverting our anthropological understanding of the modern world. 'Not having things is no evidence that you don't want them,' writes Miller in response. 'An Amazonian Indian may be much more desirous of possessions than we are, but simply be unable to obtain them' (Miller 2010: 5). 'The very concept of poverty,' he emphasizes, 'rests upon the...assumption...that many people who don't have goods desire them' (Miller 1995: 20).

Surely this is unacceptable. Poverty is firstly an accusation, and only secondarily an internalized set of culturally constructed desires on the part of the accused. We should not forget that the remaining hunter-gatherers in sub-Saharan Africa had to be tricked and forced, against their will, into land ownership and participation in a capitalist economy; nor should we forget that the indigenous communities of the American Southwest only came to be labelled 'impoverished' once the Spanish conquistadors, seeking gold, invaded and realized the natives had none.

## **(p. 189) 13.4 Conclusion**

We are led, then, to three main conclusions. (1) Poverty is founded upon the cultural production of desire; desire is not a natural or originary state that the discourse of 'poverty' simply names, after the fact. (2) Primitivity is an ideological creation of civilization; civilization is not an evolutionary product of primitivity. (3) And absences—as artefacts of perception—always stand at the end of a history of human entanglement with

present things. Some absences certainly may be regrettable or even painful in the sense of being desired things in one's mind but not in one's grasp. As often as not, however, absences come to be the objects of desire themselves, and as ongoing construction projects, these absences become productive spaces of non-consumption or non-possession that are as much a part of the architecture of modernity as sports cars and skyscrapers (see Lemonnier, this volume).

What does this mean for an archaeology of the modern world, for our excavations of the contemporary past? Minimally, we might seek the inclusion of 'non-production' and 'non-consumption' as critical keywords alongside 'production' and 'consumption' in the next round of Oxford Handbooks. More ambitiously, we might aim for a reorientation of archaeological theory that would move us beyond presentist preoccupations altogether, beyond our traditional portrayals of history either as a great accumulation of durable things or as a tragic piling up of ruin upon ruin. Is the world more material than in the past? Has modernization filled our lives with unprecedented quantities of stuff? Are our actions today more deeply mediated by tangible objects than in hoary antiquity?

Absolutely not. Industrialism has obviously increased the net quantity of *industrial* things, but the world of the Ju/'hoansi forager is just as materially dense and present as the world of the Wall Street banker. Indeed, one cannot even say that what we are really talking about is the successive transformation of natural things into a proliferation of cultural or man-made things—and not just because the nature/culture divide turns out to be philosophically impossible. Tribal ethnographies repeatedly document the impressive degree to which pre-industrial societies *already* regarded their surroundings as fully constructed and maintained through human labour. The material worlds of humans, in other words, are never not manufactured.

If the net sum of present things hasn't changed, however, this is not to say that the net sum of absent things has been similarly stable. Absences are effects of perception, and it is precisely because they take up no space at all that one can pack an ever-increasing number of them into one's closet. Perhaps, then, John Zerzan (1994: 144) and his fellow anarcho-primitivists are correct in thinking about modernity as a vast, unfolding 'landscape of absence'. Capitalism depends on bottomless desire; it depends on the mass production of absent things in the lives of those who are then compelled to engage in the (ultimately futile) effort to eliminate their absences through marketplace purchases. In this sense, one might say that modernization has always been, first and foremost, a growing awareness of everything society lacks. Anti-moderns, for their part, also aspire towards a proliferation of absences, though their end goals obviously differ. Boycotts, strikes, voluntary simplicity, assertive non-consumption—these are among the many strategies they deploy to build (p. 190) meaningful and politically potent non-presences. The lesson is ultimately the same: any archaeology of the contemporary past that

restricts itself to the analysis of material things will be missing much of what makes the contemporary world what it is. Here we have advocated a negative methodology as an alternative.

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