

BOOK REVIEW

Objects, Materiality, and Persistence in the Black Atlantic

Insignificant Things: Amulets and the Art of Survival in the Early Black Atlantic

Matthew Francis Rarey. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023. Pp. 225. \$99.95, hardcover (ISBN: 9781478017158); \$26.95, paperback (ISBN: 9781478019855); ebook (ISBN: 9781478024422).

Hermann W. von Hesse 

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

(Received 1 September 2023; accepted 23 April 2024)

Keywords: West Africa; Central Africa; Atlantic World; African Diaspora; material culture; slavery; archives

In *Insignificant Things*, Matthew Rarey examines three centuries of history from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries in which enslaved Africans, their descendants, and other marginalized people turned to “apotropaic objects as tactics of survival” during the Middle Passage and in the lusophone diaspora (4–5). Though the use of amulets in the Iberian Peninsula predates *mandingas*, *bolsas*, and enslaved Africans, their ordinary uses often overlapped, likewise their labeling in the Portuguese Inquisition records. Despite their strong African influences, these amulets or *mandingas* were used by people of diverse racial, class, and religious backgrounds in the Afro-Portuguese/Portuguese imperial world in places as far afield as Madeira, Cape Verde, Brazil, Angola, and Portugal (2). These *mandingas* — usually in the form of pouches — supposedly protected wearers, particularly Africans and people of African ancestry, from “knife wounds, gunshots, and malevolent forces,” and helped them navigate the violence of enslavement and Portuguese oppression (3).

The book’s title, *Insignificant Things*, offers insights into Rarey’s methodology and key arguments. The author does not simply assume that the colonial archive mutes subaltern perspectives; rather, he seeks out, “insignificant things” — in the form of “*mandingas*,” “*bolsas*,” or amulets — which may seem innocuous and banal, but demonstrates how enslaved Africans and their descendants left their own traces in the archive. Though “insignificant” and “banal” from the Portuguese colonizers’ perspective, Rarey centers the history of *mandingas* to map how enslaved Africans used these objects to negotiate and resist their identities, enslavement, the Inquisition, and violence in the Portuguese Empire (5). Rarey explains that these objects’ “visually banal form; surreptitious display, and inherent mobility” did more than facilitate Africans’ survival in the violent context of the Middle Passage (5). Central to Rarey’s analysis is his insistence on centering banal objects like *bolsas* or *mandingas*, which were designed to avoid the Inquisition’s detection or our own (art) historical analysis. By this methodological approach, Rarey criticizes the Anglo-American centric focus of African/Black diaspora studies and Saidiya Hartman’s idea of “critical fabulation” (25). For Hartman, colonial archives cannot recover Black lives and therefore the need to creatively reimagine such experiences. However, by moving beyond Hartman’s and Black studies scholars’ nineteenth and early twentieth century mostly English-language American archives, Rarey’s study reveals an embarrassment of Black subaltern voices and the quotidian lives of enslaved Africans, such as

West African and Mina-born Jacques Viegas. Through Viegas's trial record, Rarey sets up the book's hook, a narrative that unifies the four chapters and epilogue that follows.

Put simply, the colonial archives Rarey explains may seem to occlude enslaved African voices and agencies until we carefully read their material legacies (such as mandingas). Rarey uses these extant "insignificant" objects as a prism to reexamine long standing questions in African diaspora art, slavery history, and Atlantic visual culture studies. Despite its widespread use across the Atlantic World, the term *Mandinga*, Rarey explains, referred to *Malinke/Mande*, or its anglicized version, *Mandingo*. The connection to this West African ethnonym, according to Rarey, "helps us reframe understandings about the emergence of ethnic identities in the wake of the internal African and Atlantic slave trades" (6, 16). More so, the West African connection speaks to the multicultural context in which the fusion of Islamic and indigenous religious beliefs produced protective objects that rehearsed the uses for which Africans in the diaspora put mandingas. Rarey shows how the contents and construction of these amulets encode the stories of how captives coped with, negotiated their new conditions, and protected themselves whether on the continent or across the Atlantic.

In line with the biographical turn in African Atlantic history, *Insignificant Things* centers the lived experiences and quotidian lives of people of African descent who owned or were accused of illegally possessing mandingas.¹ In order to enforce Catholic orthodoxy, imperial authorities prohibited all African ritual objects or amulets other than Church sacramentals (see 76–77, 88–89, and 91–103). Rarey was able to recover the biographies of Viegas and several others because their lives and insignificant objects were well preserved in the Portuguese Inquisition and trial records. Born in an era of state collapse, slave raiding, and political disintegration, Viegas was kidnapped and disembarked in Portugal, and lived in Lisbon, a cosmopolitan city with a sizable Black minority (8). But Lisbon's role as an important cosmopolitan node in the Atlantic exchange of bodies, objects, and lives also meant that the Church and Portuguese Imperial authorities raised concerns about the city's "religious life" and Catholic orthodoxy. The Church through its artists not only expressed anxieties about Portugal's society but moralized and depicted these concerns in paintings as hellish dystopias (9).

Amid this cosmopolitanism and alternative spiritualities, the Inquisition began to confiscate mandingas and try Africans and people of African descent for possessing "insignificant things." It is important to note that such objects were never possessed by a single race or ethnic group. Rather than simply focusing on mandingas as "emblems of cultural practices" from Africa or "new religious universes," Rarey emphasizes these objects as dynamic responses to "interpersonal violence, cultural displacement, and institutional power emerging from the intersections of slavery, commodity exchange, and religious transformations in the Black Atlantic" (16). According to Rarey, mandingas embody the historical interactions between Islam, Catholicism, and other African belief systems within the continent and in the diaspora (16). The enslaved manufacturers of mandingas drew on a *mélange* of material and spiritual sources that defy categories such as Islamic, Catholic, and indigenous religious objects, incantations, or imagery (28, 76–77, 88–89, and 91–103). Through this approach, Rarey puts unassuming art works or artifacts at the center of transatlantic debates about power and "religious experimentation" (see 18). In highlighting African and diasporic cultural dynamism, Rarey rightly criticizes Melville Herskovits's "unfortunate legacy" of "seeing African societies as static, defacto antecedents to American history, as opposed to vibrant, shifting cultures" that evolved after the slave trade (16–17). For Rarey, *mandinga* themselves are clear evidence of that dynamism.

¹For examples of the biographical and cultural turn see James Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Mariana Candido, *An African Slaving Port and the Atlantic World: Benguela and Its Hinterland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Pernille Ipsen, *Daughters of the Trade: Atlantic Slavers and Interracial Marriage on the Gold Coast* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2015).

In Chapter One, Rarey traces the parallel emergence of Mina and Mandinga ethnonyms and how these got decoupled from their West African origins and became synonymous with “*feitico*” (“fetish”) — a word referring to “a range of invisible malevolent forces as well as to the material objects that controlled, manipulated, or counteracted them” (28). Chapter Two discusses the contents of Viegas’s mandinga pouch and how that was written into his inquisitorial trial. By analyzing the multicultural contents of the pouch, Rarey argues against contemporaneous Iberian and modern scholarly labelling of these contents as “Catholic,” “Islamic,” and “African.” For Rarey, users’ deployment of these contents was pragmatic and innovative and defied any such categorization (28). In Chapter Three, “Markings,” Rarey foregrounds the inscribed paper contained in Viegas’s pouch as a “key constitutive element” meant to protect him from bodily violation. By closely reading and analyzing the handwritten papers, drawings, and orations once contained in Viegas’s and other enslaved Black people’s mandinga pouches, Rarey responds to Hortense Spillers’s idea of the intimate relationship between archives and violence (29). For Rarey, the act of inscribing ink on paper to produce mandingas not only constituted an African-produced archive but was instrumental in ensuring the unintended “hypervisibility” of enslaved Africans in the colonial archive. In that sense, Rarey uses the bodies and textual evocations of enslaved Africans and their descendants to simultaneously discuss the “hypervisibility,” “invisibility,” and the supposed “obfuscated legibility of Black histories in the archives” (29).

In Chapter Four, “Revolts,” Rarey shifts the plot to Bahia, the site of the well-known West African Muslim or Malê slave revolt of 1835, and further discusses the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of enslaved Africans’ voices and archives. In recounting this well-known story, Rarey mentions how the “seemingly innocuous” Hausa and Yorubá-made leather pouches containing Islamic prayers could be “linked to a violent insurrection” (175). And yet despite recognizing the political power that these leather pouches evoked for believers, the Bahia police specifically labelled these objects and their contents as “tiny bits of garbage” and “insignificant things” (201). These dismissive labels as Rarey notes, are reminiscent of dismissive assumptions imperial authorities in Lisbon held of African or African-derived objects.

In the Epilogue, Rarey reiterates his main argument: the “key role of visually innocuous and occluded objects in the discourses of race and power in Atlantic slavery”(208). By emphasizing this thesis, Rarey draws parallels between the Haitian Revolution and the Malê Revolt. For Rarey, these revolts “created a cultural climate in which images and references to Haiti were not only feared in general, but particularly suspicious when associated with free and enslaved Africans and Black crioulos” (211). For example, a few months after Dessalines’s installation as emperor of Haiti, an ombudsman in Rio de Janeiro found a group of Free Black militiamen wearing a medallion displaying his portrait (210). Despite the geographical expanse and historical depth of *Insignificant Things*, Rarey rarely strays from his thesis. He empirically shows how innocuous objects can bring visibility to subaltern groups in ways that the colonial archives did not intend.

This book is a major contribution to not only African and African diaspora studies but also to the visual history of global subaltern and slave studies. While Rarey neatly integrates analysis of numerous reproduced images, paintings, and photographs and extant mandingas into the book’s narrative, it would have been preferable to see some of these in color (or at least provided some external links to view them). Had Rarey provided such an external link, readers could experience these objects in much fuller detail as the enslaved Africans who valued these artifacts. Nonetheless, I really admire Rarey’s brilliant reading and interpretation of subaltern sources in the Portuguese colonial archives. That said, it seems to me that mandingas and their contents were not necessarily always innocuous or invisible, despite the dismissive rhetoric of imperial authorities. If mandingas had always remained innocuous and invisible as Rarey claimed, then perhaps Portuguese imperial authorities would not have foregrounded these objects in their archives as legal evidence in their trials of enslaved Blacks who rejected Catholic Orthodoxy.