The Material Life of Roman Slaves is a major contribution to scholarly debates on the archaeology of Roman slavery. Rather than regard slaves as irretrievable in the ruins of ancient Roman cities and villas, the book takes the archaeological record as a key form of evidence for reconstructing slaves’ lives and experiences. Interweaving literature, law, and material evidence, the book searches for ways to see slaves in these various contexts— to make them visible where texts tell us they were in fact present. Part of this project involves understanding how slaves are often actively, if unwittingly, left out of guidebooks and scholarly literature. Individual chapters explore the dichotomy between visibility and invisibility and between appearance and disappearance in four physical and social locations—urban houses, city streets and neighborhoods, workshops, and villas.

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To Michael L. Hackworth and Robert B. Joshel
THE MATERIAL LIFE
of ROMAN SLAVES

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It was... hard to observe borders, to see and unsee only what I should, on my way home. I was hemmed in by people not in my city, walking slowly through areas crowded but not crowded in Beszél. I focused on the stones really around me – that I had grown up with. I ignored the rest or tried . . .

. . . Unseeing, of course, but I could not fail to be aware of all the familiar places I passed grosstopically, the streets at home I regularly walked, now a whole city away, particular cafés I frequented that we passed, but in another country. I had them in background now, hardly any more present than Ul Qoma was when I was at home. I held my breath. I was unseeing Beszél. I had forgotten what this was like; I had tried and failed to imagine it. I was seeing Ul Qoma.

—CHINA MIÉVILLE, The City & the City

IN THE CITY & the City, a novel by China Miéville, the cities of Beszél and Ul Qoma exist side by side. At points, areas of the cities overlap and interweave, so the same street, albeit with a different name, can belong to both. Although no wall separates the two cities, the people of Beszél must have no visual or physical contact with the people of Ul Qoma: in the terms of the novel, they must not “breach.” Thus, two people may “live, grosstopically, next door to each other . . ., each in their own city, . . . never breaching, never quite touching, never speaking a word across the border” (134). From childhood, the inhabitants of each city learn the key signifiers of difference in order to see only the buildings, people, animals, and vehicles in their own city and to un-see everything in the other city. Yet, as a weary Inspector Tyador Borlú of Beszél makes clear, un-seeing takes effort because nothing but “unseeing others with care” or “polite unsensing” separates the sights and sounds of his own Beszél from those of the supposedly alien Ul Qoma. And when Borlú officially crosses
over to Ul Qoma, he must see what he has always un-seen and un-see what he has always seen.

_The Material Life of Roman Slaves_ is a book about seeing and un-seeing in the terms imagined by Miéville, but we talk about slaves and owners rather than the inhabitants of different cities that are really the same. We consider how we have been trained to recognize owners and the free in the archaeological record of ancient Italy and how we learn to ignore the slaves who were “grosstopically” in the same places. In the following chapters, without making owners or the free disappear, we look for the slaves whom we have been taught to un-see. In a way, then, at least metaphorically to borrow Miéville’s language, this book “breaches” the divide between owners and slaves to live in between the two.

Many people have helped us to see and un-see, and it is our great pleasure to thank them. John Clarke read individual chapters and provided sage advice along the way. The observations and expertise of Michael Thomas on villas in general and on Villa A at Oplontis and the Villa of the Mysteries have been invaluable. For our work at Oplontis we also appreciate the insights and generosity of Jess Galloway, Lea Cline, and Nayla Muntasser. Our friend and colleague Margaret Laird gave us the benefit of her perception and knowledge. The work and support of Eleanor Winsor Leach, Jennifer Trimble, and Natalie Kampen have enriched our project in many different ways. Lawrence Bliquez, Catherine Conners, Alain Gowing, Jeremy Hartnett, Deborah Kamen, Darby Langdon, Margaret Malamud, and Amy Richlin commented on various chapters, offering valuable observations and criticism. Beatrice Rehl encouraged this project from its inception, and Anastasia Graf shepherded it toward publication. We thank Susan Greenberg for her judicious editorial help. Most especially we are grateful for Stephen Petersen’s insight, photographic abilities, and time spent on the book’s illustrations. Without his work, ours would not have been possible.

Individuals and institutions facilitated our research in Italy. We thank the American Academy in Rome for a place to stay and to work in its wonderful library; we are especially grateful to the library staff and to Professor Corey Brennan during our stay in January 2012. We express our gratitude to the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma and the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei and especially to the former and current Soprintendente at Pompeii, Dottore Pietro Giovanni Guzzo and Dottoressa Teresa Elena Cinquantaquattro, and to Signore Vitale at Herculaneum. The custodial staffs at Pompeii, Herculaneum, Villa San Marco, Villa Arianna, and Ostia were unfailingly helpful. The Hotel Diana at Pompeii and its wonderful staff provided us with a home away from home for many weeks in 2010, 2011, and 2012. We owe a special thanks to Signore Alfonso Boccia for getting us where we needed to go.

The illustrations in this book would not have been possible without the efforts of many people. We thank Derek Churchill and George Freeman of the Visual Resources Center, University of Delaware, for their generosity and patience in working up many of the plans, and Glynnis Fawkes for her excellent drawings and plans. We are pleased to have permission to use the beautiful photographs of Michael Larvey. Art Resource helped with the acquisition of images and permissions. The British Museum, Bridgeman Art Library International, Fototeca Unione at the American Academy in Rome, Special
Collections at the University of Delaware Library, and Professor Andrew Wallace-Hadrill have all given us permission to use various images.

The book would never have seen the light of day without the financial support of a number of sources. An ACLS Collaborative Research Fellowship (2011–12) and a Loeb Classical Library Foundation Fellowship (for Lauren Petersen, 2012–13) made possible the time and resources for research and writing. A General University Research Grant from the University of Delaware and the Jon Bridgman Endowed Professorship in the Department of History at the University of Washington provided funds for research trips. The illustration program of the book was supported by subventions from the College of Arts and Sciences and the Department of Art History at the University of Delaware and the Department of History at the University of Washington. In this context, Lauren would like to express her appreciation to Professor Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, former chair of the Department of Art History at the University of Delaware, for her unending support, and Sandra hers to Professor Lynn Thomas, chair of the Department of History at the University of Washington. Susan Brynteson provided Lauren with a study to work in at the University of Delaware Library, and Lydia Gold and Jeri Park in the Department of History at the University of Washington helped with the intricacies of managing a major grant and booking travel arrangements.

Finally, we dedicate this book to our fathers, who believed in their daughters and instilled in each the value of perseverance and a sense of humor.