1997 Du Boisian Perspectives on Identities and Material Culture

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The Cutting Edge

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1996-97 AN Theme: The Known, Unknown and Unknowable in Anthropology

Du Boisian Perspectives on Identities and Material Culture
By Robert Paynter (U Massachusetts, Amherst)

For the cutting edge of their field, ivy covers a National Landmark-Registered site in Great Barrington, MA, the Boyhood Home site of W E B Du Bois. Du Bois was one of the most influential Americans of the 20th century. He authored the first monograph of urban anthropology and sociology and developed an understanding of Reconstructions which has become US history's interpretation of the post-Civil War period. Du Bois studied society at large through his trenchant and still relevant analysis of the color line. He took exception to the usual institutionalized and unmarked categories of race and social inequality at the Du Bois site-and throughout the practice of archaeology.

Du Bois's writings provide important guidance on the relationship of African American identity and material culture as played out on both the world historical stage and at the smaller scale of home sites. We must also make the discipline of archaeology as the archaeology of the Color Line.

Affirming Difference and the Discipline

Furthering our understanding of these domains of social difference involves expanding archaeology's cultural knowledge base. Some of this expansion will come about through the investigation of the material from more historic period sites. But these objects will only pose questions if we do not also include perspectives of people who have lived in the various segments of stratified societies to our theoretical and methodological toolkit. To accomplish the latter, the discipline needs to bring the works of scholars such as Du Bois inside the curriculum and canon of anthropological archaeology. We must also make the discipline of interest to people from a variety of structural positions, thereby attracting people who bring a greater range of lived experiences to the practice of archaeology.

The result of this richer intellectual and social foundation will be a shifting of the borders of the known, unknown and unknowable, and an alteration of the priorities within each of these categories. This will induce considerable intellectual debate. No doubt, poison ivy will come to grow over some sites, and come to cover others. Nonetheless such changes will only enhance our discipline's endeavor to understand and interpret the human condition across all time and space.

Lessons from Apartheid
By Walton R Johnson (Rutgers U)

Curiously, among the revelations in the postmortem of apartheid, anthropologists should learn that "race" is not a sufficiently powerful analytical concept to totally explain the phenomena of much of their own data. Poison Ivy. "W E B Du Bois wrote in 1928 of the house that was at the W E B Du Bois Boyhood Home site ("The House of the Black Bourgeois"). The Crisis 35(4):133-134. (Photo courtesy of W E B Du Bois Papers, W E B Du Bois Library, U Massachusetts, Amherst)