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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)

Poison ivy covers a National Landmark-National Register site in Great Barrington, MA, the Boyhood Homesite 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 Reconstruction which has become US history's interpretation of the post-Civil War period. Du Bois influenced society at large through his trenchant and still relevant analysis of the color line in *The Souls of Black Folk*, through his cofounding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and through his intellectual guidance of the anti-colonial movement's Pan African Congresses. It is no surprise that a piece of our historical landscape commemorates Du Bois; that he is so unknown to the discipline is only partly due to the poison ivy.

I began my collaborative study of the Boyhood Homesite when colleagues from the W E B Du Bois Department of Afro American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, wondered whether archaeology at the Homesite could shed more light on Du Bois's life and the lives of his relatives in western Massachusetts. Students in the UMass field school conducted geophysical survey, surface collection and preliminary subsurface investigations, retrieved over 12,000 artifacts from the house foundation and cellar, two middens and three trash pits, and recovered evidence for agricultural landuse practices and various landscape features mentioned in Du

Bois's writings. A series of hypothetical landscapes were developed from these remains as well as from documents housed in the W E B Du Bois Papers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. These model landscapes helped answer our questions about the research potential of archaeological remains—which is great—and will guide future investigations of the site.

Knowing and Unknowing the Color-Line

The wealth of artifactual and documentary materials makes this an odd site at which to contemplate the unknown and unknowable. A perplexing problem at the site nonetheless helps illuminate how data and theory are interrelated, and how shifts in theory can affect what is unknown and unknowable.

A question of significance for archaeology of societies riven by structures of domination and resistance is the identification of members of groups involved in these relations. At the Du Bois site—and throughout the practice of historical archaeology—a pressing version of this question has been determination of the so-called racial identities of the occupants of a site. Evidence for African culture has been the primary methodological means for making such identifications. Useful evidence has been forthcoming, especially in the southern US, in the forms of colonoware ceramics, Kwardata motif pipes and material culture associated with healing rituals. At the Du Bois site, however—and at many others occupied by people of African descent—there are few if any markers of African culture. Indeed, the house is of a vernacular style familiar on the New England landscape; the ceramics, canned foods and footwear are from the mass market. Using this conventional methodology, the African and African American identities of the inhabitants of the Homesite would be unknown.

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 venue of his Homesite in Great Barrington. His approach is a substantial reconceptualization of the archaeologist's understanding of the relationship—one which greatly expands on our present methodology of searching for African markers. Du Bois agrees wholeheartedly with the search for and acknowledgment of cultural objects, practices and beliefs that directly descend from Africa. He also acknowledges the significance of objects that have multiple cultural origins, as in his grandfather's iron fire tongs that recall African as well as European origins of iron working. He also finds African American identity in the skilled production and lasting maintenance of distinctly American forms, such as the house at the Homesite, built and maintained by his family, not ceding these forms to an exclusively European identity.

Materializing Identities

Contemplating the Du Bois site from Du Bois's perspective helps disclose white racism operating in the initial research strategy of linking African

American identity exclusively with Africanisms. Obviously this is the familiar form of domination that uses marked categories to identify the subordinate and unmarked categories to naturalize or normalize the dominant. In the US this means that marked assemblages are African (or Asian or Native American) and unmarked assemblages are assumed to be of European influence. From Du Bois's perspective we should be asking, "Is this a European American site?" at many places where such an understudied identity has been presumed.

Is identity merely an unknown, or is it indeed truly unknowable? The jury is out on this point, and will be for quite a while. The Du Boisian perspective calls attention to the insufficiency of archaeological method and theory for dealing with identity in situations of social inequality. It highlights that our methods and theories arise from specific social positions and tend to interpret the past from such positions. Alternatively, we might start by supposing that the material record at some times and in some places makes identity quite knowable for some people and obscure for others; while at other times and places, identities are equally evident or equally obscure. Even the notion of identity is likely to vary as one crisscrosses the lines dividing stratified societies. Understanding this variation entails opening up new areas of inquiry, which in addition to those raised above, include addressing such questions as: Under what conditions do stratified societies mark and hide social cleavages with material culture? How, during the age of capital, did wage labor, mass consumption and white supremacy produce distinctive and shifting identities? And, how did local communities redefine identities among these global shifts in race, class and gender relations? Clearly there is much to be done before we will be able to distinguish the unknown from the knowable when investigating identity on historical period sites.

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 grossly 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 greater 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 cease to grow over some sites,

W E B Du Bois and Shirley Graham Du Bois on a visit to the remains of his boyhood home in the 1950s. "I desperately wanted to own that house for no earthly reason that sounded a bit like sense. . . . It was decrepit almost beyond repair save that into its tough and sturdy timbers the Black Burghardts had built so much of their own dumb pluck that—'Why, the stairs don't even creak!' said She, climbing gingerly aloft," W E B Du Bois wrote in 1928 of the house that was at the W E B Du Bois Boyhood Homesite ("The House of the Black Burghardts," *The Crisis* 35(4):133-134). (Photo courtesy of W E B Du Bois Papers, W E B Du Bois Library, U Massachusetts, Amherst)

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.

[Robert Paynter studies historical archaeology as the archaeology of capitalism and social inequality at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. *Archaeology at the Du Bois Boyhood Homesite* is summarized in an article with Susan Hautaniemi and Nancy Muller, "The Landscapes of the W E B Du Bois Boyhood Homesite: An Agenda for an Archaeology of the Color Line," in *Race, S Gregory and R Sanjek, eds (1994). Du Bois's The Gift of Black Folk: Negroes in the Making of America (1924), is a lesser known but useful work on identity, history and material culture.* ■

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 popularly categorized as race relations. True, apartheid was a savagely oppressive, exploitative system rooted in putative racial differences. And, true, because it is real socially, race must be a major factor in many analyses. But apartheid was above all a form of human social organization. As such, it must have shared basic commonalities with all other forms of human social organization. It is in revealing these

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