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Book Review: Black Feminist Archaeology by Whitney Battle-Baptiste

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Book Reviews

Book Review Editor - Christa Beranek

BLACK FEMINIST ARCHAEOLOGY, by Whitney Battle-Baptiste, 2011, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA, 200 pages, \$94.00 (cloth), \$32.95 (paper), \$32.95 (ebook).

Reviewed by Barbara J. Little

Ever since archaeologists started seriously considering gender in the early 1990s, there have been frequent cautions against the “add women and stir” approach. No one should misconstrue the purpose of Whitney Battle-Baptiste’s powerful agenda laid out in this book. This is not simply about stirring in race with gender, and it is not an agenda that archaeologists who are not “interested” in feminist theory or gender can wisely ignore. Battle-Baptiste adds her compelling voice and experience to those who would reinvent archaeology as a trustworthy practice relevant to descendant communities. As she bridges politically-charged theoretical standpoints, she embraces and even celebrates the discomfort and confusion of creating a new practice and seeks to open a dialogue.

The introduction, *Understanding a Black Feminist Framework*, states the far-reaching inter-disciplinary aspirations of what Battle-Baptiste wants to achieve. She offers her sense of responsibility, her personal journey as an archaeologist, and the meaning of race, asking, “what does it mean to be of African descent in America?” (p. 22). In the first chapter, *Constructing a Black Feminist Framework*, Battle-Baptiste describes how she came to terms with both feminist and womanist perspectives. There are many different feminist perspectives, and, although she does not label it as such, it seems that she is mainly concerned with the useful elements of liberal feminism. Readers will want to spend some time engaging with the nuances here and think about the implications of Black Feminist Thought for their own work, regardless of whether they research the African American past. Battle-Baptiste offers a humanist and anthropological perspective, including an

embrace of literature as a source of inspiration and rich understanding.

Three chapters offer case examples: the Hermitage Plantation in Tennessee; Lucy Foster’s homestead in Andover, Massachusetts; and the W. E. B. Du Bois Boyhood Homesite in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Three themes that bring these sites together are first, homeplace, which is something encompassing but moving beyond household. The second theme concerns material wealth and class, with special attention to the meaning of poverty. The third theme considers women’s labor and cultural choices.

Drawing from her work at the Hermitage, Battle-Baptiste outlines her “functional plantation model” within which to approach the plantation proper, the captive African domestic space, the labor sphere, and wilderness. She applies her model to the full landscape and layers on her “complex plantation household model” to address domestic exchange across that landscape. Re-examining Lucy Foster’s homestead raises a number of interesting issues, both about the site itself and about the ways in which archaeological trends influence what we think we know about a site and its meanings. Questions about poverty, what it meant within a community and to an individual, and how we define and interpret it through an archaeological lens intersect powerfully with questions of race and gender.

The title of the fourth chapter reveals something of the complexity of the story: *The Burghardt Women and the W. E. B. Du Bois Boyhood Homesite*. The depth and breadth of the connections and meanings of this site are worthy of the attention of a career, and it is clear that Battle-Baptiste intends to devote herself to developing what she calls a “Black Feminist Du Boisian Archaeology.” She asks, “Why shouldn’t a site as significant as the Du Bois Boyhood Homesite bring up and display the everyday lives of women and men of African descent and place them both at the center of interpretive models?” (p. 160). This is an important question to ask, especially of archaeological and preservation traditions that have privileged “great man” history and

skewed lessons from the past toward individual achievement and away from community and collective action. I suspect Du Bois would wholeheartedly approve of the question and of the trajectory that Battle-Baptiste intends for the increasing relevance of this site.

In her final chapter, *Moving Mountains and Liberating Dialogues*, Battle-Baptiste highlights the need to allow different kinds of questions. She asks how archaeology can overcome the distrust of descendant communities and become trustworthy. *Black Feminist Archaeology* is part of an answer to that question as in Battle-Baptiste's own words, she "begin[s] to tell a story that is not just about archaeology or artifacts, but about people and places, women and men, leisure and labor, with details that can be relevant to contemporary struggles for social justice and liberation" (p. 31).

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SAUGUS IRON WORKS: THE ROLAND W. ROBBINS EXCAVATIONS, 1948–1953, edited by William A. Griswold and Donald W. Linebaugh, 2011, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 440 pages, 182 black-and-white illustrations, index, appendices, no price given.

Reviewed by Richard Veit

Wow! This beautiful, large-format volume on the Saugus Iron Works by William Griswold, Donald Linebaugh, and other contributors is a tour de force of industrial archaeology. From 1948 to 1953, Roland W. Robbins, an individual who even today tends to elicit mixed responses from historical archaeologists, carried out pioneering excavations at the site of the Hammersmith Iron Works in Saugus, Massachusetts. Robbins, who had already garnered some fame for his excavations at the site of Henry David Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond, began his work at Saugus nearly two decades before the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act, at a time when there were no college courses in historical archaeology, and most North American archaeologists were focused on Native American sites. In every sense, Robbins was a pioneer. In this volume he shines through as gifted, witty, and driven; however, he could also be combative and headstrong. Although he was one of the first historical archaeologists, and a vocal advocate for what we today call public archaeology, the self-trained Robbins would ultimately become a victim of the ongoing professionalization of the discipline he helped found and popularize. This book describes and illustrates Robbins' work at a truly significant site. Moreover, it serves, in part as a palliative, restoring Robbins reputation as an exceptional field-worker and pioneering public archaeologist. Indeed, Griswold and Linebaugh's book would not have been possible if Robbins had not been a careful excavator who took considerable pains to document his work.

The book project began when Griswold, the senior author, was charged with managing some structural improvements associated with the Americans with Disabilities Act at the reconstructed Saugus Ironworks. Griswold