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Book Review: Black Feminist Archaeology by Whitney Battle-Baptiste

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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

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 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 fieldworker and pioneering public archaeologist. Indeed, Griswold and Linebaugh’s book would not have been possible if Robbins had not been a careful, witty, and driven; however, he could also be combative and headstrong.

This book 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 begins with an overview of the practice of iron manufacture in the 17th century. Particular attention is paid to the state of the iron industry in Great Britain and the attractions of North America, with its extensive forests and rich deposits of ore, to English ironworkers. Next, the volume examines the historical record relating to the Hammersmith ironworks at Saugus. This chapter was authored by Janet Regan and Curtis White. Saugus was unusual in that it was an early example of a site in what were then new ironworks. It contained a blast furnace, a forge, a rolling and slitting mill, two blacksmith shops, a coal house, and a large number of ancillary buildings. Saugus operated from 1646 to 1670 when it closed, an unfortunate victim of mismanagement. The result was an exodus of ironworkers across North America. Indeed, it was from these sparks cast off by Saugus that many later ironworks sprang up in New England and the Middle Atlantic regions.

Donald Linebaugh authored the book’s third chapter, which deals with the excavations at the site. Linebaugh begins with an interesting discussion of early preservation efforts at Saugus. I was intrigued to see William Summer Appleton, founder of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now Historic New England), make a guest appearance in 1911 when the Iron Workers House, the sole standing original structure from the ironworks, went on the market. Appleton apparently acted as a historic property broker and helped find a sympathetic purchaser, the photographer and anti-quarian Wallace Nutting, for the building. Later, Henry Ford attempted to acquire the house and move it to Dearborn, Michigan, a plan which happily fell through. Ultimately, the First Iron Works Association (FIWA), with help from Quincy Bent, a Vice President of Bethlehem Steel, purchased the site, though Bent’s interest was in the remains of the ironworks rather than the historic house. Hoping to find tangible evidence that remains of the ironworks were present, the FIWA hired Robbins, and the rest, as they say, is history, or in this case historical archaeology. Robbins’ fieldwork was carried out between 1948 and 1953, certainly exceeded the expectations of his employers, as he identified the remains of a blast furnaces, slitting mill, forge, and numerous other structures.

The fourth chapter, contributed by William Griswold, looks at Robbins in context. As he notes in his introduction, “Robbins managed to do what few academic archaeologists are ever able to do: successfully investigate an early industrial site buried by huge amounts of fill, gather archaeological information that supplemented and informed a privately-funded reconstruction, create a large amount of public interest in the project, and launch a career in an archaeology that, for him, would become his life’s work” (p. 101). This accomplishment is even more impressive given that Robbins was a high school dropout, who had previously supported himself as a house painter and handymen. Nevertheless, through his intelligence, savoir faire, and persistence he became the go-to archaeologist for individuals interested in early American ironworks.

Chapter Five, also by Griswold, deals with the excavation of the blast furnace. It is followed by chapters on the forge and slitting mill, the Jenks area, and tailrace all contributed by Curtis White. Joseph Jenks is an intriguing fellow who was a blacksmith, millwright, swordsmith, and manufacturer of wire and pins. Chapters Eight and Nine, both by Griswold, discuss the waterpower system and presenting the results in what can only be described as a lavish format. The book is oversized, measuring 9.5 inches tall by 11.5 inches wide, and features 182 black and white illustrations, almost all of which are large format. These photographs, taken during the original excavations, are the work of Richard Merrill. Quite simply, they are stunning. The volume is also exceptionally well-referenced and clearly written.

Saugus Iron Works is deservedly well-received and highly recommended. It is an important contribution to the study of iron manufacture, prehistoric Native American archaeology, and of the trajectory that Battle-Baptiste highlights. From this book, historians interested in the history of science and technology will find these sparks cast off by Saugus that many later ironworks sprang up in New England and the Middle Atlantic regions.