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Grassroots Politics and Archaeological Engagement along the Color Line

By Paul R. Mullins and K. Chris Glidden*

As his prime example of America's declining civic engagement, Robert Putnam (2000) points to the declining membership in bowling leagues. In prosaic spaces like the local alley, Putnam argues, Americans once gathered together, sharing their community concerns and regularly assembling with, in his words, "a diverse set of acquaintances" in a robust public life. Yet in the past 30 years or so, Putnam concludes, we have abandoned such close-knit communities and are now "bowling alone," retreating to private pleasures and distancing ourselves from our neighbors and common civic concerns. This evocative picture of a community self-alienated at the bowling alley resonates with centuries of moral ideologues from Puritans to Progressives who took aim on the ways in which social collectives form and express community identity and civic concerns (Horowitz 1985; for recent examples, see Ewen 1988 and Schor 1998). These most recent critiques lament that in our quest for individual material satisfaction we are no longer "joiners," forsaking networks of social interaction that once fostered collective action and community.

Virtually every scholarly discipline and institutions from churches to universities have now waded into this discourse championing various definitions of "engagement." Given archaeologists' commonplace public visibility and our links to various communities, we can stake a reasonable claim to making a substantial contribution to this discussion. Yet at the same time, advocating community engagement risks imposing an equally ideological sense of how communities should be appropriately "engaged," ignoring alternative forms of politicization and collectivization in favor of a rather conventional and monolithic notion of community that will ostensibly accommodate every constituency.

A revolution may not be spearheaded by bowling leagues or archaeological constituencies, but each clearly is a potentially powerful example of community groups that shape consequential civic concerns. Nevertheless, the solidarity in voluntary collectives like bowling leagues has always been structured by concrete material and social factors that yield a wide range of politics at odds with Putnam's suggestion that such "organic" local collectives are our most powerful mechanisms for fostering "cooperation and public spiritedness" (Putnam 2000: 338). We should be just as reflective about the forms of solidarity, engagement, and politics championed by archaeologists and the wide range of constituencies that legitimize meaningful contemporary political claims through reference to the archaeological past.

Bowling, the apparently mundane yet powerful lynchpin in Putnam's argument, provides an interesting example of the complexities of politicization and community along and across the color line. Bowling is widely hailed as America's most popular participant sport, with ten-pin leagues first emerging in the late-19th century and alleys appearing in most communities in the early 20th century. Bowling emerged as a popular pastime relatively quickly in Indianapolis, Indiana. In 1880 the city already had a bowling club, and three bowling alleys attached to saloons were in business.¹ With the exception of some Black pin-setters, though, these alleys were segregated White spaces, with the first Black alley not opening until about 1941, but African Americans were bowling in venues such as billiards halls and saloons from the turn of the century onward.² Black bowling happened outside the official sanction of the nation's racially exclusive governing bodies.³ Since its formation in the 1890's bowling's most prominent organization, the American Bowling Congress, required its members to be White males, including chapters of the league that formed in Indianapolis before the turn of the century and included the Mayor as the Congress' President.⁴ Like the Parent-Teacher Organizations, Elks Clubs, and weekly card games that Putnam applauds, the American Bowling Congress and its numerous chapters were voluntary associations with a profound impact on communal identity, but their ideological commitment to White superiority, patriarchy, and classism profoundly problematizes the idealistic notion of a pre-1960's world of widespread civic involvement and organic activism reaching across lines of difference. The community engagement Putnam envisions across the American past is one of conformist, middle-class solidarity in a society that was committed to reproducing White superiority, not in establishing broad inclusive social networks that would undermine class and color privilege.

A host of commentators have lamented Americans' self-induced malaise as we retreat from club memberships and bowling leagues to suburban televisions, but there is actually significant evidence that contemporary people are in fact quite engaged in civic life and popular movements that include public archaeology. A sophisticated community archaeology can illuminate the way various contemporary constituencies have always been very much engaged in public life, and in turn it should interrogate how contemporary constituencies mobilize in a vast range of forms that can employ archaeological insight. A key dimension of such work is confronting grassroots activism and the distinctive ways collectives form along and potentially across color lines in the past and present. In 1939, for example, an Indianapolis delegation was among the African-American bowlers from eight Midwestern cities who gathered together to form the National Negro Bowling Association. Confronted by *de facto* segregation, the African-American group included in its bylaws the commitment to participate "actively in the fight for equality in bowling" (TNBA's Story 2006). Confronting racism in the alleys was part of a broad range of anti-racist grassroots activism that took aim on racially exclusive public spaces such as stores, parks, lunch counters, buses, and even bowling alleys.⁵ Much of this resistance to racialized citizen rights was utterly localized, historically deep-seated, and outside especially clear institutional collectives, instead coming from church women, groups of neighbors, disgruntled shoppers, and a vast range of patchwork communities over centuries. Archaeologists tend to work at these local scales and partner with comparable grassroots constituencies based in loose collectives of neighbors, community associations, church groups, genealogists, and similar collectives with fluid organizational boundaries and intimate claims on particular forms of heritage. Many marginalized groups often are wary of formal institutional groups and arms of the state that have historically subsumed individual and local voices, so rather than champion

particular forms of community politics or organizational forms the archaeological challenge is to recognize and embrace specific forms of local organization and concrete community history.

Civic engagement routinely aspires to fabricate certain forms of community that will confront shared problems across lines of difference, but many dominant definitions of community instead perpetuated and even increased inequality. For instance, the many saloons and billiard halls that once hosted African-American bowling on Indiana Avenue are now gone, all displaced by urban renewal programs that championed particular forms of community ostensibly intended to address material marginalization. Just after the turn of the twentieth century the Indiana University Medical Center settled beside Indianapolis' City Hospital in the midst of a predominately African-American neighborhood on the city's near-Westside. By the mid-1950s, the Medical Center eyed expansion was into these surrounding neighborhoods, knowing that federal funds supporting slum clearance could be used to expand the campus (Hardy 1989: 12). Some administrators certainly were eager to remove the predominately Black community ringing the Hospital and Medical School. In 1947, for instance, Medical School faculty member Thurman Rice (1947: 64) described the neighborhood as "an extremely ugly slum that needs to be eradicated inasmuch as it is directly in front of the Medical Center." Between the late 1950s and 1970s the state gradually emptied out the near-Westside using federal urban renewal funds until about 1964, when the city stopped accepting federal urban renewal support on Indiana University's behalf. The University assembled a team to acquire lots throughout the neighborhoods around the Medical Center, purchasing properties from land owners, moving renters from the homes (and in some cases collecting rent while residents searched for a new home), and then razing the houses. This provided expansion space first for the Medical Center and then it created room for Indiana University's proposed undergraduate campus, which became Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis in 1969.

In many ways the IUPUI campus is an ideal space to conduct an engaged archaeology that illuminates how the contemporary landscape was created to serve some groups while it dispossessed others. Rather than build a particular sort of community, an engaged archaeology might more productively take its goal to be the articulation of repressed or ignored political demands. In the near-Westside, an archaeology could not be politically engaged if it did not confront issues of race and class inequality, examine how they were fanned and exploited by the state, and press to see how they have descended to us today. An archaeology that unites all of these things can make a very powerful claim to activist intentions without limiting the range of constituencies making claims on the community's heritage: Many of the people who were displaced by the University are still Indianapolis residents; University administrators are generally willing to address this experience and our institutional role in it; and many community groups feel some vested interest in both University and neighborhood cultural heritage even if they did not live in the area. This provides valuable building blocks for a constituent-driven archaeology that uses concrete archaeological data to examine the processes that produced the contemporary landscape. However, all these constituencies are organized in different ways and each requires distinctive partnering strategies.

The issues for many African-American elders revolve around how their memories and archaeological material culture can refute persistent racist stereotypes of the Black community. Rather than simply refute ideological distortions -- an important vindicationist move, but also



Figure 1: In 2001 IUPUI conducted its first excavation on campus when it excavated an early 20th century African-American boarding house and a neighboring meat packing operation (Photo by Paul Mullins).

one that needs to move beyond replacing one self-interested representation with another -- an engaged analysis should reveal contending interpretations with an eye toward asking how those different analyses reflect contentious political standpoints. For instance, elders who work with our archaeology project in Indianapolis' near-Westside tend to frame materialism in terms of how consumption displayed African Americans' citizenship, avoiding seeing materialism in terms of how much things cost and instead interested in how a vast range of African Americans secured a foothold in American society, even if they did it with modest material things. This invests even rather mundane things like inexpensive household goods with significance that might pass unnoticed in many conventional archaeological analyses that tend to revolve around price and distance from an ambiguous social and material norm. This breaks from the commonplace archaeological position of assessing consumption primarily in oppositional terms, such as affluence or its absence, or resistance to dominant social and stylistic norms as opposed to being subsumed within those norms (whether by force or will). Instead, the questions elders ask of many goods are about resourcefulness, forethought, and ambition, stressing agency along the color line and staking a claim to the central features of American identity even as they temper

its celebration of affluence and reject its assumption that such values are White exclusive. This risks its own romanticization of agency by gravitating toward around conventional middle-class values and minimizing the concrete, racially rationalized poverty community endured. However, some former near-Westside residents are circumspect about placing racism at the heart of historical analysis because they fear that the subsequent narrative will be about how racism shaped Black lives and not about African Americans' agency in the face of such structural boundaries.



Figure 2: A group of Indianapolis students peer into a cellar excavation during the 1991 field season (Photo by Paul Mullins).

Engaged archaeologists are not really charged with resolving such internally unsettled perspectives but instead on addressing how various collectives and even individuals construct particular forms of heritage that serve certain contemporary interests. Projects that aspire to resolve such differences risk ignoring and further repressing deep-seated conflicts that should be illuminated in dissentious partnerships. In the near-Westside some of this muffled dissension focuses on the landscape itself and the heritage of urban renewal that began after World War II. The campus landscape is in many ways already politicized, but the existing political narrative does not examine the campus as a product of racism and class inequality. Instead, most faculty, staff, students, and visitors constantly bemoan the landscape's inability to accommodate their cars in spaces that are sufficiently numerous, adequately convenient, or appropriately inexpensive (Mullins 2007a, 2007b). In 1967 an *Indianapolis News* columnist visited the rapidly expanding Medical Center, and he recognized that neighborhood displacement was primarily meant to create parking lots: "Seeing all of the parking areas crowded with cars, you realize there can never be such a thing as too much parking." On a commuter campus in a city that has

always embraced car culture, complaints about parking and automobility are perhaps predictable, but they reveal how the campus community does not see itself as privileged at all and separates parking spaces from the processes that displaced the community. For example, in the very first issue of the IUPUI newspaper in April 1970, one student already was irate about the number of “unimproved, unlit parking spaces” (*Onomatopoeia* 1970: 4). He revealed that the parking lots, campus, and his very car were mechanisms that were meant to distance him from a neighborhood with which he did not wish to engage at all. He complained that IUPUI had settled in “one of the highest crime-rate districts,” so it “should accept the responsibility of the safety of its students. . . . One murder, rape or molesting will make the beautiful campus a cancerous breeding ground for fear and panic.” Spurred by such sentiments, the University gradually purchased single lots over more than 30 years, razing structures as the lots were sold and extending parking lots into the newly acquired spaces.



Figure 3: In about 1940, this photography was taken of the neighborhood where the IUPUI campus now sits. Today, every home in the picture has been removed (photograph courtesy IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives).

The real challenge this presents is how archaeology can make the landscape something other than a flat expanse of asphalt provided for commuters’ appropriate privilege. On campus archaeological sites this is relatively straightforward, because visitors are confronted by deeply stratified columns of prehistoric wetlands, early historic remains, twentieth-century discards, and

dense layers of gravel and soil on which parking lots, campus spaces, and buildings were constructed. For many of our community partners the archaeology project's most important role is to simply provide this public stage that illuminates African-American heritage on campus and in the broader community and casts the parking lots as privilege which is the product of racially based displacement. In an effort to reverse this dehistoricization roughly half of 35 new campus



Figure 4: In about 1970, IUPUI's Black Student Union already was protesting against the wholesale displacement of mostly African-American residents around the campus (photograph courtesy IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives).

dormitories constructed in 2003 were named after figures from the near-Westside. At the dormitories' May 2004 dedication ceremony many descendants and community members accepted the university's invitation to commemorate these community ancestors. Encouraged by this success, an informal campus history group installed 20 historic signs on campus documenting communities that once lived on the present-day landscape.



Figure 5: Like most commuter campuses, parking has been a perpetual problem at IUPUI, and much of campus displacement was intended to create more parking for students, faculty, and staff (photograph courtesy IUPUI University Library Special Collections and Archives).

Engagement and the Color Line

In today's civically engaged society, much of the responsibility for addressing impoverishment and inequality has been turned over to volunteerism and a variety of "points of light" organizations, but there seems to be a fair amount of indifference about inequalities. There may be many different ways engaged scholars can convince Americans to care about and contribute to a struggle against racism, poverty, and systemic inequalities. Those appeals stand a better chance of success if modest interventions like urban archaeology projects can show the concrete material evidence of race- and class-based impoverishment over time and link that back to longstanding structural inequalities that are not simply the deficiencies of individual social collectives. The question is not really how archaeologists can make constituent communities

civically engaged; instead, the issue is how we can work alongside a broad range of conflicting community politics and publicly address longstanding social justice issues like color line inequalities.

Notes

* Paul R. Mullins and K. Chris Glidden are both affiliated with the Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis. A version of this paper was originally presented in the 2008 Society for Historical Archaeology session “Civic Engagement in the 21st Century.” The authors extend their thanks to Kenneth Adams, Richard Crenshaw, and Thomas Ridley for sharing their memories about bowling in segregated Indianapolis.

1. Andrew Hermany had an alley in his tavern at West and Washington Streets in the 1880s. Hermany was born in 1863 and married in Marion County to Martha Councilman on August 20, 1878. See Denny 1994: 344-45.

2. Sea Ferguson’s “Fun Bowl” at 750 North West Street is the first bowling alley in Indianapolis’ near-Westside that appears in the city directories. Ferguson was an officer of the National Negro Bowling Association and owned a series of the city’s most prominent African-American clubs. Ferguson’s alley was mentioned in a March, 1942 letter from J. Elmer Reed to the Editor of the Baltimore, see Wiggins and Miller 2003: 108-10. Also see the comments on Ferguson and brother Denver made by musician Jimmy Coe at Campbell et al. 2004. Some background historical information on the neighborhood and Ferguson’s broader stake in the music community along Indiana Avenue is provided in Whitney et al. 2004.

3. Japanese Americans were among the other “non-White” groups excluded from the American Bowling Congress’ racist exclusivity codes (Smith 1949: 118).

4. The ABC held its third tournament in 1903 in Indianapolis at Tomlinson Hall. The ABC returned to Indianapolis in 1936 (*New York Times* 1936: 29).

5. The American Bowling Congress’ White-only rules eventually came under fire in the 1940’s. In 1949 the American Bowling Congress again rejected integrating its membership and tournaments, but by 1950 it faced litigation in four states and the threat in two more and rescinded its White male only rule that was officially introduced in 1916 (*New York Times* 1949, 1950). For an example of the organizations that banded together to challenge racist restrictions in various communities, see the Buffalo example by Rigali and Walter 2005. Bowling alleys continued to harbor racism that local communities challenged, including the most famous example of a 1968 Orangeburg, South Carolina protest in which three African-American students were shot and killed by local policemen (*New York Times* 1968a, 1968b).

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