Du Bois, W.E.B. (1868-1963)

Vincent Haddad, Wayne State University,

Paul Moore, Ryerson University,

Andrew Paravantes, York University

**<Portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois>Caption: Portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois, 1919. Photo taken by C.M. Battey.**

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois is the most significant critical writer on race and culture in the twentieth century. Du Bois characterized the issue of race in the United States as ‘the problem of the color line,’ a term itself that points to the nuance of Du Bois’s thinking; the problem was not one race or the other, but the abstract barrier between races that needed to be addressed. Over the course of his illustrious career, Du Bois’s thinking on race evolved: from writing in the social sciences to writing political propaganda, and from thinking of the ‘Negro problem’ regionally (Philadelphia and Atlanta) to nationally and globally (‘Pan-Africanism’). Du Bois is popularly credited as the founder of modern civil rights movement because, co-founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), he espoused tactics of active agitation and civil disobedience as the more effective route to gain rights and recognition. However, because he ultimately considered capitalism incapable of offering true equality and freedom for minorities, Du Bois’s pivot late in life towards Marxist ideology (he joined the Communist party in 1961) ultimately contributed to a murky legacy in the United States. Du Bois eventually self-exiled to Ghana, which became his final resting place in 1963.

**<Image: Haiti Poster. Caption: Du Bois saw the oppression of all peoples of African descent as integral to the ‘problem of the color line’ in the United States. He engaged with, therefore, historical moments that saw such oppression overthrown, as in this play he wrote for the Federal Theater Project about the highly controversial Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution: ‘Hait: A Drama of the Black Napolean,’ 1938. Work Projects Administration Poster Collection (Library of Congress).**

Du Bois was born in the rural white community of Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He came of age during the failure of Reconstruction, as the economic promises made to freed slaves following the Civil War were broken and as Jim Crow policies of social segregation became institutionalized. Singularly bright, but poor and orphaned as a teenager, Du Bois was sent to the historically black Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1885 as the beneficiary of white Northerners hoping to foster black leadership in the South (Lewis 2009). After Fisk came studies at Harvard, then a sojourn to the University of Berlin. At Harvard, Du Bois befriended and learned from psychologist William James, and, under the tutelage of the historian Albert Bushnell Hart, wrote and published his dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States, 1638-1870*. In 1895, Du Bois became the first African American to receive a PhD from Harvard University. While working as an ‘investigator’ at the University of Pennsylvania, Du Bois researched and wrote his first seminal work, *The Philadelphia Negro*: a sociological examination of the black population of Philadelphia. This academic work reflected Du Bois’s early belief that racism could be dismantled through intelligent, rational discourse, a belief that would be immediately challenged after he accepted an appointment at Atlanta University. When an impoverished local black man was accused of murder, Du Bois prepared a ‘careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts’ to publish in the *Atlanta Constitution,* only to discover that the accused Sam Hose was quickly lynched and this very newspaper promoted the event. Du Bois wrote of this time: ‘Two considerations thereafter broke in upon my work and eventually disrupted it: first, one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved; and, secondly, there was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort that I was doing’ (*Autobiography,* 221-222). Instead, Du Bois began work on one of the most widely referenced books of the twentieth century, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). This combination of essays, histories, and memoirs combats racism through propaganda and marks Du Bois’s pivot towards political writing. As he writes, ‘The cure wasn’t simply telling people the truth, it was inducing them to act on the truth’ (*Dusk of Dawn,* 94).

**<Image: The Atlanta Constitution. Caption: From The Atlanta Constitution, April 14, 1899. For Du Bois, the lynching of Sam Hose was ‘a red ray which could not be ignored.’ © Proquest Historical Papers.**

Thus, this best-known work remains his most humanistic. In *Souls*’s first essay, ‘Of Our Spiritual Strivings,’ Du Bois introduces his two most enduring concepts: the veil and double-consciousness. Both are connected to a formative event from his boyhood, an example of what today might be called an act of racial ‘micro-aggression.’ One day at school in Great Barrington, where Du Bois was the only black male student, the children were trading visiting-cards; one white girl, a newcomer, refused to accept Du Bois’s offer – ‘refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; … shut out from their world by a vast veil’ (*Souls of Black Folk*, 2). As a metaphor, the veil is particularly significant, and one that would be called upon and revised by many thinkers on race in the twentieth century, such as for example Richard Wright (*The Color Curtain* [1956]). A veil does not simply divide or separate; it shrouds, and it protects. Life on one side of the veil can remain ignorant of life on the other side. In *Souls*, Du Bois’s purpose is not so much to rend the veil so much as to invite the ‘Gentle Reader’ to pass within it and to witness the joys and sorrows of the people living therein. It seems clear from a handful of textual clues that Du Bois’s imagined reader of *Souls* is white. His intention, then, seems to have been to expose white readers to black experiences of which, perhaps, they knew little, or chose to ignore, and in doing so to foster new bonds of sympathy, understanding and communication (Lemert 1994; Zamir 1995).

The second important concept from ‘Of Our Spiritual Strivings’ is Du Bois’s notion of double-consciousness. Once again, Du Bois’s allegorical-autobiographical story serves as the catalyst for understanding how he was considered to be an Other by his white schoolmates. ‘It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder’ (*Souls of Black Folk,* 3). Much has been made of this suggestive passage. For some, double-consciousness is a negative quality, an example of black self-alienation (of ‘looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’) or of internalized racism (of ‘measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’) (ibid.). Or, positively, double-consciousness can be the source of a unique critical perspectivism (a ‘gifted…second-sight’) that is derived from one’s standpoint from within the veil, as much as from one’s capacity to transcend it (Gilroy 1993). Such overabundance of significance is no doubt due to the density of the concept’s allusions, seemingly equal portions German Idealism, Emersonian Transcendentalism and American psychology (Bruce 1992; Lemert 1994; Zamir 1995). In this passage, then, Du Bois appears to be doing several things at once. He is restating the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, where the slave, not the master, achieves self-consciousness. He is also reasserting the classic transcendental tension between spiritualism and materialism. Finally, he appears to be challenging the idea of a unified self that sits at the core of later social psychologies, such as George Herbert Mead’s *I*/*me* distinction and Charles Horton Cooley’s ‘looking-glass self.’ What is comparatively unique to the fractured subjectivity of double-consciousness is how Du Bois derives it from within a particular social situation – that of the African American experiences of racism. Furthermore, Du Bois’s idea has a general applicability similar to other sociological concepts, such as Émile Durkheim’s *anomie* and Karl Marx’s estrangement, which likewise capture the paradoxes of modernity. To possess double-consciousness is to contain and embody, without negating or unifying, the ‘unreconciled strivings’ of ‘soul’ and society.

One of Du Bois’s landmark essays, ‘The Talented Tenth,’ reflects the practical politics of these abstract concepts. In stark contrast to Booker T. Washington, who believed that through technical education and the gradual accumulation of capital African-Americans would assimilate with white culture and enjoy equal rights, Du Bois argued that African-Americans needed to organize their own liberal arts colleges, newspapers, and businesses, enabling the most talented to succeed and lead. Coinciding with this argumentation, Du Bois advocated for black artists who similarly integrated black culture into their aesthetics, whether in style, phraseology, or themes, such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston (‘The Younger Literary Movement’).

**Selected List of Works**

Non-fiction

*The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (1896)

*The Philadelphia Negro* (1899)

‘Of Our Spiritual Strivings,’ *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

‘The Talented Tenth,’ *The Negro Problem* (1903)

*Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920)

*The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America* (1924)

‘The Younger Literary Movement,’ *The Crisis* (1924)

‘The Negro Mind Reaches Out,’ *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925)

*Black Reconstruction* (1935)

*Black Folk, Then and Now* (1939)*,* revised and expanded version of *The Negro* (1915)

*Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940)

‘My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom,’ *What the Negro Wants* (1944)

*Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace* (1945)

*The Autobiography of W.E.B. Dubois:**A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1967)

Novels

*The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911)

*Dark Princess: A Romance* (1928)

*The Black Flame* trilogy (1957-1961)

**Further Reading**

Bruce, Dickson. ‘W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness.’ *American Literature* 64.2 (1992): 299-309. Print.

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Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009. Print.

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Routledge, 2001. Print.

**Images:** 

**Du Bois Portrait:**

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**Notice to Lynch Sam Hose (included as PDF in e-mail)**

DETERMINED MOB AFTER HOSE; HE WILL BE LYNCHED IF CAUGHT

The Atlanta; Apr 14, 1899; ProQuest Historical Newspapers Atlanta Constitution (1868 - 1939) pg. 1