

CHAPTER 5

Rethinking Race at the Turn of the Century

W. E. B. Du Bois and Franz Boas

Eugenics was one particular project during the reform movement; other projects intersected and clashed with applied tooth-and-claw evolutionism. Intellectuals of all stripes were contesting nineteenth-century paradigms during the decades that straddled the dawn of the twentieth century. In education, John Dewey synthesized American pragmatism with stimulus-response theory to pioneer functional psychology, which helped to formulate new teaching methods and school curriculums.¹ In economics, Thorstein B. Veblen wrote *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899), in which he introduced the notion of conspicuous consumption, insisted that economics be studied in terms of cultural institutions, and critiqued the incompatibility between the modern industrial process and the irrational ways of business and finance. Also in economics, John R. Commons challenged previous ideas about the relationship of labor to economic institutions.² In history, Charles A. Beard challenged the democratic ideals of the constitution in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), and Louis Brandeis challenged conventional ideas of jurisprudence when he fought tenaciously against giant corporations by defending a minimum wage and labor unions. To a large extent these scholars were muckrakers in an ivory tower. They were liberal reformers crusading against the untrammeled captains of industry, bolstered by ideological themes of Social Darwinism. In anthropology, the leading spokesperson against Social Darwinism and for liberal reform was Franz Boas; in sociology, W. E. B. Du Bois.

During the first decade of the twentieth century Boas began to take over and centralize the leadership of his field. He effectively directed the anthropology of race away from theories of evolution and guided it to a consensus that African Americans, Native Americans, and other people of color were not racially inferior and possessed unique and historically specific cultures. These cultures, he argued, were particular to geographic areas, local histories, and traditions. Furthermore, one could not project a value of higher or lower on these cultures—cultures were relative.

Franz Boas began to drive a wedge into the solid construct of race when he courageously challenged the ascendancy of ideas of racial inferiority within the academy. His wedge did not fracture it: only after the studies pioneered by Boas and Du Bois were appropriated by African American intellectuals engaged in the processes of razing America's racial edifice did anthropology turn the corner and begin to be used in the struggle against racial inequality.

Although anthropology continued to merge with nativism and reinforce racism well into the 1920s, much of its racial discourse had been redirected by 1910. Boas orchestrated this shift in racial theory within anthropology by distinguishing race from culture and language and by proving that racial hierarchies were scientifically untenable. With the help of his students he effectively orchestrated a paradigmatic shift in the discipline and subsequently in the social sciences, and the Supreme Court eventually embraced the “new” scientific claims about racial equality, ending Jim Crow segregation in public schools in 1954.

Boas's contributions were singularly significant, but he did not work alone. Without the wider social and political efforts of Du Bois, the NAACP, and scholars at Howard University, Boas's contributions to the changing signification of race would have been limited to the academy. The only way to fully understand the important role social science played in *Brown* is to examine the early relationship between anthropology and the NAACP, and the only way to do that is to explore the unique relationship between Du Bois and Boas in the first decade of the twentieth century. The efforts of Boas and Du Bois to change how scientists and the public understood race and culture were not simply efforts to shift a paradigm, they were struggles to secure the principles of democracy.

Boas's Early Attack

Franz Boas was born in Minden, Germany, on July 9, 1858 (Figure 8), the same year as Émile Durkheim and Georg Simmel; Booker T. Washington and Sigmund Freud were two years older than he, and John Dewey was a year his junior. Boas grew up in financially secure, socially and intellectually rich surroundings; however, he faced prejudice, anti-Semitism, and political persecution as a young Jew in Bismarck Germany, which was one of the factors that motivated him to migrate to the United States.³

From his teens on, Boas was interested in geography, the natural sciences, and cultural history, and he acquired exceptional skills in math and statistics. He pursued his education at the universities of Heidelberg, Bonn, and Kiel and was influenced by neo-Kantian philosophers as well as scholars who were committed to empiricism and positivism. He completed a doctorate in physics with a minor in geography at the age of twenty-three.⁴

In 1883 he joined a geographic expedition to the Cumberland Sound in Baffinland, Greenland, where a community of Eskimos transformed his life and shaped the balance of his career:

After a long and intimate intercourse with the Eskimo, it was with feelings of sorrow and regret that I parted from my Arctic friends. I had seen that they enjoyed life, and a hard life, as we do; that nature is also beautiful to them; that feelings of friendship also root in the Eskimo heart; that, although the character of their life is so rude as compared to civilized life, the Eskimo is a man as we are; that his feelings, his virtues and his shortcomings are based in human nature, like ours.⁵

This simple and seemingly axiomatic statement stood in stark contrast to Powell's and Brinton's contemporaneous musings about similar peoples. It also framed the philosophical positions and theoretical questions from which Boas would transform anthropology. How does the environment affect the institutions, beliefs, rituals, and social rules of a society? How can people with different physical types and widely different forms of existence and beliefs be so similar in many ways? How can physical and mental endowments—so-called racial differences—determine behavior when the environment seems so determinate? In many respects Boas committed the balance of his life to providing answers to



Figure 8. Official World's Columbian Exposition portrait of Franz Boas, 1893. (Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society)

these questions. He insisted that, to answer them, anthropologists should conduct painstaking, inductive ethnographic, anthropometric, and linguistic research so that one could cull generalizations from the universe of data. His Baffinland experience not only helped to frame his scientific questions, it also crystallized his political commitment to equal rights, which drove much of his scientific investigations. Writing to his future wife during his Baffinland fieldwork, he professed: "What I want to live and die for, is equal rights for all, equal possibilities to learn and work for poor and rich alike! Don't you believe that to have done even the smallest bit for this, is more than all science taken together?"⁶

In 1886 Boas embarked on his second field trip. This time he went to the Pacific Northwest and studied members of the Bella Coola. Instead of returning to Germany, he went on to New York and joined the editorial staff of *Science*. During this period he conducted more research in the Pacific Northwest. In 1888, and now married, he met G. Stanley Hall on a train to a professional meeting in Cleveland. Hall was presiding over assembling the faculty for the new Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and invited Boas to join the inaugural faculty. Boas taught at Clark between 1889 and 1892 and launched a series of investigations comparing the growth patterns of U.S. immigrants and their children. In 1892 he resigned from Clark to join Putnam as assistant chief at the World Columbian Exposition. After the fair Boas suffered setbacks trying to secure steady employment. Anti-Semitism pervaded the nation, and German Jews witnessed declining status and narrowing opportunities, which perhaps explains why he was denied a position at the newly formed University of Chicago.⁷

In 1896 Boas followed Putnam to the AMNH, where he served as assistant curator; in 1901 he was promoted to curator. In 1896 he also joined the faculty of Columbia University as a lecturer in physical anthropology, and by 1899 he was a member of the full-time faculty. At the AMNH he undertook major research expeditions, including the Jesup North Pacific Expedition.

The Jesup expedition made scientific breakthroughs that included establishing the links between indigenous people of North America and Arctic Siberia.⁸ The investigation was wide-ranging; as Melville Herskovits recounted, it was "designed to throw light on some of the basic theoretical and methodological problems of anthropology—the relation between race, language, and culture, the mode of diffusion of custom, and the ways in which historical relations between nonhistoric peoples, without written records, can be established."⁹ In a significant

but tangential way, the expedition influenced how race was constructed. Boas curated and exhibited the material gathered at the AMNH in a way that challenged ideas of racial inferiority.

As early as 1887 Boas began to combat scientific racism by challenging museum organizers' representations of other cultures. He argued that arranging artifacts into categories depicting degrees of savagery, barbarism, or civilization employed a fraudulent logic "not founded on the phenomenon, but in the mind of the student."¹⁰ The debates were conducted through letters to the editor of *Science*, involving Otis T. Mason, president of the Anthropological Society of Washington, and John Wesley Powell, director of the BAE.¹¹ Boas argued that an "ethnological phenomenon is not expressed by its appearance, by the state in which it *is*, but by its whole history[;] . . . therefore arguments from analogies of the outward appearance, such as shown in Professor Mason's collections, are deceptive."¹² Boas's logic, which was not completely clear, became a cornerstone for the inductive ethnographic studies that he and his students pursued:

The outward appearance of two phenomena may be identical, yet their immanent qualities may be altogether different; . . . these remarks show how the same phenomena may originate from unlike causes, and that my opinion does not at all strive against the axiom, "Like effects spring from like causes," which belongs to that class of axioms which cannot be converted. Though like causes have like effects, like effects have not like causes. . . .

It is my opinion that the main object of ethnological collections should be the dissemination of the fact that civilization is not something absolute, but that it is relative, and that our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes. I believe that this object can be accomplished only by the tribal arrangement of collections.¹³

These thoughts were important precursors for much of his work after 1887. One of the grandest examples of these AMNH installations was the Northwest Coast Hall, in which, by bringing together collections of artifacts of specific linguistic groups, he demonstrated both their similarity and their complex diversity.

In 1894 Boas delivered his first public address in which he outlined the racism of the dominant anthropological discourse. "Human Faculty as Determined by Race," delivered to Section H of the AAAS, raised this question: Does race limit the ability to achieve civilization? Boas warned, cautiously, that the problem with simple evolutionary theories was the liability "to interpret as racial character what is only an effect of social surroundings."¹⁴

He detailed how various civilizations arose either independently or through cultural diffusion and emphasized that civilizations arose in various parts of the world regardless of racial disposition. Although deferring to findings of physical anthropologists about racial inferiority, Boas demonstrated there was considerable overlap of “so called” racial characteristics, imploring that no fact “has been found yet which would prove beyond a doubt that it will be impossible for certain races to attain a higher civilization.”¹⁵ He also explained that the primary reason for African American inequality was racism, suggesting “that the old race-feeling of the inferiority of the colored race is as potent as ever and is a formidable obstacle to its advance and progress.” He advised scientists to focus on how much Negroes have “accomplished in a short period against heavy odds” because “it is hardly possible to say what would become of the negro if he were able to live with the whites on absolutely equal terms.”¹⁶ Boas concluded that “historical events appear to have been much more potent in leading races to civilization than their faculty, and it follows that achievements of races do not warrant us to assume that one race is more highly gifted than the other.”¹⁷

Boas’s approach was a direct challenge to most anthropologists during that period. Brinton essentially accepted this challenge: the following year he delivered “The Aims of Anthropology” as the presidential address to the AAAS, which seems to be a rebuttal to Boas’s 1894 address to Section H. Boas pulled together his growing concerns about the discipline of anthropology to respond to Brinton the following year, 1896, when he issued a detailed critique entitled “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology.” He was concerned about the lack of methodological rigor in ethnology and believed that the comparative method only attempted to link disparate traits and failed to study cultures holistically. He concluded that the object of study should not be individual traits or customs but “a detailed study of customs in their relation to the total culture.”¹⁸ The best way to conduct this kind of investigation, Boas asserted, was the “new historical method,” which “affords us almost always a means of determining with considerable accuracy the historical causes that led to the formation of the customs in question.”¹⁹

Boas’s arguments at this point did not have a significant impact on the scientific community and did not circulate in the more popular scientific magazines. This was in sharp contrast to Brinton’s version of anthropology, which was avidly consumed by both the general public and the scientific community. Whereas the editors of *Popular Science*

Monthly carried a one-column summary of Boas's AAAS address, they published Brinton's entire address just months before the *Plessy* decision.²⁰

Boas also attempted to attack the eugenics movement, but he was summarily dismissed by the federal government and virtually ignored by the academic community. In 1907 President Theodore Roosevelt established the U.S. Immigration Commission (or, as it was known at the time, the Dillingham Commission), consisting of three senators, three House representatives, and three scientists. The commission was charged with informing the executive and legislative branches about the impact that the "new migration" would have on the United States and judging whether they should restrict it. The commission hired an array of experts who compiled a Herculean forty-one-volume report. It cost more than \$1 million and took more than three years to complete.

Franz Boas was one of the scientists employed by the commission. He began his report by questioning the commission's underlying premise that there was some sort of difference between migrants who were coming to the United States and those who were already here. He stated that "This problem is an exceedingly complicated one, on account of the great differences in type of the people that have immigrated into the United States from different parts of Europe, on account of the changes of social conditions under which these people lived at home and here, and on account of the extended intermixture of descendants of various nationalities that is taking place in the United States."²¹ In *Changes in Bodily Forms of Descendants of Immigrants* (1912), his contribution to the massive congressional report, he sought to prove that the so-called inferiority of Eastern European immigrants was erroneous. His report consisted of more than 500 pages of painstaking statistics, graphs, and formulas. It documented significant differences between the growth patterns of first- and second-generation children and demonstrated that the so-called inferior racial traits of Eastern Europeans were plastic and developed differently in different environments. His statistics were impressive, rigorous, and far more sophisticated than those of any other study conducted under the rubric of eugenics.

Although Boas was characteristically cautious, he stated that "we are therefore compelled to draw the conclusion that . . . the adaptability of the immigrant seems to be very much greater than we had a right to suppose before our investigations were instituted."²² He continued:

[N]ot even those characteristics of a race which have proved to be most permanent in their old home remain the same under the new surroundings;

and we are compelled to conclude that when these features of the body change, the whole bodily and mental make-up of the immigrants may change.

These results are so definite that, while heretofore we had the right to assume that human types are stable, all the evidence is now in favor of a great plasticity of human types, and permanence of types in new surroundings appears rather as the exception than as the rule.²³

The U.S. Immigration Commission selectively abridged the forty-one volumes into two volumes and presented them to the Senate. Although they mentioned Boas's efforts, they summarily dismissed them, stating that there were no corroborative data. This dismissive posture toward Boas's obliteration of the pervasive myth surrounding head size or the cephalic index was summed up by the eminent Yale sociologist Henry Pratt Fairchild, who stated that "the results reached by Professor Boas are somewhat startling and challenge attention. It is to be hoped that they will be subjected to the most careful scrutiny by anthropologists qualified either to verify or correct them."²⁴

At this point Boas was provoking debate in scientific circles but was virtually discredited by the federal government. Eventually, however, his concept of culture and his defense of racial equality would become the dominant paradigm in the social sciences, and it would also be integrated into the sophisticated discourse on the political economy of race articulated by Du Bois. While Boas's thought ultimately eclipsed nineteenth-century ideas about race in the academy, Du Bois's discourse emerged as the theoretical underpinning of the NAACP and its battles to overturn the doctrine of separate but equal. It is to Du Bois that I now turn to examine how Du Bois and Boas came to strikingly similar yet different understandings of racial categories and cultural patterns contemporaneously. I will return to Boas to show his activist role and contextualize his and his students' efforts to fight racial inequality.

Du Bois's early understanding of the color line was an important precursor for the paradigmatic shift in the social sciences that is rightly credited to Boas. Boas simply had more power than Du Bois in the academy to redirect scientific approaches to race. Boas was White, was viewed as an "objective" scientist, and held sway over scientific societies, editorial boards, and a prestigious department.

As St. Clair Drake explained, Du Bois's approach contributed to a special genre of intellectual activity called racial vindication. This genre originated in the eighteenth century but eventually became a scientific assault against racial oppression. The vindicationist approach to science sought to disprove slander, answer pejorative allegations, and criticize

so-called scientific generalizations about Africans and people of African descent.²⁵

Du Bois's Early Understanding of Race and Culture

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, a small, affluent town in western Massachusetts (Figure 9). He graduated from high school in 1885 and won a scholarship to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. At Fisk, in the Jim Crow South, he experienced a sharp contrast to his upbringing in Massachusetts. But Nashville and Great Barrington had one feature in common—racial prejudice. The contrasts and consistencies of racism that he observed as a young man became a backdrop for his sagacious comprehension of the race problem in the United States and later the world. It was at Fisk University that he resolved to fight the “color line” in a forthright but peaceful manner. In 1888 he completed his undergraduate work at Fisk and embarked on work toward a second bachelor’s degree, matriculating as a junior at Harvard College. He continued graduate studies at Harvard, pursuing history and philosophy. He was interested in sociology, but, at that time, Harvard did not recognize the field.

Sociology developed into a professional academic field concurrently with anthropology, and it too gleaned many ideas from Social Darwinism. Du Bois recognized that the scope of the emerging field was congruent with his vision but that the methods and theory were not. He made a decision not to pursue sociology in the same vein as Herbert Spencer, William Graham Sumner, or Lester Ward; instead, he “came to the study of sociology, by way of philosophy and history rather than by physics and biology.”²⁶ Du Bois received his doctorate from Harvard University and was influenced in important ways by Harvard’s philosophical pragmatists, William James, Josiah Royce, and George Santayana.²⁷

Du Bois’s contribution to the philosophical foundation of American pragmatism has recently been established,²⁸ but his contribution to the concept of culture has not been addressed. He made a distinction between the cultural aspects of race and the social relations of race. These ideas were informed by his training within the German philosophical rubric *Geisteswissenschaften*, which roughly translates as the humanities and explored aspects of culture.



Figure 9. W. E. B. Du Bois, 1904. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Before he completed his award-winning dissertation, "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade in the United States" (1896), Du Bois attended the Friedrich-Wilhelm III Universität in Berlin. He enrolled in October 1892 with assistance provided by the Slater Fund. In Germany he had the opportunity to garner an academic approach to society and culture that emphasized a methodology relying on inductive reasoning and the empirical gathering of historical and descriptive data. This methodology was used in conjunction with a rigorous curriculum of political economy. Du Bois stated:

I was admitted my first semester to two seminars under Schmoller and Wagner, both of them at the time distinguished men in their line; . . . I sat under the voice of the fire-eating Pan-German, von Treitschke; I heard Sering and Weber; . . . Under these teachers and in this social setting, I began to see the race problem in America, the problem of the peoples of Africa and Asia, and the political development of Europe as one. I began to unite my economics and politics.²⁹

This approach was drastically different from the Spencerian approach to understanding society that was being touted at Harvard University by Shaler, Putnam, and others during the same period.³⁰ In *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1943), Du Bois explained this difference:

At Harvard . . . I began to face scientific race dogma: first of all evolution and the "Survival of the Fittest." It was continually stressed in the community and classes that there was a vast difference in the development of the whites and the "lower" races; that this could be seen in the physical development of the Negro. . . . [S]tress was quietly transferred to brain weight and brain capacity, and at last to the "cephalic index." . . . [I]n Germany, the emphasis again was altered, and race became a matter of culture and cultural history.³¹

During the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century Du Bois, like Boas, forcefully argued that racial categories were divorced from cultural patterns by suggesting that one should analyze historically specific cultures, as opposed to hierarchical levels of culture. The two scholars emphasized different issues, but both engendered strikingly similar lines of thought even before they began to collaborate.

Du Bois's Early Attack

Du Bois committed his life to developing a theory of society interactively with and through social and political practice in order to achieve enlightenment *and* emancipation.³² Because of the interactive nature of Du Bois's social theory, he never made a distinction between theory and practice. His theory emanated from his political activism, and his political activism emanated from his theory.³³ The world into which Du Bois was born was changing as fast as his attempts to change it. His political and theoretical strategies and orientations changed as the world changed. He explained that he lived during, and subsequently chronicled, "changes of cosmic significance." "From 1868 to 1940 . . . incidentally the years of my own life but more especially years of cosmic significance, when one remembers that they rush from the American Civil War to the reign of the second Roosevelt; from Victoria to the Sixth George; from the Franco-Prussian to the two World Wars. They contain . . . the turmoils of Asia in China, India and Japan, and the world-wide domination of white Europe."³⁴ Although his theory was responsive, many of his biographers have been critical because they viewed him as eclectic and contradictory or incomprehensible and inconsistent, portraying him lurching between the antithetical and contradictory goals of black nationalism and racial integration.³⁵ Du Bois was, however, developing ideas to combat racial inequality when America was lurching between contradictions and global changes.

Du Bois's notion of the color line was one consistent tenet in his work. Race, he declared, was a political and social relationship, an integral part of capitalism, and the ultimate paradox of democracy.³⁶ He remarked that "to be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships."³⁷ The color line, according to Du Bois, prevented Negroes from gaining any political, economic, or social equality. As a form of institutionalized alienation, the color line ultimately denied the "cultural and spiritual desire to be one's self without interference from others; to enjoy that anarchy of the spirit which is inevitably the goal of all consciousness."³⁸

Early in his career Du Bois sought to explain the color line as it related to the daily life of Negroes, arguing that racial inequality in the United States was the direct result of the heritage of slavery—not biology. And he viewed slavery as one component in the global imperialism

undertaken by the “lighter races.” Racial inequality, he argued, was born from the imposition of the color line, and that imposition created the relationship between “darker to the lighter races of men,” “the burden he bore upon his back, that dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem.”³⁹ Du Bois explored “the experience of being a problem” in its geopolitical and economic contexts, as opposed to the capacity of humans to surmount them.⁴⁰ He usually referred only to “the concept of race” and did not define race in biological terms. He was not even satisfied with describing race as a concept, suggesting “perhaps it is wrong to speak of it [race] at all as a concept rather than as a group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies.”⁴¹

In 1897 Du Bois groped for the right language to express ideas about racial equality and the unique cultural contributions of different races. This was evident in “The Conservation of Races,” a paper presented at the first meeting of the Negro Academy. During this address Du Bois explained that “when we thus come to inquire into the essential difference of races we find it hard to come at once to any definite conclusions.”⁴² His main argument was that “so far as purely physical characteristics are concerned, the differences between men do not explain all the differences of their history.”⁴³ He used examples of the subtle variations in color, ranging from the marblelike color of the Scandinavian to the rich dark brown of the Zulu, from the creamy Slav to the yellow Chinese. He dismissed color, cranial measurements, body shape, and language as criteria for demarcating racial categories. His evidence was gleaned from the fact that the racial criteria employed to categorize the races were inconsistent and appear in various combinations and different magnitudes within each race. He argued that science has not succeeded in clearing up the “relative authority of these various and contradictory criteria.”⁴⁴ Concluding the first part of this address, he denied that any specific criteria existed to define races but contended:

yet there are differences—subtle, delicate and elusive, though they may be—which have silently but definitely separated men into groups. While these subtle forces have generally followed the natal cleavage of common blood, descent and physical peculiarities, they have at other times swept across and ignored these. At all times, however they have divided human beings into races, which while they perhaps transcended scientific definition, nevertheless, are clearly defined to the eye of the Historian and Sociologist.⁴⁵

After effacing the scientific and biological categories of race, Du Bois attempted to discern “What is the real distinction between these

nations?”⁴⁶ The answer he provided for this mounting question was a precursor to the later articulation of the culture concept. He explained that the cohesiveness which races (or nations) shared was rooted in more than physical characteristics: “The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences—undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them. The forces that bind together the Teuton nations are, then, first, their race identity and common blood; secondly, and more important, a common history, common laws and religion, similar habits of thought and a conscious string together for certain ideals of life.”⁴⁷

As early as 1897 Du Bois provided an important first step for disassociating race from language and culture when he suggested that race was not a biological category and was not necessarily associated with different nations or the genius of a people (what later would be explained as ethnic groups or culture areas). His writings anticipated ideas of cultural relativism and the critique of ideas of racial inferiority that emerged from anthropologists at Columbia University during the 1920s. In certain respects, Du Bois presaged the “emergence of a scientific ‘paradigm’ for the study of mankind. The idea of culture, radically transformed in meaning [and stripped from ideas of evolution that linked patterned behavior to ‘race traits’], is the central element of this paradigm, and indeed much of the social science of the twentieth century may be seen as a working out in detail of the implications of the culture idea.”⁴⁸

Du Bois also anticipated and was a pioneer of urban ethnography when he undertook research for *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1896. This study was sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania and underwritten by the City of Philadelphia. He developed a holistic ethnography based on fifteen months of intensive participant observation. He “sought to ascertain something of the geographical distribution of this race, their occupations and daily life, their homes, their organizations, and, above all, their relation to their million white fellow-citizens.”⁴⁹ His ultimate goal at this juncture was to combat the notions of racial inferiority because “the world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation.”⁵⁰

Du Bois explored the history of the Negro people in Philadelphia and their condition as individuals and organized social groups, as well as their physical and social environment.⁵¹ He gathered data from thousands of informants in a wide range of class positions and occupations, including members of the police force and social organizations, bankers, cobblers, prostitutes, and parishioners. He painstakingly wove

the ethnographic data into a comprehensive historical and demographic survey.

According to Du Bois, Philadelphia was the worst governed of the ill-governed northern cities. White residents in Philadelphia blamed the mismanagement of the city on the “the corrupt, semi-criminal vote of the Negro Seventh Ward.”⁵² To prove these allegations the city commissioned a study, backed by a prestigious university, in an effort to study their Negro problem. What city officials received did not quite match their expectations. They received a 400-page monograph which utilized innovative sociological and anthropological methods to demonstrate that poverty, segregation, and lack of health care, not racial inferiority, disposition toward criminal activity, and bad morals were the root causes of Negro degradation. The study was summarily shelved, and the University of Pennsylvania did not grant Du Bois an academic appointment. He had hoped that the study would steer public policy and secure him a position at the university.⁵³

Du Bois's ethnography blazed a trail for such theoretical problems as differences in enculturation and socialization experienced by longtime urban residents and newly arriving southern migrants. Additionally, he was the first sociologist to document and analyze the changing forms of cultural adaptation, the impact on urban social relations by rural forms of social organization, and the perils and benefits of cultural identity.⁵⁴ Faye V. Harrison and Irene Diggs have both pointed out that the method and theoretical point of view which Du Bois articulated for this study helped to lay foundations for research that changed the discourse on race and culture in the social sciences in the United States. Harrison, extending the intellectual history of Diggs, has suggested that findings in *The Philadelphia Negro* predate similar findings in both *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911), by Franz Boas, and *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918), by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki. Moreover, W. Lloyd Warner's school of community studies at Harvard and Chicago (which resulted in *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton [1945], and Allison Davis's *Deep South* [1941], a social anthropological study of caste and class, as well as Warner's influential *Yankee City Series* [1941–1959]) shared comparable methods and theoretical perspectives with *The Philadelphia Negro*. The argument posed by Diggs and Harrison has important ramifications. They establish Du Bois as a progenitor of the important shift in the social sciences, from ideas of society born of Social Darwinism and premised on racial inferiority, to ideas of society born

of notions of cultural diversity premised on racial equality. What is at stake is who ultimately gets “credit” for the profound shift in the social sciences.⁵⁵ Although Du Bois’s work in *The Philadelphia Negro* and his Atlanta University studies were innovative, they did not have the same direct influence, credibility, and prestige as did studies by White scholars who explored social relations in urban arenas.

In 1897 Du Bois was appointed professor of history and economics at Atlanta University. He wanted to change the inherent racism in the social sciences and then to let sociological knowledge “trickle down” to erode the ignorance of people who harbored racist attitudes. To do so, he developed a systematic hundred-year program of studies of Negro life. As Du Bois stated, he wanted to “study the facts, any and all facts, concerning the American Negro and his plight, and by measurement and comparison and research, work up to any valid generalization I could. I entered this primarily with the utilitarian object of reform and uplift; but nevertheless, I wanted to do the work with scientific accuracy.”⁵⁶

The Atlanta studies covered a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from the physique and health of African Americans to patterns and strategies of economic cooperation. Each year Du Bois organized a conference to present the results of that year’s investigation into a specific topic. He outlined ten topics of inquiry and envisioned revisiting each topic every decade for ten decades. The result would be a massive longitudinal study of Negro life and culture.

Many White scholars at the time could not accept that Negroes could pursue “rational” research because they considered them too “emotional.” Others, however, took them seriously and applauded the much-needed data. The noted author and reformer George Washington Cable praised the conferences when they were launched: “It seems to me, from the highest, broadest, most patriotic and cosmopolitan point of view, to be one of the best enterprises that could be undertaken at this time.”⁵⁷ The economic historian Frank Taussig said that no better work was being done anywhere in the United States.⁵⁸ W. Montague Cobb, a physical anthropologist and anatomist at Howard University, stated that the sixth study, in 1906, on Negro health was the “first significant scientific approach to the health problems and biological study of the Negro.” Cobb was clear that “neither the Negro medical profession nor the Negro educational world was ready for it. Its potential usefulness was not realized by Negroes. [And] Whites were hostile to such a study.” Although this study was Du Bois’s only excursion into the health field,

Cobb quipped that it “was an extraordinary forward pass heaved the length of the field, but there were no receivers.”⁵⁹

Cobb’s reflection on the 1906 study was emblematic of the gravity and originality of this ground-breaking research and its marginal impact at the time. However, the studies undertaken at Atlanta University were compiled into a series of monographs that became the corpus of research from which the interdisciplinary standard of African American studies was advanced.

The first two studies were conducted and subsequently presented in conferences before Du Bois became the official director of the annual conferences. The first, “Morality among Negroes in Cities,” was conducted in 1896. The second, “Physical Condition of Negroes in Cities,” was conducted and presented in 1897. When Du Bois officially became the director of the conferences he tightened up the series and developed the long-range intensive program. He also began to publish the proceedings of the annual conferences in a series, *The Atlanta University Publications*, which consisted of eighteen monographs with five bibliographies.⁶⁰ Du Bois began to edit the monographs with the third study, “Some Efforts of American Negroes for Their Own Social Betterment” (1898). The fourth study, “The Negro in Business” (1899), called for the establishment of a Negro business organization. Incidentally, Booker T. Washington established the Negro Businessmen’s League the following year. The fifth, sixth, and seventh studies were entitled “The College-Bred Negro” (1900), “The Negro Common School” (1901), and “The Negro Artisan,” respectively. The eighth study, “The Negro Church” (1903), was one of the first attempts to advance the sociological significance of the Black church, by documenting the history and diversity of several prominent Black denominations. The ninth study, “Some Notes on Negro Crime, Particularly in Georgia” (1904), linked crime to poverty, a double standard of justice in the courts, and discriminatory laws. The study found that African Americans, and African American women in particular, had no legal defense against violence perpetrated by White men. The study also highlighted the exploitation born of the convict-lease system and southern prison labor. The tenth and eleventh studies were “A Select Bibliography of the Negro American” (1905) and “The Health and Physique of the Negro American” (1906). Franz Boas participated in this study and contributed to the proceedings. The twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth studies were the last edited solely by Du Bois: “Economic Co-Operation among Negro Americans” (1907), “The Negro American Family” (1908), and “Efforts for Social Betterment among Negro Americans” (1910).⁶¹

In 1910 Du Bois left Atlanta to become an officer of the NAACP and the editor of its official organ, the *Crisis*. The hundred-year study did not materialize, and by 1905 Du Bois began to look for other ways to fight racial inequality. He began to see that correcting people's ignorance via the social sciences did not "trickle down" and correct the social evils of institutionalized racism, racists attitudes, and the pogrom attacks on entire communities. Furthermore, the Atlanta studies were woefully underfunded. Philanthropic agents did not see a need for the research, and Booker T. Washington blocked support for the project.⁶² The studies continued anyway and received a paltry annual allocation from the university of \$500.

During his years in Atlanta Du Bois took charge of the annual sociological conferences, edited the annual volumes for the studies, chaired the program in sociology, and instructed an upper-division year-long course. He began to grow impatient with the slow program of Negro progress led by Booker T. Washington and with the ineffectiveness of, and lack of support for, his Atlanta studies. The problems facing African Americans remained unchanged. African Americans lacked civil rights and economic opportunity and were still largely segregated by law and practice. Even worse, pogrom attacks and lynchings continued unchecked.

In an effort to combat racial inequality through political action, Du Bois organized a Negro rights group, the Niagara Movement, in 1905. Twenty-nine members of Du Bois's so-called talented-tenth of the Negro population attended the initial conclave. The press called them "the radicals." More African American leaders were expected but, according to rumors, declined the invitation at the last minute, after being pressured by friends of Booker T. Washington.⁶³ The Niagara Movement was much more demanding than Washington's Tuskegee Machine. It insisted that the government meet several demands: free speech, equal employment, union opportunities, federal aid for education, an end to sharecropping, and no more federal subsidies for the Tuskegee Machine's press.⁶⁴

Du Bois's move from the academy enabled him to focus on political activism and agitation. The move was also facilitated by an increasing rift with Washington. Du Bois was not opposed to industrial education and generally agreed with Washington in terms of economic uplift, self-help, and self-determination. However, he disagreed with Washington about how to obtain equality. Du Bois held the position that social equality and economic opportunity could be obtained only through gaining political rights.

The rift, drawn in terms of region and social status, separated the South from the North, a vocationally trained working class from the normal-school- and college-educated talented-tenth. The rift was thrown into vivid relief in 1903 with the publication of Du Bois's widely acclaimed *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of essays previously published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and other fifteen-cent monthlies. The book contained some of the finest prose of the day, and in it Du Bois was openly critical of Washington's agenda. Du Bois exposed differences between the young intellectuals who organized the Niagara Movement and the established leadership and summarized his criticism in a chapter entitled "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington." He curtly penned:

Mr. Washington thus faces the triple paradox of his career:

1. He is striving nobly to make Negro artisans, businessmen and property owners; but it is utterly impossible . . .
2. He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority . . .
3. He advocates common-school and industrial training, and deprecates institutions of higher learning.⁶⁵

The "old-school" leadership of Washington and the Tuskegee Machine was delivered a fatal blow in 1909, when Mary White Ovington, a White social worker, issued a call to form the National Negro Committee. She wanted to merge the weak Niagara Movement with a group of White reformers.

This organization, which soon became the NAACP, first met in New York City on May 31, 1909.⁶⁶ The widely publicized meeting was viewed as a protest movement. Members of the university community, including William James, Du Bois's former professor at Harvard, thought that race prejudice might increase as a result of the publicity the committee would receive. Furthermore, powerful White friends of Washington, such as Andrew Carnegie, shunned the conclave. The meeting attempted to forge a new model for the advancement of colored people. Washington's model ignored the future role of urban African Americans and was blind to the growing horror of racial violence.⁶⁷ For these reasons, the organization convened without him.

Although the *Crisis* was the official organ of the NAACP, Du Bois exercised editorial independence. It was essentially his publication, and he made it one of the most effective tools for education, vindication, and liberation. Each issue critiqued and chronicled, provided leadership and propaganda, agitated and organized, all the while tackling the myriad issues that African Americans had to negotiate during the 1910s.⁶⁸

Between 1896 and 1910 Du Bois made profound contributions. He laid the foundation of a new discourse on race within the social sciences, undertook an important research program at Atlanta University, published numerous articles in widely circulated periodicals, helped to establish the NAACP, and began his work as editor of the *Crisis*.

Franz Boas, in an attempt to establish a new discourse on race within anthropology, intersected each of these endeavors undertaken by Du Bois. Boas took part in the Atlanta studies, attempted to popularize his notion of race in widely circulated periodicals, spoke at the first meeting of the NAACP, and contributed to the *Crisis*.⁶⁹

Some of their parallel experiences may illuminate the reasons why both Boas and Du Bois developed lines of thought that were inimical to the consensus about racial inferiority held by people in the mass media, the academy, southern state legislatures, and each branch of the federal government. To begin with, Boas was trained in the same German traditions that influenced Du Bois. Boas shared with Du Bois the methodological orientation that emphasized inductive reasoning and the empirical gathering of descriptive and historical data. Boas also shared with Du Bois firsthand experience with persecution and discrimination.⁷⁰ The precise experiences that influenced these two scholars to engender similar approaches may never, however, be known.

There were, of course, differences between their strategies, philosophies, and subject positions. Boas viewed racial categories in terms of biological differences. Though deeply committed to ideals of the equipotentiality of the race, he was also committed to the science that seemed to prove Blacks to be inferior to Whites. He tried to explain the differences in terms of plasticity and frequency, but his early critiques were conducted on terms laid down by Social Darwinists in previous years. As Vernon J. Williams, Jr. suggests, Boas was a “prisoner of his times.”⁷¹ Young Du Bois was imprisoned too. According to David Levering Lewis, Du Bois was imprisoned by both his own color complex, in which “mulattoes” were superior to “full-blooded” Negroes, and his adopted Victorian elitism. Although Du Bois did not view racial differences in strictly biological terms, he stood arrogantly and willfully apart from the Negro masses, who were, he envisioned, his destiny to uplift.⁷² I do not dispute the claims of Williams and Lewis, but I do see both Du Bois and Boas during the first decade of the twentieth century working hard to subvert the racial discourse as reformers, not as revolutionaries. Although Boas may have been imprisoned by his empiricism, that was not what hindered his efforts to fight for racial equality.

Franz Boas in the Struggle for Racial Equality

Boas's reputation began to grow in the late 1890s, and he became viewed by African American leaders as an ally in the struggle for racial equality because of his antiracist research and theories.⁷³ Boas was also eager to build alliances and strengthen his ties with civil rights leaders. He appears to have been initially unaware of the various strategies used by African American leaders to alleviate racial inequality, for he attempted to build alliances with both Washington and Du Bois. Ultimately, however, he allied himself with Du Bois and became associated with the radical integrationist arm of the movement. The relationship Boas formed with Du Bois and the NAACP alienated him from the accommodationist wing of the movement led by Washington and financed by Andrew Carnegie. It, in effect, cut off Boas from possible funding from Carnegie.

While Du Bois and his associates began to gain prominence, the vast majority of African Americans continued to claim Washington as their leader. Few Whites ventured into matters of race relations without his counsel.⁷⁴ Franz Boas was no exception. In 1904 Boas wrote to Washington concerning the admission of an African American student into the graduate anthropology program at Columbia University:

Dear Sir,

A young gentleman, Mr. J. E. Aggrey, of Livingston College, Salisbury, N.C., desires to study anthropology at Columbia University. He is a full-blood negro. . . . I very much hesitate to advise the young man to take up this work, because I fear that it would be very difficult after he has completed his studies to find a place. On the other hand, it might perhaps be possible for him to study for two or three years and take his degree of master of arts, and then to obtain a position in one of the schools for his people.⁷⁵

Boas must not have been fully aware of Washington's strategy, which emphasized vocational training and devalued university education. If Boas had been, he would have been able to predict Washington's response:

Judging by what you state in your letter and knowing what I do, I cannot rid myself of the feeling that the course which he [Aggrey] is planning to take, will be of little value to him.

At the present time I know of so many cases where young colored men and women would have done well had they thoroughly prepared themselves for teachers, some kind of work in the industries, or in the applied sciences, but instead, they have made the mistake of taking a course that had no practical bearing on the needs of the race; the result being they ended up as hotel-waiters or Pullman car porters.⁷⁶

Boas was characteristically shrewd in his professional relationships; however, this rather naive understanding of the political terrain within African American leadership proved detrimental. At least one of Boas's projects was not funded by Carnegie due to his involvement with Du Bois at Atlanta University.

Du Bois's initial contact with Boas was a letter written on October 11, 1905. In it he explained the hundred-year study and asked Boas to participate in the eleventh conference, which was on the Negro physique.⁷⁷ Boas accepted the invitation and also delivered the 1906 commencement address for Atlanta University. In the speech he empowered African Americans by saying that their ancestors contributed greatly to the civilization of the human race. He explained that "while much of the history of early invention is shrouded in darkness, it seems likely that at a time when the European was still satisfied with rude stone tools, the African had invented or adopted the art of smelting iron."⁷⁸ Boas also used other examples: the military organization of the Zulu, the advanced economic and judicial system of the Negro Kingdoms of the Sudan, and the innovative bronze casting of Benin. He further appealed: "If, therefore, it is claimed that your race is doomed to economic inferiority, you may confidently look to the home of your ancestors and say that you have set out to recover for the colored people the strength that was their own before they set foot on the shores of this continent."⁷⁹

St. Clair Drake has suggested that the Atlanta University address clearly placed Boas and early anthropology at Columbia right in the middle of the "vindication struggle."⁸⁰ It also placed Boas squarely within the integrationist, radical, and anti-Washington wing of the struggle for racial equality. And it had a tremendous impact on Du Bois. In *Black Folk Then and Now* (1939) he reflected on what a profound contribution Boas made to his own view of the African world.

Franz Boas came to Atlanta University where I was teaching History in 1906 and said to the graduating class: You need not be ashamed of your African past; and then he recounted the history of black kingdoms south of the Sahara for a thousand years. I was too astonished to speak. All of this I

had never heard and I came then and afterwards to realize how the silence and neglect of science can let truth utterly disappear or even be unconsciously distorted.⁸¹

It is difficult to know for certain whether Boas understood the complexities of the political debates among African American leaders or whether he even knew about Washington's contempt for both Du Bois and Atlanta University. On the other hand, the contempt Washington held for Du Bois was well known in the Black community. It was made quite clear in public arenas. For example, Washington indicted Du Bois in an open letter to the president of Atlanta University, after *Souls* was published. This 1903 letter was published in one of the most popular African American newspapers, the *Colored American*.

If Atlanta University intends to stand for Dr. Du Bois' outgivings, if it means to seek to destroy Tuskegee Institute, so that its own work can have success, it is engaged in poor business to start with; . . . Tuskegee will go on. It will succeed . . . notwithstanding the petty annoyances of Du Bois and his ilk. . . . Let him [the university president] prove himself by curbing the outgivings and ill-advised criticism of the learned Doctor who is now in his employ.⁸²

In November 1906 Boas exposed his lack of understanding regarding the different agendas set forth by the African American leadership. He wrote a letter to Washington requesting his support for the creation of an African and African American museum, and he enclosed his Atlanta University commencement address to prove to Washington that he was sincere about the Negro:

I am endeavoring to organize certain scientific work on the Negro race which I believe will be of great practical value in modifying the views of our people in regard to the Negro problem. I am particularly anxious to bring home to the American people the fact that the African race in its own continent has achieved advancements which have been of importance in the development of civilization of the human race. You may have seen some of my references to this matter, but I enclose an address that I gave in Atlanta last spring, which will suggest some of the matters that I have in mind.⁸³

Clearly, the copy of his commencement address was not warmly received by Washington. Chances are that Boas was seeking Washington's support so that Carnegie would fund his project. Two weeks later he solicited financial support for the museum directly from the financier:

All that we can say at the present time is that it seems unfair to judge the Negro by what he has come to be in America, and that the evidence of cultural achievement of the Negro in Africa suggests that his inventiveness, power of political organization, and steadiness of purpose, equal or even excel those of other races of similar stages of culture. . . . It seems plausible that the whole attitude of our people in regard to the Negro might be materially modified if we had a better knowledge of what the Negro has really done and accomplished in his own native country. . . . The endless repetition of remarks on the inferiority of the Negro physique, of the early arrest of development of Negro children, of the tendency in the mulatto to inherit all the bad traits of both parental races, seems almost ineradicable, and in the present state of our knowledge can just as little be repudiated as supported by definite evidence. . . . There seems to be another reason which would make it highly desirable to disseminate knowledge of the achievements of African culture, particularly among the Negroes, in vast portions of our country there is a strong feeling of despondency among the best classes of the Negro, due to the economic, mental, and moral inferiority of the race in America, and the knowledge of the strength of their parental race in their native surroundings must have a wholesome and highly stimulating effect. I have noticed these effects myself in addressing audiences of Southern Negroes, to whom the facts were a complete revelation.⁸⁴

Carnegie did not support the project.

Boas wanted to help advance African American equality. Yet his impact as an activist was limited to influencing a small number of anthropologists at Columbia University and to lending his name to a few radical intellectuals. He did not successfully negotiate the political dynamics produced by the African American leadership. His impact was also limited within the sciences and among the educated public because of the virulent racism that permeated U.S. social relations.

Even though Boas may not have realized the depth or significance of the strategic differences and polarization of African American intellectuals, he continued to struggle for racial equality. He attempted to popularize his views in magazines, in spite of the fact that writers sympathetic to Social Darwinists dominated that medium. For instance, in September 1906, the influential *Century Magazine* published an article by Robert Bean entitled "The Negro Brain." Bean wrote, "The Caucasian and the negro are fundamentally opposite extremes in evolution. Having demonstrated that the negro and the Caucasian are widely different in characteristics, due to a deficiency of gray matter and connecting fibers in the negro brain . . . we are forced to conclude that is is [sic] useless to try to elevate the negro by education or otherwise except in the direction of his natural endowments."⁸⁵ In response to this article

Boas wrote to the owner, editor, and publisher of this magazine, Richard Watson Gilder, explaining that such an article would "give strong support to those who deny the negro equal rights; and from this point of view . . . the paper is not just to the cause of the negro."⁸⁶ Boas's letter to Gilder did nothing to curb the racism perpetuated by Gilder's magazine. A month later, in the October issue, Gilder published another article by Robert Bean which espoused the same propaganda as "science."⁸⁷

A year later Boas wrote to Gilder again and proposed submitting a nonscientific essay on African culture, accompanied by various pictures of native industries.⁸⁸ The article was rejected but in 1909 appeared as "Industries of African Negroes" in the *Southern Workman*, published by Hampton Institute.⁸⁹ This article had nineteen images, ranging from "Pottery made by the Bali tribe" to "Congo throwing knives." Between them were statements like the following: "A broader treatment of the question will require a consideration of the achievements of the Negro under other conditions, and particularly of the culture that he has developed in his own natural surroundings. The conditions for gaining a clear insight into this question are particularly unfavorable in North America, where loss of continuity of development and an inferior social position have made a deep impress on the race that will be slow to disappear."⁹⁰

Boas was unable to publish this article in a magazine that promoted racism. Undaunted by the setback, he made several other attempts to popularize his views. In 1907 he published an article entitled, "The Anthropological Position of the Negro" in *Van Norden's Magazine*.⁹¹ Its impact was diminished because it was published in the same issue as "The Race Question," written by South Carolina Senator Benjamin Tillman, who sought support for repealing the Fifteenth Amendment. Boas again attempted to popularize his position by editing an encyclopedia of the Negro, but the project was aborted.

Substantial resistance to Boas's proposals to further the cause of the Negro came from influential capitalists, such as Carnegie and Gilder—men who, through vast financial resources, controlled the media and forcefully articulated notions of racial inferiority. Boas's efforts to educate White Americans failed, but as early as 1906 his efforts did contribute to the nascent fields of African and African American Studies. He subsequently developed both a personal and a professional relationship with Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Boas was a member of its Executive Council

and sat on the Editorial Board of its organ, the *Journal of Negro Life and History*.⁹²

The discourse on race that Boas established resonated with the vision of the political activists fighting for racial equality, and he was invited to the first conclave of the NAACP. The meeting began with a symposium that attempted to finally answer the basic question of whether or not Negroes were equal to other peoples, so Boas and Burt G. Wilder, a zoologist at Cornell University, delivered the opening address.⁹³ Boas also spoke the following year at the organization's annual meeting. His second address, "The Real Race Problem," was subsequently published in the *Crisis*. The subtitles in the article show how Boas had espoused racial equality since 1906: "The Negro Not Inferior," "The Handicap of Slavery," "[African] Trade Well Organized," and so forth.⁹⁴

Boas continued to support the NAACP and its leaders. In 1911 he wrote the foreword for Mary White Ovington's book, *Half a Man: The Status of the Negro in New York*, a sociohistorical study of Negro labor relations in New York City.⁹⁵ For the next fifty years the NAACP led the fight for racial equality and integration. Boas continued to be involved with and published on issues surrounding African Americans, and he developed a lifelong friendship with Du Bois.

Boas forms a tenuous but critical link between two nascent groups who would help to change the structure and meaning of race. The first group consisted of anthropologists trained at Columbia University, who orchestrated a paradigmatic shift in the scientific discourse on race by advancing the notion of cultural relativity and refuting ideas regarding racial inferiority. The second group Boas influenced comprised the intellectuals of the NAACP, who orchestrated a juridical shift in the legal codification of racial inferiority by tenaciously fighting racial segregation in the courts.

Tightly Knit Discourse on Race

Between the world wars three distinct but closely aligned methodological approaches to anthropology were used to explore the African American experience. The first was folklore. The anthropologists who delved into African American folklore took seriously the diffusion, contribution, and cultural continuity of African cultures in the Americas. The second approach took the nexus of race and class as its central

charge. These anthropologists investigated the environmental and social conditions of segregated communities and documented the cultural, social, and psychological toll of racism. This approach converged with sociology and social psychology and was active in the caste-versus-class debates. Finally, physical or biological anthropology followed and emerged as an important field for the scientific assertion of racial equality. Each of these methodological approaches was affected in important ways by African American anthropologists.

The earliest African American scholars to study anthropology were vindicationists first and anthropologists second. Invariably, they employed a multidisciplinary approach to the study of race and culture and were primarily interested in integrating scholarship with political activism and/or artistic expression. What united these scholars was a penchant for the vindication of diasporic Africans in the academic literature and a propensity to “set the record straight.”

These vindicationists gravitated toward the scholars in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University and helped to accelerate the paradigmatic shift in the understanding of race and culture. This occurred during the tumultuous social transformations in the United States between World War I and World War II, which began to slowly erode the construct of race that had solidified in the 1890s. Change was on the horizon, and once again anthropology played an integral role—this time, on both sides of the color line.