
Lee W. Formwalt

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Abstract In the decade and a half between the completion of his Harvard Ph.D. (1895) and his founding of The Crisis for the NAACP (1910), African American historian and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois laid the empirical foundations for modern sociology and the revisionist interpretation of history. Despite his prodigious academic efforts, he eventually lost faith in the ability of scholarship to help African Americans and he left academe for the NAACP and the world of advocacy.

Keywords Du Bois · Race · Atlanta · Negro · NAACP · Sociology · History · Scholarship · Advocacy · Segregation · Black Belt · Double-consciousness · Education

Although I live in Bloomington now where for 10 years I ran the Organization of American Historians, I spent most of my career as a history professor in a place called Albany, Georgia. So I wanted to start off this afternoon by pointing out the connection between Albany and Wellesley College. It was your fifth president, Caroline Hazard, who presided over Wellesley from 1899 to 1910 (roughly the years Du Bois spent in Atlanta), who was a major benefactor of the Albany Bible and Manual Training Institute founded in 1903. Initially Hazard and her relatives made regular contributions to the Albany Bible and Manual Training Institute. But by 1917, the year the major brick building, named Caroline Hall, was dedicated, Caroline Hazard was emerging as the primary benefactor (Holley 1949, pp. 48–49, 64–65). She continued to support the institution as it evolved into the Georgia Normal and Agricultural College in 1918 and into a four-year school, Albany State College, in 1943 (Ramsey 1973, pp. 70–71). When I first arrived on campus in 1977, Caroline Hall was the main administrative building at ASC. It survived until the Flood of 1994 destroyed it. Other names related to the Hazard family can still be found on several Albany State buildings.

And so it is with pleasure that this retired Albany State historian speaks on the campus once presided over by Caroline Hazard.

I thought what I would do this afternoon is briefly sketch out W.E.B. Du Bois’s life; then we’ll look at race relations in the 1890s—the context for Du Bois and his scholarship both before and when he was at Atlanta University. Next we’ll look at his work as a scholar and the impact he had on the nascent sociology and history professions. Then we will look at his decision to abandon academe for the world of advocacy, or propaganda as he called it. Finally, we’ll wrap up with an account of my pilgrimage of sorts in 1997 to Great Barrington, where Du Bois was born and grew up.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was one of the most important—many would argue the most important—African American intellectual in twentieth-century America. When he died at the time of the March on Washington in 1963, he was 95 years old. In many ways he shaped the discussion of race in America for much of the twentieth century (Lewis 1993).

Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, shortly after the Civil War in 1868—in the middle of Reconstruction, that great Unfinished Revolution (Foner 1988), when emancipated African Americans sought to secure political rights and for a short time were successful. But in the 1870s, the great gains made in the areas of politics and education in the late 1860s, were gradually eroded in the Deep South and elsewhere and by the 1880s the long era of Jim Crow, characterized by official racism and legal segregation, had begun.

Early on as a child, Du Bois demonstrated his intelligence. In high school he took college prep courses in mathematics (algebra and geometry) and classical languages (Greek and Latin). He also wrote occasional columns in the Springfield Republican and the New York Globe, a black weekly newspaper (Lewis 1993, pp. 36, 38–39, 47). In 1885, he went to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in 3 years. During his Fisk years he spent two summers teaching poor African American students in the “hills of Tennessee,” an experience that became the basis for one of his chapters in The Souls of Black Folk (Du Bois 1903/1997, p. 73). From Fisk he went to Harvard in 1888 and earned his second bachelor’s degree.

L. W. Formwalt
2116 S. Azalea Lane, Bloomington, IN 47401, USA
e-mail: lee.formwalt@gmail.com
in 2 years. The following year he earned his M.A. in history there and began work on his Ph.D. dissertation on the suppression of the African slave trade. He spent 2 years researching and traveling in Europe and studied at the University of Berlin, where he came close to earning a Ph.D. He returned to the U.S. and taught for 2 years (1894–1896) at Wilberforce University, a black school where he finished his Harvard Ph.D. dissertation in 1895, making him the first African American to get a Ph.D. in history from Harvard.

In 1896, he married Nina Gomer, a Wilberforce student, and he moved to Philadelphia when the University of Pennsylvania hired him to study the Negro community there. The result of that project was the book The Philadelphia Negro published in 1899 to much acclaim (Du Bois, The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study, 1899). His growing national reputation as a scholar of African American life led to his appointment in 1897 as professor of economics and history at Atlanta University. There he undertook an incredible amount of research on all aspects of African American life, examining education, social life, family life, churches, and of course, labor and economics. He would often spend his summers researching, gathering his data, and then present the results in conference papers which he then published.

At first he was a supporter of the most celebrated African American leader of his day, Booker T. Washington, but later broke with him and explained that breach in another chapter of The Souls of Black Folk. In his efforts to promote economic and political rights for blacks, he helped organize the Niagara Movement and then the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The NAACP championed integration and Du Bois served as editor of its major publication, The Crisis. Eventually, however, Du Bois became disillusioned with the NAACP’s integrationism and he broke with them over it, in the 1930s. He did return to the NAACP in the 1940s before leaving again. Du Bois had a similar relationship with Atlanta University—leaving in 1910 and returning in 1933 and leaving again in 1944.

Du Bois was a brilliant thinker, but he was often intolerant of those who disagreed with him. He had what might be called an arrogant and prickly personality. He was a dapper dresser—very much the Victorian gentleman—and in many ways an elitist. His promotion of the idea of the Talented Tenth of the Negro population leading the race reflects this elitism. And yet, he spent much of his life studying and writing and concerned about ordinary African Americans. He was a complex man characterized by contradictions.

Near the end of his career, he gave up on the possibility of the U.S. ever treating African Americans as equal citizens. He applied for membership in the Communist Party of the U.S. at the age of 93 in 1961 before moving to Ghana. He died 2 years later and was buried in the Ghanaian capital of Accra. Word of his death in late August 1963 reached the U.S. as the March on Washington was culminating with a series of speeches before a quarter million participants. Shortly before Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his stirring “I Have a Dream” speech, the crowd learned that the great Dr. Du Bois had died.

Du Bois’s scholarship, which flourished in Atlanta, had its origins in his graduate training in Berlin and Cambridge where he studied under the most influential thinkers of the day in philosophy, history, economics and sociology. “Inspired by the example of Bismarck’s Germany, and convinced by Hegelian philosophy that ideas had the power to transform reality,” Du Bois was ready to take on the world and make his mark in sociology, history, and literature for his race (Fairclough 2001, p. 74). Two years before his appointment at Atlanta University, he completed his first major scholarly work—his Harvard Ph.D. dissertation on The Suppression of the African Slave Trade in the United States of America, 1638–1870, followed by his report on The Philadelphia Negro. The latter was an amazing research project and report on the African Americans in Philadelphia’s Seventh Ward where one-quarter of the city’s black population was concentrated. Du Bois devised a series of six tables on which he collected data of the close to ten thousand blacks living in the crime-ridden ward—many of them poor and recently arrived from the South. Du Bois and his wife rented a one-room apartment in the Seventh Ward and in a three-month period he interviewed some 2,500 households. Each morning, according to Du Bois’s Pulitzer-Prize winning biographer David Levering Lewis, the young sociologist, with cane and gloves, began visiting his neighbors. “Unassisted, indefatigable, he would sit for an average of twenty minutes patiently guiding often barely literate, suspicious adults through a series of questions on the six schedules.” After some 835 hours of interviews, he sorted through the 15,000 household schedules. “No representative sampling for Du Bois. . . . he had before him the life histories of the entire black population of the Seventh Ward—nearly ten thousand men, women and children” (Lewis 1993, pp. 190–91). This is the data collection model that he would follow in Farmville, Virginia, the next summer (1897), in Dougherty County, Georgia, in the summer of 1898 and in Lowndes County, Alabama in 1906.

Du Bois’s belief was that he could help his race—his people—as a social scientist by collecting the data that would demonstrate not that people of color were criminally inclined or naturally indolent, but that the racial problems America faced were due to race prejudice on the part of whites who refused to treat Negroes as equals economically, politically, and socially. The story of Du Bois’s years in Atlanta is one in which he lays down the foundations for empirical sociological research, but eventually comes to lose faith in the ability of scholarship to help his people. This would result in his leaving Atlanta in 1910 to join the NAACP as editor of The Crisis.
There were many times when Du Bois felt he was fighting a losing battle against American racism. He started out his career in the 1890s when that racism was growing worse. Reconstruction was long over, as the North gave up on helping the newly freed African Americans in the South as they struggled against southern whites who resented the end of slavery. Eventually, the forces of reconciliation between North and South triumphed around the turn of the century as northern and southern whites came to agree on the race question. What they agreed on was the inequality of the races, the superiority of the white race, and that the Negro Problem in the South was best handled by southern whites. Contributing to this northern evolution on racial thinking was the growing number of African Americans migrating out of the South to northern cities as well as the increase in eastern and southern European immigration to the U.S. Encountering these people who were different and coming in large numbers, northerners began thinking that southern whites were correct, after all, on the issues of race (Blight 2001).

As northerners began retreating on the issue of race, southerners were free to exploit the situation in the South and thousands of African Americans were lynched during this period. This was also the time when southern white businessmen used the law to benefit from involuntary servitude—convict labor, peonage, and chain gangs (Blackmon 2008). They also reduced the number of black voters through new laws (with literacy requirements and poll taxes) and with terror (carried out by nightriders or whitecappers). And, this is when southern state legislatures passed the Jim Crow laws forcing a legal separation of the races in public and private. White control in the Jim Crow era insured that few blacks became landowners in the South. The majority of rural African Americans eked out a living as sharecroppers or renters. Political control by whites meant that state and local laws reinforced white control and exploitation of black sharecroppers (Litwack 1998).

This was the America that the newly minted Harvard Ph.D. encountered in the 1890s. As a researcher and Atlanta University professor, Du Bois kept his finger on the pulse of northern philanthropy, particular those philanthropic groups like the John F. Slater Fund for the Education of Negroes, the Southern Education Board and the General Education Board established to support African American education. It was the Slater Fund that provided Du Bois support for 2 years at the University of Berlin. And just when his Berlin doctorate was within sight, the Slater Fund refused to renew his funding for his final year and he had to return to the U.S. What Du Bois found more and more with the Slater Fund and other northern philanthropies was a growing inclination to support Negro schools featuring manual and agricultural education—schools championed by the great race leader of the day, Booker T. Washington (Lewis 1993, pp. 117–27, 144–46, 266–73). Washington had founded Tuskegee Institute in 1881 in Alabama to teach trades and skills to poor African American boys and girls and train them to be good farmers and servants. Washington recognized the power of white racism and argued that African Americans would have to prove themselves first before whites would accept them as equals. It was preposterous to educate African Americans in the humanities and sciences and higher fields of study, for who would hire such graduates? Only after they had proved themselves and they were accepted by whites should blacks pursue higher education and exercise political and civil rights. To do so beforehand would only antagonize the white power structure and lessen the situation for Negroes. Washington summarized his major arguments in the famous Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895, when he told blacks to “cast down their buckets” in the South while assuring whites that “In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” At first, Du Bois congratulated Washington on his Atlanta speech. But as he gradually realized the implications of Washington’s Atlanta Compromise for African America and as southern atrocities increased rather than diminished, he began to break with Washington, a break that he would address directly in The Souls of Black Folk.

In the summer of 1897 Du Bois was appointed professor at Atlanta University with teaching not to start for 6 months. Du Bois could not move to Atlanta in the summer of 1897 as he was right in the middle of his Philadelphia Negro project and had also agreed to do a study of African Americans in Farmville, Virginia, seat of Prince Edward County, for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The reason Du Bois chose this small rural town was that it was in Southside Virginia whence a significant number of African Americans migrated to northeastern cities. Du Bois explained “that in order to really get at the South and carry out any theories,” he had to amass factual data. So Du Bois interrupted his Philadelphia work and spent July and August, 1897, in Farmville. “The study,” David Lewis concludes, “was a small masterpiece of great range and depth, influencing the conclusions of the [Philadelphia Negro] monograph and serving as the standard for the Atlanta University Studies of which he was then planning to take charge” (Lewis 1993, p. 195). Du Bois concluded that despite the poverty, crime, high unemployment, and dysfunctional families in Farmville, he “detected upward mobility and class formation” (Lewis 1993, p. 197). He would see this as well in Albany, Georgia, the following year. In 1900 he compiled and prepared a map of Albany showing the geographical distribution of the city’s African Americans by social class which appeared in the Negro Exhibit of the American Section of the world exposition in Paris (Du Bois, “Albany, Dougherty County, Ga. Distribution of 2,500 Negro Inhabitants”).
After completing his Farmville research, Du Bois returned to Philadelphia to finish that project and then moved to Atlanta where he began teaching in January 1898. A major focus of the young scholar in Georgia was the annual Atlanta University Studies Conferences that produced annual research publications and had started in 1896. The annual research conferences on Negro life had their beginnings at Tuskegee and Hampton institutes focusing on education, labor, and farming. While these conferences focused on the Negro in the rural South, the AU conferences mostly focused on the Negro in the urban setting—the future of African American life. When Du Bois took over the AU conferences in 1898, he saw them as the place to bring together “many of the best minds in the world” (Lewis 1993, pp. 217–19). He drew on his growing network of colleagues from Fisk, Wilberforce, Cambridge, New York, and Philadelphia for presenters. The conferences were held each May and focused on a particular theme. Afterwards, the Conference reports were published. Du Bois’s first conference—the third AU Studies Conference—was in May 1898 on “Some Efforts of American Negroes for Their Own Social Betterment.” It was quickly slapped together and looked at “cooperative enterprises, traditional businesses, insurance establishments, and property holdings by individuals and churches,” as well as “infant and adult death rates in southern cities” (Lewis 1993, pp. 219–20). Future AU Studies conferences would much more bear the mark of Du Bois’s distinctive thinking, but his immediate attention following the third conference was to the southwest Georgia black belt.

When he decided to study the black belt, he chose Dougherty County in southwest Georgia because it had “about as large a majority of negroes as any county in Georgia” and it was small enough to cover in 2 or 3 months of summer vacation (“Testimony of Prof. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois,” 13 Feb. 1901, pp. 160, 159). Accompanied by two or three research assistants, Du Bois set out for Albany and Dougherty County, “the heart of the Black Belt,” the “centre of those nine million men who are America’s dark heritage from slavery and the slave-trade” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, pp. 103–4). The world that Du Bois found in Dougherty County was a dispiriting one characterized by poverty, work, and lack of leisure. With his assistants, the Atlanta professor, following his research pattern laid down in Philadelphia and Farmville, “visited nearly every colored family in the county.” They collected data on the 6,093 blacks who lived in the county district as well as the 2,500 blacks in Albany (“Testimony of Prof. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois,” 13 Feb. 1901, pp. 159–60).

In southwest Georgia, Du Bois was struck by the housing: “All over the face of the land is the one-room Cabin,—now standing in the shadow of the Big House, now staring at the dusty road, now rising dark and sombre amid the green of the cotton-fields. It is nearly always old and bare, built of rough boards, and neither plastered nor ceiled. Light and ventilation are supplied by the single door and by the square hole in the wall with its wooden shutter” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, p. 119).

Rural black education was depressing for Du Bois. Most children went to school “after the ‘crops are laid by,’” and very few stayed in school after the spring work began (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, p. 122). “The schools in Dougherty County are very poor. I saw only one schoolhouse there that would compare in any way with the worst schoolhouses I ever saw in New England” (“Testimony of Prof. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois,” 13 Feb. 1901, p. 161). “The degree of ignorance” Du Bois found “cannot easily be expressed. We may say, for instance, that nearly two-thirds of them cannot read or write. This but partially expresses the fact. They are ignorant of the world about them, of modern economic organization, of the function of government, of individual worth and possibilities, of nearly all those things which slavery in self-defence had to keep them from learning. Much that the white boy imbibes from his earliest social atmosphere forms the puzzling problems of the black boy’s mature years. America is not another world of Opportunity to all her sons” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, pp. 121–22).

The daily grind rural black folk faced was debilitating: “Among this people there is no leisure class. . . . Here ninety-six per cent are toiling; no one with leisure to turn the bare and cheerless cabin into a home. . . . The toil, like all farm toil, is monotonous, and here there are little machinery and few tools to relieve its burdensome drudgery. But with all this, it is work in the pure open air, and this is something,” remarked Du Bois thinking of his urban readership, “in a day when fresh air is scarce” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, pp. 122–23).

The drudgery of farm toil was finally relieved on Saturdays. For “Six days in the week [Albany] looks decidedly too small for itself, and takes frequent and prolonged naps. But on Saturday suddenly the whole county discharges itself upon the place, and a perfect flood of black peasantry pours through the streets, fills the stores, blocks the sidewalks, chokes the thoroughfares, and takes full possession of the town. They are black, sturdy, uncouth country folk, good-natured and simple, talkative to a degree, and yet far more silent and brooding than the” peasants he had observed in Germany, Italy, and Poland several years earlier. “They walk up and down the streets, meet and gossip with friends, stare at the shop windows, buy coffee, cheap candy, and clothes, and at dusk drive home” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, pp. 105–6).

“It gets pretty hot in Southern Georgia in July,” Du Bois observed, “a sort of dull, determined heat that seems quite independent of the sun” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, p. 106). So it was with some relief that he and his assistants boarded the Jim Crow car and headed north to cooler Atlanta to begin his first full academic year at AU. In addition to hi
classes, he began preparing for the fourth AU Studies Conference on the Negro in Business. That spring, however, in the final months before the conference, Du Bois was struck by two tragedies—the Sam Hose lynching and the death of his twenty-month-old son, Burghardt.

In April 1899, African American farm laborer Sam Hose killed his employer in self-defense in Coweta County just southwest of Atlanta. By the time he was caught, the rumors were flying that he had raped his employer’s wife as well. A white mob of some 2,000, including some arriving on a special excursión train from Atlanta, witnessed his grisly lynching. Stripped of his clothes, he was chained to a tree; his ears, fingers, and genitals were cut off, the skin on his face was removed; he was then covered with oil and set afire. Without further details let me say this was just the beginning of his tortuous death. Before the dead corpse cooled, eyewitnesses carved off pieces of flesh and bone as souvenirs. When Du Bois heard of this gruesome tragedy, he felt compelled to write a “careful and reasoned statement” about the lynching for the Atlanta Constitution that he went to deliver in person. On his way, he learned that Sam Hose’s knuckles were displayed at a store that he would have to pass by. He could not continue. He turned around and went home. Years later, he recalled, “Something died in me that day” (Litwack 1998, pp. 280–81, 404).

On the heels of the Sam Hose affair came a more personal tragedy. In mid-May Du Bois’s twenty-month-old son Burghardt contracted diphtheria and within 10 days he was dead. This was at the same time Du Bois was making the final arrangements for the upcoming AU Conference on “The Negro in Business.” There was plenty of guilt felt—had he paid more attention to his son’s condition he might have looked sooner for “one of the two or three black” doctors in Atlanta; had he not moved to the Deep South, there might have been better medical care for his black child. His wife never quite forgave him for this loss. He admitted later that he was not a great father or husband for that matter—how could you be once you had determined to devote your life to improving the conditions of your race? Later he claimed that he had suffered a nervous breakdown—but if that happened, it would have to wait. There was no time for that in late May. Burghardt died on the 24th. He and Nina carried the baby’s remains to Great Barrington, Massachusetts, where they buried him and where he left his wife grieving as he raced back to Atlanta for “The Negro in Business” conference on May 30–31 (Lewis 1993, pp. 227–28). In his elegy for Burghardt—“Of the Passing of the First-Born”—written for inclusion in The Souls of Black Folk—Du Bois mourns his loss and in some way finds comfort in the fact that his beloved son would have to grow up in the world of Jim Crow (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, p. 162).

“The Negro in Business” conference had as its major theme the need of the African American community “to accumulate capital as rapidly as possible by creating its own markets.” Du Bois documented that there were five thousand African American businessmen and then broke them down by category of business and examined “their activities in key cities.” The next AU studies conferences in 1900 and 1901 focused on college education and public school education. Here “Du Bois was the first to compile and analyze” data collected from surveys of college and common school students as well as “letters from professors, teachers, and officials . . ., curriculum requirements . . . and grade school attendance reports, [and] per capita expenditures by state.” In the report on colleges, Du Bois pointed out that black college education was successful and was just as necessary for African Americans as industrial training. In later conferences on the Negro Artisan (1902), the Negro Church (1903), and the Negro American Family (1908), Du Bois, according to David Lewis, “would push the Atlanta University Studies to the frontier of American social science research, virtually singlehandedly” (Lewis 1993, pp. 220–23).

The summer of 1900 found Du Bois once more heading to Europe. He had just finished the fifth AU Conference on the College-Bred Negro American and said goodbye to Nina who was 5 months pregnant with their second child. In Paris he assisted Fisk classmate Thomas Calloway who was responsible for putting up the American Negro Exhibit at the Exposition Universelle. They had assembled the materials earlier in the States and even though they were late in setting it up, Du Bois won a gold medal as “Compiler of [the] Georgia Negro Exhibit.” From Paris, it was on to London for the 1900 Pan-African Congress. The closing address of the Congress was delivered by Du Bois in which he first proclaimed, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line.” Du Bois was optimistic that the future of Pan-Africanism bode well, if several more such congresses could be convened (Lewis 1993, pp. 242–43, 246–51).

Two years after Du Bois’s return to the States, A.C. McClurg & Co., a Chicago publisher, approached the AU professor about writing several essays to be published as a book. Du Bois suggested instead that he pull together several essays already published as well as write several new ones. The resulting book—The Souls of Black Folk—is an American classic—note, I did not say African American classic. For it is truly one of the great pieces of American literature and one that every American should be familiar with. Its origins help explain part of its unusual character.

The book published in April 1903 consists of fourteen chapters, a brief forethought and even briefer Afterthought. Nine of the chapters appeared as articles in various magazines or journals between 1897 and 1902. Du Bois revised them and wrote the other five essays for the book. Thus, in many ways, this is an eclectic gathering of writings produced over 6 years for different purposes and different audiences. Yet the miracle of the book is that, as different as their original purpose or intent may have been, they come
together and have a certain unity to them. At the head of each chapter Du Bois placed “a bar of the Sorrow Songs,—some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, pp. 34–35). His final chapter is devoted to the “Sorrow Songs,” Negro folk songs and spirituals, which he sees as such an important contribution of African Americans to American and world culture.

I must say that when I first opened The Souls of Black Folk, soon after arriving in southwest Georgia to teach at Albany State College in the late 1970s, I went straight to the two chapters on Dougherty County—“Of the Black Belt” and “Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece.” After I had milked The Souls of Black Folk for the local history of Dougherty County, I began to dip into the rest of the book. The wonderful thing about this book is that any of the chapters can be read independent of the others and that’s how I read it. Eventually, it became clear to me how wonderful this book was for teaching African American history, Georgia history, and the history of race in America. I soon found myself assigning this to students in a variety of courses that I taught.

One of the most famous lines in the book comes on one of the earliest pages, in the author’s “Forethought.” There he repeated what he had stated in his speech to the first Pan-African Congress in London in 1900: “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” What prescience he had—for not only was the problem of race central to the history of the last century—it could well be restated today as we stand not far past the beginning of the twenty-first century. So much of what Du Bois wrote a hundred years ago rings true today (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, p. 34).

There are two images that one encounters in so many of the chapters of The Souls of Black Folk—images that are a constant reminder to Du Bois then and to us today of the great racial divide that existed and continues to exist: the Veil and the Jim Crow railroad car. In one of the saddest tales he tells—that of Josie and her family in the hills of Tennessee, where he taught for two summers—we encounter these two images. When he rides with a young white teacher out to the white commissioner’s house to talk about the terms of his employment as a teacher, the commissioner invites them in: “come in. Have a seat. Yes, that certificate will do. Stay to dinner. What do you want a month?” “Oh,” thought I, “this is lucky”; but even then fell the awful shadow of the Veil, for they ate first, then I—one. And near the end of his tale he recounts a return visit to the hill community 10 years later and learns that one of his favorite students, Josie, had died. Du Bois concludes, “How shall man measure Progress there where the dark-faced Josie lies? . . . . How hard a thing is life to the lowly, and yet how human and real! And all this life and love and strife and failure,—is it twilight of nightfall or the flush of some faint-dawning day? Thus sadly musing, I rode to Nashville in the Jim Crow car” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, pp. 73–81).

One of the most important questions Du Bois addresses in his first chapter, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” is—what is it like to be black in America? Whites are curious about life behind the Veil but they are not sure how to ask about it. Du Bois opens the chapter this way: “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unmasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, . . . Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, p. 37).

The separation of African American life from that of whites—being “shut out from their world by a vast veil”—shaped (and shapes) the lives of black Americans from birth to death. In a sense, says Du Bois, the African American is “gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, 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 unconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, p. 38).

Du Bois argues that the Negro’s struggle was to “merge his double self into a better and truer self,” but not one in which either of the older selves is lost. The Negro “would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach the Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.” But this was difficult in a racist society where the despised race was also the poorest. “To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.” The lack of education for blacks also meant ignorance of how to succeed in such a capitalist society. Add to this what Du Bois called “the red stain of bastardy,” the rape of slave women by white owners for the previous two centuries. The oppressive prejudice of whites, he notes, led to self-questioning and self-disparagement and vast despair among blacks (The Souls of Black Folk, 1903/1997, pp. 39, 41–42).

Despite all this, Du Bois expressed hope that with the improvement and expansion of education and with political involvement through voting, African Americans could improve
their situation. Du Bois’s dream was that “some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack.” And what do African Americans bring to their white brothers and sisters? “There are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folk-lore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903/1997, p. 43).

It was Du Bois’s belief in black education and black political involvement that eventually led him to break with the most popular African American leader of his day, Booker T. Washington. Washington was perceived by most whites and many blacks as the black leader in America. Although Du Bois had originally supported Washington, he threw down the gauntlet in his chapter in *Souls* entitled, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others” and challenged him on most of his principal teachings. Du Bois argued that Washington wanted blacks to give up the vote, give up civil rights, and limit education to manual training. And what had been the result? Blacks were disfranchised. Jim Crow segregation made them second-class citizens in a caste system. And African American institutions of higher education were losing support. This was not progress. If African Americans were going to improve their condition, they must have the vote and civil rights to protect themselves and their interests. And they must have institutions of higher education for those African Americans fitted for colleges and universities. It was those institutions which produced the teachers in manual training schools. In other words if you are going to have kindergartens for African Americans you need colleges that would train the black kindergarten teachers (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903/1997, pp. 62–72).

The chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* called “Of the Wings of Atlanta” was Du Bois’s critique of American capitalism and how the pursuit of wealth could distort the true purpose of higher education. Atlanta was the commercial center of the New South. Making money—grabbing for dollars—was central to its life. This focus on “interpreting the world in dollars” was having an impact on the African American world too. In the heyday of emancipation and Reconstruction, the preacher and the teacher were the important African American leaders. But now the black businessman was emerging as the leader. And certainly Booker T. Washington was encouraging this phenomenon. Du Bois’s fear was that blacks would “be wooed from a strife for righteousness, from a love of knowing, to regard dollars as the be-all and end-all of life” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903/1997, p. 85).

But “the hundred hills of Atlanta are not all crowned with factories. On one” lay Atlanta University. Du Bois went on to argue that the true college “will ever have one goal,—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes.” Once again he points out the value of higher education implying the difference between him and Booker T. Washington. In the South, Du Bois encouraged the nourishment of white and black universities where there could be “plant[ed] deeply and for all time centres of learning and living, colleges that yearly would send into the life of the South a few white men and a few black men of broad culture, catholic tolerance, and trained ability, joining their hands to other hands, and giving to this squabble of the Races a decent and dignified peace” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903/1997, pp. 85–88).

Du Bois’s last chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* is entitled, “The Sorrow Songs.” “The Negro folk-song...stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas... It still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903/1997, p. 186).

“Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things... the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903/1997, p. 192). This is reminiscent of Martin Luther King, Jr., six decades later asking that people be judged by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin. The modern civil rights movement had at its heart the freedom songs that came directly from this African American tradition of the sorrow songs.

Du Bois concludes his reflections on the sorrow songs by asking white America: “Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundation of this vast economic empire 200 years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit... Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the Nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903/1997, pp. 192–93).

*The Souls of Black Folk* was a publishing success. Within 2 months, it went into a third printing. Within 6 months, its second edition was selling 200 copies a week. Five years later, nearly 10,000 books had been sold. Although a number of southern papers and much of the African American press, controlled by Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Machine,
ignored the book, it was reviewed widely outside the South. The Ohio Enterprise, a black newspaper told its readers the book “SHOULD BE READ AND STUDIED BY EVERY PERSON, WHITE AND BLACK.” Meanwhile a reviewer in one of the southern papers that did acknowledge the book, the Houston Chronicle, insisted that Du Bois be indicted for “inciting rape” (Lewis 1993, pp. 291–93).

Over the next several years Du Bois continued his teaching, lecture tours, and writing popular essays as well as producing his scholarship. In addition, he helped found and edit two periodicals, founded and directed the Niagara Movement, and wrote a biography of John Brown. All of this was before he left Atlanta for New York City and the new NAACP in 1910. How did he do it? Early on, he developed a work routine that he sketched out on graph paper with each weekday divided into time segments beginning after breakfast and ending at 9 p.m. He was in bed by 10 p.m. Over the years the work charts got bigger. He would read history, philosophy, or sociology before 11 a.m. Then came writing on his next monograph after lunch, followed by writing essays and book reviews. Before dinner, he dictated institutional correspondence. After dinner, he wrote to friends and then read a work of fiction until bedtime (Lewis 1993, pp. 343–44).

The annual AU conferences were central to his scholarship. At the completion of the tenth conference in 1905, he decided to repeat the topics of the previous 10 years over the next decade. Thus each decade of studies would document what changes and continuities there were in each dimension of African American life—health, business, education, religion, the family, etc. In addition to the AU Conference Studies, Du Bois continued his work for the Bureau of Labor for which he had done four studies of rural southern labor between 1898 and 1904, including his pathbreaking study of Farmville. In 1906 he arranged a major study of sharecropping in Lowndes County, Alabama. He assembled a team of a dozen or so young sociologists and others who interviewed eighty percent of the county’s 31,000 black farmers.

Local whites opposed the investigation and shot and ran two of his men out of one part of the county. It was an incredible amount of work that involved tabulating the answers to the questionnaires and going back and determining landownership and labor control in the county since 1850 (Lewis 1993, pp. 354–55). The evidence was damning and after presenting some of it to the American Economic Association annual meeting in 1906, Du Bois concluded that “outside of some sections of the Mississippi and Red River valley, I do not think it would be easy to find a place where conditions were . . . more unfavorable to the rise of the Negro” than Lowndes County (Jeffries 2009, pp. 9, 259). The report and its conclusions were a political hot potato and in 1908 the Bureau of Labor decided it could not publish it. When Du Bois asked for the return of his report, he was told it “it had been destroyed!” (Du Bois, The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century, 1962/1968, p. 227).

Du Bois had better luck in dealing with his colleagues on the historical profession when he presented a paper on “Reconstruction and Its Benefits” to the American Historical Association in New York in December 1909. The prevailing historiography on Reconstruction was that it was a tragic era when greedy northern carpetbaggers and traitorous southern scalawags persuaded ignorant newly freed Negroes to take over southern legislatures and line their pockets. It finally ended when northern voters ended their support of southern Republican governments and southern Democrats turned out the corrupt and greedy Republicans. The turn of the century efforts to disenfranchise African Americans was the logical consequence of undoing corrupt Republican rule in the South. Du Bois challenged this interpretation turning it on its head. He praised the benefits of Reconstruction—something he started with his Souls of Black Folks essay, “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” and would culminate in his major revisionist book, Black Reconstruction, in 1935. Du Bois did not deny that there were problems with the Reconstruction governments, but, he argued, “The Negro governments in the South accomplished much good.” They gave to the South three things: “1. Democratic government. 2. Free public schools. 3. New social legislation.” The paper was published 6 months later in the American Historical Review (Du Bois, “Reconstruction and Its Benefits”, 1910). Much to Du Bois’s chagrin, AHR editor J. Franklin Jameson refused to capitalize the word Negro in the article (Lewis 1993, p. 385). There Du Bois’s article stood alone in the historical literature (along with his later 1935 book) as a challenge to the American historical profession’s belief in Reconstruction as a tragic failure. Only at the end of his long life, during the civil rights movement, did the profession come to accept Du Bois’s revisionism on Reconstruction as the new orthodoxy.

The same year Du Bois presented his Reconstruction paper at the AHA (1909), he began planning a multivolume Encyclopedia Africana, which would cover “the chief points in the history and condition of the Negro race.” He planned the five-volume work to appear in 1913, but funding was an issue and it did not get off the ground. The project was revived in 1934 as the Encyclopedia of the Negro, but again funding issues derailed it. Finally at the end of his life he found support for the Encyclopedia in Nkrumah’s Ghana, but he died before it could be finished (Lewis 1993, pp. 379–80). Finally in 1999, 90 years after Du Bois first conceived of it, Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience was published by Basic Civitas Books, edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. And serving on the advisory board was Selwyn R. Cudjoe of Wellesley College.

In addition to his scholarship in the first decade of the twentieth century, Du Bois also wrote a popular biography of
John Brown, which turned into a five-year project, and he started up and edited two periodicals. The first was The Moon Illustrated Weekly published by Du Bois and two partners in Memphis from December 1905 through the following summer. The black weekly newspaper reported on matters of race, challenged the leadership of Booker T. Washington, and advocated for equal political rights. It never reached a circulation of a thousand and the three partners blamed each other for its failure. Within 6 months Du Bois founded a new monthly, The Horizon: A Journal of the Color Line. Starting in January 1907, it was headquartered in Washington, DC, and was “better edited and more widely circulated” than the Moon. The Horizon covered global issues of race and politics. In it Du Bois espoused his growing affinity for socialism noting that in socialism lay “the one great hope of the Negro American” (Lewis 1993, pp. 323–27, 337–38). Still his commitment was far from complete. In the 1912 presidential election, for example, he supported Woodrow Wilson over Socialist candidate Eugene Debs. His editing the Moon and the Horizon gave Du Bois the experience he needed in 1910 when he took on the job of creating and editing The Crisis for the newly formed NAACP.

At the same time that Du Bois was teaching, writing, and editing, he was actively organizing in the African American community. He was involved in a number of committees and organizations before 1905, but his major organizing effort came that year when he invited 59 African American men known to oppose Booker T. Washington’s accommodationism to meet in Buffalo, NY, that summer. Because of the racist policies in the Buffalo hotels, he and co-organizer publisher Monroe Trotter moved the meeting across the Niagara Falls to Fort Erie on the Canadian side. There the 29 men attending formed the Niagara Movement—“the first collective attempt by African Americans to demand full citizenship rights in the twentieth century” (Lewis 1993, p. 317). In their Declaration of Principles Du Bois and Trotter declared, “We refuse to allow the impression to remain that the Negro American assents to inferiority, is submissive under oppression and apologetic before insults.” Protest was central to the Niagara Movement and the Declaration stated passionately: “The Negro race in America stolen, ravished and degraded, struggling up through difficulties and oppression, needs sympathy and receives criticism; needs help and is given hindrance, needs protection and is given mob-violence, needs justice and is given charity, needs leadership and is given cowardice and apology, needs bread and is given a stone. This nation will never stand justified before God until these things are changed” (Broderick and Meier 1965).

The movement expanded to 170 members in thirty-four states, but soon faced trouble within as well as opposition from the Bookerite forces. Du Bois and Trotter disagreed as to whether women could become members; Du Bois, ever the feminist, won this argument, but tensions remained. The Niagara Movement met for several more years (Tuttle 1999). As it was losing steam, however, plans for a new organization were under way. In response to the 1908 Springfield, Illinois race riot, a group of white liberals, including Oswald Garrison Villard and Mary Ovington White, called for a meeting to discuss racial justice issues. A call was written and some 60 signed, including seven African Americans. Du Bois was one of the signatories. The call was issued on the 100th anniversary of Lincoln’s birth, February 12, 1909, now celebrated as the founding of what would become the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Sullivan 2009). In 1910 Du Bois was offered the position of Director of Publicity and Research and on July 5, W.E.B. Du Bois resigned from AU and left for New York and the NAACP (Lewis 1993, p. 386).

Leaving Atlanta and AU was a major turning point in Du Bois’s career. He left behind him the world of academe and plunged himself into the world of advocacy. He would return to the academy in 1933–1944 during which time he produced his greatest work of historical scholarship, Black Reconstruction in America (1935). But in 1910, his initial academic stint was over and his work for his race would now shift to other forms of literature and to advocacy. In the decade and a half between his completion of his Harvard Ph.D. and his founding The Crisis for the NAACP, the pathbreaking sociologist and historian laid the empirical foundations for modern sociology through his ground-breaking work in Philadelphia, Farmville, and Dougherty and Lowndes counties as well as his brilliant series of AU Studies conferences. As a historian he laid down the lines for a positive interpretation of the Reconstruction era, a perspective it would take the rest of the profession a half-century to understand and promote. As he headed for New York, Du Bois could take pride in knowing he had left his imprint on the modern sociology and history professions.

I thought I would conclude today by telling you of my pilgrimage to Great Barrington, Massachusetts, where W.E.B. Du Bois was born and grew up. It was the summer of 1997 and I was attending a five-week NEH summer institute at Harvard University on Teaching the History of the Southern Civil Rights Movement. One of my colleagues, David Dennard, an African American historian at East Carolina University, asked if anyone wanted to join him on a trip to Great Barrington in the western part of the state—what he called a pilgrimage to the Du Bois childhood home. I agreed to accompany him and we drove the more than two hours to the other end of the state. We made a wager as we neared Great Barrington as to how long it would take for us to find someone there who knew of Du Bois or where his birthplace and childhood homes were located. Our first stop was a small art gallery on the main street. When we asked the young woman if she knew about Du Bois, she replied, “He was an artist wasn’t he?” We tried several other shops but to no avail. Finally we located the local library and found someone who had heard of Du Bois and knew how to direct us to the birthplace and the childhood home. We were astonished that the town’s most
important son was virtually unknown to its present inhabitants. When we saw some of the clippings and other Du Bois material in the library, it became clear that while he was still alive and afterwards, the country’s most famous African American intellectual was persona non grata in his own hometown. As America carried on its Cold War with the Communist enemy, Du Bois was also identified as the enemy. We might as well have been in Alabama or Mississippi in the 1960s where civil rights activists were accused of being Communist agitators.

While an older generation of Great Barrington residents tried to wipe away the memory of Du Bois, the younger generation had no memory of him to forget. As we surveyed the Housatonic River that Du Bois recalled in The Souls of Black Folk or stood quietly at his wife’s and son’s graves, we thought how sad it was that this great American was rejected in the place of his birth. And yet, to a certain extent, it should be thought how sad it was that this great American was rejected in the place of his birth. And yet, to a certain extent, it should have not surprised us at all. For America has yet to truly come to grips with the problem Du Bois pointed out to us 113 years ago—the problem of the color-line. It’s still there. When a U.S. Congressman shouts out to the first African American President of the United States, “You lie!”, we have a problem. When white southerners insist on honoring the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, we have a problem. When the powers to be undermine the public school system which has become re-segregated, we have a problem. When whites flee their neighborhoods because the wrong people are moving in, we have a problem. And that problem is the problem of the color-line.

Further Reading


Lee W. Formwalt, born in Springfield, MA, was professor of history at Albany (GA) State University for 22 years and served his last 2 years there as Dean of the Graduate School. Founder and editor of The Journal of Southwest Georgia History, he has written numerous scholarly articles and essays on southwest Georgia history, focusing largely on the African American experience. From 1999 to 2009, he was executive director of the Organization of American Historians, and in 2009, he returned to Albany, GA, to become executive director of the Albany Civil Rights Institute. He retired in 2011 and lives in Bloomington, Indiana, where he is currently working on his memoirs and a history of Dougherty County, Georgia. This article is an adaptation of a talk delivered on February 28, 2012 at Wellesley College. Many thanks to Selwyn R. Cudjoe, Professor of Africana Studies, Wellesley College, for introducing Professor Formwalt to Society.
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