

## W.E.B. DU BOIS EDUCATING STILL

“As the decades pass, the appreciation of Du Bois will grow.”

Herbert Aptheker, 1989

How does one relate to a legend? Because Du Bois’s accomplishments, and his life-long commitment to racial, social, and human progress are legendary, i.e., journalist and editor; educator and researcher; historian and sociologist; lecturer and dramatist; political and social activist and, above all, writer (of singular grade and depth; writer of precision and prophecy in that his famous declaration, “the problem of the twentieth century is the color line,” accurately foretold the racial essence of the era that was only then unfolding. (Many people associate that analysis with DuBois’s 1903 classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*. But, in reality, the prediction came even earlier: at the Pan African Conference in London in 1900 when Du Bois authored the conference’s appeal “To the Nations of the World.”) But it was not only Du Bois’s prediction that came true, Aptheker’s did as well.

In the twilight of his life, Du Bois was invited to Ghana by Kwame Nkrumah to continue working on the *Encyclopedia Africana* project that he had originally embarked upon a half-century before. And after his death, in the late Sixties and early Seventies, recognition came in the form of youthful leftist groups who called themselves the Du Bois clubs. Meanwhile, outside the city of Berlin, commemorating its 600 year anniversary in 1989 by publishing a monograph entitled, *Welcome to Berline: Das Image Berlins in der englischsprachigen Welt von 1700 bis Heute*. (*The Image of Berlin in the English-Speaking World from 1700 til Today*). And that monograph contains a chapter on Du Bois, “Die Preussische Lehrjahre eines Schwarz amerikanischen Autor: W.E.B. Du Bois” (“The Prussian Learning Years of the Black American Writer, W.E.B. Du Bois”).

The chapter referred to those nineteenth century years, 1892-94, when Du Bois studied at the University of Berlin. (And it is ironic that a nation in which Du Bois spent only two years of his life—though he visited it five times—esteemed him more highly in the 1980’s than did his native land.)

But gradually, as time passed, and as Aptheker had envisioned, to more and more Americans, Du Bois became an accepted—even iconic—figure. And nowhere was this about face more surprising than in Du Bois’s hometown of Great Barrington which had no reason to doubt the veracity of his constant vilification by the local and national press over his allegedly too-much-akin to Russian Cold War politics.

The government labeled Du Bois a communist “fellow-traveler” in 1949 because he advocated the Stockholm Peace Appeal “to banish the atomic bomb” which America called “a communist trick to disarm the West” (p. 32). Two years later, in 1951, the government indicted Du Bois for working with the Peace Information Center and “not registering as a foreign agent.” That was supposed to be a criminal offense because the government had labeled the Center “a communist front.”

However, because the charge was groundless, the judge dismissed the case. Bu the government was still not through. Vindictively, it took away Du Bois’s passport for seven years to prevent him from going abroad and informing the outside world about the continuing—and unsolved—racial problem “in the land of the free.” This was an issue of great sensitivity to America because the Third World was beginning to stir. And America’s racial contradictions made it fair game for Soviet ridicule. It was no wonder then that Great Barrington, like America at large, succumbed to the anti-communist fever.

But, slowly, after Du Bois’s death, the scope of his manifold contributions began to emerge from the shadows of propaganda and alter people’s perceptions of his life. . . even in Great Barrington.

This belated embrace by his birthplace assumed many forms. For example, a Friends of Du Bois's Boyhood Site was formed in the Nineties following an archeological field school established at the site in 1982-83 by archaeologists of the UMass-Amherst Anthropology Department. (It has since excavated some 20,000 artifacts.)

A Du Bois mural was painted near the center of town. And in 2002 a Du Bois River Garden Park was named. There is a "Du Bois in Great Barrington" brochure and a walking tour of 50 Du Bois-connected places that visitors can take with a guide or do themselves. And now there are highway signs leading into Great Barrington that identify it as Du Bois's birthplace. So, as the Bible says, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again."

Great Barrington was not the only institution in the state of Massachusetts that belatedly recognized Du Bois's historical worth. Harvard, his alma mater, now has a Du Bois Institute while the University of Massachusetts in Amherst created the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies as one of the first Black Studies programs in the nation; before recognizing Du Bois's role in Black, American and world history became fashionable.

Indeed, one might even say that a unique Du Bois tradition has developed at UMass since the university houses the Du Bois papers, has renamed its library after Du Bois, and as mentioned previously, archaeologists of the Anthropology Department, through their work on the Du Bois home site, have helped to build a sustaining bond between the university and Du Bois acolytes in the town.

The latest demonstration of that UMass tradition of relating the university to Du Bois is the exhibition, "Du Bois in Our Time" that the Museum of Contemporary Art opened last September to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Du Bois's passing in 1963. The exhibition featured ten artists from the United States, Canada, and the West Indies who the museum asked to submit works that they felt were in keeping with Du Bois's legacy. Thus, visual artists, artists in sculpture, photography, public space and other fields, produced the exhibits that made up "Du Bois in Our Time."

In the three month exhibition, September 10 – December 8, 2013, in which the visual exhibits were displayed, the Museum also sponsored public events with the artists and Du Bois scholars to further explore the significance of Du Bois's legacy "in our time."

There was, for example, a panel about Du Bois's views on education called "Color Lines of Education," and another on the relation between art and politics that I served on along with LaToya Ruby Frazier, the Braddock, Pennsylvania artist-photographer, and Ann Messner, the public space artist from New York. The panel was moderated by Susan Jahoda of the Art Department who kicked off our panel discussions by reminding us of Du Bois's own views on art and politics:

...All art is propaganda and ever must be despite the whaling of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda. For gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy, I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is strict and silent.<sup>1</sup>

One may conclude, therefore, that Du Bois recognized no difference between art and prose. Both were to affirm the truth—and reality—of the black condition habitually kept "strict and silent" in America.

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<sup>1</sup> from Du Bois's lecture, "Criteria of Negro Art," given at 1926 NAACP convention in Chicago; later published in the December 1926 issue of the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine.

This theme of invisibility of black truth and the artist's obligation to render it visible is also the motivation behind LaToya Ruby Frazier's decision to use her camera to lift up the debilitating racial curtain that Du Bois called "the Veil" in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century. . . Leaving then, *the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses.* . .<sup>2</sup> (emphasis mine)

So what Du Bois saw "at the dawn of the twentieth century," LaToya saw—and sees still—in the twenty-first:

I'm LaToya Ruby Frazier. I'm an artist and a photographer from Braddock, Pennsylvania. Braddock, Pennsylvania is an historic steel mill town that is the home to Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill, the Edgar Thomson Works which still operates today.

When you come from a town like Braddock that's never addressed the historical racism and persecution against working class people and African Americans. . . that moves me and concerns me and vexes me [so] *I picked up the camera and began photographing this painful reality. . . because I was told I didn't exist—I was invisible and it didn't matter.*

*I began to use my camera as a weapon to fight back* against all the things I don't like about America; poverty, discrimination, and racism."<sup>3</sup> (emphasis mine)

So LaToya Ruby Frazier uses her camera "to fight back" against the invisibility to which America has consigned her as Du Bois used his pen and person to shed light upon "the Veil."

The focus of both was not the South but the North. And both wished to tell the story of, in one sense, the same locale: the state of Pennsylvania. Because LaToya Frazier's Braddock story is not all that different, though there are decades between them, than Du Bois's story of the black Seventh Ward in his path-breaking sociological study, *The Philadelphia Negro*:

I settled in one room in the city over a cafeteria run by a college settlement in the worst part of the Seventh Ward. We lived there a year, in the midst of an atmosphere of dirt, drunkenness, poverty and crime. Murder sat on our doorsteps, [and] police were our government. . .<sup>4</sup>

And if black people are still being shunted aside in LaToya Ruby Frazier's time, presumably in the 1980s and 1990's as they were in the 1890's, when Du Bois wrote *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), then clearly Du Bois's critique of what was racially astray then is as relevant in our time as it was in his.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Forethought," *Souls of Black Folk*, Vintage, New York, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> LaToya Ruby Frazier, Panel, November 13, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*, International, New York, 1988, p. 195.