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## Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois: A Life Lived Experimentally and Self-Documented

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*St. Clair Drake*

## DR. W. E. B. DU BOIS: A LIFE LIVED EXPERIMENTALLY AND SELF-DOCUMENTED\*

**T**he man died in self-imposed exile on the West Coast of Africa—at the age of 95—and the news of his passing was spread from coast to coast in the land of his birth by a curious coincidence.<sup>1</sup> Tens of thousands of Negro Americans were converging upon the nation's capital as he lay dying. They were participating in a "March on Washington For Jobs and Freedom"—at least one out of every fifty adult Negroes in the United States was involved. The next day when they were assembled before Lincoln's monument, the Executive Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People announced to the vast throng that the news had just come that one of the founders of the N.A.A.C.P. had died on the eve of the March, Dr. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, in Accra, Ghana. Many were surprised that his name was mentioned at all, for "the old man" had been something of an embarrassment to Negro and white liberals because he had joined the American Communist Party in 1961 and had renounced his citizenship to become a Ghanaian in 1962. The fact that he was mentioned at all on the occasion of the March was not only a tribute to the courage of the man who felt that it was proper and fitting to do so, but it also gives vivid corroboration to the hypothesis that Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, whatever he might do, had had such an impact upon American history that he could not be ignored—that his name is secure in the list of 19th and 20th Century American "immortals." Indeed, during this very week, a memorial service is being held for him at Carnegie Hall in New York and the list of sponsors reads like a roster of the country's most distinguished social scientists and literary figures.

During his forty-ninth year, Dr. Du Bois was stricken with a serious illness. When he recovered, he wrote these words at the end of a brief biographical note

\* A speech delivered at Roosevelt University by St. Clair Drake, Professor of Sociology, in a series on "Recent Immortals," February 26, 1964.

<sup>1</sup> Born on February 23, 1868, W.E.B. Du Bois died on August 27, 1963. [ed.]

which forms chapter one of his book of essays, *Darkwater*:

Last year I looked death in the face and found its lineaments not unkind. But it was not my time. Yet in nature sometime soon and in the fullness of days I shall die, quietly, I trust, with my face turned toward South and Eastward; and dreaming or dreamless, I shall, I am sure, enjoy death as I have enjoyed life.

Dr. Du Bois always took great pride in what he felt was his readiness and willingness to make the last great venture into a possible new experience. On the eve of his *ninetieth* birthday, he penned a note, sealed it and gave it to his wife, the writer, Shirley Graham, for safekeeping until the hour of his death. It was read in Ghana on August 29th, 1963, just before his body was laid to rest near the ashes of the West Indian journalist, George Padmore, in Christiansborg Castle, site of an old slave-pen by the sea. Dr. Du Bois had left this message:

It is much more difficult in theory than actually to say the last good-bye to one's loved ones and friends and to all the familiar things in life.

I am going to take a long, deep, and endless sleep. This is not a punishment but a privilege to which I have looked forward for years.

I have loved my work, I have loved my people and my play, but always I have been uplifted by the thought that what I have done well will live long and justify my life; that what I have done ill or never finished can now be handed on to others for endless days to be finished, perhaps better than I could have done.

And that peace will be my applause.

One thing alone I charge you. As you live, believe in life! Always human beings will live and progress to greater, broader fuller life.

The only possible death is to lose belief in this truth simply because the great end comes slowly, because time is long.

Good-bye.

Toward life itself Du Bois seems to have that same aloof air of detachment with which he confronted the "masses" whom, like life, he said he loved, that same unwillingness to be fully embraced which he showed toward white liberals who worked for Negro welfare—an "in it, but not of it" attitude curiously

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reminiscent of certain religious sectarians whose creed is “come ye out from among them and be ye separate—and sanctified.”

I think that one index to Dr. Du Bois’ greatness lies in the fact that he could leave a message such as this and it does not strike a false note with those who knew him. The act skirts the edge of posturing, of keeping an eye on history, of making sure that the exit is well publicized. In fact, there is something Shavian about Du Bois, too—just a hint of the poseur (he admitted this, himself, and refers to the fact that he “affected” spats and a cane when he returned home from Germany in the Nineties.), and the leaving of the note fits this aspect of his character. But, to those who were close to Dr. Du Bois, and I suspect, even to those who were not, but who take the long view, the act has another significance. It is one more index to what I have called his style, the living of an “experimental, self-documented” life, lived in the hope that it will be of benefit to those who take the time to study it. As this letter indicates, he never lost his 19th century optimism, his belief in Progress, his belief in Reason. Du Bois was a mixture of Romanticist and Rationalist to the very end.

Du Bois was other things, too, but of these I shall not write. He has had his biographers and myth has begun to grow about the man. Some thought him warm and appreciated him as a friend. Others considered him aloof, cold, and arrogant. Some have made psychoanalytical appraisals of his work and of his life. I shall simply comment on his ideas as expressed in “a life lived experimentally and self-documented.”

Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois was a scholar as well as what an older generation of Negroes referred to as a “Race Leader.” He was also what the modern generation of Africans would call a “Freedom Fighter.” And his way with worked certainly entitles him to be called a “man of letters.” But Du Bois’ major contribution to our epoch is not the shelf of books he wrote or the scores of articles, nor even the 30-odd leadership years with the N.A.A.C.P., but is rather the contribution of “*a life lived experimentally and self-documented*”—a restless, seeking, ever searching quest, a life journey which began in New England, carried him over the whole world, and ended—by his own choice—on the Guinea Coast from whence one group of his ancestors came. Dr. Du Bois, throughout his long lifetime, was often accused of ideological inconsistency and biographers use the term “paradoxical” frequently when writing about him. The real significance of his ideological twisting and turning, and of the apparent “paradoxes” in his behavior, lies in the fact that Dr. Du Bois conceived of his life as a continuous probe, touching the sensitive areas along the color-line, and considered it his duty to document the results of the probing as well as his own reaction to the situations. Certainly by the time he reached the 50 year mark, he also considered himself an institution as well as a person—and he was. Precisely because he was a man who insisted upon acting, and then reflecting upon his actions, writing about them what

sometimes turned out to be very beautiful prose, he has left us a valuable legacy. *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1904, and *Darkwater*, in 1920, gave him a secure niche among America's better essayists.

I suspect that Dr. Du Bois, if asked to evaluate the first half of his life, would have said that his most important acts, however, were those which led to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—the challenge which he threw out to Booker T. Washington and his philosophy of gradualism, the organization of a new civil rights movement of which he, Du Bois, was a vital part, and his editorship of the N.A.A.C.P. journal, *The Crisis*. It is interesting to note that it was this aspect of his life which was given emphasis by Dr. Kwame Nkrumah in a radio address delivered in 1963 immediately after Du Bois' death. Dr. Nkrumah, like many Americans, saw symbolism in Du Bois' death during the Negro's great summer of discontent. He said:

We mourn the death of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, a great son of Africa.

Dr. Du Bois, in a long life-span of 96 years, achieved distinction as a poet, historian and sociologist. He was an undaunted fighter for the emancipation of colonial and oppressed people, and pursued this objective throughout his life.

The fields of literature and science were enriched by his profound and searching scholarship, a brilliant literary talent, and a keen and penetrating mind. The essential quality of Dr. Du Bois' life and achievement can be summed up in a single phrase: "intellectual honesty and integrity."

Dr. Du Bois was a distinguished figure in the pioneering days of the Pan-African Movement in the Western World. He was the Secretary of the first Pan-African Congress held in London in 1900. In 1919 he organized another Pan-African Congress in Paris which coincided with the Paris Peace Conference. When George Padmore and I organized the Fifth Pan-African Congress in 1945 at Manchester, we invited Dr. Du Bois, then already 78 years of age, to chair that Congress. I knew him in the United States and even spoke on the same platform with him. It was, however, at this Conference in Manchester that I was drawn closely to him. Since then he has been personally a real friend and father to me.

Dr. Du Bois was a life-long fighter against all forms of racial inequality, discrimination and injustice. He helped to establish the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and was first editor of its fighting organ, *The Crisis*. Concerning the

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struggle for the improvement of the status of the Negro in America, he once said:

“We will not be satisfied to take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights. We belong to a free-born American: political, civil, and social; and until we get these rights, we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America. The battle we wage is not for ourselves alone, but all true Americans.”

It was the late George Padmore who described Dr. Du Bois as the greatest scholar the Negro race has produced, and one who always upheld the right of Africans to govern themselves.

I asked Dr. Du Bois to come to Ghana to pass the evening of his life with us and also to spend his remaining years in compiling an Encyclopedia Africana, a project which is part of his whole intellectual life.

We mourn his death. May he live in our memory not only as a distinguished scholar, but a great African Patriot. Dr. Du Bois is a phenomenon. May he rest in peace.

Du Bois' last message and Kwame Nkrumah's obituary were printed in a booklet together with the familiar figure on the cover—the Mephistophelean face with the Van Dyke beard, mellowed by age, but with the glint of fire still in his eye. And over the picture the words, “In Memoriam.”

Why is this man so honored despite the fact that he became a Communist in his old age and rejected his American citizenship for that of Ghana? For the few White Americans who do him honor the explanation may have deep laid Freudian roots—a half-conscious feeling of guilt, a gnawing suspicion that it was America which drove “the old man” to such drastically “un-American choices.” For the Negro Americans it is partly a gesture of defiance, an unwillingness to let white Americans dictate to them which leaders shall be honored and which not. For a very few it is honor *because* he became a Communist. The honors heaped upon Du Bois, now that he is dead, have a much deeper significance than any of these things.

There are many Americans who consider Du Bois a great man—and a great American—measured by any of the conventional standards of greatness—whatever his personal idiosyncrasies or political convictions may have been. Those who believe this believe that all Americans will some day believe it too—when the passions of the Cold War have some day cooled. In what then did his greatness lie?

Dr. Du Bois was born three years after the Civil War. His life spanned almost a hundred years of American history. He graduated from college in 1888 and at that time Negroes were but 23 years out of slavery. It was generally believed that Negroes were intellectually inferior to whites and very few Negroes had ever had a chance to secure a college education. Du Bois, New England born, of Dutch, French, and African descent—a Negro by those peculiar American definitions which insist that “one drop make you whole”—gradually became aware of the derogatory appraisals which the Anglo-Saxon cultures place upon dark skin color and particularly upon Negroidness and African cultural traits. In an essay, “The Shadow of Years,” written when he was nearly fifty, he tells us of it:

Very gradually—I cannot now distinguish the steps, though here and there I remember a jump or a jolt—but very gradually, I found myself assuming quite placidly that I was different from other children. At first I think I connected the difference with a manifest ability to get my lessons rather better than most and to recite with a certain happy, almost taunting glibness, which brought frowns here and there. Then, slowly, I realized that some folks, a few, even several, actually considered by brown skin a misfortune; once or twice I became painfully aware that some human beings even thought it a crime. I was not for a moment daunted,—although of course, there were some days of secret tears—rather I was spurred to tireless effort. If they beat me at anything, I was grimly determined to make them sweat for it! . . . . As time flew I felt not so much disowned and rejected as rather drawn up into higher spaces and made part of a mightier mission. At times I almost pitied my pale companions, who were not of the Lord’s anointed and who saw in their dreams no splendid quests of golden fleeces. [The symbols of golden and silver fleeces were a favorite of Du Bois.]

Dr. Du Bois wrote these words just before his fiftieth birthday, and, as is the case with all recollections, they are partly fact and partly interpretation. But they do describe the Du Bois America knew—determined from his youth to beat the white world at its own game, to try to do better what white competitors did well, and through it all to refuse to apologize for his color or condition, but yet to seal himself off—just a bit—in a world of fantasy which imbued his life with meaning.

Harvard was the ultimate educational goal, but first there were three years at one of the then young Negro colleges in the South—Fisk University in Tennessee. Du Bois claims that he fell in love with Negroes there. He had known few

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of them in the small integrated village in Massachusetts where he grew up:

Consider how miraculous it all was to a boy of seventeen, just escaped from a narrow valley: I willed and lo! my people came dancing about me,—riotous in color, gay in laughter, full of sympathy, need, and pleading; darkly delicious girls—“colored” girls—sat beside me and actually talked to me while I gazed in tongue-tied silence or babbled in boastful dreams. . . .

This was the beginning of that strain of Negro glorification in Du Bois thought which remained there to the end—the doctrine of Negro “special gifts” (what French-speaking Negro savants call *Négritude*) which he at first attributed to the genes and later to the tenacity of culture. Du Bois won the first great battle with himself early—acceptance of the body nature gave him. He did not, like many others of his day, sit pining and longing to be white. It was in those days, too, that he elaborated the symbolism of The Veil—that translucent film that stands between all American Negroes and American reality, which always hangs between them and all white people however close the friendship. Du Bois said of Fiske, “I studied eagerly under teachers who bent in subtle sympathy, feeling themselves some shadow of the Veil and lifting it gently that we darker souls might peer through to other worlds.”

Apparently it was at Fisk, too, that Du Bois dedicated himself to a life-style—a “life lived experimentally and self-documented,” I call it. He taught during two summers among rural Negroes in Tennessee and one of his most moving pieces of writing deals with the people he met during these two summers and what he found their fate to be when he returned years later—an essay called “Of the Meaning of Progress” in *The Souls of Black Folk*. At his own half-century mark Du Bois, himself, attempted to analyze “the life lived experimentally” and he divided it into periods. This analysis appears in the first chapter of *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*:

As I peer back through the shadow of my years, seeing not too clearly, but through the thickening veil of wish and after-thought [The Veil again but in another context] I seem to view my life divided into four distinct parts: The Age of Miracles, the Days of Disillusionment, the Discipline of Work and Play, and the Second Miracle Age. . . .

As he phrases it, “The Age of Miracles began with Fisk and ended with Germany. . . .”

In a period when even the ardent friends of the Negro expressed doubts about the extent of their intellectual capacity and when a group of New York liberals



had to begin a conference with a comparative exhibit of human brains and with an anthropologist on hand to explain that there was no real proof that Negro brains were inferior, young Du Bois determined to get both undergraduate and graduate degrees from Harvard. He first took an A.B. at Fisk and then entered as a junior at Harvard, taking an A.B., and later a Ph.D. While there he stood aloof in proud disdain from southern white students who would not sit beside him in class, ignored northern students who were friendly in class but avoided him outside of it, and enjoyed himself with the Boston middle-class Negroes while assailing them for being ashamed of their dark color, their slave origins and their remote African ancestry. He states that he was happy. William James and George Santayana impressed him, but he came increasingly to feel that the intellectual battleground for equal rights lay in the social sciences. So at the age of 24, with a grant from the Slater Fund, he headed for Germany where such sciences were then taught at their best. He studied with Max Weber and Adolph Wagner. He reports that in Germany where he formed genuine friendships upon the basis of individual choice, not race, he felt for the first time, "more human." But unlike some Negroes who expatriated themselves in Europe, he felt the drive to return home. He could not forget he was an American Negro. One permanent result of the German stay was, as he phrases it, the fact that now he was able to "stop loathing others because they were white." The experience was therapeutic. And then—he "... dropped suddenly back into 'nigger' hating America." In detailing these reactions so familiar to all Negro Americans who have had the opportunity to travel abroad, Du Bois lays bare the roots of that ambivalence, that love-hate relationship which all Negro Americans have with the land of their birth, and which, in forcing adjustment to it even drives rifts between friends as in the case of Richard Wright and James Baldwin. Du Bois was not yet ready to shake the dust of American soil from his feet. He came home fired up with the belief that the pursuit of truth and the publication and popularization of the results of research about the Negro and race relations should be the vocation of the Negro scholar trained in the social sciences—and of those white scholars who wanted to be his allies. He was Rationalist in those days.

The Days of Disillusionment, as he calls them, came upon his return, but did not last long. Disillusionment was tied up primarily with the difficulty in finding some way in which he could use the training he had secured. Finally he was offered a job teaching Latin and Greek at a school in Ohio run by the African Methodist Episcopal Church and he took it. He fled from the theological atmosphere and the unsophisticated religious ritual when he secured a chance: "What business had I, anyhow, to teach Greek when I had studied men?" So he accepted an appointment at the University of Pennsylvania as "Investigator of the Social Conditions of the Colored Race" in Philadelphia. The salary was small and he had just married, but he plunged into the task of making questionnaires, inter-

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viewing, participating, and observing with enthusiasm and vigor. The job lasted only a year, but out of it came one of the first pieces of thorough empirical urban research done by any American scholar.

By 1900, the young 32-year-old Negro scholar had already won his place in the academic history of the U.S.A., not alone by being the first Negro to get a Ph.D. in history from Harvard, but by having also produced two pioneering scholarly works, one in history and one in sociology. I refer to his doctoral dissertation which became Volume I in the Harvard Historical Series: *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (published commercially in 1896), and to *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (published by the University of Pennsylvania in 1890). The young man who vowed to “beat them at their own game” and thereby to fulfill himself and “vindicate the Race,” must have felt very proud in 1899 when the *Yale Review* called his social study “. . . a credit to American scholarship and a distinct and valuable addition to the world’s stock of knowledge concerning an important and obscure theme . . . .” Du Bois had leaned over backwards to be objective, and the *American Historical Review* stated that he had been “. . . perfectly frank, laying all necessary stress on the weakness of his people . . . if any conclusions are faulty, the fault lies in the overweight given to some of his beliefs and hopes . . . .”

On Du Bois’ 90th birthday, I was asked to prepare a scroll and to solicit testimonials from a group of Midwest social scientists. Only one person refused, rather ostentatiously writing that he could not associate his name with honors bestowed upon a man who was both gullible and un-American. Over a dozen other scholars, however, heaped praise upon him as a pathfinder and pioneer in the days when their disciplines were young. Had he done nothing else other than finish Harvard and publish these two books, he might have qualified for at least a junior place among America’s academic immortals. But what Du Bois calls his third period, that of the “The Discipline of Work and Play” lends an added dimension to his life, for Du Bois was eager to use his scholarship to aid what all Negroes in those days referred to as “The Race.”

The traits which the scholars admire in Du Bois’ early work—detachment, willingness to belabor the Negro masses for their alleged slothfulness, the acceptance of the duty to “call the shots as they came” without fear or favor—were not the traits which make a leader. Du Bois, at this period, preferred the scholarly role, and was happy to accept a post at Atlanta University in Georgia to teach, carry out research, and organize annual conferences on the welfare of the Negro. He expected no praise from his people for this kind of work, and of the Philadelphia study he wrote:

The colored people of Philadelphia received me with no open arms. They had a natural dislike to being studied like a strange species. I met again and again in different guise those curious cross-currents and inner social whirlings of my own people. They set me to groping. I concluded that I did not know so much as I might about my own people . . .

So off to the Deep South he went—to teach and to learn.

Du Bois has evaluated the Atlanta years himself:

My real life work was done at Atlanta for thirteen years, from my twenty-ninth to my forty-second 'birthday. They were years of great spiritual upturning, of the making and unmaking of ideals, of hard work and hard play. Here I found myself. I lost most of my mannerisms. [With this many observers would not agree.] I grew more broadly human, made my closest and most holy friendships and studied human beings. I became widely-acquainted with the real condition of my people. At Wilberforce I was their captious critic. In Philadelphia I was their cold and scientific investigator, with microscope and probe. It took but a few years of Atlanta to bring me to hot and indignant defense. I saw the race-hatred of the whites as I had never dreamed of it before—naked and unashamed . . . I held back with more difficulty each day my mounting indignation against injustice and misrepresentation. . . .

In this particular account, written in 1919, Dr. Du Bois does not mention the fact that he wrote over 65 pamphlets, books, and articles during this period, including booklets in the Atlanta University Sociological series on such topics as *The Negro in Business*, *The College Bred Negro*, *The Negro Artisan*, *The Negro Church*; a propaganda article for the *Missionary Review of the World* in 1904 on "What Intellectual Training is Doing For the Negro," a piece for the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in 1903 on "The Laboratory in Sociology at Atlanta." The sociological work was of uneven quality due both to lack of adequate finances and the unsophisticated nature of nearly all sociological research during the period. Du Bois managed, in one or two cases, however, to produce some model studies. He went to London in 1900 and participated in the first Pan African Conference ever held and wrote an article for *The Dial* on "The Storm and Stress in the Black World." And through it all he was polishing and refining those little gems of poetry and essay which were brought together in 1903 in a volume called *The Souls of Black Folk*. By 1904 the book had gone through five editions. With deftness and erudition, although in a Nineteenth

Century style which sometimes leaves the modern reader cold, Du Bois spoke to the white world:

Herein lies buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century . . . . I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses. . . . and finally need I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil . . . .

For those who had eyes to see and ears to hear, one essay in the book revealed that forces were at work which would shake America in a fashion not experienced since the Civil War, a chapter entitled, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others." It was somewhat critical of the gentlemen.

The Atlanta experience opened Du Bois' eyes to the one massive fact about race relation in America during the 1880s and the 1890s, namely, that Booker T. Washington and his advisers and backers "called the tune" and that the wealth of influential northern capitalists could buy new columns and editorials to push the Booker T. Washington philosophy and could withhold aid from men and institutions who tried to buck the conservative leader who had come "Up From Slavery," who advised Negroes to stay out of politics, to stop agitating for their full rights, urging them to learn agriculture and trades and to mend their morals before demanding equality. What we now call "Accommodationist Leadership" was in the ascendancy and what Du Bois called "The Tuskegee Machine" occasionally steam-rollered him as well as others who got "out of line." Du Bois was not an "agitator" during these thirteen years in the South, but there were certain points of view which he held and espoused with quiet tenacity: 1. that Negroes should not abandon political activity in the U.S.—anywhere; 2. that adequate support should be given to liberal arts colleges to train "The Talented Tenth" for leadership as well as to Tuskegee and Hampton for agricultural and trade training; 3. that protest organizations among Negroes as well as schools were needed. But now he felt the time had come to speak out. He had written an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1902, "Of the Training of Black Men," and another in a collection of articles the next year on "The Talented Tenth"—that leaven needed to energize the great masses of Negroes, to plan, and to lead. He felt that Booker T. Washington had gone too far in a policy of compromise and now he wrote:

The black men have a duty to perform, a duty stern and delicate,—a forward movement to oppose part of the work of their greatest leader. So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and

strive with him, rejoicing in his honors and glorying in the strength of this Joshua called of God and of men to lead the headless host. (This symbol of the headless host like that of the Veil and the Golden Fleece appears continuously in Du Bois' writings.) But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, North or South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds—so far as he, the South, or the Nation, does this,— we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them. By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords men. . . .

It is hard for us, across the vast expanse of years, to appreciate the significance of these words or the courage which it took to fling them forth—risking not only his own dismissal from Atlanta but also the cutting off of funds for the school by Northern philanthropists so long as he remained there. (Had it not been for the unusual college president of his later years there, John Hope, he would have already been ousted.) This period was one in which the lynching curve was going up year by year, the disfranchisement of the Negro was being completed, and Jim Crow laws were being placed upon the books at an increasing rate. The Radicals—white and Negro—felt that the time had come for a frontal assault against race prejudice; the Conservatives felt that such an approach could only make matters worse. Booker Washington's philosophy of "get education and wealth, stay out of politics, don't agitate, work behind the scenes," made sense to the business circles of the North who supported the Republican Party which was in power and Tuskegee, Washington's citadel. Du Bois and the radicals were considered a menace to everything Booker Washington stood for and a threat to the civic peace and constructive race relations. But the *Souls of Black Folk* made Du Bois adhere to the "Young Turks" in the North—and changed the direction of his life. A far from friendly critical biographer of Du Bois sums up the situation at this point in his life as follows, giving us a convincing picture of a reluctant activist:

Du Bois increased his emotional commitments to the radicals. He had painfully observed the power and implacable influence of Booker T. Washington and was filled with disgust and anger. Now he was finally able to overcome his reluctance to assume command of the social movement which was dedicated to the Negroes' prompt realization of the promises in the American Creed . . . he led the Radicals (mainly Northern Negroes) in a fruitless attempt to negotiate an honorable peace with the Tuskegeans; in 1905 he founded the Niagra movement, an organization which waged an all-out war upon

the gradualist approach to race relations.

The Niagra Movement was composed of young and militant Negro preachers, journalists, school-teachers and professional men with Du Bois at their head, by their choice. They met for the first time in July of 1905, secretly, at Niagra in New York—twenty-nine of them—to frame the following demands of Booker T. Washington and of America:

1. Freedom of speech and criticism (where race relations was involved)
2. An unfettered and unsubsidized press (a reference to Washington's habit of "buying" press support for his point of view)
3. Manhood suffrage (they were willing to have educational and property restrictions if applied fairly to whites as well as Negroes)
4. The abolition of all caste distinctions based simply on race and color.
5. The recognition of the principles of human brotherhood as a practical present creed.
6. Recognition of the highest and best human training as a monopoly of no class or race or creed.
7. A belief in the dignity of labor.
8. United effort to realize these ideals under wise and courageous leadership.

In 1906, the Niagra Movement met at Harper's Ferry and Du Bois and his followers made a pilgrimage, barefoot, at dawn to the round house where John Brown had died to pledge themselves to give all they had in energy, life and money to realize the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the eight Niagra goals. They began to organize branches throughout the North, published a magazine called *Horizons*, and mounted a program of lobbying and voter pressure.

Booker Washington was frightened and horrified. We now know that what Du Bois charged and most people then refused to believe was really true. Students of Booker T. Washington papers in the Library of Congress have now verified the fact as Rudwick reports it that "Booker T. Washington, keeping all

irons in the fire, suggested that spies be employed to undermine the Niagara movement” and used his considerable political influence to punish civil servants or professors who and journalists who supported the movement. But it survived though in a feeble limping state till 1910, and John Hope ran interference for Dr. Du Bois.

The movement both fascinated and scared Northern white liberals. They objected to the idea of Negroes organizing by themselves—in situations beyond their control—for a civil rights fight. Yet, they felt it was time for such a fight. One white radical organization called The Constitution League was in the field, and a dedicated group of socialists around New York tried to keep alive the Abolitionist tradition. Du Bois describing the fourth period of his life—the Second Miracle Age—which began when he was about 41, said:

It all came—this new Age of Miracles—because a few persons in 1909 determined to celebrate Lincoln’s Birthday properly by calling for the final emancipation of the American Negro. I came at their call. My salary even for a year was not assured, but it was the “Voice without reply.” The result has been the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the *Crisis* and this book which I am finishing on my fiftieth birthday.

Dr. Du Bois does not give the details of the founding of the N.A.A.C.P. in this source nor his reason for leaving the South and taking the post with that organization. All of this, however, is discussed in detail in his autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn: his apologia pro vita sua* which anyone who wishes to understand Du Bois must read. But certainly one factor in his leaving the South was the feeling that education was not enough. He witnessed the horrible race riot in Atlanta in 1906. He saw the educated Negro as well as the hoodlum set upon by the mob. If this could happen in the South’s most enlightened city where middle class Negroes were concentrated, something more drastic than education was needed, he thought. The time was drawing close when he would have to leave.

Du Bois’ reaction to that riot was a cry—a dirge, a requiem, a lamentation, and an affirmation that has become a classic—*A Litany at Atlanta*. It affects us even today and speaks to our condition as we think of Birmingham and Jackson. And it is Du Bois at his literary best:

*A Litany at Atlanta*  
(excerpts)

O Silent God, Thou whose voice afar in mist and mystery hath left our  
ears an-hungered in these fearful days —

*Hear us, good Lord!*

Listen to us, Thy children: our faces dark with doubt are made a mockery in Thy Sanctuary. With uplifted hands we front Thy Heaven, O God, crying:

*We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord!*

From lust of body and lust of blood, —

*Great God, deliver us!*

From lust of power and lust of gold,—

*Great God, deliver us!*

From the leagued lying of despot and of brute,—

*Great God, deliver us!*

A city lay in travail, God our Lord, and from her loins sprang twin Murder and Black Hate. Red was the midnight . . .

*Bend us Thine Ear, O Lord!*

In the pale still morning we looked upon the deed. We stopped our ears and held our leaping hands . . .

*Turn again our captivity, O Lord!*

. . . How long shall the mounting flood of innocent blood near in Thine ears and pound in our hearts for vengeance? Pile the pale frenzy of blood-crazed brutes, who do such deeds, high on Thine Altar, Jehovah Jireh, and burn it in hell forever and forever!

*Forgive us, good Lord; we know not what we say!*

Bewildered we are and passion-tossed, mad with the madness of a mobbed and mocked and murdered people; straining at the armposts of Thy throne, we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of our stolen fathers, by the tears of our dead mother, by the blood of Thy crucified Christ: What meaneth this? Tell us the plan; give us the sign! . . . Sit no longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and dumb to our dumb suffering. Surely Thou, too, art not white, O



Lord, a pale bloodless, heartless thing! . . . Forgive the thought!  
Forgive these wild, blasphemous words. Thou art still the God of our  
black fathers . . . .

*Vengeance is Mine: I will repay, saith the Lord!*

Thy will, O Lord, be done! . . . *Kyrie Eleison!* . . . We bow our heads  
. . . . *Selah!*

Soon after the Atlanta Race Riot in 1908, a horrible lynching and a riot took place in Springfield, Illinois, the site of Abraham Lincoln's grave. It was this that jolted the white liberals into action. They expected no better of Atlanta. They were shocked that such a thing could happen in the North. So Mary White Ovington and Oswald Garrison Villard, Charles E. Russell, and Henry Moskowitz first met as an all-white group, then formed the National Negro Committee in May, 1909—an interracial body of which Du Bois was a member—and out of which grew the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The Niagra leadership and the white liberals had merged for a common battle. The merger was not a painless one. The Negroes accused the whites of trying to dominate the organization. The whites often accused the Negroes of being unreasonable. Both managed to keep their complaints behind closed doors and to confine their nasty words to that wonderful correspondence with each other which scholars are now being permitted to read. They presented a united front to the South and the reactionaries.

Du Bois now had a magazine, virtually his own, though nominally the organ of the N.A.A.C.P., *The Crisis*. Through his editorials and a column, *As The Crow Flies*, he spoke every month to at least 100,000 persons, among them some of the most perceptive and influential people in the country. With irony and sarcasm, earnestness and wit, he commented upon persons and places fearlessly. One objective appraisal of his work during this period notes that "The Niagra addresses were masterpieces. His demands for equality were simply, sharply and often lyrically written. . . . As *Crisis* editor, Du Bois felt free to lecture the race on a wide array of subjects from consumer cooperation to migration to the Northwest. . . . The height of his influence occurred during the period immediately preceding and following World War I. . . . Although he did not initiate N.A.A.C.P. policies and frequently deviated from some of them, for twenty-five years he was the organization's most prominent equal rights propagandist. *There can be no doubt that in the field of race relations W. E. B. Du Bois, despite his individualism, was the dean of the protest advocate leaders during the first half of the Twentieth Century.*"

### FATHER OF PAN-AFRICANISM

In this Era of Integration, Negro Americans see Du Bois primarily as the pioneer and prophet of a vigorous civil rights movement. But this is also the Epoch of African Liberation, and Africans see him in another role—as “Father of Pan Africanism.” While many Negroes were rejecting enforced identification with the unsavory stereotype of Africa which existed during the Nineteenth Century, Du Bois took quite a different tack. He *identified* with Africa. He researched and crusaded to “set the record straight”—in two seminal books, *The Negro*, published in 1915 and in *Black Folks Then and Now*, published in the 1940s. He owed much to German-Jewish anthropologist, Franz Boas, who began to open his eyes to the value of Negro art and the impressive aspects of the Sudanic kingdoms and the possibilities that Sudan Negroes may have invented the smelting of iron.

While working in the South there was little Du Bois could do to express this identification with Africa except to write and to protest against misinformation and vilification of Negroes and of Africa. But as soon as he began to work with the N.A.A.C.P. he tried to interest the Board in Africa. On the whole, the members were lukewarm although they gave sporadic support to his efforts to convene several Pan African congresses. Between the end of World War I and the outbreak of The Great Depression, he organized—almost single handedly—four such Congresses. The first met in Paris in 1919 to the great discomfiture of the American State Department. The second was held in London, Brussels and Paris—a sort of roving convention—and it resulted in a split between Franco-ophile Africans and Anglo-Saxonized black militants. The third was in London and Lisbon in 1923 and was financed by the National Association of Colored Women of the U.S.A. since the N.A.A.C.P. was not interested at the time. American lukewarmness and French-African hostility almost caused its cancellation, but Harold Laski and H.G. Wells were there. The final one called by Du Bois met in New York in 1927—again financed by American women.

A not-too-sympathetic biographer has called the Pan African Congresses “one of Du Bois’ biggest failures.” With the comment that “he was always fond of writing editorials and conference resolutions and was not disposed to give much attention to creating strong well-developed social action groups. The movement was composed of small, ineffectual organizations which never became more than an exclusive cult . . .” The statement may be essentially true, but misses the most important point, that these heroic failures inspired others to succeed and that when they did, the early Congresses were transmuted and transformed from failures into the integral, pioneering, stages of a social movement. As George Padmore points out in his book *Pan Africanism or*

*Communism?* and as Kwame Nkrumah notes in his autobiography, Dr. Du Bois inspired both of them to action and was a symbol of what they wanted to do. When, in 1945, the younger men—Padmore, and Nkrumah—along with Jomo Kenyatta—found themselves in a position to call the Fifth Pan African Congress in Manchester, England, they sent to America for Dr. Du Bois to come over to occupy a seat as Honorary Chairman. Characteristically enough, Du Bois, though 77, pitched into the committee work with vigor. He refused to be just an ornament. This time, the conveners of the conference were African and West Indian revolutionaries ready to place themselves at the head of the restless postwar African masses and to lead them to victory over colonialism. When they won they were ready to honor Du Bois having vindicated—as they phrased it—his ideas. He was enshrined as the “Father of Pan Africanism” and assigned the role of preparing the groundwork for an *Encyclopedia Africana*. And so—he died in Africa and will perhaps be best remembered in Africa—rather than in the land of his birth.

### IDEOLOGIST OF “NEGRO SOCIALISM”

Dr. Du Bois was asked to resign from the N.A.A.C.P. during the Depression and he went back to Atlanta University to teach, to do research and to edit a newly founded literary and scientific journal called *Phylon*. The circumstances of his leaving were peculiar and paradoxical. Dr. Du Bois had always considered himself something of a socialist and felt quite at home with those New York socialists who helped to found the N.A.A.C.P. He had always been an admirer—though not an uncritical one—of Marx—since his days in Germany. But he was also an ardent “Race Man” and was skeptical of the possibility of any co-operation between white and black workers. Negro left-wing socialists condemned him as a “snob” and “aristocrat out of touch with the masses.” Yet, during the Nineties he espoused the co-operative movement as a desirable middle-way for “the Black Masses.”

When the Depression came and the Communist Party began to work actively among Negroes, organizing them for protest and for some far-off utopian Black Belt Soviet Republic, Du Bois tossed out a counter-proposition, namely, that Negroes should organize themselves here and now to found co-operatives to help themselves because of their large scale unemployment. He called upon the churches to serve as a base for the movement. Since he felt Negroes were losing confidence in themselves, and their morale was weakening as they became a lumpen-proletariat, he called upon them to build “race pride,” to use their separate schools and churches to strengthen their morale, and to strive for group cohesion. The other N.A.A.C.P. board members felt that such advice was

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inconsistent with their own sharply chiseled integrationist point of view and that the *Crisis* certainly could not be used to support what sounded like voluntary segregation. Du Bois stood firm; so he had to go. Among the paradoxes of the period was the fact that the Julius Rosenwald Fund granted him a sizeable amount of Sears Roebuck-garnered money to write a Marxist interpretation of a period in American history—*Black Reconstruction*.

So until the outbreak of the Second World War, Dr. Du Bois was elaborating for American Negroes, the counterpart of what West Indian and African intellectuals were elaborating for Africa—what they called “*African Socialism*.”

### THE VEIL OR THE CURTAIN?

Despite his espousal of a mild Marxism and a co-op based socialism, Dr. Du Bois, throughout the Thirties and well into the War period, was often at odds with the American Communists. He attacked them. They attacked him. The Second World War—after 1942—threw the USSR and the USA into war on the same side against Hitler and caused both the American Communists and their opponents to mute the criticisms of each other and even to co-operate in the war effort—a fact we are sometimes very prone to forget. (Even Eisenhower once stood on Lenin’s tomb beside Stalin, applauding the Red Army and the youth formations as they march by!)

A rapprochement between Dr. Du Bois and the N.A.A.C.P. took place during the War with his being hired for the special purpose of helping to prepare position papers for them to be used at international conferences where they had to take a stand on Africa and colonialism. He had an office once more in N.A.A.C.P. headquarters. He wrote a book during this period—*Africa and the World*.

He was in his 77th year as the War drew to a close. He had visited the USSR in 1926 and 1936. He had watched the performance of that country during the War. He had studied its “nationality policy.” He had gradually come to the conclusion that until the profit system was destroyed and colonial imperialism eliminated race prejudice throughout the world could not be destroyed—he felt that these were necessary, though not sufficient conditions for its expiration. He conceded the existence of a Russian Iron Curtain but considered it preferable to the Veil. As he saw it, there was no Veil in the USSR, and he believed that no men would forever tolerate the Curtain. Above all, he felt that Negro Americans would suffer so long as Africa was colonized and vilified, and he believed that an assault upon colonialism demanded cooperation with the USSR and China. He also felt that the cooperation between the USSR and the West should continue on into the post-war years, and that a broad united front of the Left should exist in the USA, just as the Labor Party was ruling Britain and a Catholic-Communist-Socialist national front was ruling France. So he joined Henry Wallace and the

Progressive Party to espouse these ideas. Roosevelt's death, the Progressive Party's defeat, the triumph of Truman (who Du Bois felt was led about by Churchill) all tended to drive Dr. Du Bois further to the Left. He held Truman and the USA primarily responsible for the continuation of the Cold War, but when he attacked the N.A.A.C.P. for following the Truman line they let him go this time once and for all. So, approaching the age of 80, Dr. Du Bois was unattached to either a movement or a University. He attached himself very soon to the Council on African Affairs which was being run by Paul Robeson and Alphaeus Hunton and which was on the Attorney General's subversive list.

There was a bit of the mischievous and the Machiavellian in this act. Dr. Du Bois told me, upon one occasion during this period, "We've got to light a fire under the imperialists. Searing them with the prospect of a Communist revolution is one way to make them move. Younger people have to watch their careers and their future. I don't have to." By 1950, however, it was clear that Dr. Du Bois was not just engaged in a maneuver—that he now passionately and earnestly believed that the primary issue confronting the world was that of preventing a Third World War and that the USSR stood at the head of the "peace loving forces" while American bureaucrats and militarists were quite willing to see a nuclear war unleashed. He accepted the post as chairman of the Peace Information Center which was circulating the Stockholm Peace Petition. Du Bois received a traumatic shock in 1951. He was indicted by the U.S. Government for refusing to register the organization as the "agent of a foreign principal" and was dragged into court handcuffed. His conservative Republican attorney, a Negro, was outraged and risked contempt of court by shouting "Take those handcuffs off of Dr. Du Bois—now!" Federal Judge McGuire acquitted him but the scars remained on his soul till he died. His alienation from America became even greater when he was unable to secure a passport to travel abroad because he refused to sign a non-Communist affidavit. He was not a member of the Communist Party then, but he believed American citizens had an inalienable right to travel irrespective of their political position.

Dr. Du Bois' gratitude to the American Communists in the 50's must have indeed been great. They also helped him to realize one of his long held dreams—to publish a novel in trilogy form which had been brewing in his mind for years. He had written a novel in 1911 which was not very successful, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. He was not nearly so good a writer of fiction as he was of essays. Now the Mainstream Publishers brought out his novels which commercial publishers said were rejected on stylistic grounds but which Dr. Du Bois believed were refused because of their political content: *The Ordeal of Mansart* (1957); *Mansart Builds a School* (1959). *Worlds of Color* rounded off the series in 1961. The Communist movement took his novels seriously.

In his 80's Dr. Du Bois traveled widely throughout "the Communist

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World”—after passport restrictions were lifted. He received high honors in Peking and Moscow. But he did not join a Communist party until 1961, on the eve of his departure for Ghana. He announced that while he had never agreed with the full line of the American Communist Party he felt it was his duty to join because a drive was currently on against it. He signed his card, gave his library to his *alma mater*, Fisk, and headed for Africa to end his days. He began a distinctive African Communism which would emerge some day. In the meanwhile his hosts ignored his advice to abandon positive non-alignment and to lean more heavily toward the Eastern bloc.

## TO MOTHER AFRICA

Du Bois had once begun an *Encyclopedia of the Negro* and always felt that “the rug had been pulled out” from under him by philanthropic foundations which opposed his political position. Now Dr. Nkrumah offered him an opportunity to direct an *Encyclopedia Africana*. He took up residence in Ghana to do so. And he wrote occasionally on public affairs.

Any objective critic would probably conclude that the literary productions of the last quarter of Dr. Du Bois’ life were not up to the high standard of his earlier years, and that even his polemical work did not have the sparkle and erudition of the *Crisis* column, *As The Crow Flies*, or his editorials. The Du Bois of the 1960’s would have argued, however, that some of this work would live longer and be more influential than the earlier work, for he had broken down the barrier of communication between himself and “the masses,” because he was at last speaking to “the people.” I think that this was an illusion for though the idiom of his work had changed, the publications in which he wrote had a very restricted audience in Africa and America. What is more relevant is that Dr. Du Bois was now at peace with himself, had achieved a degree of integration he had never attained before, was doing what he really wanted to do, was saying what he really wanted to say—and was being praised for it instead of assailed. And influential leaders were using him as a symbol.

A long poem which frequently appears in the Ghana press illustrates the degree to which Du Bois was at peace with himself and his style had deteriorated—as compared for instance with the Litany:

I was a little boy at home with strangers —  
I liked my playmates and knew well  
Whence all their parents came . . . .

But my brown skin and closed curled hair was alien

I lived and grew, I worked and hoped,  
I planned and wandered, gripped and coped  
With every doubt but one that slept  
Yet clamored to awaken.

I became old, worn and grey;  
Along my hard and weary way  
Rolled War and Pestilence . . . .

There stirred a doubt: Were all dreams true?  
And what was Africa?

One cloudswept day a Seer appeared,  
All cloaked and veiled as me he hailed —  
And bade me make three journeys through the world

I went to Moscow; Ignorance grown wide  
taught me wisdom;  
I went to Peking; Poverty grown rich  
Showed me the wealth of Work.  
I came to Accra,

Here, at last, I looked back on my Dream;  
I heard the voice that loosed  
The long-locked dungeons of my soul —  
I sensed that Africa had come  
Not up from Hell, but from the sun of Heaven's  
glory —

I lifted up my eyes to Ghana  
And swept the Hills with high Hosanna;

I saw dropped down—this earth of crimson,  
green and gold  
Roaring with color, drums and song;  
Happy with dreams and deeds worth more than doing.

Around me velvet faces loomed  
Burnt by the kiss of everlasting suns  
Under great stars of midnight glory.

Trees danced and foliage sang  
The lillies Hallelujah rang  
Where . . . on golden stool

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Pour high libations to the sun  
And danced to gods. . . .

Yet Ghana shows its might and power  
Not in its color or its flower —  
But in its wondrous breath of soul  
Its joy of life, its selfless role  
Of giving. . . .

School and clinic, home and hall,  
Road and garden bloom and call —  
Socialism blossoms bold  
*On Communism centuries old . . . .*

I lifted my last voice and cried—  
I cried to heaven as I died—

“Oh turn me to the Golden Horde,  
Summon all Western nations toward the rising sun—  
From reeking West whose day is done  
Who stink and stagger in their dung  
Toward Africa, China, India’s strand  
Where Kenya and Himalaya stand  
And Nile and Yangtse roll—  
Turn every yearning face of man.

Come with us, dark America!  
The scum of Europe batted here  
And drowned a dream  
Made fetid swamp a refuge seem—  
Enslaved the Black and killed the Red  
And armed the rich to loot the Dead—  
Worshipped the whores of Hollywood  
Where once the Virgin Mary stood  
And lynched the Christ. . . .

Awake, awake, O sleeping world,  
Honour the sun;  
Worship the stars, those vaster suns  
Who rule the night  
Where black is bright  
And all unselfish work is right  
And greed is sin.



The wheel had come full circle. In 1903, in *The Souls of Black Folk* he had written "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." He had attended the Universal Races Congress in London in 1911 and dreamed for awhile of a color-blind Parliament of Man. He had, for a brief time thought that economic solidarity would dissolve the barriers of race among the working class. But in the end he returned to his original conception of the "special gifts of black folk"—Negro Messianism—it was Black Men who out of their suffering would be purified and would purify the world. He died in Ghana clinging to the dream. Rudwick in his critical analysis of Du Bois' ideas notes that "the world may someday witness his concept of a 'common consciousness among India, Africa, China, Egypt and Japan.' When he promulgated the idea over forty years ago, it seemed preposterous and there was no evidence suggesting its possibility. And yet in 1955, the Asian-African Conference convened in Bandung with twenty-nine governments represented . . . Du Bois foresaw the awakening of Africa . . . the continent is stirring, and, as time passes, Du Bois may well become beatified as a saint in the new Africa."

It was Dr. Du Bois' life-fate to evolve into a black socialist in white capitalist America during the Epoch of the Cold War. America will not beatify him. But in the end, when the Cold War is forgotten, this country may well say of him what he said of his hero when he died, the venerable black Episcopalian clergyman, Alexander Crummel. When Crummel died, Du Bois wrote these words:

And now that he is gone, I sweep the Veil away and cry, Lo! to the soul to whose dear memory I bring this tribute . . . He did his work,—he did it nobly and well . . . In another age he might have sat among the elders of the land in purple-bordered toga; in another country mothers might have sung him to the cradles.

In assessing the life and work of this amazing man, I have always taken my cue from the advice he gave the readers of *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903:

I pray you then receive my little book in all charity, studying my words with me, forgiving mistake and foible for the sake of the faith and passion that is in me, and seeking the grain of truth hidden there.

Applied to his life as well as to the book, this attitude places Dr. Du Bois in proper historical perspective. The significance of Du Bois was a "life experimentally lived and self-documented."