



European journal of American studies Reviews 2017-3

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Adam Burns



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12343>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Adam Burns, « Chandler, Nahum Dimitri, editor. *Du Bois, W. E. B. The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2017-3, Online since 29 November 2017, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12343>

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

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- 1 Chandler, Nahum Dimitri, editor. *Du Bois, W. E. B. The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays*.
- 2 New York: Fordham University Press, 2015, pp. 400.
- 3 Adam Burns
- 4 Nahum Chandler has dedicated many years to studying the works of one of the twentieth century's foremost thinkers, W. E. B. Du Bois – something illustrated both in this volume and in his recent monograph, *X – The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (Fordham UP, 2014). Chandler, an intellectual and literary historian currently at the University of California, Irvine, regards Du Bois as first and foremost a ‘thinker whose practice was writing,’ something which he amply demonstrates in this assemblage of Du Bois’s early essays.¹
- 5 The collection under review here focuses upon the period c.1894-1906, representing the determinative years of the man who would go on to lead the Niagara Movement (1905-1910) to advance black rights in the United States, and play a major role in the formation of its successor movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (c.1909-present). As much of Du Bois’s work is already widely disseminated, this review focuses on the nature of the edited collection, rather than the content of Du Bois’s individual essays themselves – a number of which have appeared elsewhere (even if not in exactly the same format).
- 6 Made up of twelve essays (and one substantial appendix), Chandler’s volume emphasises the period which he sees as the ‘intellectual maturation’ (1) of Du Bois, bringing together

works that are readily available online, such as “The Talented Tenth” (1903), with other lesser-known essays, like “The Afro-American” (c.1894). As such, it serves as a manageable and affordable introduction to Du Bois’s thought in this period in a way that the more comprehensive multi-volume collections of Herbert Aptheker perhaps do not. It also provides, as Chandler intended, a look into the intellectual origins – or ‘prehistory’ (8) – of Du Bois’s most famous work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

- 7 Prior to the foundation of the NAACP, the most influential African American of the *fin-de-siècle* period was the educator Booker T. Washington, who advocated vocational training as the most effective route to a gradual improvement in the lot of the average black American. By presenting Du Bois’s work across the period of Washington’s pre-eminence, Chandler allows readers the scope to trace the increasing dissonance between the more accommodationist stance of Washington and the increasingly “radical” Du Bois. However, it is Du Bois’s overall intellectual journey, rather than a specific narrative, that Chandler wishes the reader to glean from this collection.
- 8 To achieve Chandler’s vision, the essays are presented in a somewhat purist manner – in totality and in chronological order – leaving readers to deduce motifs, rather than these being highlighted by the editor’s own curation. Nevertheless, Chandler does not simply reprint the essays, which are foregrounded in a lengthy introduction and further elucidated by substantial endnotes at the end of each essay. The introduction explains in detail both Chandler’s editorial approach and the volume’s position within the historiographical landscape. It also outlines some of the themes that are ultimately eschewed in the way the essays are presented afterwards, such as the development of the oft-quoted (and titular) term “color line” and the global nature of Du Bois’s vision. The presentation of the essays that follow does, as Chandler intends, reveal the complex workings of a great intellect and allows one to engage deeply with the development of his thinking.
- 9 Chandler’s volume is certainly a valuable collection – however, it is a book that does not fully embrace the wider audience it deserves. The introduction, for example, seems to speak almost exclusively to the editor’s peers, providing a level of detail – in a densely academic style – that might alienate ‘the beginning student’ (20) to whom Chandler reaches out. From the point of view of a potentially large undergraduate audience, the lack of short editorial introductions to each essay in turn, and – more tellingly – the absence of a substantial index (here only a short list of names), might serve to limit accessibility for those new to Du Bois. Overall, this volume suits more advanced scholars of Du Bois, and of intellectual history more generally, providing a significant addition to the number of edited collections of Du Bois’s work that already exist.

NOTES

- i. Nahum D. Chandler, “The Figure of W. E. B. Du Bois as a Problem for Thought,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, 3 (Winter 2006), 31.