

April 2007

# Racing the Archive: Will the Real William DuBois Please Stand Up?

Shannon Rose Riley

San Jose State University, [ShannonRose.Riley@sjsu.edu](mailto:ShannonRose.Riley@sjsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/humanities\\_pub](https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/humanities_pub)



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Shannon Rose Riley. "Racing the Archive: Will the Real William DuBois Please Stand Up?" *English Language Notes (ELN)* (2007): 103-110.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Humanities at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).

# RACING THE ARCHIVE: WILL THE REAL WILLIAM DUBOIS PLEASE STAND UP?

---

SHANNON ROSE RILEY

**T**he 1938 Federal Theatre Project play *Haiti* has been repeatedly misattributed to the famous black scholar W. E. B. Du Bois; however, white *New York Times* journalist William DuBois is the author of the work.<sup>1</sup> The play's contemporaries were aware that the white DuBois authored the work;<sup>2</sup> however, at several points in the last few decades the mistake has been made—and it appears to occur predominantly at the level of the archive. The Library of Congress, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, other prominent archives including the British Library, and several individual scholars have made the misattribution. To be sure, many of the scholars who study the play attribute the work correctly to the white DuBois, but none seem to be aware of the misattribution.<sup>3</sup> If they are, they have not documented it or theorized its implications.

My goal here is to prove my claim and in so doing to call attention to the way the misattributed play performs “blackness” in the national archive and mediates the production of a phantom body of knowledge that integrates the play into W. E. B. Du Bois’s theories of theatre and of race. I argue that this remarkable misattribution reveals a racialized logic at work in the national archive—one that assumes that the black Du Bois must have authored the play because it narrates the founding revolution of the Black Republic and was staged by a black theatrical unit.<sup>4</sup> This demonstrates that the archive organizes knowledge according to the logic of the national imaginary even as it constitutes part of what is said or imagined about the nation. In this sense, the national archive is a collection of the commonly known, already said, and rehearsed; it offers a kind of restored or surrogate knowledge that mediates the national imaginary.

Looking at the misattribution in this way facilitates an understanding of the ways that archives are sites for the mediation of race and nation. It reveals racialized meanings, values, and ideologies at work in the national imaginary, as well as the propensity within the archive to repeat and reproduce rehearsed national narratives and racial logics. This misattribution, and my tracing of it, also demonstrates that the archive is not so much a repository of artifacts or secure knowledge as it is lived and performed through acts of collecting and cataloging, as well as racing, erasing, and research. As such, this essay will partly perform my discovery of the misattribution. I will begin with a summary of the play’s genealogy, drawing substantially from historical reviews and interviews to support my claims.

### **A Brief History of *Haiti***

In 1917 or 1918—just a couple of years into the lengthy U.S. occupation of Haiti<sup>5</sup>—a young white boy from Florida wrote a play called *Haiti*.<sup>6</sup> The play, set in 1802, tells the story of the final turning point in the twelve-year-long Haitian revolution—Napoleon has sent more troops to reclaim the former colony of St. Domingue from rebelling black slaves and disenfranchised mulattos but is soon to be defeated. The original script, now lost, took up the theme of “the tragic demise of the French” rather than black independence.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, in an article written around the time of the play’s production, the playwright notes that numerous white Broadway producers rejected the original script, and it was not until 1938 that the Harlem Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) first staged it.<sup>8</sup> As the story goes, black director Maurice Clark revised DuBois’s script—particularly the final scene where black and mulatto Haitians defeat Bonaparte’s army.<sup>9</sup> The revision was necessary in order to shift the theme from the tragic loss of the French colony to “the underlying dramatic story of the struggle for racial identity and self-determination for black Haiti.”<sup>10</sup> According to Clark, the white DuBois was “a real southern Cracker,”<sup>11</sup> and the original script had been “about miscegenation, which excited him terribly.”<sup>12</sup> Clark describes how DuBois had agreed to the proposed revisions on the single condition that no black and white hands touch on stage during the production.<sup>13</sup> Despite this request, a “half-white, half-Negro cast” took their first bows holding hands before a wildly enthusiastic, “half-white, half-Negro audience” on March 2, 1938.<sup>14</sup>

The play became one of the most popular productions ever staged by the Negro Unit, with more than 74,000 audience members in Harlem alone,<sup>15</sup> and Random House published the revised script in a 1938 collection of FTP plays.<sup>16</sup> In the introduction, then-national director of the FTP, Hallie Flanagan, states, “William DuBois’s *Haiti* represents our Negro theatre.”<sup>17</sup> Flanagan’s comments already mark the play’s blackness in the national imaginary and may partly set the stage for the racialized misattribution that is to follow in the archive. To be sure, the historical reviews make it clear that the work presented a powerful image of revolutionary blackness to black and white audience members alike in the context of 1930s Harlem and the U.S. occupation of Haiti.

### **Staging the Scene of Misattribution**

While conducting research on the play, I found several inconsistencies in the Library of Congress (LOC) archive. Although the historical reviews and commentaries clearly attribute the work to the white DuBois, the LOC attributes at least one work of dramatic literature and several theatrical posters with the same date and title to W. E. B. Du Bois. Specifically, the online catalog lists four citations related to the play. Two refer to graphic materials from the various 1938 FTP productions: the first attributes the work to William DuBois and the second to both William and W. E. B., taking them for the same author. The other two citations in the LOC catalog refer to works of dramatic literature titled *Haiti*, and both are attributed to W. E. B. Du Bois—one is a French translation published in 1983 and the other is the 1938 Random House collection.<sup>18</sup>

Trusting the accuracy of the historical reviews and commentaries, I knew that the W. E. B. citations were either incorrect or that they referred to different works with the same title. The next step was to double-check the author attributions as they appeared on hard copies of the Random House collection and the French translation and to compare the texts to determine if they were the same play, somewhat lost in translation.<sup>19</sup>

A physical comparison of the two books revealed that the 1938 publication by Random House does not attribute the work to W. E. B. Du Bois as the LOC catalog indicates, but rather to William DuBois on both the title and contents pages, proving that the catalog citation is mistaken. The French translation, however, attributes the work somewhat inconsistently: to "W. B. Du Bois" on the cover, "William Du Bois" [sic] on the title page, and to "William Burghardt Du Bois" in the introduction. A quick check of the translator's source material proved beyond doubt that the original work was the 1938 FTP script, which had been archived by Lorraine Brown and John O'Connor at George Mason University.<sup>20</sup> The translator confirms this herself when she states, "Origine du texte sur lequel a été faite la traduction: Federal Theatre Project Records, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia."<sup>21</sup> A scene-by-scene comparison of the 1938 collection and the French translation further verified they are the same.

Nothing in the FTP archives at George Mason and Princeton Universities or in the Hallie Flanagan Papers at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection supports the attribution to W. E. B. Du Bois. Quite the opposite, everything points to the white DuBois. The library catalog at George Mason University correctly attributes the work to William DuBois, as do FTP archivists O'Connor and Brown. Further, the script archived at George Mason<sup>22</sup> matches the Random House publication in all but a few changes to the stage directions. To remove any doubt, an obituary for the white DuBois reads,

William DuBois, a playwright, novelist and longtime editor for the *New York Times Book Review*, died on Sunday at his home in Farmington, Conn. He was 93. Mr. DuBois had several plays produced on Broadway [. . .]. [His] play, "Haiti," was produced by the Federal Theater Project and opened in Harlem in 1938. [. . .] Mr. DuBois was born in St. Augustine, Fla., in 1903.<sup>23</sup>

This proves that there are two misattributions of *Haiti* at work in the LOC catalog. One is embedded in the French translation and the other occurs at the level of the library catalog regarding the entries for the 1938 Random House publication and the memorabilia from the FTP productions.

In an ongoing constellation of misfires, these two types of misattributions (the kind embedded in a text and the kind found in a library catalog) become the source for other misattributions. Serving as the national archive and "reference source for members of Congress and other officers of the government,"<sup>24</sup> the LOC legitimizes the misattribution, guaranteeing its place in the construction, mediation, and dissemination of knowledge and the national imaginary. The American Memory collection at the LOC also houses another portion of

the Federal Theatre Project records, and thus presents itself as an expert source.<sup>25</sup> It is also likely that the Schomburg Center, as part of a state library system, copied the misattribution directly from the national source: Like the LOC, the Schomburg online catalog mistakenly credits W. E. B. Du Bois for a poster from one of the FTP productions as well as the Random House publication. The Schomburg also cites the French translation, with its embedded misattribution.<sup>26</sup>

Further, the LOC and the Schomburg are not alone. The misattribution of the 1938 Random House publication is quickly found in other major libraries, such as the collection of African American History and Life: 1877–1954 in the British Library,<sup>27</sup> and in WorldCat,<sup>28</sup> which describes itself as “the world’s largest network of library content and services.”<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, a search of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France produces a citation for the French translation.<sup>30</sup> If we accept what the British Library advertises—that it is an archive of “the world’s knowledge”<sup>31</sup>—and if we accept that WorldCat is the largest global library network, then we must admit that the Du Bois misattribution is actively at work in the global archive/global imaginary and is more than a national problem.

### **Rehearsing the Archive: Phantom Bodies of Knowledge, Race, and the Nation-State**

It is impossible to determine the source of these various misattributions. Were they cited directly from the LOC? Or did each collection reimagine *Haiti*’s blackness in the act of cataloging? Nor do we know when this series of misattributions began. To be fair, the misattribution has a seductive logic. According to the U.S. racial model, based on one-drop standards,<sup>32</sup> it makes some sense that a play about the first black republic staged by black actors would be written by a black author who had theorized a revolutionary black theatre—a man who was one of the most important leaders in the early twentieth-century civil rights movement. Given the uncanny similarity of the two names in question, and the propensity in the archive to reproduce the commonly known and already said, confusion may have been inevitable.

Nonetheless, we should not dismiss the misattribution too readily. We should not take for granted the kind of racialized or rehearsed logic that permits the error, nor should we dismiss the impacts of this misattribution on the mediation of a racialized national imaginary and the production of black knowledge. At least two of the primary sites of archival misattribution—the Schomburg and the African American collection at the British Library—claim to be repositories of black knowledge. The misattribution at work in these two archives, when taken together with the growing scholarship on the play *Haiti* by W. E. B. Du Bois—a play that does not exist—constitutes a significant body of knowledge that is partly the product of a racialized fantasy and binary racial logics. The introduction to the French translation, for example, locates the play within W. E. B.’s theory of black theatre, and two recent dissertations reinscribe the misattribution, framing the play in somewhat similar terms.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, proof of the misattribution poses significant questions about the scholarship on

the play that is invoked in the name of W. E. B. Du Bois: a phantom body of knowledge that mediates a particularly racialized national imaginary.

Let me be clear that my point is not to find fault with any individual scholar or archive. Nor is it necessarily to suggest that the play is any less a work of black cultural production or any less a part of black knowledge because a white man wrote it. The misattribution is not so much the fault of individual scholars as it is an example of a racialized imaginary at work in the archive, and this is an important distinction to make, having very different consequences. If the misattribution is only the result of poor scholarship, we miss the opportunity to examine the workings of race in the archive. More importantly, the ease with which this misattribution is repeatedly made, and made anew, prescribes a reading of the play that erases any trace of the complexity of the collaborative project between the black director and the white playwright. To articulate the play as a kind of purely black text prevents us from having the more complicated, even frustrating conversation about the complexity of racial dynamics actually at work in the script, on stage, in the audience at the live performances, and in U.S. culture in the 1930s. The misattribution erases the racial and ideological complexities of the text—from its white, allegedly antimiscegenist origins, through its black re-vision, to the radicality of its racially mixed theatrical productions in 1930s Harlem in the larger context of the U.S. military occupation of Haiti.

What is most significant is the usefulness of the realization that the play's contemporaries knew the author's identity, and that the power of national race narrative has reduced the racial complexity of the play's genealogy over time by means of archival strategies. The racially mixed genealogy—the collaboration between the white antimiscegenist playwright and the black director, the mixed cast, and so on—complicates discrete notions of racial identification in ways that have far-reaching effects, the least of which includes dilemmas over how to historicize the play itself. Is it a work of "black drama" if it is written by a white playwright, performed by a mixed cast of actors, and staged by a black director for a mixed, if predominantly black, audience? How does the play's mixed genealogy affect how we continue to think of the body of knowledge called "black drama"? Perhaps more importantly, in the containment achieved by the rigid black/white binary, we lose an understanding of racial performances—on stage and in everyday life—that do not fit easily into U.S. racial categories. Derrida argues that "there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory,"<sup>34</sup> and to the extent that the LOC is a national archive that mediates part of the national imaginary, the Du Bois misattribution erases the complexities of the interracial FTP production from U.S. memory.<sup>35</sup>

It is not possible to correct this misattribution—and perhaps not desirable. Andrea L. Foster argues for the importance of leaving the archive record intact and clearly documenting any statements of retraction or correction. Foster is speaking specifically about the problem of the erasure of electronic documents from the Elsevier Science online archive after they came under scrutiny, but the same should apply to the archive in general.<sup>36</sup> The LOC, the Schomburg, the British Library, and so on, should not simply erase the misattribution from

their catalogs, but should amend the citation with documented statements of correction so that the misattribution itself becomes part of the history of the play, the archive, and the national imaginary.

Nonetheless, even with documented amendments, the contingent nature of the archive and its tendency to classify according to restored knowledge suggests that W. E. B. Du Bois will continue to haunt *Haiti*, and vice versa. The misattribution embeds in the archive and threatens to appear again, whether based on the citation of previous misattributions or on the racialized logic that permits the error in the first place, in a process of repetition and miscitation that I refer to as the performativity of race in the archive. Further, should the archive be amended, the Du Bois misattribution will persist in copies of the already published French translation and in various repertoires of black knowledge. Diana Taylor positions the repertoire in a dialectical relation to the archive. For Taylor, the myth of the archive is that it is unmediated and that it resists change and political manipulation. Repertoires, on the other hand, do not make any such claim. Rather, they keep and transform bodies of knowledge, or what Taylor calls "choreographies of meaning."<sup>37</sup> They generate, record, and transmit this knowledge through embodied and performed acts. The Du Bois misattribution can thus be found also in repertoires of black knowledge: in lectures in university courses, in past and future student papers, in conversations, in unpublished theses, in the imaginations of past and future readers of the French translation, and so on.

To conclude, one of the quotations cited in the *OED* entry for the term *misattribution* includes the statement, "This misattribution can hardly be a trick of the memory."<sup>38</sup> I extrapolate that the Du Bois misattribution is hardly a trick of the LOC's "American Memory." Rather, the lapse in memory of the national archive indicates the ongoing reclassification and reordering of knowledge according to too-tidy racial categories. National archives, rather than being static unmediated collections, continue to change, alter, and perform, often according to previously rehearsed knowledge and the politics of race in the national imaginary.

Shannon Rose Riley  
Saint Mary's College

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I spell "W. E. B. Du Bois" with a space between "Du" and "Bois," and "William DuBois" without the space, but with double capitalization. The spelling for the former is common, and the spelling for the latter follows the William DuBois collection at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University. I maintain original spellings in all citations, using [sic] to show alternates.

<sup>2</sup> Reviews of the 1938 production correctly attribute the work to the white journalist. See particularly Brooks Atkinson, "The Play: William Du Bois's [sic] 'Haiti' Opens in Harlem — 'There's Always a Breeze' Opens Downtown," *New York Times* 3 March 1938; and Howard Barnes, "'Haiti' Play by William Du Bois [sic] Produced in Harlem," *Herald Tribune* 3 March 1938. Historical clippings are from the Hallie Flanagan Papers (Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York: NYPL Library for the Performing Arts).

<sup>3</sup> Mary Renda, Glenda Gill, VèVè Clark, and FTP archivists John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown attribute the work correctly to the white playwright. See Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001) 286; Glenda Eloise Gill, *White Grease Paint on Black Performers: A Study of the Federal Theatre, 1935–39* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988) 97; VèVè A. Clark, "Haiti's Tragic Overture: (Mis)Representations of the Haitian Revolution in World Drama (1796–1975)," *Representing the French Revolution: Literature, Historiography and Art*, ed. James Heffernan (Hanover: UP of New England, 1992) 255; and John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, eds., *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project* (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Books, 1978) 117.

<sup>4</sup> Haiti formed the first black republic in the world.

<sup>5</sup> The United States occupied Haiti between 1915 and 1934, with extended economic control through 1940.

<sup>6</sup> Renda dates the play to 1917; Clark sets it to 1918. Renda 286; Clark 255.

<sup>7</sup> Renda 286.

<sup>8</sup> William DuBois, "Thanks to the Federal Theatre," *New York Times* 20 March 1938: 150.

<sup>9</sup> O'Connor and Brown 117; Renda 286.

<sup>10</sup> O'Connor and Brown 117.

<sup>11</sup> The term "cracker" originally signified someone who lies, but not long after the Civil War came to signify someone poor and white, particularly from Georgia or Florida. See *OED Online*, 2007, Oxford English Dictionary, 22 Mar. 2007 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Clark, quoted in O'Connor and Brown 119.

<sup>13</sup> O'Connor and Brown 119.

<sup>14</sup> "Review of 'Haiti,'" *Time* 31.10 (1938): 34.

<sup>15</sup> "Haiti' Viewed by 74,000," *Daily Mirror* 22 May 1938, Hallie Flanagan Papers. The play also traveled to Boston.

<sup>16</sup> William DuBois, "Haiti," eds. Pierre de Rohan and U.S. Federal Theatre Project, *Federal Theatre Plays* (New York: Random House, 1938) 3–80.

<sup>17</sup> Hallie Flanagan, introduction, *Federal Theatre Plays* xi.

<sup>18</sup> *Library of Congress Online Catalog*, United States Library of Congress, 10 Dec. 2006 <<http://catalog.loc.gov/>>.

<sup>19</sup> W. B. Du Bois, *Haiti*, trans. Nicole Vincileoni (Abidjan: Editions CEDA, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> O'Connor, Brown, and LOC librarian John Cole discovered lost FTP archives in an airplane hanger and helped organize the material at George Mason University. See O'Connor and Brown, introduction, vii–viii.

<sup>21</sup> Nicole Vincileoni, "Notes a propos de la traduction," *Haiti*, by W. B. Du Bois 8.

<sup>22</sup> William Du Bois [sic], *Haiti* (National Service Bureau, 1938).

<sup>23</sup> "William DuBois, 93, Playwright and Editor," *New York Times*, 19 March 1997, late-final ed.: B11. Copyright © 1997 by The New York Times Co. Reprinted with permission.

<sup>24</sup> "Congress, Library of," *Britannica Online*, 2006, Encyclopædia Britannica, 14 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9025862>>.

<sup>25</sup> *American Memory Collection*, 2005, United States Library of Congress, 10 Aug. 2005 <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>>.

<sup>26</sup> *Catalog of the Schomburg Center*, 2006, New York Public Library, 10 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/sc.html>>.



- <sup>27</sup> Jean Kemble, "African American History and Life: 1877–1954: A Selective Guide to Materials in the British Library," *The British Library Online Catalog*, 2006, The British Library, 10 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.bl.uk/collections/americas/afamhl.html>>.
- <sup>28</sup> *WorldCat*, 2006, OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., 10 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.worldcat.org/>>.
- <sup>29</sup> "What is WorldCat?" *WorldCat*, 2006, OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., 10 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.worldcat.org/whatis/default.jsp>>.
- <sup>30</sup> *Catalogue Bn-Opale Plus*, 2006, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 10 Dec. 2006 <<http://catalogue.bnf.fr>>.
- <sup>31</sup> *The British Library Online Catalog*, 2006, The British Library, 10 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.bl.uk/>>.
- <sup>32</sup> The United States constructs racial difference along a black/white axis, traceable to "one-drop" rules of the slaveholding South. In an economy based on slave labor, the rule was an effective tool for maintaining the largest possible workforce: one drop of black blood marked one a slave. After Emancipation, Jim Crow devices maintained the one-drop rule and the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) renewed the binary model of racialization.
- <sup>33</sup> Kennedy Miller Schultz, *Haitian H/(h)istories: Representations of Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution in the Plays of Glissant, Césaire and Dadié*, diss., U of Wisconsin, Madison, 2000 (UMI, 2000), 61–3, 126, 260; Suzanne Jacqueline Spoor, *Searching for a Black Republic: The Textual Invention of Haiti by U.S. Black Artists in the 1930s*, diss., U of Maryland, College Park, 1999 (UMI, 1999), 156–57, 322–23, 352. Schultz cites the French translation as source and Spoor perhaps copies the misattribution of the 1938 Random House publication from the LOC.
- <sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998) 4, n.1.
- <sup>35</sup> I take up an extended analysis of the racially mixed genealogy of this play and the implications of the misattribution in a chapter of my current book project, *Performing Race and Erasure: Cuba and Haiti in U.S. National Culture*.
- <sup>36</sup> Andrea L. Foster, "Elsevier Announces New Procedures for Retracting Online Articles," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 28 Feb. 2003: A35.
- <sup>37</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003) 20.
- <sup>38</sup> "Misattribution," *OED Online*, 2007, Oxford English Dictionary, 22 Mar. 2007 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>. The citation is originally from a 1941 philosophy resource.

Copyright of English Language Notes is the property of University of Colorado Dept. of English and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.