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Black Feminists and Du Bois: Respectability, Protection, and Beyond

By FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN

ABSTRACT: Throughout his life, W.E.B. Du Bois was an advocate for black women. However, in his article of 1898, "The Study of the Negro Problems," he posits a model of the intellectuals, the investigators who analyze Negro problems, as male. In other writings, the most important being "The Damnation of Women," Du Bois focuses his attention on black women as mothers, workers, and activists but not as intellectuals. This is why contemporary black feminist intellectuals continue to claim him as an important ancestor even as they critique some of his failures around gender. The author's research attempts to enhance and extend the intellectual agendas Du Bois set in motion by being attentive to both gender and race.

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MORE than any other African American thinker of his time or before, W.E.B. Du Bois devoted a great deal of his attention to the condition of black women specifically and distinct from black men. That attention is not apparent in his article “The Study of the Negro Problems.” One assumes he includes black women under the rubric of Negro, though his analysis of “Negro problems” is articulated in masculinist language: “these problems that we are . . . facing . . . will survive to curse the nation, unless we grapple with them manfully and intelligently” (Du Bois 1898, 6). The intellectuals, the investigators, the people who analyze Negro problems are male. This, of course, simply means that Du Bois is speaking the language of his time. Gender as a category of analysis did not exist until the latter part of the last century.¹

In this article, I outline the way some contemporary black feminist intellectuals write about Du Bois and then offer a brief discursive analysis of his most important writings on black women. In the last section of the article, I use my own research as a means of demonstrating one way black feminist scholarship might enhance and extend the intellectual agendas Du Bois set in motion.

BLACK FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON DU BOIS

For the most part, black feminist intellectuals acknowledge Du Bois’s sexism in his personal life (specifically his treatment of his daughter), but many of them also applaud his efforts on behalf of black women and claim him as an intellectual ancestor. Beverly Guy-Sheftall has named him as one of the founding parents of the discipline of black women’s studies.

Guy-Sheftall takes the title of her study, Daughters of Sorrow, from Du Bois’s essay “The Damnation of Women.” To situate him in the context of his time, Guy-Sheftall cites Du Bois’s fight with Monroe Trotter over admitting women into the Niagara Movement and notes that Du Bois later helped to organize the women’s auxiliary. Guy-Sheftall does recognize Du Bois’s “idealized image of black women, much in the same way that southern white men paid homage to the shrine of womanhood.” This idealized image “reveals the extent to which black men subscribed to the notion that since women are the weaker sex they must be protected by their men from the evils of the world” (Guy-Sheftall 1990, 161).

More recently, Claudia Tate, in Psychoanalysis and Black Novels, also notes that Du Bois was an exception among black intellectuals. As with Guy-Sheftall, Tate notes Du Bois’s “chivalric idealization of female sexuality” (Tate, 1998, 49).

In Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals, Joy James provides a framework for understanding Du Bois’s “profeminism” as well as his “masculinism.” Hers is one of the most complex analyses of Du Bois’s gender politics: “Since masculinism does not explicitly advocate male superiority or rigid gender roles, it is not identical to patriarchal ideology. Masculinism can share patriarchy’s
presupposition of the male as normative without anti-female politics and rhetoric.” James explains that, “without misogynist dogma,” Du Bois naturalized black male intellectual dominance (James 1997, 35). At the same time that Du Bois advocated women’s rights, he “veiled the individual achievements of women such as [Anna Julia] Cooper and [Ida Wells] Barnett from the political landscape” (37). Furthermore, Du Bois had troublesome relationships with independent black women activists.

The most critical voice among contemporary black feminists to wrestle with Du Bois, black British critic Hazel Carby, extends James’s critique. In Race Men, Carby initiates an extended critical discussion of the work of black male artists and intellectuals, and she posits the ways that the black intellectual tradition has been constructed as masculine. In a chapter that is as much a critique of Cornel West as it is of Du Bois, Carby argues that Du Bois’s complete failure to imagine black women as intellectuals and race leaders . . . [his] failure to incorporate black women into the sphere of intellectual equality . . . is not merely the result of the sexism of Du Bois’s historical moment . . . it is a conceptual and political failure of imagination that remains a characteristic of the work of contemporary African American male intellectuals. (Carby 1998, 10)

In contrast to Guy-Sheftall and Tate, for Carby “there is, unfortunately, no simple correspondence between anyone’s support for female equality and the ideological effect of the gendered structures of thought and feeling at work in any text one might write and publish” (Carby 1998, 12). Carby’s focus on ideology and on Raymond Williams’s concept of “structures of feeling” move her critique beyond the “intent” of an individual author. Structures of feeling are described by Tony Bennett as “a shared set of ways of thinking and feeling which, displaying a patterned regularity, form and are formed by the ‘whole way of life’ which comprises the ‘lived culture’ of a particular epoch, class or group” (quoted in Turner 1990, 57). Interestingly, in turning to Williams, Carby utilizes paradigms of a male intellectual who was certainly far less attentive to black women as thinkers or subjects of history than was Du Bois.

Carby goes on to assert that her critique of Du Bois is necessary in order to “struggle to be critically aware of the ways in which ideologies of gender have undermined . . . the past and continue to do so in the present” (Carby 1998, 33).²

DU BOIS ON THE DISTINCT PROBLEMS FACING BLACK WOMEN

I imagine Du Bois might have been taken aback at the vehemence of Carby’s critique of his sexism, for he most certainly would have believed himself to be a champion of black women and progressive on issues of importance to their advancement. Certainly, Du Bois was sexist, just as he was elitist and “color-struck.” Were he not, he would have been even more unique among his contemporaries. For instance, although critics such as Carby have argued that early black authors
chose to privilege biracial characters in their fiction because such characters served as mediators and as persons embodying the absurdity of race purity, I have never lost sight of the fact that most of the authors of these texts believed fairer-skinned black people to possess more beauty, intelligence, and worth than those of a darker hue. This is in no way to diminish their commitment to racial uplift and justice, but instead to demonstrate their contradictions and their own internalization of the very ideologies against which they fought. Under these circumstances, we might consider how Du Bois advanced our understanding of the oppression of black women even as we are critically aware of his limitations.

W.E.B. Du Bois’s arguments on behalf of black women are most apparent in four works: the poem “The Burden of Black Womanhood” (1907) and the essays “The Black Mother” (1912), “Hail Columbia” (1913), and “The Damnation of Women” (1920). Of these, I focus briefly on “The Damnation of Women.” Du Bois opens the essay with a description of four women of his boyhood: his widowed mother; his beautiful cousin Inez; Emma, the victim of a sexual double standard; and Ide Fuller, the outcast. These four women represent the limitations American society places on women when denying them social, political, and economic freedom. Of them Du Bois writes, “They existed not for themselves, but for men; they were named after the men to whom they were related and not after the fashion of their own souls.”

Du Bois launches a critique of inhibitions to the development of women’s intellect and leadership:

Only at the sacrifice of intelligence and the chance to do their best work can the majority of modern women bear children. This is the damnation of women. . . . All womanhood is hampered today because the world on which it is emerging is a world that tries to worship both virgins and mothers and in the end despises motherhood and despoils virgins. (Du Bois 1995, 300)

He does not critique the false divisions between the Madonnas and virgins (and I would add whores) but instead focuses on the contradictory impulses of desiring one icon while despising the other, and consequently leaving no space for real, human women.

In the final analysis, Du Bois argues, “The future woman must have a life work and economic independence. She must have knowledge. She must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion” (1995, 300). This paragraph holds within it the seeds of what emerges decades later as a feminist politics: women must have access to educational and economic opportunity free of their relationships to husbands, fathers, and brothers.

Interestingly, where others have found the seeds of an emasculating black matriarchy, Du Bois applauds the emergence of economically independent black women. Furthermore, he asserts the necessity of women’s control over their reproduction. Finally, there is an emerging critique of the “promise of protection,” which I will discuss in detail later. He writes,
“Not by guarding the weak in weakness do we gain strength, but by making weakness free and strong” (1995, 300). This is as progressive a stance on black women to emerge from the pen of a black man since Frederick Douglass. It echoes the demands of feminists such as Anna Julia Cooper and Margaret Sanger. In fact, it is doubtful that even black women thinkers were as explicit in their demands. For the most part, it is only in the context of veiled allusions in their fiction that black women writers and thinkers of the time approach any discussion of sexuality and birth control.

Du Bois situates the contemporary condition of black women in the historical context of slavery, where they had no protection from the abuses and exploitation of their masters. However, he not only focuses on the victimization of black women during slavery, but he also notes their agency as well by citing women such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Although the turn to black women’s agency is an early contribution to black feminist revisions of African American history, Du Bois’s delineation of black female types is somewhat disturbing because of its implied class and color politics. While hailing the courage and contributions of Tubman and Truth, he writes of them:

Such strong, primitive types of Negro womanhood in America seem to exhaust its capabilities. They know less of a not more worth, but a finer type of black woman wherein trembles all of that delicate sense of beauty and striving for self realization which is as characteristic of the Negro soul as its quaint strength and sweet laughter. (Du Bois 1995, 307)

In other words, America thinks that these “primitive” types are the best the race has to offer, but they know nothing of those delicate ladies of beauty and refinement. The perfect examples of this type of womanhood of beauty and intelligence he gives in the following: “Mary Shadd . . . was tall and slim . . . of that ravishing dream born beauty, that twilight of the races which we call mulatto. Well educated, vivacious, with determination shining from her sharp eyes, she threw herself single-handed into the great Canadian pilgrimage” (Du Bois 1995, 307). For a full three sentences prior to stating her contribution to the black freedom struggle, he writes of Shadd’s appearance, her beauty, her color. He describes Louise De Mortie as “a free born Virginia girl . . . her high forehead, swelling lips and dark eyes marked her for a woman of feeling and intellect” (307-8). Her looks are what mark her intellect. In contrast, he describes Sojourner Truth as “a tall, gaunt black unsmiling sibyl, weighted with the woe of the world” (306).

Now, oddly enough, Du Bois moves from this focus on the physical attributes of the representative women of the race to launch into a critique of the white world for caring only about the way a woman looks:

When in this world a man comes forward with a thought, a deed, a vision we ask not, how does he look, but what is his message? . . . This which is axiomatic among men, has been in past ages but partially true if the messenger was a
woman. The world still wants to ask that a woman primarily be pretty and if she is not, the mob . . . asks querulously what are women for. (Du Bois 1995, 310)

In contrast, Du Bois claims black people have respect for women's attributes beyond their physical appearance:

Their sturdier minds have concluded that if a woman be clean, healthy and educated, she is as pleasing as God wills and far more useful than most of her sisters. If in addition to this she is pink and white and straight haired and some of her fellow men prefer this, well and good; but if she is black or brown and crowned in curled mist (and this to us is the most beautiful thing on earth), this is surely the flimsiest excuse for spiritual incarceration or banishment. (Du Bois 1995, 310)

Du Bois acknowledges that some black men judge black women by a white standard of beauty, but he is quick to claim he is not one of them. Nonetheless, he asserts that even those women not considered pleasing to the eye are not condemned. He writes, "for black women . . . 'Handsome is as handsome does' and they are asked to be no more beautiful than God made them, but they are asked to be efficient, to be strong, fertile, muscled, and able to work" (Du Bois 1995, 310).

Significantly, he closes the essay with a chivalric tribute to and assertion of the beauty and femininity of black women:

Their beauty,—their dark and mysterious beauty of midnight eyes, crumpled hair, and soft, full-feature faces—is perhaps more to me than it is to you, because I was born to its warm and subtle spell; but their worth is yours as well as mine. No other woman on earth could have emerged from the hell of force and temptation which once engulfed and still surrounds black women in America with half the modesty and womanliness that they retain. I have known the women of many lands and nations, I have known and seen and lived beside them, but none have I known more sweetly feminine, more unwaveringly loyal, more desperately earnest, and more instinctively pure in body and in soul than the daughters of my black mothers. (Du Bois 1995, 311-12)

The irony of this passage, and for the essay as a whole, is that, while he argues for women's freedom, he occupies many of the stances of which he is critical. He is caught in a bind that many feminists, black and white, later find themselves in. Do we argue for the rights of women based on their equality with or their difference from men? How do we argue for their equality while at the same time acknowledging their need for protection? This is an especially dangerous trap for black women who certainly have needed more protection than their white counterparts. Also, given white supremacists' assaults on black beauty, even black feminists have had to come to terms with the contradictory impulses of needing to counter these assaults by focusing on physical attributes at the expense of dismissing all hierarchies of beauty as oppressive. Of course, this focus on black beauty is one means of healing the psychic wounds of white supremacy. Another more significant attempt has resulted in a politics of respectability.
THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY

For African American leaders and intellectuals, the politics of respectability first emerged as a way to counter the images of black Americans as lazy, shiftless, stupid, and immoral in popular culture and the racist pseudosciences of the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, as black leaders attempted to counter racist discourses and their consequences, the politics of respectability also reflected an acceptance and internalization of these representations. The politics of respectability seeks to reform the behavior of individuals and as such takes the emphasis away from structural forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, and poverty.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham notes the scathing critiques against nonconformity that accompany the politics of respectability. She writes:

The politics of respectability equated non-conformity with the cause of racial inequality and injustice. The conservative and moralistic dimension tended to privatize racial discrimination thus rendering it outside the authority of government regulation. (Higginbotham 1993, 203)

The politics of respectability emerged in a sincere attempt to address the conditions of black people both internally and externally. It marked an attempt to instill dignity and self-respect while also challenging negative, stereotypical images of African Americans. However, it fails to recognize the power of racism to enforce itself upon even the most respectable and well-behaved black people. Such a politics leaves little room for those who choose not to conform.

If this was a guiding principle in the political work of black leaders, it also informed the paradigms of the early days of Afro-American studies as well. Afro-American studies was born outside of the academy in the late nineteenth century with the goal of counteracting negative images and claims of genetic inferiority. Today, after a century of practicing a politics of respectability, a century of being concerned with presenting “positive images” of black life, we have so policed our own intellectual efforts that often we find ourselves caught up with narrow representations that in no way allow for the full complexity and humanity of black people, particularly black women. Black popular culture has always been a site that resists the confines of the politics of respectability.

One manifestation of the politics of respectability is something I call the “promise of protection.” Discussions of protection are not original to me. Both Nancy Cott (1987) and Deborah Gray White (1999) offer analyses of the protection dilemma. Elsewhere, I have written at length about the politics of protection (Griffin forthcoming). Here, I provide a more succinct working definition.

THE PROMISE OF PROTECTION

Because black women were denied the privileges of femininity and
protection from physical and discursive violence, black intellectuals and activists developed a discourse of protection. My term “promise of protection” is influenced by Jacqueline Dowd Hall’s term, “rhetoric of protection.” Hall uses the phrase to describe the discourses of a pure and protected white womanhood in the American South: “the rhetoric of protection [was] reflective of a power struggle between men...the right of the southern lady to protection presupposed her obligation to obey” (Hall 1983, 335). I have chosen not to use the word “rhetoric” because I want to avoid the implications of the word that suggest a discourse lacking in conviction or earnest feeling. Black male desire to “protect” black women grows out of a sincere concern for their emotional, psychic, and physical safety; it is also reflective of the power struggle between black and white men and black men and black women.

Nonetheless, many black women understandably have been willing to accept the terms of this contract. The promise of patriarchal protection was certainly much better than the methodical abuse suffered by black women throughout much of their history in the New World. The promise of protection has a long history in black thought and politics. The National Association of Colored Women was formed in 1896 in part to protect the name and image of black women. Leaders like Du Bois and Alexander Crummell simultaneously called for the protection of black women from rape, physical abuse, and economic poverty. Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam, and Louis Farrakhan are contemporary proponents of a promise of protection. A promise of protection addresses two important concerns of black nationalism: it restores a sense of masculinity to black men while granting black women at least one of the privileges of femininity.

This is not without its cost. The promise of protection assumes a stance of victimization on the part of those who need to be protected, without allowing much room for their agency in other spheres. It places the woman in the hands of her protector—who may protect her, but who also may decide to further victimize her. In either case, her well-being is entirely dependent on his will and authority.

Protection is not in and of itself a bad thing. Patriarchal societies such as ours foster misogyny from which all women need protection. A racist patriarchal society is particularly dangerous for black women. Of course, until the day arrives when we no longer live in a patriarchal society, women need to be protected from misogyny; however, protection need not be equated with possession. We must be careful to recognize offers of protection that are made in a context that places limitations on women’s freedom. Our intellectual and social movements ought to be guided by a vision that not only seeks to protect women from misogyny but also helps to eradicate patriarchy as well as racism. As we have seen, Du Bois himself recognized this: “Not by guarding the weak in weakness do we gain strength, but by making
weakness free and strong" (Du Bois 1995, 300). The promise of protection is one dimension or outcome of the practice of a politics of uplift and respectability.

BEYOND THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY AND THE PROMISE OF PROTECTION

Despite Du Bois's contradictions, we ought to be grateful to him for keeping black women at the forefront of his vision, and we ought to learn from his limitations and mistakes and move on. Contemporary black male intellectuals and activists ought to be criticized for not moving beyond these limitations in matters of gender, sexuality, and class. Unlike Du Bois, they have access to the history and analytical frames and paradigms made available by the work of politically engaged black feminist intellectuals such as Patricia Hill Collins, Joy James, Wahnemah Lubiano, and Kimberly Crenshaw, to name a few. In "The Damnation of Women," Du Bois names all of the intellectuals he cites except Anna Julia Cooper. Today, many black male intellectuals name black women, but all too often they do not seriously engage their intellectual work. There are exceptions to this. A bevy of younger scholars such as Robin D. G. Kelly, Lewis Gordon, Kevin Gaines, and Brent Edwards have work that proves to be promising in this regard.

At this point, I think a more productive black feminist research agenda might be one that makes sure contemporary debates are informed by black women's insights, reconceptualizing African American intellectual, social, political, and cultural history in a way that accounts for black women's experiences. What does Reconstruction look like when we add black women? How do analyses of racism change if we include gender along with race as an analytical category? Such questions make us reexamine dominant understandings of Reconstruction and force an analysis of the construction of black masculinity. Black feminist intellectuals must continue the work of recovering, analyzing, and theorizing those aspects of black life that have been subsumed because of past adherence to sexist, elitist, and heterosexual norms.

Du Bois identifies four divisions for the study of Negro problems: (1) historical study, (2) statistical investigation, (3) anthropological measurement, and (4) sociological interpretation. I would add to them cultural analysis as well. In earlier work, I have used cultural analysis as a means of researching that which Du Bois includes under anthropological measurement:

a scientific study of the Negro body. The most obvious peculiarity of the Negro—a peculiarity which is a large element in many of the problems affecting him—is his physical unlikeness to the people with whom he has been brought into contact. This difference is so striking that it has become the basis of a mass of theory, assumption and suggestion which is deep-rooted. (Du Bois 1898, 19)

Of historical study he writes, "The material at hand for historical research is rich and abundant, there are... the collections of historical so-
cieties . . . the personal narratives” (Du Bois 1898, 18). These hold information about “the history of the oft-forgotten class of free Negros” among other aspects of black life. One of the objects of historical study is to show the dynamic nature of black life and the changing nature of the problems confronting black people. Furthermore, historical study reveals the diversity of the population of people who fall under the racial category “Negro.”

In articles on the response of black women artists and intellectuals to racist categorizations of black bodies, I have attempted to address the issues he raises here. However, for now I want to focus on two projects that fall under the rubric of historical study and my added category of cultural analysis. Two areas of research identified by Du Bois in “The Study of the Negro Problems” resonate with my own intellectual agenda, especially two forthcoming projects: a collection of letters between two nineteenth-century black women and a cultural analysis of the construction of various Billie Holiday icons and the cultural work they perform.

In the more historical of these projects, Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends (Griffin 1999), I have attempted to fill in gaps left by Du Bois in his seminal work, Black Reconstruction ([1935] 1969). While he praises the Yankee schoolteachers, particularly white women, who went south to teach the freedmen following the Civil War, he cites no black women. Once again, he ignores the work of black women as intellectuals. Rebecca Primus, one of the “oft-forgotten class of free-blacks” was one such dedicated teacher. Her letters found their way to the Connecticut Historical Society in 1932, three years before the publication of Black Reconstruction.

This project also focuses on a member of the black working poor not as a problem but as a vibrant, intelligent woman—Addie Brown. Brown was a member of the black poor and working class that Du Bois did not imagine: she is not only burdened by the problems of poverty and exploitation; she is also a vibrant, intellectual, funny, sensual woman. Furthermore, the letters reveal as much about the private lives of these two women as they do about their public lives. The correspondence makes clear the two shared a romantic/erotic relationship as well. Despite these differences, the letters project does share Du Bois’s concern that historical research demonstrate the complexity and heterogeneity of antebellum and postbellum black life.

Given his early disdain of the black subcultures that produced jazz, Du Bois probably would not have encouraged a study that centers on Billie Holiday—a foul-mouthed, promiscuous drug-addicted musical genius. The Billie Holiday project is a means of challenging and confronting silences demanded by the politics of respectability and uplift without ignoring the need for such a politics at the time of their emergence. Billie Holiday has often been cast as a victim in need of protection. Black male intellectuals want to protect her from white men. Feminist intellectuals want to protect her from men,
particularly black men. Of course, anyone familiar with Holiday's life would not disagree with her need for protection. However, there were instances when she neither desired nor needed protection.

The Holiday project also provides me the opportunity to explore the class origins and context out of which she emerged and to demonstrate, contrary to Du Bois's suggestion, that these conditions can also create and nurture black genius. Such an analysis turns a critical eye on those powers that deny the expression of such genius on a broader stage, while recognizing that the black elite have no monopoly on talent or brilliance. Finally, the Holiday book, as with the letters, adds a much needed analysis of gender to Du Bois's research agenda.

Because I make no pretense of an objective analysis in this project, I make my agenda explicit. In addition to demonstrating the way that various representations of Holiday serve the interests of those who create them, I try to posit an alternative representation as well. In an attempt to offer an alternative subjectivity for contemporary and future black women to occupy, perform, and live, I try to reconstruct an understanding of Holiday as a woman who at times needed protection but who also happened to be a highly gifted jazz artist, who preferred the fast life, who indulged in her appetite for pleasure, and who practiced and refined her artistry not simply as entertainment but as a form of creative expression and self-realization. As such, I do hope that the scholarship entailed in the project will serve to inform contemporary conceptions of black women's lives and potential.

In closing, as a black feminist scholar I am most indebted to Du Bois not so much for his identification of areas in need of analysis but for his model as an activist intellectual. To be a black feminist scholar in the truest sense, one must be both an intellectual and an activist: simultaneously broad in scope and deep in analysis and committed in theory and praxis to black freedom. I am also indebted to Du Bois for the very notion of demanding that the problems confronting black people, as well as their cultural contributions, are worthy of serious scholarly inquiry and that inquiry might in some way be related to relieving their problems. I do not share his article's optimism about knowledge as the means toward the end of racism and his identification of the university as the "only competent agency" to study the complexities of black life. I believe the university might be one such site, though it is profoundly limited. Because of this, we are in desperate need of the creation of others. Perhaps this kind of institution-building outside of the academy might be one of the projects of future generations of black intellectuals.

Finally, black people are confronted with enormous poverty—a maldistribution of cultural and economic capital—and continued state violence; they are also confronted with ideological structures that define them for the world and all too
often for themselves. Consequently, in addition to research that leads directly to policy initiatives, we are also in need of cultural analysis that reveals the contours of these ideologies and that encourages critical rather than conspiratorial thinking. Our own historical context demands an analytic category not only of race but also of class (which Du Bois would later discover); not only gender but sexuality as well. Most important, our context demands an understanding of the ways that all of these categories intersect, each defining our experience of the other.

Notes

1. Joy James (1997) and Hazel Carby (1998) disagree with me here. James argues that black women intellectuals and activists who were Du Bois’s contemporaries—Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells—did provide gender-based critiques. I thoroughly agree with this, but would suggest that, although they did critique sexism and the relationship to masculinity and power, gender as the kind of analytical category that we have come to know did not exist. Similarly, although Du Bois is clearly aware of class conflict and differences, he does not use class as an analytical category until he published Black Reconstruction (Du Bois [1935] 1969).

2. In addition to those discussed here, black feminists such as Tera Hunter have also offered critiques of Du Bois (see Hunter 1998).

3. For an excellent discussion of these contradictions between Du Bois’s contemporaries, see Davis 1994.

References


