

THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION:
FROM SCIENCE TO THE POLITICS OF POETRY

Aldon D. MORRIS, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2015)

You, my dark brothers, no one names you.

Léopold Sédar Senghor

In *A tour de force* publication, *Scholar Denied* launches a *ŷ'accuse* of American sociology. "I lay bare," Aldon Morris writes not mincing words, "the racism and power of dominant whites responsible for suppressing a seminal body of social scientific thought" (Morris, 2015: 226). W.E.B. Du Bois founded American sociology, the author maintains, inaugurating a tradition of cutting-edge, path-breaking empirical research a full two decades before Robert Park and the Chicago School.

Scholar Denied also situates Du Bois as the first to demonstrate empirically that race was a social construct, that racial hierarchies do not otherwise exist, and that meaningful differences between groups stem from differences in social, political and economic conditions. His arguments are convincing; but I think Morris understates Du Bois' contribution. Du Bois does not only inaugurate the idea that race is a social construct in American sociology, but in European sociology as well. For I can think of no other richly empirical study like *The Philadelphia Negro* that challenged, in the Old World, the firm belief in a hierarchy of the races, a hierarchy first erected by figures like Linneaus, Blumenbach and Gobineau.

The aesthetic dimension

But who is this Du Bois? Do you recognize him? I do not fully recognize the picture Morris paints, this scientist *par excellence*. By focusing so narrowly on his empirical work, Morris confines us to the very beginning of Du Bois' career. And where does this lead us? It leads us to miss what is most important, most interesting, most challenging, most expansive about this polymath's sprawling oeuvre. The book overestimates Du Bois' ongoing commitment to science in

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order to legitimate him in the field of sociology, in order to juxtapose him with a less “scientific” Robert Park.

And yet, if we look at Du Bois’ publications, we notice something striking about his trajectory: over the course of his work he makes a distinct turn away from the empirical toward the aesthetic and, ultimately, the political.

In 1896, he publishes *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*; in 1899, *The Philadelphia Negro*; yes, two deeply empirical works. And then comes *The Souls of Black Folks* in 1903, a mix of prose and poetry, opening with sorrow songs, intimating a radical new vision and a bold new direction for the scholar. By 1906, Du Bois commits seriously to writing verse, publishing his most famous poem, “A Litany for Atlanta,” in the wake of the Atlanta race riots where white mobs attacked blacks, killing over 25 people. In the following years, he releases a slew of poetry with such titles as “The Song of Smoke” and “The Burden of Black Women” [1907]; “A Day in Africa,” “The Song of America,” and “The Prayer of the Bantu” [1908]. By 1910, he has left academia altogether to begin work as propagandist and editor of *The Crisis* for the next two decades. In 1911, he publishes his first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. Plays and pageants and more novels soon follow.

For Morris’ story to work—of Du Bois as a strict scientific, empirical social scientist—the book must frame Du Bois’ attention to aesthetics as secondary to the goal of transmitting scientific knowledge. In explaining Du Bois’ turn to literature, Morris argues that “[t]he intent is to convey weighty sociological ideas in a fashion far more attractive than dispassionate arguments and dense statistical tables” [Morris, 2015: 89].

But already in *Souls* we find a growing frustration with the disenchanting effects of brute facts and a loss of faith in the power of empirical work to change society: “But alas!,” Du Bois pens with no lack of venom, “while sociologists gleefully count his bastards and his prostitutes, the very soul of the toiling, sweating black man is darkened by the shadow of a vast despair” [Du Bois, 1994: 6].

Years later, in his autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*, he expresses the same political urgency seen in Marx’s Thesis #11 when he writes: “Stepping [...] out of my ivory tower of statistics and investigation, I sought with bare hands to lift the earth and put it in the path in which I conceived it ought to go” [Du Bois, 2007: 111].

But the question is this: what precisely *is* the connection between the empirical Du Bois, the aesthetic Du Bois, and the political Du Bois? I want to suggest that the aesthetic functions as a *bridge* from the empirical to the political in Du Bois’ work. The empirical sciences reveal themselves as not only not enough, but woefully insufficient for

changing the plight of blacks. There is not a dearth of knowledge, but a dearth of empathy on the part of whites, and a dearth of self-possession on the part of blacks. And it is to art—literature, painting, and, in particular, poetry—that he increasingly turns to rectify it.

Aimé Césaire tells us that “[p]oetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge” [Césaire, 1990: xiii]. “What presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, the sharpest sensibility or the subtlest feelings, but experience as a whole” [*ibid.*: xivii]. Du Bois attempts to capture this holistic experience when he moves from a mere enumeration of black suffering to an aesthetic and political expression of it. “It is easy,” he writes, “for us to lose ourselves in details in endeavoring to grasp and comprehend the real condition of a mass of human beings. We often forget that each unit in the mass is a throbbing human soul” [Du Bois, 1994: 88].

Art is deeply political, for Du Bois, conveying human emotion like no other medium. “All art is propaganda and ever must be,” Du Bois wrote in a widely misinterpreted passage. By propaganda he is not referring to the colonization of art by politics, but that art carries deep political import.¹ As Amy Kirschke (2014) recounts, during Du Bois’ editorship of *The Crisis* “Art became a powerful tool for political expression [...] Art was integral to his political program, and *The Crisis* became a principal patron of the [...] arts” [49].

But art also facilitates a turn inward for the black subject. While art has the potential to evoke sympathy in white audiences, it is also absolutely necessary for the “coming to consciousness” of an oppressed black people, as Sartre articulates in “Black Orpheus,” his 1948 defense of the literary movement *Négritude*. The white proletariat, he insists, suffers primarily from a technical oppression, based on the nature of profits and surplus value, based on the conditions of ownership of the means of production, based on the objective character of the proletariat situation. Thus it is through *techne* that they seek to liberate themselves. But the “coming to consciousness” of blacks is not only a liberation from a technical, but from a subjective oppression: “But since the selfish scorn that white men display for black men [...] is aimed at the deepest recesses of the heart, black men must oppose it with a more exact view of black subjectivity; consequently, race consciousness is based first of all on the black soul” [Sartre, 1964: 19].

¹ Du Bois himself used the term “propaganda,” a word derived from the verb “to propagate,” literally to spread.

This is why art becomes “critical,” as it facilitates a turn inward, addressing not wounds of poverty, but wounds of the soul, wounds far more difficult to see, wounds far more difficult to heal. And Sartre implicates poetry directly: “Subjectivity reappears [...] the relation of the self with the self; the source of all poetry, the very poetry from which the worker had to disengage [...] The first revolutionary will be the harbinger of the black soul, the herald, half prophet and half follower, who will tear Blackness out of himself in order to offer it to the world [...] From Haiti to Cayenne, there is a single idea: reveal the black soul. Black poetry is evangelic, it announces good news: Blackness has been rediscovered” [ibid.: 19-20].

And it is to the *Souls of Black Folks* that Du Bois, the herald, decidedly turns when he writes these lines in his poem “The Song of Smoke”:

*I am the Smoke King,
I am Black!
I am darkening with song,
I am hearkening to wrong!
I will be black as blackness can—
The blacker the mantle, the mightier the man!
For blackness was ancient ere whiteness began.
I am daubing God in night,
I am swabbing Hell in white:
I am the Smoke King
I am black.*

(W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Horizon*, 1907)

But art, for Du Bois, also prepares us for a politics of creation, a creation requiring a different kind of truth. When he shifts from empiricism to aesthetics and politics, Du Bois is also shifting away from a preoccupation with “proving” black humanity through “hard data” and “cold facts” to a deeper concern with the task of building a new black reality, a task that will require first and foremost beauty: “Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of *beauty*, of the preservation of *beauty*, of the realization of *beauty*, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before. And what have been the tools of the artist in times gone by? First of all, he has used the truth—not for the sake of truth, not as a scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination” [Du Bois, 1996: 327, my emphasis].

Art confronts us with no fixed concepts, no easy right or wrong answers. Rather it challenges us to exercise our “reflective judgment,” to interpret. In so doing, we begin to cultivate our ability to judge in other equally uncertain areas of life—most notably politics—in order to remake this world beyond what we already know, beyond what is already given.

The neglected theorist

In addition to aesthetics, *Scholar Denied* also gives too short shrift to Du Bois’ theoretical work, under-appreciating how he was not simply a scholar of race, but a scholar of the self and society. Indeed, he is in direct dialogue with Charles Cooley’s (1902) theory of the “looking-glass self,” which holds that the self is constructed through how “I imagine you see me” and how “I imagine you judge me.” Du Bois, however, raises the questions: what does it mean to see oneself from a point of view that inculcates disdain for one’s person? What self-feeling is possible for African Americans, or anyone bearing a visible stigma? Cooley’s “I” then is Du Bois’ “double consciousness.”

What is more, Du Bois’ entire *Souls of Black Folks* gives us a meaty elaboration of George H. Mead’s passing comment at the end of *Mind, Self & Society* that “We often find the existence of castes in a community which make it impossible for persons to enter into the attitude of other people” [Mead, 1967: 327]. Racism, Du Bois shows, prevents us from being able to “take on the attitudes of the generalized other,” a less than ideal situation in Mead’s account. But Du Bois does the legwork of elaborating how this occurs and articulating the consequences that follow.

And, of course, we cannot forget Du Bois’ radical definition of crime in *The Philadelphia Negro*, provocatively describing it as “the open rebellion of an individual against his social environment” [Du Bois, 2004: 173]. This presages Walter Benjamin’s seminal text *Critique of Violence* in which he writes of a law-destroying divine violence that challenges the present order of legal violence. Du Bois also foreshadows Franz Fanon’s declaration that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” [Fanon, 2004: 1]. Thus, Du Bois challenges us, forcefully, with the language of science and the rhetoric of art, to find the universal in the particular experience of blacks.

Final words

Now I ask you this: Who is W.E.B. Du Bois? Must we ignore his expansive endeavors for the sake of canonizing him as a founding father of sociology, a worthy tribute but a category that cannot contain him? Or will we allow him to refine that category, forcing us to redefine what it means to be a sociologist in the 21st century?

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