

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

***By W. E. B. Du Bois with an Introduction
by Robert Brown***

The Du Bois Review is pleased to publish, for the first time, this significant reflection on “the meaning of Booker T. Washington to America,” and in so doing highlight Du Bois’s desire to see courage, rather than sacrifice, prevail in the face of injustice. This previously unpublished essay is among the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers housed in the Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. It was brought to our attention by Robert Brown, who provides an introductory essay including an analysis of the likely date the essay was penned. We present it to our readers with the permission of The David Graham Du Bois Trust.

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Introduction

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On the evening of February 19, 1900, W. E. B. Du Bois was refused a ticket for a Pullman Company sleeper train from Atlanta to Savannah, Georgia. Du Bois exhausted every option in obtaining the ticket; according to Lewis (2009), he argued with “the Pullman conductor, the train conductor, the bagman, and even the hapless car porter” (p. 173). Du Bois was on official business, helping plan the United States’ participation in the upcoming Paris Exposition, and was thus, as Lewis describes, “compelled to ‘sit up all night’ in the crowded, filthy ‘colored’ car hooked just behind the engine” (p. 173). Certainly this was not a unique experience for African Americans during the years of burgeoning disfranchisement and Jim Crow laws, but Du Bois saw it as an opportunity to agitate for greater civil rights, to challenge the legality of segregation. Du Bois submitted a formal protest with the Southern Railway Company, parent to the Pullman Company, and wrote to his then friend

Booker T. Washington for help in obtaining redress. Washington chose one associate from his trove of well-connected and influential benefactors and convinced him to file a law suit against the railway company. However, Lewis (2009) reports, Washington's associates eventually told him to give up on the suit as it "would cause nothing but bitterness" (p. 174).

Washington (1989) publicly submitted to his old friends and then privately went on to help Du Bois by providing him with legal contacts and money for their services, even hand-delivering money so as to ensure his help remained secret (vol. 6, p. 91). This interaction exemplifies the friendship of Du Bois and Washington at its height, before Du Bois ([1903] 1994) published "On Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," before the Boston riot, and before the two had effectively broken ties.

In the following, and apparently misdated, essay Du Bois uses Washington's response to Jim Crow racism on a Pullman train to define his legacy:

It was not more than two months before the end. Booker T. Washington was already beneath the shadow of death. He had hired his Pullman berth from Chicago to Montgomery and was riding during the day alone in his section. A white man and his wife entered. They had seats for a day ride and the seats were in Mr. Washington's section. The man glared at him. He announced to the conductor and to the public that he did not propose "to sit with a nigger." The conductor shrugged his shoulders and made off. It was the only seat left. Mr. Washington got up slowly and went forward to the empty dining car and sat there among the disheveled tables. At mealtime he went out and stood in the vestibule. . . . There is a point where such sacrifice becomes cowardice; where meek submission becomes crime; and while no man may idly and easily draw metes and bounds for other souls, yet this incident throws curious and revealing light on the controversy which may always envelope the meaning of Booker T. Washington to America (pp. 375–376).

This paragraph is the capstone to this forgotten nineteen-page essay by W. E. B. Du Bois. The essay has not been published in any collection of Du Bois's papers; I have found no reference to the essay in any book which focuses on the relationship between Du Bois and Washington, and I have found only one passing reference to it in a book of Du Bois's quotations edited by Weinberg (1992, p. 258). "The Social Significance of Booker T. Washington" (Du Bois 1980a) has been largely overlooked despite its profound importance to some of the most widely studied aspects of Du Bois's career—the conflict with Booker T. Washington, and, at least secondarily, Du Bois's ([1935] 1995) *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, as well as the public and private turmoil affecting Du Bois in 1935.

Adding to the essay's mystique, it appears to have been catalogued under an incorrect date by the archivists from the University of Massachusetts Amherst who catalogued Du Bois's papers on microfilm. In the marginalia of the microfilm, Du Bois's (1980a) essay is listed as written "c. 1920" (reel 82, frame 1376), but considerable textual and secondary evidence indicates the text was written in 1935. Critics often note, with little archival support, that Du Bois's departure from the NAACP in 1935 coincided with a shift in attitude toward Washington. If this essay is dated as I suggest, then it answers and complicates a host of questions that previously found very little traction in the archives. I will proceed by considering when the essay was written and the social factors which may have convinced Du Bois not to publish the essay in 1935. I make no claim to any definitive answer as to Du Bois's intentions; rather, I hope to use this introduction to "The Social Significance of Booker T. Washington" as a point of departure for further discussion and scholarship.

CONTEXTUAL TIMING CRITIQUE

Evidence within the text itself suggests that it was written in 1935—twenty years after Booker T. Washington died—and not “circa 1920”: On page seventeen of “Significance,” Du Bois summarizes the grievances that the Bookerites and his “Talented Tenth” felt towards each other and then continues:

Of course, it would be too much to say that any final agreement was reached between the two parties. To the last Mr. Washington’s opponents maintained that he never adequately explained or withdrew his very damaging attacks upon the Negro colleges or his slurring of the right to vote. Mr. Washington’s friends too always felt in a certain sense of personal injury and dissatisfaction at the severe attacks long made on their leader.

Thus matters stood when Booker T. Washington died. The personal bitterness within the race had died down considerably but still smoldered. The Black world joined the White in acknowledging the great work which this man did in establishing a great school, spreading counsels of thrift and establishing a channel of communication between White and Black in the South. Through this channel there has without doubt come a new figure on the field—a Third Southerner as distinguished from the old master class, and the Tillman-Vardaman type of radical: He asks for justice to Negroes; not complete and ungrudging in all cases but so far beyond anything heretofore heard in the White South that he is being viewed with both jealous suspicion and lively hope.

Looking back over these twenty years of controversy what can either side point to in justification of its contentions? First of all both sides must grant each other essential honesty of purpose. The Washington propaganda was not all compromise and cowardice, the opposition was not all envy and moonshine. On the other hand both sides could not be wholly right and supplementary in their efforts (p. 375).

Here, Du Bois provides a compelling account that pinpoints when the text was written; the whole context for the statement “Looking back over these twenty years” lies in the previous paragraph, which describes the social scene and race relations which obtained at the time of Washington’s “historic” death. It may be inappropriate to parse language in a document that was never intended to be a final product, but when Du Bois writes “looking back over these twenty years,” he can only be referring to the twenty years which have passed since the momentous event that stood at the head of the second paragraph: “Thus matters stood when Booker T. Washington died.”

DU BOIS AND THE ARCHIVES

Until now, “Significance” was available only in the microfilm collection of Du Bois’s papers as collected by his confidant Herbert Aptheker. The “Unpublished Essays” section of Du Bois’s papers consists of a few hundred frames on reels eighty-two and eighty-three—less than one percent of the collection’s published writings. The respective dates of unpublished essays in this Library of Congress collection suggest that if “Significance” had been written in 1920, there would have been little reason for Du Bois not to publish it then. As managing editor of the NAACP’s monthly journal *The Crisis*, he was able to publish anything he cared to, and the editing marks Du Bois left in the margins suggest that “Significance” is at least a second draft and thus something a person with his time constraints cared a great deal about indeed. The collection of Du Bois’s (1988) most interesting unpublished materials from the

archives, *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887–1961*, includes only one essay in the time period between 1910 and 1934—the years during which Du Bois edited *The Crisis*—but contains fifteen unpublished essays composed between 1935 and 1945, a slew of which were written around 1935.

While some change of heart or apprehension must ultimately have dissuaded Du Bois from publishing “Significance,” the archives show that while Du Bois was managing editor of *The Crisis*—as he was in 1920—he published all but a few of his own essays that he cared enough about to make multiple drafts. “Significance” seems an odd fit for 1920 anyway. Among many other reasons, the refusal of Bookerite complicity and the call for agitation found in “Significance” would have been gratuitous after the historic 1919 “red summer” of unionist strikes and racial agitation. As Foley (2008) writes, Du Bois may have benefitted personally by disassociating himself from Washington in 1920 as he was being accused of representing the “Old Negro” stereotype—most efficiently embodied by Washington—for his encouragement of Black enlistment in the army, but had this been his sole motivation for writing the essay, he would have had no reason not to publish it. As Lewis (2009) points out, Du Bois had already been criticized by several contemporaries for using *The Crisis* for his own personal gain; it therefore seems unlikely that in 1920 Du Bois would have refrained from publishing “Significance” merely because it served his interests.

In 1935, however, the unpublished essays for which Du Bois made multiple drafts generally fell into two categories: either they were not fully developed, or they were rejected by editors who found them too ideologically slanted. In Du Bois’s *Against Racism*, a volume edited by Aptheker and published in 1988, Alain Locke is quoted as referring to one of Du Bois’s pieces as “direct propaganda” (p. 103). Often such editors wanted to publish work by Du Bois, but he refused to edit his work to fit their requests. The archives suggest that acting as his own chief editor at *The Crisis* for a quarter of a century made it difficult for Du Bois to return to being edited by others.

“Significance” is unique among Du Bois’s 1935 unpublished documents because it represents at least a second draft and is free of the excesses which prevented the publication of many of his projects circa 1935. Du Bois’s opinion remained influential, particularly about Washington, so it seems likely he could have found a publisher for “Significance” had he not changed his mind about the direction or value of the essay itself. Multiple factors existed which could have made Du Bois reticent to publish “Significance”; not all of them imply a meaningful struggle over the substance of the essay. All we know for certain is that something caused Du Bois to change his mind about publishing the essay. Whatever the event(s), or change of heart, the archives suggest that it was a unique experience for Du Bois. If “Significance” was written in 1935 then Du Bois’s decision not to publish it likely reflects, in interesting ways, events from Du Bois’s life in 1935. Working under this premise, I will now proceed to analyze how the conditions affecting Du Bois in 1935 may be reflected in “Significance” and its shelving.

1935

After a bitter and protracted public dispute over the utility of some aspects of segregation, Du Bois split with the NAACP in 1934. His plea to distinguish the positive elements of Black Nationalist separationism from the negative implications of White supremacist segregation failed to gain traction with the NAACP board. The fallout from this very public debate would have complicated in some measure the publication of “On The Social Significance of Booker T. Washington” which so

sharply critiqued Washington—a lifelong supporter of the economic Black Nationalism that Du Bois was advocating.

Washington's view of economic Black nationalism was partly shaped by his 1900-era partnership with Du Bois, and it is possible Du Bois may have intended this piece to demonstrate his similarities to and differences from Washington when public opinion was veering towards Benjamin Stolberg's assertion, as quoted in Broderick (1959), that "Today [1935] Du Bois winds up pretty much where Booker T. Washington started" (p. 190). Du Bois could have responded to such a critique in a number of ways; though it might have seemed appealing at first blush to respond by publishing "Significance," upon second thought that course of action might have revealed a vulnerability that he preferred not to broadcast.

Du Bois faced a series of shifting landscapes in 1935. His position at Atlanta University was less than solid; depending on when in 1935 he wrote "Significance," he was either completing work on *Black Reconstruction* or dealing with the fallout from the text's critical reception. Also, in March of 1935, New York City experienced its first modern race riot. The country was in the grip of the Great Depression and in the midst of electioneering that would end in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's second of four victories in presidential elections. These events help illuminate the rhetorical utility Du Bois found in the subject of Booker T. Washington in 1935. More importantly, each of these individual events would have complicated the reception of "Significance," and thus they provide insight as to why Du Bois would write and draft the essay but later choose not to publish it.

BLACK RECONSTRUCTION AND TENURE AT ATLANTA

During the time I argue Du Bois composed "Significance," he was either writing *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* ([1935] 1998), a project gone way past deadline, or negotiating the critical fallout from its publication.

Black Reconstruction represented an ambitious revisionist history written during what is generally considered the sea change between the New Negro Movement and the Civil Rights Era. In it, Du Bois asserted that the Black and White proletariat, divided by race, were unable to effectively struggle against the White bourgeoisie, and that this was the ultimate cause for Reconstruction's failure. In 1935 the historical consensus was that Reconstruction failed because it subjected morally upright Whites to villainous and inept Black politicians, a consensus certainly abetted by Booker T. Washington's conciliatory rhetoric (Bauerlein 2003, p. 15).

D. W. Griffith depicts the Reconstruction Era in his popular 1915 silent film *The Birth of a Nation*, in which the Ku Klux Klan saves Washington DC and the American South from dastardly Black politicians. As reported by Lewis (2009), Du Bois wrote that "the Negro [was] represented either as an ignorant fool, a vicious rapist, a venal or unscrupulous politician or a faithful doddering idiot" (p. 330). The concept of history depicted in *The Birth of a Nation* remained so popular that the film was reissued with a soundtrack five years before *Black Reconstruction* was published. In 1939, four years after the appearance of *Black Reconstruction*, Victor Fleming's film adaptation of the novel *Gone with the Wind* would again advance examples of sensationalist histories Du Bois sought to correct with *Black Reconstruction*. So in 1935 Du Bois was already up against significant public opposition, for *Black Reconstruction*, without attacking in print the still-popular Washington under the same flag of revisionism.

"Significance" and *Black Reconstruction* were sure to provoke the same type of controversy. If it were published first, "Significance" could only make it harder for

Du Bois to get *Black Reconstruction* into print; if published after *Reconstruction*, the contention stirred up by the essay would prove a distraction from the book's primary message.

The reception of both *Black Reconstruction* and "Significance" had the potential to undermine the positive benefits that Du Bois's support for segregation had reaped for him with the mostly White trustees of Atlanta University. Lewis (2009) writes that Du Bois, in a tactical move Washington would have appreciated, might have "intended his writings to be capable of diametrically opposite interpretations" (p. 574)—appealing equally to separatist Black Nationalists and racist White segregationists. Whatever the case, the controversy Du Bois's agitation often invited had caused several extended periods of strife for Atlanta's trustees during his previous years of work (1897–1910) at the university; as Lewis (2009) shows, the most abrasive of these periods surrounded Du Bois's also very public 1903 conflict with Washington. Given the trouble Du Bois was assured of provoking with the publication of *Black Reconstruction*, perhaps he felt it was simply not prudent for him to remind Atlanta's trustees of their troubled past relationship as highlighted in "Significance."

"Significance" is similar in tone and methodology to *Black Reconstruction*—it could easily have been written as a Du Boisian errantry from the long hours of editing and compiling *Reconstruction*—again marking 1935 as the more likely date for composition of the essay.

ROOSEVELT

While 1935 was difficult professionally for Du Bois, it was a complicated year for the United States in general. Examples of social anxiety relevant to Du Bois and "Significance" include the continuing Great Depression, an alarmingly active Germany (resulting in a more deeply polarizing debate over Black service), the upcoming presidential election which Franklin D. Roosevelt would win, and the historic race riots in New York City. The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New York race riots probably held the greatest sway as far as "Social Significance" is concerned.

As editor of *The Crisis*, Du Bois supported specific candidates, denounced others, and was generally disappointed by their representation either way. Du Bois's public critiques of Roosevelt were well known, but in 1934, as Lewis (2009) writes, speculation Roosevelt would appoint Du Bois "as special assistant on Negro affairs to a cabinet officer" in "service to the New Deal" (p. 564) had caused some hopeful frenzy in the NAACP. Du Bois's sometimes abrasive politics probably would have made such an appointment unsustainable, but the thought was tempting, as the mean annual earnings for Black farmers under the New Deal was \$295 and only \$175 for sharecroppers—this, according to Sitkoff (1978), compared to \$417 and \$232 for Whites in the same positions (p. 53). Lewis (2009) writes, "The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) reserved relief overwhelmingly for whites," and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), indicative of other work programs sponsored by the New Deal, had "less than 1 percent of its workers recruited among blacks" (p. 565). Ostensibly Du Bois would have been a force for overcoming such blatant racism, but Du Bois had lost confidence in FDR and the New Deal's utility to African Americans.

Still, Roosevelt had significant support among the African American community in general and more particularly among the more liberal Board of Trustees of Atlanta University. In the build-up to the election, the nation was mobilizing its support for Roosevelt, resulting in one of the most lopsided victories in presidential history—Roosevelt won every state save Vermont and Maine. National fervor was firmly on the side of Roosevelt and the New Deal. A piece such as "Significance," which described so

outspokenly the plight of African Americans and also attacked Washington (who was to many people a symbol of race progress), would have proved less than welcome to the political machines firing on behalf of Roosevelt and the status quo.

As an indication of his reticence to court controversy with Roosevelt in 1935, Du Bois ended up declining an offer from the editor of *The American Mercury* to write an article that would be “*distinctly unfavorable to the administration.*” Du Bois (1980b) submitted a thoroughly researched article which the editor rejected when he could not convince Du Bois to engage Roosevelt in any race-related conflict.

It is not inconceivable that the far-reaching mechanisms of the Roosevelt machine made publishing “Significance” overly complicated for a new professor who, despite earning a great deal of money in his lifetime, had very little savings to speak of and was in real danger of losing a second prestigious job in the midst of the Great Depression.

RACE RIOTS AND THE NEW NEGRO

While Roosevelt’s election was notable to many in 1935, New York’s race riot may have been a more pressing issue for Du Bois. Lino Rivera, a sixteen-year-old person of color, was caught shoplifting a penknife at the Kress Five and Ten store across from the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, and after a store employee physically threatened Rivera, a tussle ensued in which Rivera bit an employee’s hand. A crowd gathered and news spread that an employee had beaten Rivera severely. Apparently Rivera was never actually hurt, but mistrust for the police and anger against racist police practices resulted in protests which quickly turned violent. This event signaled to many people that the hope and optimism which had characterized the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement had ended.

The New Negro Movement, according to early estimates, began in 1895—the year Frederick Douglass died and Washington gave the “Atlanta Compromise”—and ended around 1935 with the New York race riots. There is no widely held consensus about which dates ultimately constitute the New Negro Movement, but 1935, partially because of the riot, marks the beginning of a new epoch in the modern Civil Rights Movement. The race riots were indicative of a shift in tone, and the audience for “Significance” would have altered in relationship to these riots.

Du Bois’s challenge to Bookerite submission in “Significance” is distinctly New Negro in character. According to Gates and Jarrett (2007), the New Negro sought to distance himself and other African Americans from “caricatures” which “oversimplified black subjectivity” (p. 1); Du Bois here is making just such a populist plea against his version of the “Old Negro” (represented by Washington). As Du Bois describes in “Social Significance,” calling for agitation is good and fine when one’s constituents are in a “slough of despond” (p. 18), but in the aftermath of the New York riots such a call might court the sort of controversy which would make Du Bois’s precarious professional life in Atlanta even less tenable. Du Bois’s decision not to publish “Significance” provides yet another symbolic end to the New Negro Movement.

CONCLUSION

“The Social Significance of Booker T. Washington” adds depth and detail to a quarrel which helped define the New Negro Movement. One of the lessons taught by “Significance” (or *Black Reconstruction* for that matter) is that despite what we are

often told about the sanctity of history, it can always be reduced to a popular fiction in which details are continually being shaped and reshaped by forces of the present. While I find compelling the evidence that “Significance” was written in 1935, the importance of the essay’s date and its historical value rely largely on what we—you and I—bring to it.

The conflict between Du Bois and Washington is widely taught to high school and college students as an introduction to social rhetoric, American history, or the roots of the Civil Rights Movement. One of the great values of “Significance” is that Du Bois, during his first stint as a professional educator in over twenty years, also used the conflict pedagogically. Written at a time when a paradigm shift was bringing about the modern Civil Rights Era, Du Bois framed his conflict with Washington in the historical transition between a Reconstruction mind-set and that of the New Negro. With that in mind, reading—or teaching—“Significance” in our contemporary context can provide the same feeling of standing between two mirrors: “Significance” reveals itself to be a perpetual anachronism, a recursive reflection of the dynamics and pressures in effect now as we transition from the Civil Rights Era into whatever the future holds.

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