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# Du Bois in His Time (and Ours)

*All Motion is Not Progress*

*I would have been hailed with approval had I died at fifty,  
at seventy-five my death was practically requested.*

—W. E. B. Du Bois, on or around  
his seventy-fifth birthday.

EXACTLY ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY-FIVE years ago (1868), a mere five years after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (and in splendid coincidence the year of the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, declaring that "previous condition of servitude" did not preclude one from the fundamental democratic act of casting a vote), in a small western Massachusetts mountain town—as the crow flies no more than thirty-five miles from where I write this—a manchild was born into a family of black artisans and small farmers. His mother was of the black Burghardts, whose antecedents were, as the name suggests, once the property of a Dutch landowner. His father was light-skinned, from a Haitian Creole family of more recent American arrival, hence the infant's impressive array of names: William Edward Burghardt Du Bois.

Soon after his birth the Haitian father would abandon the marriage and his mother's economic circumstances would become very straitened indeed and remain so for the rest of her life. She would die in his seventeenth year, a few months before he left for college in the South. In the small-town New England of his birth, secondary education was class- (hence race-)based and very elitist, the province only of families affluent enough to afford the fees of private academies for their children. Consequently few working people, of any race, received more than a few years of elementary education, nor saw any real need for it. They may indeed have been right.

It was the advent of public education in the 1870s, with the establishment of the Great Barrington High School, that made the youth's education at all possible. There—the sole brown face among the students—driven by his mother's pride and ambition for him as by the encouragement

of two kindly and perceptive women teachers who were impressed by “Little Willie’s” uncommon and precocious intelligence and industry, the youth flourished despite the regimen of odd jobs necessary to help his mother cope. He would later credit Mr. Hosmer, the principal, with guiding his intellectual development and steering him into the college preparatory curriculum heavy with Latin, Greek, and the canonical Western “classics” of the time. Providentially, during the high school years, the arrival of a small community of southern black folk, who promptly founded an AME Zion church, where the black Burghardts faithfully attended services, would provide him with at least an introduction to the religious culture of his people.

By his graduation in 1884 at the age of sixteen, young Willie’s academic accomplishments had made him something of a local prodigy among the townfolk. The graduation class consisted of seven boys and six girls, and young Willie delivered an apparently well-received oration on the abolitionist Wendell Phillips. The local *Berkshire Courier* reported that “William E DuBois, a colored lad who has had good standing gave an excellent oration and provoked repeated applause.”

The graduate’s ambition was to attend Harvard, but for reasons as much financial as social (i.e., racial), this was not to be at that time—a disappointment which would prove most fortunate for his real education. His principal Mr. Hosmer, joined by the principal of the local private academy and two Congregational ministers, persuaded four Congregational churches to underwrite his education at Fisk University, a Congregational school for blacks in Tennessee. He was seventeen years old when he left New England for the South in 1885. He would later recall this as a “great adventure” into the “south of slavery, rebellion and black folk” where, at last, he would be surrounded by other people of color. He was, he professed, delighted to go south because, consequence of the New England upbringing, he in fact knew very little about the real life of black folk. In Tennessee he would be immersed in the Africa-inflected culture of rural, postslavery southern black communities while teaching “out in the rural.” Here his true education would begin. As was to be expected his New England small-town sensibilities were appalled by the prevailing, “ignorance,” squalor, and poverty that surrounded him.

But he would also perceive something else, something real if elusive, for which nothing in his education, experience, or the prevailing discourses of the day had prepared him, or given him any language to articulate or fully process. All around him he detected many signs of a distinctive black

culture only dimly perceived, but tantalizingly indicative of something real which he would later refer to as “the soul of black folk.” He struggled for a language in which to process some real perceptions because in the New England of his youth “culture” was Euro-focused, a consequence of America’s much deplored colonial complex. A “cultured” person spoke French or German, read Latin or Greek, listened to European classical music and understood—enjoyed was quite another question—opera. *That* was “culture.” So what was this he was now seeing and listening to?

Indeed, much of his early writing would be devoted to the attempt, not at first entirely successful, to create a vocabulary capable of accurately conveying and defining—in its own terms—black cultural truths free from the crude and “unscientific” language of condescension or denigration of all things “Negro” which permeated the literary and academic discourses of the time. The struggle to liberate discussions of black reality from the ignorance-driven, reductive racist formulations of white establishment “experts” would remain an enduring mission of his life’s work.

After graduation from Fisk there would be Harvard (where he would be befriended by William James) for a second undergraduate degree, then a master’s in history and ultimately a doctorate, the dissertation for which, *The Suppression of the Slave Trade to America*, would inaugurate a Harvard series of historical monographs. However, the disciplined intellectual effort which resulted in such spectacular academic achievement, formidable though it must have been, paled into insignificance against the grinding necessity of a struggle at every stage simply to convince whites on admission and academic committees or funding agencies that a young black man was capable and deserving of education at this level. That said young man succeeded in doing so while conducting himself with dignity, rather than the fawning self-abasement from Negroes which these grandees understood to be the natural order, is as worthy of respect, as are the accomplishments which resulted.

For example, how Du Bois secured support to do the Harvard Ph.D. and later advanced study in the new discipline of sociology at University of Berlin is wondrously instructive both of Du Bois’ character and of the times. An enormously endowed and influential body, the John F. Slater Fund for the Education of the Negro, run by a former American president, had announced that “the principle of higher education” was the province of all, regardless of race. To this end they welcomed, but had been quite unable to attract any suitably “qualified” black candidates. (Has a curiously contemporary ring, does it not?)

This announcement apparently provoked so fierce a Confederate backlash that the fund retreated to mumblings about “industrial education of heart and hand,” the mantra which would so endear Booker T. Washington to the South and northern philanthropists. The fund made no awards to blacks and Du Bois’ application for a stipend was ignored, as were a few others. When he inquired he was informed by the fund’s director that the news reports had been exaggerated, and in any event the “plan had been given up.” However Du Bois could take comfort that, had this not been the case, his candidacy might otherwise have “deserved attention.”

Evidently the young Du Bois was sufficiently comforted as to reply to the fund’s president, none other than one Rutherford B. Hayes, lately president (if a strongly disputed one) of the United States.

Did he beg, importune, and plead his case as a deserving darky was expected to do? No indeed, he confronted them. With admirable audacity the twenty-two-year-old addressed Hayes as an equal, first unequivocally declaring, “As for my case I personally care little, I am perfectly capable of fighting alone for an education if the trustees do not care to help me.” However, the fund’s behavior confirmed his suspicion that their claim to searching in vain for suitable (Negro) candidates had been less than sincere. Then he proceeded to school the former president, to wit:

*the injury you have—unwittingly I trust—done the race I represent and am not ashamed of, is almost irreparable. You went before a number of keenly observant men who regard you as an authority on the matter and told them in substance that the Negroes of the United States either couldn’t or wouldn’t embrace a more liberal opportunity for advancement when presented.*

Du Bois’ missive concluded, “from the above facts I think you owe an apology to the Negro people.”

I have no idea exactly how Hayes and his cohorts received that scolding. One would have expected the uppity Negro to be summarily dispatched to the outer reaches of philanthropic darkness, *there*, like Lucifer upon his expulsion from Heaven, *to dwell in adamant chains and penal fire*. This time however—which would not always be the case—his impudence was not punished. Instead, to the trust’s credit, he was supported for the Harvard Ph.D. After which Du Bois was able to convince them of the long-term benefit of his being able to explore the new discipline of sociology in Germany. Later, however, his letter explaining that their support for just one more term in residence would enable him the prestige of a German doctorate proved beyond the fund’s tolerance or resources. There is specu-

lation that the prospect of having the first such degree to be earned by an American going to a Negro proved to be the last straw.

I tell this not merely for what it reveals of the young Du Bois' character, determination, and talent but because it prefigures an enduring conundrum of his long and extraordinarily productive professional life. Combining the necessity of constantly having to seek support for necessary, important, and groundbreaking work—invariably on his people's behalf—with a steadfast refusal (or inability) to prostrate his or his people's dignity, interests, or rights, to compromise political principle, professional standards, or intellectual integrity before the altars of powerful, ignorant, ill-informed even when well-intended plutocrats. (Anyone having taught Black Studies at white universities can readily sympathize with having to justify one's purposes to people not as intelligent as oneself and who entertain not the foggiest notion of the meaning or importance of what it is one does.)



SOON ENOUGH, his German sojourn coming to a close, the young man on his twenty-fifth birthday took a glass or two of wine and repaired to his room for an exercise in quiet introspection. What emerges, once stripped of the fruit of his education (a ponderous overlay of classic conceptual language and reference adorned with heavy doses of German romanticism), is not just revelatory but prophetic and powerfully affecting. On the one hand it is typical of youth: the musings of any sensitive and thoughtful young person on the unknowable—the meaning of life, the uncertainty of the future, the goals worthy of one's life, while reaching for terms and principles, the values upon which one might stand to honorably engage an indifferent if not hostile world.

*in the long, dark winter of northern Germany, I felt a little lonesome and far away from home . . . I arose at eight and took coffee and oranges, read letters, thought of my dead parents, and was sorry. . . I will in this second quarter century of my life, enter the dark forest of the unknown world for which I have so many years served my apprenticeship—in the chart and compass which the world furnishes me I have little faith—yet I have nothing better—I will seek till I find—and die.*

And earlier:

*I began to feel that dichotomy which all my life has characterized my thought: how far can love for my oppressed race accord with love for the oppressing country? And when these loyalties diverge, where shall my soul find refuge?*

And more:

*The hot dark blood of a black forefather is beating at my heart, and I know that I am either a genius or a fool. . . I wonder if life is worth the Sturm. I do not know—perhaps I never shall know: But this I do know: be the Truth what it may I will seek it on the pure assumption that it is worth seeking—and Heaven nor Hell, God nor Devil shall turn me from my purpose till I die. . .*

*This . . . represents my attitude toward the world. I am striving to make my life all that life may be—and I am limiting that strife only in so far as that strife is incompatible with others of my brothers and sisters making their lives similar. The crucial question now is where that limit comes. I am too often puzzled to know. . .*

*I therefore take the world that the Unknown [God] lay in my hands and work for the rise of the Negro people, taking for granted that their best development means the best development of the world. . .*



IT WOULD BE HARD not to be touched by the evident idealism as by the ambition and, indeed, the bravery of the foregoing—or was that simply the arrogance of youth? Inevitably and very soon to be dissipated by reality: the cold winds of time and the “hard school” of experience from which none of us are spared. Unavoidable, even were the author some overprivileged, upper-class European princeling, an unquestioned beneficiary of the world as constituted in the closing decade of the nineteenth century. But for a young Negro American without affluent and influential family connections, the issue of a people but one generation removed from bondage? At the time of writing without even a job or the prospects of one? He proposed to take the world (and what a world) in his hands and work to ensure the rise of his people. Driven, in his words, by “pride of race, lineage and self” and armed only, as his best biographer wrote, “with a brain, a pen and audacity”? One can add to that an almost superhuman determination, discipline and focus, tireless effort and uncommon longevity. Even so give it five years, ten at the most. Then we shall see how much of that high-minded vision and noble commitment survives. Yes we would.

The America to which the twenty-five-year-old Du Bois would return from Europe, sans the doctorate which, but for a technicality, he had fully earned, was for his people no hopeful land of opportunity. The South, having lost the war and their former slaves, ramped up a campaign (the

baleful effects of which haunt the society to this day) that would succeed magnificently in winning and disfiguring the peace, ultimately coming to dominate national congressional politics, damn near making the mind of the South the mind of the Nation. Over the next half century the rancorous Confederate resurgence would succeed in subverting democracy: rewriting history, disfranchising the third of its population that was black, reducing the southern black population to economic near slavery by a system of peonage called sharecropping, establishing white supremacy, and legalizing “Jim Crow” apartheid (*A place for evrah Niggah an’ evrah Niggah in his place*) by utilizing the violence of the mob and the state.

The Klu Klux Klan would become for a time a national organization, the lynching of Negroes accepted social practice among the “lower classes” (and, apparently, given their voting record, the national Congress). In the academy, “scientific” studies projecting the mental, moral, and genetic inferiority of “the black race” became an accepted means to professional advancement, “coonery”—the caricaturing of our physical features and the parodying of our speech and manners—became a regular fixture of the national press. The rise of a commercial popular culture would be launched by blackface minstrelsy—the first of many crude commercial appropriations for profit of our people’s culture—while reducing it to a racist instrument of mockery, ridicule, and painful insult to the culture they were hijacking and its creators. Significantly enough, this genre, an invidious, overtly racist attack on our people’s humanity, would become the first transnational popular culture export of the United States. An early excursion into world cultural leadership in which postracial America should take appropriate pride.

Worldwide, our people’s circumstances were faring no better. All of Africa, north and south, with the exception of Ethiopia, was being subjected to a particularly rapacious European colonization and all its attendant ills. While colonialism’s most obvious and visible effects were always political and economic, its most enduring destructive effects—particularly in black Africa, the ancestral homeland—being of a cultural, religious, and psychological nature, were at their worst. Worst because this entailed the systematic assault on and dismantlement of those native institutions by which people ordered their affairs. This required the disparagement and dismissal of all conventions of indigenous culture and thought by which people articulated their values, defined their universe, and understood and passed on the meaning and consequence of their presence and place in the world.

In the diaspora a different version of the same dynamic was at work. The Caribbean labored under colonization and there, as in Central America, their African populations—Du Bois’s kinsmen, so to speak—struggled in societies informed by economic arrangements as well as social attitudes and practices deriving directly from their histories of plantation slavery.

HERE I HAVE BEEN, however briefly, at considerable pains to sketch out something very like a report on the dismaying “State of the Race” across the world. Why so? Because there is, quite literally, *not a single aspect of any of all this* which Du Bois would not fearlessly engage with determination, tireless political activism, and rigorous intellectual discipline during a public and scholarly career of some seventy years. Generations would come and go, intellectual fashions ebb and flow, ideological certitudes be discredited or abandoned, war would follow wars, powerfully transformative new analytical systems would make their mark as this country went from a former slave-holding, largely agrarian nation to a world-leading industrial society and the modern world emerged, slouching toward nuclear annihilation.

Throughout all of which Du Bois was not still. He observed and thought, grew, changed, and evolved with the times, but purposefully so, always from an unchanging, centered set of concerns through every advance and the many reversals of his people’s fortunes. What did this development mean for his people’s interests and progress? What did it portend for the possibility of true democracy in this country, in the world? In these he never wavered, never deviated, and apparently never tired. In this he was not simply the preeminent and most effective American public intellectual since perhaps only Jefferson, he was the very model and contemporary archetype of the species.

In the smithy of his art Du Bois did indeed forge the consciousness of a “race” and summon the ancestors to struggle. As even Roy Wilkins, his longtime opponent in the fierce NAACP insider wars, finally had to concede. As a very young man at the March on Washington, I sat in the headquarters tent and watched on TV as Wilkins announced the Doctor’s death in Ghana, telling the suddenly hushed multitudes that, despite recent historical ironies, *it is incontrovertible that at the dawn of the twentieth century his was the voice calling you to gather here today in this cause.*

Which is why our most recent confederacy of dunces is such a travesty. This being the rabblement (*of certain but by no means all, as folk like the admirable Michelle Alexander, Robin G. Kelley and—on his better days—Reverend*

*Brother Cornel demonstrate*), black, self-proclaimed “public intellectuals” who apparently answer to no principle visible to the naked eye, political, intellectual or moral. Either from cowardice or self-advancement, these careerists never risk engaging the doctrinal absurdities of global capitalist establishment propaganda. They are content to prostrate themselves before every successive quasi-theoretical cult and pseudo-intellectual fad proceeding out of the entrails of post-industrial, post-colonial, post-modern, post-structural, post-intelligence, post-coital, post-language, “post-racial” America.

Instead of being instructed by the rigor, courage, integrity and consequence of the DuBoisian example, personal and professional, they pick over the corpus of the oeuvre tearing away fragments and minutiae, from which—devoid of any context—they hope to “deconstruct under color of theory” the “intellectual mystique” of DuBois. They need to abandon that effort as well as that self-appropriated term by which apparently they hope in vain to imply equivalence. Please, DuBois was a public intellectual; they are public embarrassments.



THAT IS THE PUBLIC and professional Du Bois, but what of the remarkable personality of the man? In appearance and deportment he displayed a style and affect that was distinctly European rather than American or indeed “Negro” as that was then understood, and which was sufficiently striking as to invite caricature and accusations of foppish self-regard and overweening vanity from his many detractors. But for their own reasons they preferred to look only at surfaces.

He was not a physically imposing figure, being on the short side and almost slightly built. However, he was of robust constitution, well coordinated and physically adept, a strong swimmer, a devoted and skillful dancer and excellent tennis player. (One student at Fisk remembers him cutting so fine a figure in his tennis clothes that a group of young ladies would congregate at the courts to admire his legs.) The length of his life and the variety, volume, and demanding nature of his work and accomplishment attest to uncommon physical resources.

His size notwithstanding, he certainly had presence, and to spare. As a young student in Germany he had affected a Van Dyke and mustache inspired by that of the young Kaiser, which he maintained all his life. In public he was always formally attired in the manner of a Victorian gentleman, or “dandy,” if you prefer: well-tailored vested suits, a pocket watch on a gold chain, a hat (frequently a homburg), and occasionally even spats and an elegant cane, which invariably he flourished as he walked. If, as

detractors scoffed, the style was not “Negro,” the impulse certainly was black. “*In yo’face cracker,*” black. That clearly was deliberate on his part, as his untaught, simple folk would have easily recognized, “*Bless mah soul that doctah do be styling, styling lak a big doug, yes he be!*”

At a time when the preferred—indeed required—and most widely and sentimentally celebrated quality in Negroes (among whites) was their “natural humility,” Du Bois carried himself always with an evident pride which was naturally seen as haughtiness. While courtly and formally correct, he did not suffer fools of any race or status gladly, making him that bane of white male sensibilities and affront to the natural order, “an arrogant Negro.” People emerged from interviews or public addresses remarking on the “frosty,” “cold,” “intimidating formality” of his aspect, while others were disposed to see something “leonine,” “noble,” or even “regal” in his bearing. Or, as novelist Henry Miller would write after hearing him address a potentially rowdy crowd during the McCarthyite hysteria, *The very majesty of the man silenced any would-be demonstration*. During this period one black editor, observing his manner and deportment before a hostile investigating House committee, emerged personally and racially validated. “No one seeing him,” he exulted, “can ever again see me as inferior.”

The apparent contradictions seemed endless. He was denounced as “elitist” but his deeply democratic instincts and abiding commitment to the interests of, and faith in, the abilities of the masses of black folk was unrivaled. He was said to be self-absorbed and personally ambitious, yet he never sought self-promotion on the back of other black folk or at the expense of his people’s interests. An “ambitious” intellectual who never disguised his contempt for the received wisdom and fashionable consensus in the establishment on race, class, and capitalist cupidity? Derided as “Eurocentric,” even as he launched in colonial capitals the offensive that would lead to the movement for African independence fifty years later.

This stiff, frosty, patriarchal prototype was deeply and unwaveringly committed, however unlikely, to the struggle for the rights of women and especially those of his race. From his undergraduate days at Fisk he became a profound admirer of the beauty and sensuality of black women, though not exclusively. More than that he was genuinely a friend to women, recognizing their hidden strengths, insight, and value. He liked and respected independent women who were attracted to him and sought his company. He fostered their careers wherever he could, worked with them politically, encouraged their ambitions in literature and the arts, and generally gloried in the admiration, loyalty, and love of a number of intellectually

accomplished and artistic women. Evidently beneath the surface of that stiff, cold formality there lurked deep reservoirs of passion, warmth, sensuality, and fun. How could he possibly have found the time? But indeed he had. Clearly in the idiom of his folk, the Doctor was a “*nachral man*.” Or in the argot of the black street, “*Ohwie, Ol’ Dab O’ Sugar Willie got him some gaame wid the ladies, bro. Oh yes he do.*”

Sometime in the early seventies I was in Great Barrington at an event connected to the university’s undertaking development of the Du Bois family home site. The location of this site had been painstakingly researched and brought to the university’s attention by an admirer of Du Bois’s. This man, whose name I have unfortunately forgotten, was white, a workingman (as I recall a carpenter by trade), and a man of profound insight and—as I would discover when I sought to thank him—few but eloquent words. I needn’t thank him, he said, because, *The Doctor lived a good life. He fought all the right fights and he made the correct enemies. He was a great man.*

Which, come to think of it, summarizes all I have been laboring to say. *Let the Church say, “Ahmen an’ Selah.”*



WHAT FOLLOWS is a narrative which could be described as an account of the relationship between Dr. Du Bois (or at least his family and legacy) and this university, where his papers reside and the main library bears his name.

In early 1969 a group of us were putting the finishing touches on a proposal for the establishment of a department of African–American Studies here. During the past couple of years this notion of “Black Studies”—new, innovative, and controversial, clearly a spin-off from the Black Power phase of the civil rights movement—had been roiling the academic waters across the nation.

In Amherst we anticipated no serious problem. This was to be no surprise suddenly sprung without warning on the administration. There had been some preliminary discussions with a group of uncommonly able and intelligent leaders of the upper administration: Chancellor Oswald Tippo, Provost Robert Gluckstern, and Dean of Humanities Seymour Shapiro. We’d had very civil and substantive discussions in which we explained that what was envisioned was a corrective expansion of the entire curriculum in the liberal arts to take into accurate and rigorous account the role, effect, and consequences of the black presence in the evolution of the

society. They appeared to agree that the continued exclusion of that element of the national experience from the curriculum rendered it not just incomplete but resulted in a falsification of history and denial of reality which the nation could no longer afford. This would not be a gesture to placate the expected influx of black students. Rather, as we all agreed, any continued failure to fill this gaping lacuna in the scholarship would result in the continued impoverishment of the education *all* our students receive.

This was not—as it was at a great many other institutions—an entirely new discussion. At the university Professor Sidney Kaplan in particular had been raising such questions continuously, eloquently, and effectively for many years. The previous year Professor Jules Chametzky had organized a discussion of the subject in this magazine, for which he secured contributions from leading figures—black scholars and activists—prominent in the national debate. That *Mass Review* forum had become the authoritative text across academe. Both these colleagues were serving in an advisory capacity on the committee for Black Studies. So the ground had been prepared, we had an agreement in principle, and all that was left was for the proposal to articulate the practical means by which these goals might best be accomplished.

Which was not then as easy a question as it might now appear. This, you must remember, was unprecedented in any American university's experience. There were a host of questions for which there were no ready answers. What form should it take—college, department, or program? Depending on that answer, would this new entity grant degrees, offer majors, or simply an academic “concentration”? What would its effect and reception by faculty in existing departments be? Who would teach it? Where was “qualified” faculty to come from? On what scholarship would it be based? And even, believe it or not, whether white students would be admitted to Black Studies courses. What would students (here read *white*) and their parents' reaction be? And above, all how was it to be afforded? To the exceeding good fortune of our enterprise, the university was then in the middle of its expansion from state college to flagship university. Consequently, there were far more new spaces and resources to be deployed than otherwise would have been the case.

The proposal addressed all said questions in clear and (if I dare say so) practical and persuasive terms, and we were days from submitting it to the governance processes of the university. There was among us unanimity only on its most politically sensitive proposition. This we made clear was

not negotiable: the form which the new entity should take. This would be that of a department rather than a program, which had been the strategic ploy common to most universities. A program could offer no major and hire no faculty: all incoming faculty being joint appointments, it would require agreement from the preexisting (read *white*) departments in that discipline, as would any courses it defined. This would in effect give preexisting departments veto power over appointments and courses, an insulting colonial arrangement of overseership which on no account was acceptable. We were to have a department, freestanding and independent, which could hire its own faculty and define its own curriculum, or nothing.

On that we were agreed. So the last-minute inspiration that the new department bear the name of the native son of western Massachusetts who was the unquestioned intellectual progenitor of the field met some not unreasonable resistance. Academic departments are never named after people, so why this one? The political fight is uphill enough as is, why add the burden of Du Bois's political baggage? (remember, *the Doctor made all the correct enemies*). What do we gain?

First of all, it's an appropriate act of homage and respect to the man without whose pioneering advocacy for black higher education none of us would be here. And he was born here in western Massachusetts, but that is much more than empty symbolism. Have we not said that our emphasis is going to be on education for service, community responsibility, and struggle? *That* is his legacy.

Second of all, what other (*white*) departments do or have done is beyond irrelevant. What we are about is something unprecedented, sui generis, quite literally something that has never before existed, a Black Studies *Department*. What we do is what we decide to do. Therefore, how can there be any precedents which apply?

Several months after this discussion I would discover unassailable proof of the accuracy of our choice when I discovered a remarkably prophetic speech at Fisk from 1933, in which Du Bois, talking about *The Negro University*, and cutting against the grain of prevailing education philosophy, would anticipate the central tenets of the Black Studies agenda forty years in the future. *A Negro university begins with Negroes. It uses that variety of the English idiom which is indigenous to them; and most of all it is founded on a knowledge of the history and culture of their people in Africa and the United States and of their present condition.* Enough said!

In any event the name was duly affixed to the top and the document sent off into the labyrinthine processes of university governance, where the name elicited few questions and no real objections. Some nine months later, on April 23, 1970, the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies came into official existence.

Which is somewhat misleading because, in truth and in fact, it had been—as a kind of phantom entity—completely functional that previous year. Even while having no official existence, we had recruited and hired a splendid faculty but . . . into the English Department. In this, that department (home to Sidney Kaplan and Jules Chametzky) had been splendidly cooperative. Thus the university acquired a collection of unlikely “English professors” of high intellectual quality, diverse experience, and unconventional academic provenance. There was for example Playthell G. Benjamin, an autodidact “historian” with one year of college; Ivanhoe Donaldson in Political Science, with an undergraduate degree from Michigan State; and Cherif Guelal, whose academic credentials were unclear because he had dropped out of the Sorbonne sans degree.

Benjamin was a captivating lecturer with an encyclopedic knowledge of African and Afro-American history and a photographic memory. Soon enough, for their own excellent reasons—I shan’t speculate as to what extent concern for “eroding standards” played any role—the History Department invited him to present a lecture on the scholarship in black history. I remember with still undiminished pleasure sitting in the back of that room while Benjamin conducted an audience of historians on a tour through the historical scholarship from ancient Africa to the contemporary United States. Speaking without notes for over three hours, he cited the important works—author, title, and date, giving astute and witty capsule analyses of the contribution (or lack thereof) of each historian to the evolution of the field. I distinctly recall (I was watching closely) that no one left the room before he finished. I watched as the astonishment and growing respect of the audience would erupt at the end in a hearty standing ovation. I was not at all surprised, because it had been just such a virtuoso performance at a conference where we met that had led to his recruitment.

Ivanhoe Donaldson, the political scientist with merely an undergraduate education, was the legendary SNCC field organizer immortalized in the documentary film *Ivanhoe, the Story of a SNCC Field Secretary*. A shrewd and canny political strategist, Ivanhoe had guided several successful racially groundbreaking electoral campaigns: Julian Bond to the Georgia House; Andrew Young, first to the U. S. Congress, then the Atlanta mayoralty; Carl

Stokes, the first black mayor of Cleveland, Ohio; as well as that of our former SNCC ally, the unfortunate Marion Barry, in the nation's capital. While in the department Donaldson would be architect of the historic National Black Power Conference in Cleveland. Though I had known Ivanhoe since we were both twelve years old, it was only in Amherst that I would discover that he was far and away one of the smartest people I have ever known.

Cherif, actually *Ambassador* Cherif Guelal, was revolutionary Algeria's first ambassador to the United States, a close friend and intellectual collaborator with Frantz Fanon. His reason for terminating his Sorbonne studies had been to serve in the government-in-exile of the FNLA (Front for the National Liberation of Algeria) during the Algerian war of independence. It was the overthrow of Ahmed Ben Bella which had cost him his diplomatic posting and made him available to our department. His courses "Revolution in the Third World" and "The Writings of Frantz Fanon" were not only popular with students here but were a true innovation in the American academic curriculum of the time. He would leave our department for the presidency of what was said to be at that time the world's largest corporation when the Algerian government decided to nationalize and incorporate all its petroleum reserves and wisely called Cherif back to service to manage that process.

The other "English" professors in Afro-Am—Esther Terry and myself—were not at all academically esoteric, having been trained in "English" right here. This discussion is important in understanding the next chapter: in the proposal we had written that the shortage of conventionally trained academics for our purposes would dictate that most initial faculty would have to be drawn from the ranks of "intellectual activists" in the black world. Why should conventionally trained academics not be available? Because for many years graduate committees across the nation had been strenuously advising doctoral candidates in no uncertain terms, for their own good to be sure, that any dissertation addressing any aspect of their own people would not be permitted, since professionally "there simply is no future in it."

Which explains our nonconventional appointments. However, these had been celebrated in the student community, and more important, seen by the administration as so successful, that I guess we were encouraged to push the envelope on the next round.

Once the trustees consummated the deal, our papers were transferred from Bartlett Hall to New Africa House and we all officially became

Black Studies professors. But even from our position of bureaucratic limbo the search for faculty had gone forward to excellent effect. So that by the time I left the country that spring, ostensibly to write a (yet unwritten) novel about Nat Turner, four files for new appointments were ready to be sent forward to the administration. My return for the fall semester was delayed by certain unexpected difficulties. (“*Mr. Thelwell, travel to the United States is not a right, it is a privilege, over which I have total discretion.*” *Consular Officer, U.S. Embassy, Kingston, Jamaica*). These difficulties were only resolved by the intervention of the university and a successful expedition into the federal bureaucracy in D.C. by three members of the upper administration. (There is a funny and instructive story involving our administrators, the State Department, and the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest for which, alas, there is no space here.)

Feeling highly “privileged” and grateful for the administration’s loyalty, I returned to find classes under way and three new faculty settling in nicely. These were Josephus Vidal Olufemi Richards of Sierra Leone, an amazingly erudite African Art historian and fabric designer Dovi Afesi; a young African historian from Ghana (in his high school graduating class his chief rival for top academic had been a bright young man named Kofi Annan); and Johnetta Cole, an anthropologist who went on to the presidency of Spelman College and is now director of the Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution. In the prevailing excitement of arrival it took me a few days to realize that something, the fourth appointment, that of a historian on American slavery, was missing.

“Wait a minute,” I asked, “what happened to the Aptheker appointment?”

“Waal”, drawled Bernie Bell, who been interim chair in my absence, “that’s something the administration has been wanting to talk to you about.”

THIS WAS AN APPOINTMENT we had thoroughly discussed among ourselves. Dr. Herbert Aptheker, a serious scholar of slavery and, as I was to discover, something of a disciple of Du Bois, had written a book, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, which had excited the ire of a cabal of establishment southern historians, particularly C. Vann Woodward of Yale. According to this group, Aptheker’s work was inferior if not spurious scholarship. We were convinced that the real issue was that the book definitively refuted the since discredited “Sambo theory” of slavery, which was for that time curiously influential. This version of our ancestors’ experience held—in total contravention of the preponderance of evidence—that Africans had been so traumatized by the institution that

they had been reduced, like zombies, to a state of psychological paralysis and utter dependence which foreclosed any possibility of resistance, the so-called Sambo Personality.

Our friend and mentor Professor Kaplan (a founder of this august journal) had repeatedly challenged these gentlemen in print to produce evidence of error—even a single instance of omission, carelessness, or falsification of evidence—in Aptheker’s work. None were ever forthcoming. Nevertheless Dr. Aptheker had never, despite impressive publications, received appointment to the faculty of any university in the country. Whenever this possibility arose it was always dismissed by reason of “dubious” scholarship, though we suspected that the real reason might just possibly have been Dr. Aptheker’s prominently held position as “chief theoretician” of the Communist Party USA. But we could have been wrong.

However, we concluded that since the “poor” scholarship charges seemed clearly a canard, denying a fine scholar employment because of political beliefs was an equally scandalous violation of fundamental principles of academic freedom and that the Academy should be ashamed. And oddly enough, when we had approached Dr. Aptheker, he had not discussed ideology nor had he tried to convert much less “brainwash” us. The names Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, or Joseph Stalin never arose in our discussions, though those of David Walker, Nat Turner, and Frederick Douglass had. We discussed black history and found that our positions on that subject were in strong agreement. Which was the basis on which the nomination was made. Now the administration for which we had complete respect wanted to discuss it further.

The meeting was to prove eventful. The top administration was in place when we arrived. Chancellor Tippo, Provost Gluckstern, and Dean Shapiro looked real serious. In fact, so serious and so busting with gravitas that it actually occurred to me to greet them with a bow, in the words of Othello greeting the Venetian senate, *“Most Potent, Grave, and Reverend Signiors, My very Noble and approv’d Good Masters,”* as Esther, Johnetta, and Ivanhoe seated themselves. But unsure how this might be received, I restrained myself and often wondered what might have happened had I not.

Of the many good qualities I appreciated about Chancellor Oswald Tippo, his principled directness and guileless, blunt honesty stand out. He came straight to the point. They’d looked into Aptheker and everything we said about his scholarship appeared accurate. He agreed that the denigration of his work simply wasn’t fair, and was in fact disgraceful. His

work seemed to fit the department's mission, so on that score it would be a sensible appointment. And, he agreed, in a just world a fine scholar would not be kept out of the Academy because of his political ideas and commitments. But, that said, there was absolutely no way he was gonna make this appointment. And let's be quite clear. This is not about scholarship; it's the communist thing. His administration appointing one of the leading figures in the Communist Party to the faculty? No way. Forget it. As chancellor he had to be responsible for the interests of the entire university. This appointment would be an utter and complete political disaster. Quite simply, it could not be done.

Our side understood, sympathized, and expressed measured disappointment. But would it *really* be such a disaster after all? Assorted importunings were uttered evoking "the high road . . . correcting historical injustice . . . institutional pride . . . courageous leadership . . . setting an example . . . affirming fundamental principle . . . doing the right thing . . . leading the way in higher education . . . academic freedom." Yaya, yaya, on and on.

They listened patiently. Look, it will not, and cannot, happen, they said. This university has real enemies in the legislature. Someone, I think Dean Shapiro, said, "Jesus, can't you just see what Blackie Burke would do with something like this?" Looks of genuine horror crossed their faces. "We'd be giving that bastard the knife he's been looking for to cut the university's throat."

Senator Burke, the loud, abrasive, and very conservative chairman of the committee out of which the university's appropriation came, was not a friend of public higher education. At least not in western Massachusetts.

So we cannot *appoint* Aptheker but there are things we *can* do. We can invite him to give a series of eight well-remunerated lectures next year, one each month of the academic year, on the life of Dr. Du Bois. Further we can assign the department four new positions for which searches can begin immediately. What do you think? Of course, what did not need saying was that, in return, the department would not publicly raise the issue of academic freedom in connection with the Aptheker appointment. It would not, as in the climate of those times we were perfectly capable of doing, mobilize some kind of national movement around the issue.

"We appreciate that this is a very thoughtful proposal, gentlemen. But of course, you understand that we shall have to caucus?"

Outside, strange as it might sound today, I actually was torn. There were real principles, important issues of fairness and justice at play. My SNCC instincts were toward riding principle wherever it might lead. On the

other hand, I deeply admired the men in that room, and only recently had excellent reason to have been grateful for their support with that arrogant and vindictive consul in Kingston. Also they clearly had respected, perhaps even shared, our feelings about the seriousness of the issue. I had gotten the distinct impression that they—particularly Chancellor Tippo—would have liked to be able to redress the injustice to Aptheker. But they had to do what they had to do, period. . . . These were not bureaucratic careerists but honorable and intelligent men. . . . Embarrassing them or in any way damaging their university was the last thing I wanted to do. . . . but principle was principle, and standing on principle was easy only when it didn't cost anything. . . .

In the caucus I suppose we all knew what we had to do but we had to go through the radical motions anyway. Ways to “heighten the contradiction,” or “bringing pressure to bear” were tossed around. Then Ivanhoe cut to the chase incontrovertibly.

“Who y’awl kidding? What will any of that get us—one national press conference, two at the most, and after that what?”

Back in the meeting the administrators had the grace to pretend relief, as though they had not known that we had no sensible other choice. We affected that we were making a painful concession only out of loyalty. Of course we would have to consult Aptheker on the offer but we believed had we had achieved common ground. The tension broken, the gathering relaxed and an administrator, Dean Shapiro I think it was, entertained us with the story below about the bush league provincialism that oftentimes characterizes state politics.

One of those new positions went to John Henry Bracey—now serving his second term as chairman—as it were, trading one fine historian for another. Two were used for Chester Davis and Bill Strickland from the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta, and the fourth went to the inimitable and unforgettable Acklyn Lynch. (Bill Belichick never did better with his draft picks, but, as he would be the first to tell you, it always is a bit of a gamble.)

Dr. Aptheker seemed unsurprised by our news, thanked us for our efforts, and reassured us that building the department had to be our priority. We had done the right thing and he would be delighted to offer the lectures on Du Bois. In the event the Five College community was treated to a truly extraordinary educational experience. Nothing could have better justified to the community our reason for the association of that name with the department's. Aptheker's evident devotion, combined

with his historian's attention to detail, his intimate acquaintance from working with Dr. Du Bois over many years, and the respectful care which he obviously devoted to preparing each lecture, was a revelation. Du Bois the man was presented all his complex, admirably quirky, and enigmatic humanity, and the remarkable career of struggle, endurance, and accomplishment was situated in the context of history. I had heard Dr. Aptheker speak while at Howard and had not thought him capable of such affecting eloquence. I attribute it to his reverence for the subject. I don't know whether Dr. Aptheker ever published these lectures, but they certainly, certainly, certainly, Lord, deserve to be.



ONE AFTERNOON toward the end of the first year of the department's official existence, my phone in New Africa House rang. It was Vincent Harding, director of the Institute of the Black World in Atlanta, and his voice fairly quivered with excitement. "Mike, I can hardly believe what I've just this minute discovered," he burst out. "This house, the one where we have the Institute, turns out to be one in which *Du Bois actually lived while at Atlanta University!*"

His excitement was infectious; this really was beyond coincidence, though not being the Christian minister Vincent is, I was not prepared to attribute it to intelligent design, so I said something like, "Wow. Really? That can't be an accident, my brother. Truly the ancestors do not sleep. But how did you find this out?"

Well, I'm here talking to Madame Du Bois, and . . ."

"Madame? . . . You, you can't mean *Shirley Graham Du Bois*, can you?"

"None other. That's exactly who I mean," he said. "Matter of fact she's sitting right across the room from me right now."

It was my turn to be flabbergasted. Tell the truth, I hadn't been entirely sure whether Mrs. Du Bois was still alive. I knew that Gamal Abdel Nasser (peace be unto him) had sent a plane for Kwame Nkrumah's wife and family at the time of the Ghanaian coup that overthrew the *Osagyefo*. I had assumed that his protection would have extended to Du Bois's widow and had heard that she had moved to Cairo sometime after. But I hadn't really had reason to think about her. So it was kind of a shock to hear that she was actually in this country. My excitement matched Vincent's.

"Oh, man, tell her she's *gotta* come to Amherst. Please, brother, you gotta persuade her." Vincent left the line, then came back to report that Mme. Dubois said that a visit to Amherst, intriguing as it was, simply

was not going to be possible this trip. Of course she'd like to come, but perhaps next time.

I asked to speak with her and explained what a great honor and inspiration it would be if she would come to see what was being done in her husband's name here at the University of Massachusetts. She was very gracious. Said that Vincent had said as much, but she explained why it simply wasn't possible. The trip had been a year in the planning. The scheduling was in the hands of organizers who'd had to decline a great many important and attractive invitations that she'd have loved to accept. And now the visit was coming to its end. She couldn't see how another stop could possibly be fitted in.

I begged, pleaded, cajoled, flattered (subtly, to be sure), and exaggerated shamelessly—all in about three minutes.

"You really are most persuasive, young man. Tell you what. I can't promise anything because it's really out my hands. But I will take the matter to the organizers, old friends whose judgments I respect, and then we'll see."

I had my fingers crossed but had no way of knowing exactly what those trusted "old friends," among whom I'm sure Herbert Aptheker would have been prominent, might have said of us. . . . But within a week Mme. Du Bois called to accept. She could be in Amherst for three days.

The administration shared our excitement. If there is a university equivalent of a state visit, that is what was rolled out for the occasion. Mme. Du Bois was received onto the campus by the top leadership. Among us she was impressive and businesslike. She spent much time in New Africa House, met the faculty and the students, scrutinized the department proposal, and asked really astute and probing questions about everything. There was a community reception, which she seemed to enjoy greatly.

She was a petite lady with a strong face, a no-nonsense demeanor, and very alert eyes that appeared to miss nothing. By the second day, I suspected that she had satisfied herself and reached her conclusions, because she visibly relaxed and became expansive. She answered our eager questions about the Doctor, shared their experiences of Ghana and China as well as impressing us with her candid impressions of people like Nkrumah and Nasser and their replacements in office. Before her departure she paid a "courtesy call" on the chancellor and his close associates which seemed to go on much longer than mere courtesies would seem to have required. But I thought nothing of it at the time.

My recollection is that, although I'd gotten a strong impression that Mme. Du Bois looked favorably on our efforts, it never would have occurred to me to be so presumptuous as to invite her to join our faculty. I came to suspect, though, that such an invitation may have been issued during that unduly lengthy, last courtesy call. In any event Mrs. D. would join the department for the 1974-75 academic year. A few years later, her son, David Graham Du Bois, would join the faculty and return as a visiting professor in journalism until his death at the turn of this century.

The author of a number of books, Ms. D. taught courses in literature for us. In the manner of many of those old-time black teachers of our youth, she was exemplary and very disciplined. She devoted great care to her teaching preparation and enormous time and concern to her students. In the department's early days faculty meetings were of necessity much more frequent, and one of my most enduring images of her comes from those meetings. As chair I had to be punctual. But every time I'd arrive exactly on time for a meeting Mrs. Du Bois would've beaten me there, a solitary, businesslike presence sitting erect in the front of the room, alert, pen in hand, notebook at the ready. I'd sit with that elderly lady and, over the next half hour or so, watch the rest of the faculty, every one at least twenty years her junior, casually straggle in. I grew to admire Mrs. Du Bois very much, and I was able to spend time in her company. From our conversations I learned a great deal, as much from what she did not say as from what she did, but especially from the way she conducted herself always. And in retrospect it is possible to see that certain things which she did not share had been perhaps her greatest lesson.

At the end of the year she meticulously completed all her duties, took her leave, and departed for China, there to die of cancer in what seemed a very short time. All year she had neither requested nor accepted any special treatment based on age or status. Yet, as seems quite evident, she had to have known at least for a considerable portion of that year that she was terminally ill and may very well have been in some pain. And so far as I know, she never breathed a word to anyone in Amherst.

ONE DAY Mrs. Du Bois came into my office so angry that she could not sit still nor get her words out. She paced back and forth, fuming and unable to control some very strong emotions. Never having seen this dignified lady in such a state, this was totally out of character. I was quite concerned and tried to calm her. When she was able to speak, it was apparent that she was having difficulty suppressing tears of anger.

“I’m just back from Harvard and I simply can’t remember being as angry. The arrogance . . .” Wishing to lighten her mood, I attempted quite unsuccessfully a bit of humor.

“Oh, Harvard, Mrs. D? Well, that explains everything. Remember what someone said about ‘a place where fake pearls are tossed before real swine?’” The lady was in no mood to be distracted or amused.

“No, it doesn’t explain anything.” She gestured impatiently. “Now this is serious, you listen . . .” She had gone there to finalize discussions about Harvard’s acquisition of the Du Bois papers. Du Bois having earned his doctorate there, they felt his papers were theirs as a matter of right, institutional prestige, and previous condition (*his*). . . Really, it was quite unthinkable they could possibly rest anywhere else but the Widener.

On the value and price of the papers there was complete agreement. And once acquired, the university would oversee and undertake their appropriate publication by the university’s press. Mrs. D. naturally agreed and pointed out that the obvious editor for that project would be the historian who had figured significantly in gathering the collection and consequently best understood it. This was of course Dr. Herbert Aptheker. Mrs. Du Bois was then made to understand, in no uncertain terms, that once the papers were Harvard’s property only the university would determine their disposition. And she should understand that there was absolutely no possibility of Harvard University’s entering into any such professional relationship with Aptheker. I can only speculate as to what, if any, reasons were presented in justification, but I’m pretty sure apprehension of the dread “Blackie” Burke was not one of them. From the intensity of Mrs. D’s. outrage and repeated mention of “arrogance,” I suspect that the slanders of Aptheker’s scholarly integrity and competence which had ossified into received wisdom among a certain coterie of academics may have entered the conversation. They watched her end the discussion and storm out, probably entirely too confident that inevitably she must “come to her senses” and be back, cap in hand. What alternative did she have? What alternative *could* there be to Harvard? Well, that they were soon to discover.

(To the extent that the Harvard grandees had been surprised by Mrs. Du Bois’s indignation, they really should not have been. It was pretty common knowledge that Aptheker had for many years done yeoman work tracking down and collecting as many of Du Bois’s papers as he could. And, according to the grapevine, he had done so entirely at personal expense, free from the contamination of a dime of the institutional or philanthropic support usually awarded as a matter of course to

collections of this historical, literary and intellectual significance. It was the department's resident historian, John Bracey, who had given me the sharpest, most enduring image I retain concerning this: "Yeah, man, it was nobody but Herbert and Faye Aptheker by themselves, working long nights in their basement organizing, annotating, and coordinating that mountain of documents. That's why these papers exist in their current form at all.")

Listening to Mrs. DuBois, I was relieved to see that recounting the experience seemed to calm her down appreciably.

"Oh, Mrs. D., don't distress yourself. Calm down, this ain't the end of the world. In fact, it just might be the best thing that could have happened." She appeared startled and looked at me as though contemplating the possibility that I had taken leave of my senses.

"No, ma'am, I'm serious. Harvard isn't the center of the universe, they just think they are. Look over there," I pointed west out the window, "we can almost see Great Barrington from here. And this university plans to build a great new library. Maybe this is the place where the ancestors intend those papers to find a home, why on earth not?"

Mrs. D was silent and thoughtful for a long minute or two. Then suddenly and completely her face brightened into a radiant smile,

"Yes," she said with excitement, "yes. That is so right. And this, this is the *State* University of Massachusetts, it will *always* be here. At least as long as there is a state." Mrs. D. was a socialist, so that misconception was understandable, and I felt that wasn't the best moment to enlighten her about the politics of the "Blackie" Burkes of the world, or its implications for the university's permanence.

By then Chancellor Tippo had been succeeded by Randolph "Bill" Bromery, a truly extraordinary black man. After flying with the legendary Tuskegee Airmen, Bromery had availed himself of the G.I. bill to become a geologist, worked in government in D.C., then come to Amherst as chair of the Geology Department and, within a decade, had risen to the chancellorship. From which you might assume, and quite correctly so, that Bro. Bill was uncommonly politically astute and effective.

"Brother Chancellor, Mike Thelwell. Guess who I have in my office? Mrs. Du Bois, and there's something important she wishes to discuss with you. No, no. I think it best you hear it from her. But I'm sure this is something that could redound to the great credit of the university and, of course, of your administration. Interested? Of course, I'll drive her right over." The rest, to coin a phrase, is history.

How Chancellor Bromery accomplished it is worth some attention. I have no idea how the papers were evaluated financially. Within a week of their talk, the brother began the process to secure the necessary funds to acquire them without recourse to state funds. He called up the president of the Friends of the Library, an alumnus named William Manchester, author of the first published biography of the recently martyred John F. Kennedy (which had been a runaway bestseller, an American book of the year, and brought its author extremely high literary visibility). To Manchester's enthusiastic efforts in those circles, Bromery added chips he could call in from executives of oil companies who had excellent reason to be grateful for the oil fields his geological expertise had been able to help them locate in the past.

NEXT CAME the Aptheker question. He was appointed editor. To allay the longstanding canards re scholarship, an advisory committee of prominent (i.e., "respectable") American historians, chaired by Professor Sidney Kaplan, was established to "oversee" publication by the university press. The members of this committee had all been carefully selected by Sid with the clear understanding that the work would not be onerous. Sid was nothing if not a man of his word, so much so in fact that I cannot recollect this group's ever having met. So much for oversight. All of the volumes published have won high critical acclaim for the intelligence brought to the selections and the probity and editorial judgment displayed in their presentation. As I said, Bromery was a man of uncommon resourcefulness and political dexterity.

The next significant event in this "history" is the naming of the library. This came in 1994, almost exactly two decades after the events just recounted. This initiative is something for which neither the W. E. B. Du Bois Department nor the general faculty can take any credit beyond, perhaps, having signed the students' petitions. The credit belongs entirely to a determined group of progressive graduate students and the leadership of the undergraduate student government who launched the campaign.

I must have signed the petition, difficult to imagine that I wouldn't have, but I do not remember when or where. What I do remember was a number of phone calls from journalists with questions about Du Bois's joining the Communist Party, which I was happy to discuss:

That was not on Dr. Du Bois's part an act of political naïveté, senility, or as your question seems to suggest, disloyalty to "America." It was at the age of ninety-three an act of immense courage in affirmation of

the most “American” of values, which the Supreme Court had failed to do by refusing to disqualify the McCarran Act. This now discredited legislation required American citizens—and certain parties suspected of communist sympathies—to register with the government. As an affirmation of every citizen’s fundamental right to freedom of thought and association Dr. DuBois made *public* application for Party membership. And this during what Lillian Hellman had famously called “scoundrel time” because of the cowardice of many progressives in the face of the McCarthyist hysteria of the period.

IF I WONDERED about the cause of this sudden flurry of press inquiries, the answer was not long in coming.

All motion is not progress. In the two decades since the acquisition of the papers, a particularly extreme brand of student conservatism, ideologically nurtured and amply funded by forces outside the universities, had made an appearance on campuses across the country. This university was not spared, so that in March the local right-wing student paper sounded the alarm, urgently appealing to the president and board of trustees to save the library and the university community from itself:

*There’s a radical movement sweeping across the UMass campus, attempting to impose a twisted ideology upon an unsuspecting student body. A few misguided individuals here on campus are in the process of immortalizing an admitted communist and racial separatist.*

To his great credit, Chancellor David K. Scott publicly endorsed the student initiative. Presumably against the advice of the more fiscally pragmatic of his advisors, who felt the library’s name to be a valuable commodity that could profitably be “branded,” for example, the Kentucky Fried Chicken Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

That same month university president Michael J. Hooker announced the decision of the board on the students’ petition, and the W. E. B. Du Bois Library of the University of Massachusetts came quietly into existence. Sometimes institutions really do make good decisions.



W. E. B. Du Bois receiving an honorary degree on his ninety-fifth birthday, University of Ghana, Accra, 1963. *courtesy of the Department of Special Collections and Archives, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.*