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Du Bois's *Crisis* and Woman's Suffrage¹

The meaning of the twentieth century is the freeing of the individual soul; the soul longest in slavery and still in the most disgusting and indefensible slavery is the soul of womanhood. God give her increased freedom. . . .

W. E. B. Du Bois, "Woman Suffrage,"
The Crisis XI (November 1915), 30

THE SERIOUSNESS of W. E. B. Du Bois' interest in the woman question is evident in his writings on this subject from "The Work of Negro Women in Society" published in 1902 to *The Damnation of Women* which appeared sixty-two years later.² From 1910 when he founded *The Crisis* until he resigned as editor in 1934, Du Bois used the pages of the N.A.A.C.P. magazine to champion woman's rights.

The number and variety of the materials he published concerning women—most of them specifically concerning black women—is remarkable. They include factual studies of the employment of black women which survey wages, hours, working conditions, job opportunities, and organizations; exposés of sexist discrimination against white women and of racist discrimination against black women practiced by women's organizations; a column and a number of articles reporting work done by black women's clubs; and biographies of outstanding women in the (misnamed) "Men of the Month" series.³ Du Bois published editorials attacking laws which prohibited the marriage of blacks and whites, and articles exploring the question of racial intermarriage (which he said "is what . . . [white people] . . . mean by the race problem").⁴ He reviewed books on the woman question and reprinted comments published elsewhere about women. He wrote essays, articles, and editorials protesting sexist, racist efforts to degrade black women, including the much-anthologized "Black Mother"⁵; and poems and parables glorifying black women, including his own lyrical "The Woman," "The Princess of the Hither Isles," and "The Burden of Black Women."⁶ While exploring many aspects of the woman question in *The Crisis*,

from 1910 to 1920 Du Bois focused on the issue of woman's suffrage.

In 1911 Du Bois outlined his position in a sharply worded editorial entitled "Forward Backward":

The nemesis of every forward movement in the United States is the Negro question. Witness Woman Suffrage. . . . Mrs. Anna Shaw, president of the Woman's Suffrage Association of America, recently made the extraordinary statement that all Negroes were opposed to woman suffrage. This is, of course, a bare-faced falsehood [which] hurts the Woman's Suffrage Movement far more than it hurts black folk. The strength of the woman's movement in England is that it is honest and unselfish, aristocrat and working woman working hand in hand. But in America . . . the war cry is rapidly becoming "Votes for White Women Only." . . . The Negro problem is the door which bars progress in the United States and which makes us liars and hypocrites. [II (October 1911), 243-44.]

President Shaw's response, which Du Bois ran in an editorial three months later, asserts that "There is not in the National Association any discrimination against colored people. . . . Our whole contention is for justice to women, white and colored. . . ." Du Bois reports, however, that at a recent Woman's Suffrage convention held at Louisville, a black delegate was denied permission to introduce a motion condemning the disfranchisement of black people in the South. He concludes by quoting from President Shaw's letter opposing the motion:

The resolution . . . proposed . . . would do more to harm the success of our convention in Louisville than all the other things that we do would do good. I am in favor of colored people voting, but white women have no enemy in the world who does more to defeat our amendments, when submitted, than colored men, and until women are recognized and permitted to vote, I am opposed to introducing into our women suffrage convention a resolution on behalf of men who, if our resolution were carried, would go straight to the polls and defeat us every time. [IV (January 1912), 76-77.]

Du Bois' exposure of white racism within the woman's movement, linked with his endorsement of the goals of that movement, suggests the double thrust of his position on woman's suffrage.

The coupling of rights for women with rights for black people was not new. Du Bois educated his readers in the history of the struggle for the

franchise by both groups in September 1912, in the first special issue of *The Crisis*. His central theme is suggested on the cover, which features a portrait of Frederick Douglass and the message “Woman’s Suffrage Number.” In his lead editorial, Du Bois asks why black voters should concern themselves with woman’s suffrage, and answers:

First, it is a great human question. Nothing human must be foreign, uninteresting or unimportant to colored citizens of the world. Whatever concerns half mankind concerns us. Secondly, any agitation, discussion or reopening of the problem of voting must inevitably be a discussion of the right of black folk to vote in America and Africa. . . .

Finally, votes for women means votes for black women. . . . The enfranchisement of these women will not be a mere doubling of our vote and voice in the nation; it will tend to stronger and more normal political life, the rapid dethronement of the “heeler” and “grafter” and the making of politics a method of broadest philanthropic race betterment. . . . [IV (September 1912), 234.]

The suffrage symposium which follows in *The Crisis* suggests that, in the era of disfranchisement of black men by legalisms and by terror, an era which saw increasing support for the enfranchisement of women, Du Bois was engaged in an effort to revive the alliance of “women and Negroes” which a half century earlier had won passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Thus Fanny Garrison Villard, recalling her father’s work for antislavery and for feminism, discusses the historical alliance between advocates of woman’s suffrage and of black suffrage; and Mary Church Terrell forcefully asserts their identity of interest:

. . . the very arguments which are advanced against granting the right of suffrage to women are offered by those who have disfranchised colored men. . . .

Frederick Douglass did many things of which I am proud, but there is nothing he ever did in his long and brilliant career in which I take keener pleasure and greater pride than I do in his ardent advocacy of equal political rights for women, and the effective service he rendered the cause of woman suffrage sixty years ago. When the resolution demanding equal political rights for women was introduced in the meeting held at Seneca Falls, N.Y., in 1848, Frederick Douglass was the only man in the convention courageous and broad minded enough to second the motion. . . . In his autobiography Douglass says: “I have been convinced of the wisdom of woman suffrage and I have never denied the faith.” [pp. 243–45.]

Evidently alluding to the recent failure of the Louisville convention to endorse black suffrage, which Du Bois had exposed in the January issue, Martha Gruening recalls a nineteenth-century woman's rights convention. The suffragists, under attack by antifeminist clerics, had been reluctant to permit a black woman to speak, yet when Sojourner Truth arose, she had saved the convention. After quoting her famous "Ain't I a Woman" speech, Ms. Gruening comments:

If such incidents have been less frequent in recent years it is not because the profound and close connection between the Negro and women movements no longer exists. The parallel between their respective situations is as clear to-day as it was in 1848, but it is too frequently ignored by the reformers on both sides. Both have made some progress toward complete emancipation, the gains of women in the direction of enfranchisement being seemingly the more lasting. Both, however, are still very largely disfranchised, and subject to those peculiar educational, legal and economic discriminations that are the natural results of disfranchisement. And finally, both are being brought with every onward step nearer to the identical temptation—to sacrifice the principle of true democracy to the winning of a single skirmish. . . . What all suffragists must understand, whatever their sex or color—[is] that all the disfranchised of the earth have a common cause. [pp. 245–47.]

The final participant in the symposium, Adella Hunt Logan, discusses the work black women have undertaken in civic reform and in the woman's rights movement.

The message of this 1912 *Crisis* symposium, writ large, by black and white women in both movements, is that the nineteenth-century bond between feminists and blacks must be re-wrought in the twentieth century.

In November, addressing the 1912 convention of the National Woman Suffrage Association at Philadelphia, Du Bois reiterated his belief in the identity of interest shared by disfranchised women and blacks, and in the months that followed, used the pages of *The Crisis* to develop his arguments more fully.⁷ He excoriated "Anglo-Saxon manhood" which harassed feminist activists, hailed the efforts of women to obtain the suffrage, and criticized those within the woman's movement who discriminated against black feminists.⁸ But the problem, for a black supporter of woman's suffrage, was not only the white racism within the woman's movement, but the racism of American white women generally. Du Bois discussed this in an editorial (August 1914).

. . . considering what the subjection of a race, a class or a sex must mean, there will undoubtedly manifest itself among women voters at first more prejudice and petty meanness toward Negroes than we have now. It is the awful penalty of injustice and oppression to breed in the oppressed the desire to oppress others. The southern white women who form one of the most repressed and enslaved groups of modern civilized women will undoubtedly, at first, help willingly and zealously to disfranchise Negroes, cripple their schools and publicly insult them. . . . Granting [however] that first tendencies would make the woman voter as unfair in race rights as the man, there would be in the long run a better chance to appeal to a group that knows the disadvantage and injustice of disfranchisement by experience, than to one arrogant and careless with power. And in all cases the broader the basis of democracy the surer is the universal appeal for justice to win ultimate hearing and sympathy.

Therefore:Votes for Women. [VIII, 179.]

In August 1915, he devoted another special issue of *The Crisis* to woman's suffrage. On the cover, a picture depicting Sojourner Truth and Abraham Lincoln recalls Du Bois' earlier effort to revive the historic alliance between "women and Negroes." Inside, the text demonstrates the commitment of black leaders to the rights of women. Introduced by Du Bois as "one of the strongest cumulative attacks on sex and race discrimination in politics ever written" [X, 177], this second symposium encompasses statements by twenty black men and women endorsing woman's suffrage from a wide spectrum of viewpoints. Thus then-Alderman Oscar de Priest writes on "Chicago and Woman's Suffrage," pointing out the role played by black women in his election; Rev. John Hurst, Bishop of the AME Church, discusses the equality of souls within the Christian religion; and Ms. Paul Laurence Dunbar speaks of the commitment of women writers to woman's suffrage. Of particular interest are the contributions of Benjamin Brawley who, referring to Ibsen's *Nora*, writes that "The finest and deepest culture is not that which keeps its possessor forever enclosed in a Doll's House," and of Charles Waddell Chesnut, who argues:

Experience has shown that the rights and interests of no class are safe so long as they are entirely in the hands of another class—the rights and interests of the poor in the hands of the rich, of the rich in the hands of the poor, of one race in the hands of another. And while there is no such line of cleavage between the sexes as exists between other social classes, yet so far as women constitute a class differentiated from men, neither can their rights be left with entire safety solely in the hands of men.⁹

Three months later, Du Bois published a response entitled "The Risk of Woman Suffrage" written by Kelly Miller, the well-known Howard professor. Miller begins:

The symposium. . . involved only one side of a disputed issue. . . . The public, however, should not be misled to suppose that they represent the general attitude of the colored race on that question. . . . Sex is the one fixed and unalterable separatrix of mankind. . . . Woman's sphere of activity falls mainly within while man's field of action lies largely without the domestic circle. . . . Woman is physically weaker than man and is incapable of competing with him in the stern and strenuous activities of public and practical life. . . . Suffrage is not a natural right, like life and liberty. . . . It is merely a convenient agency through which to secure the best result of government, and to make secure life, liberty and happiness to all. It cannot be maintained that woman is deprived of any of these objects under male suffrage. . . . It is alleged that Negro suffrage and woman suffrage rest on the same basis. But on close analysis it is found that there is scarcely any common ground between them. [XI (November 1915), 37–38.]

In an editorial rejoinder, Du Bois dismisses Miller's views as "ancient." He points out that women are "engaged successfully in practically every pursuit in which men are engaged"; that "Difference, either physical or spiritual, does not argue weakness or inferiority"; that "to say that men protect women with their votes is to overlook the flat testimony of the facts." Using strikingly modern imagery, he asserts that "it was [once] considered that by marriage a woman lost all her individuality as a human soul and simply became a machine for making men. We have outgrown that idea." Du Bois concludes by prophesying that women, with their long history of oppression, will achieve new freedom in the twentieth century, the era of human liberation. [pp. 29–30.]

As when he hailed in a single breath the enfranchisement of English women and the revolutions in Ireland and Russia, and contrasted these hopeful gains with the persistent disfranchisement of black people in the United States, Du Bois consistently placed the struggle for woman's rights within an international historical context.¹⁰ His June 1917 editorial endorsing American participation in the war presented a series of demands on behalf of black America: fourth in the list of eight is "the right to vote for both men and women." [XIV, 59–60.]

Implementing the thesis that "Every argument for Negro suffrage is an argument for woman's suffrage; every argument for woman's suffrage is an argument for Negro suffrage; both are great movements in democracy,"

[IX (April 1915), 285], the second *Crisis* symposium had attempted to rally black opinion for women's rights. The third special "Suffrage Number," which Du Bois published in November 1917, featured the views of three prominent feminists on the relationship between woman's suffrage and black suffrage. The discussion begins with Du Bois' "The Oath of the Negro Voter": "I will make the first and foremost aim of my voting the enfranchisement of every citizen, male and female; and particularly the restoring of the stolen franchise to my people. . . ." [XV, 7.] The first member of the feminist panel is Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, whom Du Bois had criticized so sharply five years earlier. She writes:

I trust we are approaching the time when every loyal, law-abiding citizen of the country shall have an equal right with every other law-abiding citizen of the United States to express, through the ballot box, the will of the citizen, regardless of sex or color, in connection with those problems of the Government which affect the lives of American citizens. [p. 19.]

In an equally revealing statement Carrie Chapman Catt, now president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, begins by criticizing black men for making "the white man's mistake of deciding that the suffrage was the prerogative of men only" during Reconstruction. After asserting that democracy is "based on an extension of the franchise without regard to race, sex, color, or creed," she continues:

In our own country woman suffrage is but one, if acute, phase of the problem. The Negro question is but another. The enfranchisement of the foreign-born peoples who sweep into this country and forget to leave the hyphen at home is yet another. [p. 20.]

In contrast, Mary Garrett Hay, chairman of the militant New York City Woman Suffrage Party, announces that "The colored race is a progressing race. Women constitute a progressing sex," and, identifying the struggle for woman's rights with the black struggle for the franchise, she urges black men to support woman's suffrage. [p. 21.]

Although he entitles this third special suffrage issue "Votes for All," Du Bois' editorial is headed "Votes for Women." [p. 8.] In it, he acknowledges that the Afro-American voter has generally opposed woman's suffrage. He "does not realize the new status of women in industrial and social life" and still "looks forward to the time when his wages will be large enough to support his wife and daughters in comparative idleness

at home.” In addition, he “is particularly bitter at the attitude of many white women: at the naive assumption that the height of his ambition is to marry them, at their artificially-inspired fear of every dark face, which leads to frightful accusations and suspicions, and at their sometimes insulting behavior toward him in public places.” Nevertheless, Du Bois argues, “as an intelligent, self-supporting human being a woman has just as good a right to a voice in her own government as has any man; and . . . the denial of this right is as unjust as is the denial of the right to vote to American Negroes. . . . We cannot punish the insolence of certain classes of American white women or correct their ridiculous fears by denying them their undoubted rights.”

He then addresses himself to the racism of American white women:

It goes without saying that the women’s vote, particularly in the South, will be cast almost unanimously, at first, for every reactionary Negro-hating piece of legislation that is proposed. . . . But against this consideration it must be remembered that these same women are going to learn political justice a great deal more quickly than did their men and that despite their prejudices their very emergence into the real, hard facts of life and out of the silly fairy-land to which their Southern male masters beguile them is going to teach them sense in time.

The editorial ends with an affirmation of faith in black womanhood:

. . . it is going to be more difficult to disfranchise colored women than it was to disfranchise colored men. . . . While you can still bribe some pauperized Negro laborers with a few dollars at election time, you cannot bribe Negro women.

Du Bois’ effort to realize the thesis of his third suffrage symposium—to ensure that woman’s suffrage would mean suffrage for all—was consistent until passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Thus in December 1918, celebrating the political demise of a Georgia senator who had used racist arguments to defeat woman’s suffrage, he paraphrased President Wilson’s defense of woman’s right to vote, making it into an endorsement of black suffrage. [XVII, 62.] In an editorial six months later, he quoted three versions of the proposed Woman’s Suffrage Amendment to the United States Constitution. The first gave Congress the power to enforce its provisions; the second gave this power to the states but stipulated that if they did not enforce woman’s suffrage, Congress might act; the third, introduced by a Louisiana senator, left enforcement up to the

several states. Du Bois, entitling his comment "Descent into Hell," wrote that some feminist leaders had agreed to this Southern version which would disfranchise black women in the South, and warned that "In the next Congress these Suffragists will bear strict watching." [XVIII (June 1919), 61.]

A month later, announcing his postwar program for the Afro-American, Du Bois prophesied, "The colored woman is going to vote. This is our chance. . . ." [XVIII (July 1919), 131.] For nearly a decade he had consistently opposed sexism and supported woman's suffrage, had exposed racism within the feminist movement and among American white women generally, and had attempted to reunite the woman's movement and the black movement, pointing out that both women and blacks were victimized in America. Now, when the triumph of woman's suffrage was imminent, Du Bois repeatedly addressed himself to black women, urging them to prepare themselves to vote. In September 1920 he hailed a resolution by the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs which had demanded Congressional enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution.¹¹ He greeted the victory of woman's suffrage in October by underscoring the lessons he had taught. Asking "Who opposed Woman Suffrage?" Du Bois answers, "With but few exceptions those states which oppose the abolition of child labor, the raising of the age of consent and universal education; those which advocate and practice lynching, mob violence and government by minority." [XX, 261.]

But the nineteenth amendment, like the Fifteenth, was not enforced to protect the voting rights of Afro-Americans. During the 1920 election Du Bois quoted a Virginia newspaper which openly suggested that literacy and property qualifications be used to disfranchise black women, claiming it would be unnecessary to "resort to a drastic redressing of the voting lists . . . until their intelligence as a class is superior to that of white women." [XXI (November 1920), 7-8.]

In the next issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois published Walter White's exposé of the disfranchisement of black women in Florida:

In Orange and Osceola counties, a colored woman would attempt to register; on being asked her age, for example, she would say twenty-four. She would then be asked the year in which she was born. Many of them being illiterate, would not know. The registrar would then probably say, "If you are twenty-four, you were born in 1892, weren't

you?" The applicant, seeking to get the ordeal over, would reply in the affirmative. Before she had been away from the place very long a warrant for perjury had been sworn out against her and she had been arrested. I found many cases equally as flagrant where Negro women had been imprisoned for such "offenses" as these. [XXI (December 1920), 106-08.]

Four months after the elections, Du Bois congratulated black women who had voted. In the next issue, without editorial comment, he published an article reporting that the recent triumphant convention of the Woman's Party had defeated a motion to press for Congressional investigation of violations of the Nineteenth Amendment.¹² As feminist groups continued to ignore the disfranchisement of black women, it became clear that the effort to revive the nineteenth-century alliance between "women and Negroes," and thus to achieve full suffrage, had failed. Nor has this alliance yet been re-established. The ironic optimism Du Bois voiced upon passage of the Nineteenth Amendment still seems appropriate today:

To think that we had to wait until 1920 for Woman Suffrage. . . . Yet in this very fact lies hope for us: A civilization that required nineteen centuries to recognize the Rights of Women can confidently be expected some day to abolish the Color Line. [XX (October 1920), 261.]

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NOTES

¹ The author thanks Pace College Scholarly Research Committee for granting her time for this project. A somewhat different form of the paper was presented at the Institute of Afro-American Culture (University of Iowa, Summer 1972).

² *Spelman Messenger*, XVIII (February 1902), 1; Chicago: Afro-American Books, 1964.

³ In *The Crisis*, employment of black women is discussed in "Employment of Colored Women in Chicago," I (January 1911), 24; Mary E. Jackson, "The Colored Woman in Industry," XVII (November 1918), 12; and "Women Workers in India-

napolis," XXXVII (June 1930), 189. Two series, "Talks About Women" and "Women's Clubs," appeared between I (December 1910) and IV (July 1912); for more on women's clubs, see VIII (October, 1914), 285; and XIV (October, 1917), 289. For a discussion of sexism, see Du Bois' editorial "Consolation," XII (June 1916), 79. For handling of racism, see Catharine D. Lealtad, "The National Y.W.C.A. and the Negro," XIX (April 1920), 317, Du Bois' editorial "A Question," XX (July 1920), 119, "The International Council of Women," XXI (December 1920), 57; Du Bois' editorials "The Woman's National Foundation," XXIII (March 1922), 201 and "The Woman's Medical College," XXVI (August 1923), 154.

⁴"Postscript: Another Symposium," XXXVII (1930), 210. In editorials entitled "Postscript" or "Opinion," materials on intermarriage include: "Intermarriage," V (February 1913), 180, "The Next Step," VI (June 1913), 79, "Sex Equality," XIX (January 1920), 106, "Mississippi," XX (June 1920), 69, "Intermarriage," XXXIII (January 1927), 128, "About Marrying," XXXVII (January 1930), 28, "Inter-Marriage: A Symposium," XXXVII (February 1930), 50 and (March 1930), 89, "Inter-Marriage' Finis," XXXVII (May 1930), 172.

⁵V (December 1912), 78; also see, for example, "The Looking Glass: Women and Lynching," XVIII (September 1919), 246, "White Men and a Colored Woman," XXXVII (1930), 416, "The Honor of Women," XXXIX (1932), 266.

⁶"The Woman," II (May 1911), 19, is republished in *Darkwater* as "The Call." Also see "Opinion," IV (May 1912); "Princess of the Hither Isles," VI (October 1913), 285 is included in *Darkwater* as is "The Burden of Black Women," IX (November 1914), 31; the poem was retitled "Riddle of the Sphinx" when republished.

⁷Du Bois' speech, "Disfranchisement," was published by the National Woman Suffrage Association, New York, 1912. It is reprinted in *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses 1890-1919*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: 1970), pp. 230-38. The speech is referred to under the title "The Democracy of Sex and Color" in *The History of Woman Suffrage*, ed. Ida H. Harper, 6 vols. (New York: 1922), V, 343; republished, New York, 1969.

⁸See "Hail Columbia!" V (April 1913), 289-90, "Along the Color Line: Politics" in the same issue, "Woman's Suffrage," VI (May 1913), 29, "Agility," IX (January 1915), 133, "Suffrage and Women," IX (February 1915), 182.

⁹X, 178-92. Brawley's comment is on p. 179; Chesnutt's on p. 182.

¹⁰"The World Last Month," XIV (May 1917), 8 and XIV (July 1917), 111.

¹¹"The Looking Glass: The Stand of Colored Women," XX (September 1920), 235-36. Also see "Woman Suffrage," XIX (March 1920), 234, and "Get Ready," XX (May 1920), 5-6.

¹²Du Bois' congratulations to women voters can be found in XV (December 1917), 67, and XXI (March 1921), 200. For the Woman's Party, see Ella Rush Murray, "The Woman's Party and the Violation of the Nineteenth Amendment," XXI (April 1921), 259; for more, see "Looking Glass: The National Woman's Party," XXII (May 1921), 25.