

The Profeminist Politics of W. E. B. Du Bois with Respects to Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells Barnett

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The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause. When, now, two of these movements—women and color—combine in one, the combination has deep meaning.

—W. E. B. Du Bois¹

In the above quote from his 1920 essay, “The Damnation of Women,” W. E. B. Du Bois designates the “great causes” as the struggles for racial justice, peace, and women’s equality. His use of the phrase “next to” does not refer to a sequential order of descending importance. Concerns for racial equality, international peace, and women’s emancipation combined to form the complex, integrative character of Du Bois’s analysis. With politics remarkably progressive for his time, and ours, Du Bois confronted race, class, and gender oppression while maintaining conceptual and political linkages between the struggles to end racism, sexism, and war. He linked his primary concern, ending white supremacy—*Souls of Black Folk* (1903) defines the color-line as the twentieth century’s central problem, to the attainment of international peace and justice. Du Bois wove together an analysis integrating

the various components of African American liberation and world peace. Initially gender, and later economic, analysis were indispensable in developing his political thought.

I explore Du Bois's relationship to that "deep meaning" embodied in women and color by examining his representation of African American women and his selective memory of the agency of his contemporaries Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. I consider the contradictory aspects of Du Bois's gender politics, and their implications for black intellectualism and agency.

Du Bois's writings champion women's rights, denounce their exploitation, and extol women as heroic strugglers. While condemning the oppression of African American women, Du Bois "veiled" the achievements of women such as Cooper and Wells-Barnett from the political landscape. In his profeminist² politics, he obscured black women's radical agency in black women's intellectualism. In gauging Du Bois's profeminism, I consider both his political actions on behalf of women's rights and the place of women in his nonfictional essays and political autobiographies. I see that in theory and practice Du Bois opposed women's subjugation; yet his political representations reflect considerable ambivalence towards black women's political independence.

My premise in this discussion is that certain forms of profeminism, like certain forms of anti-racism, are deceptive. For instance, anti-racist stances that are contextualized within a larger eurocentric worldview present European American culture as normative; consequently, they inadvertently reinforce white dominance despite their democratic positions on racial politics. Likewise, profeminist or anti-sexist thinkers who articulate their political project within a larger paradigm in which the male is normative reinforce male dominance, despite their stances for gender equality.

I see that Du Bois's profeminist politics clearly mark his opposition to patriarchy and misogyny. Nevertheless, I consider his writings influenced by a masculinist worldview which de-radicalized his gender progressivism. Du Bois rejected patriarchal thought that posits the inferiority of women and the superiority of men. Yet his masculinist framework presents the male as normative. Since masculinist thought does not explicitly advocate the superiority of men or rigid gender social roles, it is not synonymous with patriarchal thought. Masculinism can share patriarchy's presupposition of the male as normative without its anti-female rhetoric. Men who support feminist politics, as profeminists, may advocate the equality or even "superiority" of women. For instance, Du Bois argued against sexism and occasionally for the superiority of women. However, even without patriarchal intent, their works may reinforce gender roles. Du Bois makes no chauvinistic pronouncements, like the aristocratic ones characterizing his early writings on the "Talented Tenth."³ Still,

without misogynist dogma, his nonfictional writings minimize black female agency. They consequently to naturalize as normative the dominance of black males in African American political discourse.

PROSELYTIZING WOMEN'S NOBILITY AND SUPPORTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

A vocal supporter of women's equality and a tireless critic of patriarchy, Du Bois provided important advocacy for ending women's oppression. He consistently emphasized the equality of women with the least rights—African American girls and women. A pioneering feminist scholar and interpreter of Du Bois's pro-feminism, Bettina Aptheker notes that Du Bois began his scientific studies of Africans and African Americans "in an era when predominant scientific and theological opinion held the Negro to be an inferior, if not subhuman, form."⁴ As "a pivotal figure in the struggle for human rights," writes Aptheker, Du Bois was also "strikingly advanced in his views on women . . . a conspicuous theme in much of his work is the subjugation of women, especially Black women."⁵

That theme dominants in "The Damnation of Women." The essay argues for the liberation of females from domestic exploitation: "Only at the sacrifice of intelligence and the chance to do their best work can the majority of modern women bear children. This is the damnation of women." Such declarations by Du Bois are often highlighted by those who note his profeminist activism. Aptheker documents that through the *Crisis*, Du Bois celebrated women in the "Men of the Month" column popularizing race leaders; and, condemned lynching and violent attacks and sexual assaults against black women as well as white men's violence against white women. An advocate of women's enfranchisement, he was invited to address the predominantly white National American Woman Suffrage Association.⁶

In January 1906, African American women in New York state formed a women's Du Bois Circle. Charter members of this group, an auxiliary to the male-dominated Niagara Movement, formed in 1905, organized to support and popularize the work of Du Bois. They also organized around social issues and sex education.⁷ Despite opposition from some of the original all-male membership, like Monroe Trotter who opposed women joining the Niagara Movement, Du Bois successfully worked to ensure the inclusion of women. He also unilaterally organized a Massachusetts Niagara women's Auxiliary.⁸

Holding exceptionally progressive positions on gender equality, sexual violence, and the victimization of women and girls, Du Bois condemned sexual assaults and endorsed initiatives waged by the women's movement. His profeminist positions censured white society's denigration of African American. In a strong denunciation of white males's sexual violence against

black females, he wrote: "I shall never forgive, neither in this world nor the world to come . . . [the white South's] wanton and continued and persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust."⁹ Du Bois eloquently condemns the hypocrisy of the prevailing sexual politics which legitimized violence against women: "All womanhood is hampered today because the world on which it is emerging is a world that tries to worship both virgins and mothers and in the end despises motherhood and despoils virgins."¹⁰

With references to Du Bois's essays on women's oppression, David Levering Lewis compares the familial patriarch with the public advocate of women's rights, describing Du Bois as a "theoretical feminist whose advocacy could erupt with the force of a volcano."¹¹ Indeed, Du Bois's condemnations of sexism and racial-sexual violence appear skewed by a "theoretical feminism" that simultaneously condemns social injustice and reproduces gender dominance. For Lewis, Du Bois's progressive sexual politics strongly emerge in his fiction, particularly Du Bois's first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911):

The Quest reflected the force and sincerity of Du Bois's feminism, his credo that the degree of society's enlightenment and of the empowerment of disadvantaged classes and races was ultimately to be measured by its willingness to emancipate women—, and, above all, black women. What he would later affirm with pistol-shot accuracy was found on virtually every page of the novel: that the race question is "at bottom simply a matter of the ownership of women; white men want the right to own and use all women, colored and white, and they resent any intrusion of colored men into this domain."¹²

Through his writings, we easily ascertain that Du Bois's response to the query "Should women be emancipated?" is an emphatic "Yes!" Answering the question "By whom?" is more difficult. Du Bois's fictional portraits of African American women differ from his nonfiction writing regarding individual African American women. His nonfiction presents vague and generalizing portraits of the agency of his female contemporaries. As Lewis notes, Du Bois largely reserves detailed depictions of specific black women leaders for fictive characters. In his nonfiction essays and autobiographies, Du Bois withholds from his female contemporaries the recognition given his invented women.¹³

BLACK FEMINIST ASSESSMENTS OF DU BOIS'S REPRESENTATIONS

Often the existing literature on Du Bois refrains from analyzing the ways in which his contributions paradoxically reproduced male elites or gendered black intellectualism. An uncritical acceptance of Du Bois's pro-feminist politics at their face value seems to be the norm. Generally, scholars who analyze

gender relations examine Du Bois's sexual politics. For instance, Patricia Morton and Nagueyalti Warren demystify Du Bois's symbolic treatment of black women.

According to Morton, Du Bois "was a pioneer in the transformation" of anti-black woman stereotypes "into empowering symbols of worth."¹⁴ Du Bois's literary representations of black women rewrote them into history. These same representations also obscured women's political agency with symbolic imagery that contradicted the pragmatic politics of his profeminist work. Morton argues that while challenging the demeaning racial-sexual stereotypes concerning black women, Du Bois failed to "reconstruct black women as full human beings in history."¹⁵ Du Bois's writings were influenced by an Afro-American tradition presenting "both idealized and ambivalent images of black women."¹⁶ Du Bois idealized the "black mother" as the responsible caretaker of the morals of black youth and communities, linking femininity to motherhood; Morton contends that his "emphasis on the primacy of women . . . and his frequently feminized symbolization of the virtues he attributed to the Negro race" allowed him to employ the "all-mother" as "both the controlling metaphor of his vision of black womanhood . . . [and] his mystique of race."¹⁷ Du Bois's reading of history discerned a "legacy of survival and strength" rooted in the African American woman "epitomizing and nurturing the ability of her race to move ahead into the future."¹⁸ Yet, his historical works praise women such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman but focus on male leaders.¹⁹ For Morton, his writings venerated "a not more worthy, but a finer type of black woman" who embodied, in Du Bois's words, "that delicate sense of beauty and striving for self-realization which is as characteristic of the Negro soul as is its quaint strength and sweet laughter." Illustrating how gender idealization obscured political specificity and women's radical agency, Morton quotes Du Bois description of Mary Shadd in *Darkwater*: Shadd was, writes Du Bois, "a refined, mulatto woman of "ravishing dream-born beauty," whose "sympathy and sacrifice" were "characteristic of Negro womanhood." Morton elaborates on Du Bois's depiction, writing that Shadd also a confrontational abolition noted for being "strong-willed, independent, and highly intelligent."

Du Bois's "casting" black women as "types," contends Morton, transformed anti-black female stereotypes; for instance, he reworked the image of the stereotypical "mammy" into that of the black Christian martyr. However, the icon of black female martyr or noble sufferer, redeemed through crucifixion, can not accurately depict the defiant, militancy of race women such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Nagueyalti Warren examines how Du Bois's fiction depicts African American women as victims and survivors. Surmising that his representations mythologize female victimization as well

as agency, Warren argues that Du Bois's *Darkwater* uses "the Black Madonna or messianic symbol" as a "literary archetype" to project "a covert image of powerlessness"; this "canonizing of virginity and immaculate conception" strips the woman of "the power and control of her body."²⁰ For Warren, the "strength of the positive, strong African American woman" paints her as "invincible" as this strength is "mythicized to the almost total exclusion of her victimization."²¹

Both profound strength and deep suffering exist in his fictive depictions of African American women. In general, Du Bois's fictional and nonfictional writings present varied and contradictory relationships with African American women. He evinces relationships of: symbiosis with his fictional female protagonists; admiration for the generic, composite symbol of womanhood in African American women's suffering and strength; reverence for his mother, familial women as well as personal friends and acquaintances; concern and committed activism to end the abuse and exploitation of African American women; censorious revisionism in obscuring the pioneering works of Cooper and Wells-Barnett. The multiplicity and contradictory nature of these relationships point to a "double consciousness" muddled with the contradictory gender politics.

Undoubtedly, the multiple oppressions and brutalities that women of African descent battled moved Du Bois to empathy and outrage. His 1914 poem, "The Burden of Black Women," pays tribute to the trials of African American women:

Dark daughters of the lotus leaves that watch
 the Southern sea,
 Wan spirit of a prisoned soul a-panting to
 be free;
 The muttered music of thy streams, the
 whispers of the deep
 Have kissed each other in God's name and
 kissed a world to sleep²²

This poetry echoes the sensibilities of "The Damnation of Women": "To no modern race does its women mean so much as to the Negro nor come so near to the fulfillment of its meaning."²³ Despite the moral sentiment and political commitment, those women, including the ones informing his politics, largely remain nameless in Du Bois's book(s). African American women were an essential cause to be championed for Du Bois. Still those black women leaders, whom Du Bois did not create as fictional characters, would have a difficult time finding themselves in his writings.

THE MARGINALIZATION

OF ANNA JULIA COOPER AND IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT

It is disingenuous to minimize Du Bois's significant contributions towards women's equality. It would also be deceptive to ignore his problematic literary representations of and political relationships with influential African American women activists.

The writings and political work of Cooper and Wells-Barnett are so significant in the life-struggles of their era that they compel juxtaposition with the work of Du Bois. Both Cooper and Wells-Barnett worked with, were influenced by, and influenced Du Bois. At times all three were members of the same organizations. Each struggled with and critiqued white supremacy and the conservative segments of African American leadership. Eventually each leader was isolated from mainstream African American leadership for his or her radical commitments. They were also alienated from one another. Cooper and Wells-Barnett independently made overtures to work with Du Bois which he rebuffed. Neither woman left a record of having sought the other out.

Hazel Carby observes that black American history commonly perceives the turn of the century "as the Age of Washington and Du Bois." Such a view, writes Carby, marginalizes black women's political contributions during "a period of intense intellectual activity and productivity" marked by their development of institutions and organizations. In the "Age of Washington and Du Bois," Cooper was a well-known figure among African American leaders. One of three African American women invited to speak at the World's Congress of Representative Women in 1893, she would later present a paper, "The Negro Problem in America," at the 1900 Pan African Congress Conference in London. Cooper had helped to organize that first Pan African conference and served as a member of its Executive Committee, working alongside another prominent conference organizer, Du Bois. She co-founded the Colored Women's YWCA in 1905, the same year that Du Bois founded the Niagara Movement. Widowed at as a young woman, and childless, she worked as a life-long activist in African American liberation. As principal of the prestigious M Street (later the Dunbar) High School in Washington, D.C., Cooper, who had a graduate degree from Oberlin, structured a curriculum enabling her students to be admitted to Harvard, Yale, and other prestigious universities. As a result of her successes, outraged European Americans and alarmed African Americans on the school board forced her out of the principalship. Racism and unsubstantiated rumors of sexual impropriety were the basis of the dismissal. Continuing her activism as an educator, she obtained her Ph.D. from the Sorbonne in 1930 at the age of sixty-six. As an elder, Cooper assumed the presidency of Frelinghuysen University, an independent

school known as the "College Extension for Working People" for employed working class African Americans in Washington, D.C.

In advocating liberal arts higher education for African Americans and criticizing Booker T. Washington's ideology of vocational training for African Americans, Cooper became an important ally of Du Bois. Although Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* was written as a response to Cooper's urging and her declaration of support for financing and distribution, he never acknowledged Cooper's request that the *Crisis* serialize her biographical sketch of Charlotte Grimke, the prominent activist-intellectual. He would nevertheless draw upon Cooper's intellectual resources more than once. Paula Giddings writes that in her 1892 political autobiography, *A Voice from the South*, she provides a "treatise on race and feminism . . . anticipated much of the later work of W. E. B. Du Bois."²⁴ Du Bois's later democratic revisions of the "Talented Tenth" adapt Cooper's gender critique and expands upon the assertion that elite African Americans were neither the cure nor criteria for black liberation.

In *A Voice from the South*, Cooper calls for a mass, female standard for evaluating the effectiveness of African American praxis, ten years before Du Bois penned his concept of "The Talented Tenth." Cooper's standard to gauge the efficacy of African American praxis reflected the mass of people: "Is it not evident then that as individual workers for this race we must address ourselves with no half-hearted zeal to this feature of our mission [the lives of the masses and women]. The need is felt and must be recognized by all."²⁵ Rejecting the idealized "great leader" and the premise that the lives and (real and potential) contributions of elites were more consequential than those of laborers, she set new criteria for race leadership. Dispensing with black intellectual male elites as representative of Africana freedom, she reasserted the whole, starting with the bottom, as the measure for liberation. Emphasizing the conditions of working class and poor black women, Cooper writes:

our present record of eminent men, when placed beside the actual status of the race in America today proves that no man can represent the race. . . . Only the black woman can say "when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enter with me."²⁶

Quoting Cooper's now-famous "When and where I enter" sentence in "The Damnation of Women," Du Bois fails to mention her by name, prefacing his remarks with the proprietary phrase: "As one of our women writes."²⁷ Du Bois's selective quotations curtail Cooper's full argument; the passage preceding the quote more accurately reflects the critical mandate for black leadership echoing throughout *A Voice from the South*: "as individual workers for

this race we must address ourselves with no half-hearted zeal to this feature of our mission"²⁸—the uplift of the masses of African American women. Du Bois's failure to name this African American author independent of himself renders Cooper anonymous. With no attributed source, his citation allows Cooper to disappear as her words appear. In her absence, readers were unlikely to juxtapose Du Bois with Cooper. Nor would they fully benefit from her own gender analyses. Her anonymity allows Du Bois to appear as a transgender representative for the entire vilified and oppressed race. Washington contextualizes this erasure of Cooper's name within masculinist and patriarchal thought: "The intellectual discourse of black women of the 1890s, and particularly Cooper's embryonic black feminist analysis, was ignored because it was by and about women and therefore thought not to be as significantly about the race as writings by and about men."²⁹

This "embryonic black feminism" maintained that the criterion for African American progress centers on the emancipation of black women, who labor the longest for the least wages under the most numbing and exploitive conditions. Du Bois himself suggests this position by using her quote. Sharing Cooper's advocacy for the struggles of impoverished black women, he detaches from her advocacy of leadership as the attribute of black female elites.

Cooper's gender politics centered poor black women's struggles and elite black women's agency. Du Bois's eventually more inclusive class politics theoretically allowed him to attribute greater agency to *poor* black women workers and laborers. Du Bois's increasingly nonclassist writings surpass Cooper's 1892 work in democratizing agency. Cooper repudiates masculine elites, or privileged black male intellectuals. However, her repudiations do not extend to feminine elites, or privileged black female intellectuals. Du Bois's criticisms were not self-referential regarding his male privilege. Cooper, who countered the dominance of male elites with that of female elites, was somewhat oblivious of the limitations of her caste.

The conservatism of *A Voice From the South* stems the double bounds by racism and sexism faced by black women elites such as Cooper who "had a great stake in the prestige, the respectability, and the gentility guaranteed by the politics of true womanhood."³⁰ The demanding conformism to standards of white, bourgeois "respectability" placed on middle-class African American women was partly self-imposed and self-policed. Du Bois had written critically of both this "cult of true womanhood" or bourgeois femininity and white society's hypocritical chasm imposed between black females and white "ladies." It would have been difficult but not impossible for Cooper to disengage from the mores of conventional feminine respectability to think about the radical agency of *non-elite* or non-bourgeois black women. Unlike Du Bois's later revisions of the "Talented Tenth" to include poor and working

class back women and men, Cooper's writing failed to argue that the intellectual and leadership abilities of black women laborers equaled those of black women college graduates.

Not all middle-class race women were trapped by rigid social conventions. In the same year as the appearance of Cooper's *A Voice from the South*, Wells-Barnett's *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* was published. The anti-lynching crusader embodied the race militancy and intellectualism of a responsible womanhood that reflected and rejected the cult of womanhood. Her writing on the volatile racial-sexual politics of lynching focuses on issues of race, sex, and violence unmentioned in *A Voice From the South's* pioneering discussions of sexual violence. As the lioness of the anti-lynching crusades, Wells-Barnett survived death threats, the destruction of her Memphis press by a lynch mob, and endured decades of exile from the south. Transgressing the notions of feminine gentility and masculine courage, armed, Wells-Barnett traveled extensively to organize against and document lynchings.

The university-educational campaigns of Du Bois and Cooper included and directly affected fewer blacks than the anti-lynching campaigns. Only a small percentage of African Americans were likely to attain a university education. Yet all were susceptible to the violence of a lynch mob (poorer Blacks were likely more vulnerable to racial violence). Du Bois and the former school teacher Ida B. Wells-Barnett participated in both the liberal arts educational campaigns and the anti-lynching crusades. Advocating liberal arts education for African Americans, Wells-Barnett in fact became a proponent of Du Bois's social thought. This stance placed her in the line of Booker T. Washington's fire. Wells-Barnett's memoir, *Crusade for Justice*, recounts how influential black and white leaders at a Chicago meeting debated the merits of *The Souls of Black Folk* were debated. Most of those present, writes Wells-Barnett, were "united in condemning Mr. Du Bois's views."³¹ The Barnetts championed Du Bois's critique of Washington's promotion of industrial education as the racial panacea. Wells-Barnett's stands in the educational debates were consistent with her outspoken anti-lynching advocacy. The failure of Du Bois's memoirs to mention her work in the educational campaigns underscores his silence with respect to her extraordinary anti-lynching activism. Despite her prolific research and publications,³² her political courage, and radical analysis of the sexual politics of lynching, Du Bois's autobiographical writings on anti-lynching mostly ignore Wells-Barnett.

As one of the most significant human rights campaigns in postbellum American, at the turn of the century, the anti-lynching crusades engendered a black liberation movement in which black women were prominent public leaders. African American women initiated the first major anti-lynching campaign in 1892. Without the backing of an influential, multi-racial organization such

as the NAACP, which was later formed in 1909, early anti-lynching activism was extremely dangerous. With uncompromising demands for justice, women such as Florida Ruffin Ridley and Mary Church Terrell, and Wells-Barnett challenged the U.S. "red record" of African Americans disproportionately brutalized, imprisoned, and murdered at the whim of Whites. Skeptical that media, court, or mob prosecution was motivated by the desire to end sexual violence, they created a legacy of investigative reporting to ascertain facts distorted or denied by the media or legal institutions.

Just as Wells-Barnett had been transformed by the 1892 lynchings of her friends in Memphis and propelled into national leadership, lynchings had a tremendous impact on Du Bois, politicizing him into a militancy which left him ill-suited for academic society and liberal institutions. His *Darkwater* short story on lynching, "Jesus Christ in Texas," speaks to his profound pessimism concerning America's proclivity towards racist violence. Two decades later, *Dusk to Dawn* describes the young Du Bois being radicalized by American barbarity. The atrocities haunted and transformed his early adult life: "Lynching was a continuing and recurrent horror during my college days: from 1885 through 1894, seventeen hundred Negroes were lynched in America. Each death was a scar upon my soul, and led me on to conceive the plight of other minority groups. . . ." ³³ *Dusk of Dawn* chronicles Du Bois's heightening consciousness about the need to actively oppose lynching. The pressing need to confront racist violence furthered his disaffection for and alienation in academic life:

At the very time when my studies were most successful, there cut across this plan which I had as a scientist, a red ray which could not be ignored, I remember when it first, as it were, startled me to my feet; a poor Negro in central Georgia, Sam Hose, had killed his landlord's wife. I wrote out a careful and reasoned statement concerning the evident facts and started down to the Atlanta *Constitution* office. . . . I did not get there. On the way news met me: Sam Hose had been lynched, and they said that his knuckles were on exhibition at a grocery store farther down on Mitchell Street, along which I was walking. I turned back to the University. Two considerations thereafter broke in upon my work and eventually disrupted it; first, one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved; and secondly, there was no such demand for scientific work of the sort that I was doing, as I had confidently assumed would be easily forthcoming.³⁴

Du Bois, who sat with a shotgun on the front steps of his home during the Atlanta race riots by whites, was both shaken and galvanized by his close proximity to a lynching victim.

Wells-Barnett critiqued the racial-sexual politics of interracial sex and the duplicity of the legal system's and its complicity in lynchings in language few male or female race leaders dared to use. Her writings discredited the apologias for lynchings noting that the rape charge was only used in a fraction of lynchings; and where employed, the accused black person was generally innocent of sexual assault. Her arguments paraphrase Frederick Douglass's critique of post-bellum rationalizations (like Du Bois, she did not always give credit her sources—*Crusade for Justice* does not fully acknowledge Douglass's influence on anti-lynching activism or the contributions of other activists). Wells-Barnett's unique contribution to the anti-lynching movement was her documentation and incendiary rhetoric on the hypocrisy of American sexual politics in which white men were the predominate assailants of white and black females, yet masked their violence (as well as their attempts to politically and economically dominate blacks) with racist terrorism.

Never fully acknowledging his debt, Du Bois built on and benefitted from the political and intellectual radicalism of Wells-Barnett. By refusing to name Wells-Barnett and her dynamic leadership, his writings erase her contribution much as he renders Cooper anonymous. Given their incendiary tone, Du Bois likely could not use Wells-Barnett's words, as he had Cooper's, without sharing her stigma and isolation as too combative in anti-racist activism. Failing to document Wells-Barnett's anti-lynching agency, Du Bois obscures both her individual contributions and the range of anti-racist militancy and radicalism. Consequently, Du Bois foregoes a critical examination of Wells-Barnett's political thought and so misses an opportunity to analyze the "deep meaning" of the lives of radical African American women activists.

Though not as prolific a writer nor as formally educated as Du Bois, Wells-Barnett's was widely influential during that era. With the decline in mob lynchings, her prominence waned while Du Bois's prestige increased in the first part of the twentieth century. As Du Bois's writings were increasingly "mainstreamed" through the NAACP, her work was marginalized. In part, this occurred because of her uncompromising politics and opposition to Booker T. Washington. In retaliation to the Barnetts's political independence and vocal critiques, Washington used his influence over the Afro-American press to cripple the publishing and journalistic careers of the Barnetts.

Anti-lynching organizing unraveled rather than cemented the ties between Wells-Barnett and Du Bois. In August 1909, white race riots and the lynchings of African Americans in Springfield, Illinois led progressive European Americans and African Americans to form what would become the NAACP. As founding members, Du Bois and Wells-Barnett were active in the first meetings at New York City's Cooper Union. Outspoken from the floor, Wells-Barnett urged the assembly not to compromise its agenda with that of the

Tuskegee machine.³⁵ Seated on the dais, Du Bois wielded influence behind doors in closed meetings of the nominating committee for the organization's initial leadership. Unlike Wells-Barnett, Du Bois was not isolated by white and black NAACP liberals for his radicalism and opposition to Washington as accommodationist.

Du Bois's autobiographical record of the founding of the NAACP omits any reference to Wells-Barnett being ostracized at the NAACP founding conference. He writes: "the members of the Niagara Movement were invited into the new conference, but all save [William Monroe] Trotter and Ida Wells-Barnett came to form the backbone of the new organization."³⁶ *Dusk of Dawn* does not explain Wells-Barnett's absence from a key organization in a crusade she had initiated. Nor does Du Bois refer to maneuvers to bar her from NAACP organizational leadership. One of two African American women signing the conference "Call," Wells-Barnett's name was left off of the list of the Committee of Forty assigned to develop the NAACP. According to Wells-Barnett, Du Bois, in seeking a representative from the Niagara Movement Du Bois substituted for her name that of an absent Dr. Charles E. Bentley. Wells-Barnett also speculates that Mary White Ovington's friendship and influence with Du Bois led to "the deliberate intention of Dr. Du Bois to ignore me and my work."³⁷ Ovington, who later chaired the NAACP, was on less than cordial terms with Wells-Barnett. Lewis minimizes Wells-Barnett's account to argue that philanthropist Oswald Garrison Villard's aversion to radicalism and anti-Tuskegee activists bears the primary culpability for Wells Barnett's isolation. Yet Du Bois, also a radical and an outspoken critic of Washington, was not similarly censored. Lewis writes that Du Bois in attempting to achieve moderate representation, "was probably motivated far less by personal animus than by well-intentioned (though possibly sexist and perhaps mistaken) calculations."³⁸ Whatever its motivation, this slighting marginalized the era's most effective anti-lynching militant. After the restoration of her name to the Committee of Forty, following protests by herself and others, Wells-Barnett joined NAACP national leadership in name only. Holt notes that: "the singular irony of her career is that Wells-Barnett, the most prominent voice opposing lynching over the preceding decade and the most persistent advocate of a national organization to combat racial oppression, was not among the leaders of the NAACP. . . ."³⁹

Wells-Barnett's bitterness must have been edged with a sense of betrayal. For years she had been an avid supporter of Du Bois and a critic of Washington and as a consequence she suffered the backlash from the Tuskegee machine.⁴⁰ Wells-Barnett consistently supported Du Bois until the 1907 break at the NAACP conference. This support was not reciprocated.

The most glaring omission by Du Bois regarding the significance Wells-

Barnett's anti-violence activism occurs in *Dusk of Dawn*. Here he erases her unparalleled contributions to the anti-lynching activism. Consider Du Bois's depiction of organizing around the Steve Green and Pink Franklin cases. In 1910, Steve Green arrived in Chicago, wounded from a shootout with a white Arkansas farmer who tried to indenture or enslave him on his farm. Green was extradited to Arkansas, ostensibly to be lynched. However, Ida B. Wells Barnett's Negro Fellowship League raised money and organized a defense committee that safely spirited Greene to Canada. Lewis comments on Du Bois's selective recollection: "Curiously Du Bois' coverage of the dramatic events behind Greene's removal from the clutches of his Arkansas warders, omitted any mention of Wells-Barnett and her Negro Fellowship League."⁴¹ Several months earlier, in a similar case, the NAACP had struggled and failed to save Pink Franklin from a legal lynching or state execution. Franklin had shot and killed a white farmer breaking into his house in order to return Franklin to sharecropping. Such "curious omissions" concerning Wells-Barnett are not aberrational in Du Bois's autobiographies.

After military service in World War I, African American soldiers returned with raised expectations concerning equality and democracy. Instead, they encountered a white backlash. Lynchings increased, particularly in the south. *Dusk of Dawn* refers to the September 1917 military, legalized lynchings of African American soldiers in Texas where the Twenty-fourth colored infantry engaged in an armed rebellion against the local whites.⁴² He does not mention Wells-Barnett's campaign to stop the executions and free imprisoned members of the 24th Infantry. Wells-Barnett describes these soldiers as "martyred." In 1917, while stationed in Houston, Texas, 100 armed black troops in response to racist assaults, marched on the town. The resulting confrontation left sixteen Whites and four black soldiers dead. Following the revolt, the U.S. Army executed nineteen soldiers and court-martialed and imprisoned fifty. Wells-Barnett's activism for the release of the 24th Infantry was so noteworthy that secret service agents threatened her with charges of war-time sedition if she continued agitating on behalf of the prisoners. Despite government threats to imprison her, she extended her organizing and remained free.

Dusk of Dawn forgoes relaying this information to detail the expansion of the NAACP's organizing to end lynching. According to Du Bois, in 1919 NAACP leadership was instrumental in two thousand anti-lynching public meetings and a government investigation of the Chicago riot; it also convened a national Conference on lynching in New York City which issued an address to the nation signed by prominent officials, including a former U.S. President and a current Chief Justice. Du Bois writes that the NAACP organized African American political power to "make it influential and we started a campaign against lynching and mob law which was the most effective ever organized

and eventually brought the end of the evil in sight."⁴³ Reconstructing NAACP activity as *the* anti-lynching movement, he writes that "Mary Talbert started the anti-lynching crusade, raising a defense fund of \$12,000," and that NAACP secretary James Weldon Johnson forcibly brought the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill before Congress in 1921.⁴⁴ Du Bois's singular validation of NAACP anti-lynching activism deflects from the work of the Negro Women's Club Movement, Wells-Barnett, and other anti-lynching activists whose radicalism and analyses laid the foundations for later NAACP campaigns.

While describing, or embellishing upon, NAACP anti-lynching activism, Du Bois refers to internal contradictions and the organization's ineffectiveness and ideological liberalism. In "Revolution," the final chapter of *Dusk of Dawn*, he ends this memoir by expressing his disappointment over the increasing ineffectiveness of the NAACP, an organization to which he devoted decades of his life work. His regrets echo those of Ida B. Wells-Barnett.⁴⁵ Wells-Barnett reflects in her own autobiography that had she been more active in its national leadership, the NAACP would have been more responsive to the dire conditions of African Americans. Lacking allies for radicalizing organizational leadership, for instance allies with the tenacity and militancy of Wells-Barnett, Du Bois recalls that by 1930 he had increasing doubts about the viability of NAACP liberalism. For him the organization's ideology advocated: "a continued agitation which had for its object simply free entrance into the present economy of the world, that looked at political rights as an end in itself rather than as a method of reorganizing the state; and that expected through civil rights and legal judgments to re-establish freedom on a broader and firmer basis."⁴⁶ This ideology, wrote Du Bois, "was not so much wrong as short-sighted."⁴⁷ Du Bois maintained that liberalism, legalism, and inadequate economic program led the NAACP to miss an essential opportunity "to guard and better the chances of Negroes" to earn an adequate income. In the 1930s, he resigned as editor of the *Crisis* and from the NAACP national board. It is uncertain if a successful Du Bois-Wells-Barnett alliance might have influenced the NAACP national leadership towards civil rights radicalism with an economic program. In any case, such an alliance was apparently undesirable on Du Bois's part.

Du Bois's political distance from Cooper and Wells-Barnett persists in his autobiographies, despite his increasing radicalism. Du Bois, who lived into his nineties, developed a structural analysis of black oppression that addresses economic exploitation and state oppression, issues Cooper's and Wells-Barnett's analyses largely ignore.

REFLECTIONS ON GENDER ERASURE

The lack of specificity, or the detailed account of agency and subject identification, contextualizes Du Bois's profeminist and later pro-worker stances. This

lack inadvertently highlights the black vanguardism which he eventually repudiates. Perhaps Du Bois's early, progressive views on women shielded him (and his own self-reflections) from criticism. This shield may blind us to the fact that his writings about African American women notably erase their political agency. Specificity and erasure inform Du Bois's gender politics. In their lack of documentation, his autobiographical records choose a generic rather than an empirical study regarding the achievements of his female and working class contemporaries. I do not suggest that Du Bois should have written his memoirs with the impressive detail found in *Black Reconstruction*. I only note that he reserves specificity in his memoirs and essays for fellow elites: his autobiographies privilege activists who were his personal friends or acquaintances—African American men such as Monroe Trotter and James Weldon Johnson, as well as European Americans Joel Spingarn and Mary White Ovington. In the process of democratizing African American leadership, Du Bois inadvertently reinscribed the primacy of elites through his representations of the agency. Non-elite blacks appear largely without specificity and names as he frequently withheld the attribute of political agency from them and black women intellectuals.

Following Du Bois's example, we may address black women as a generic topic without their specificity; yet we will obscure the radicalism of black politics and history. Portraying African American women in an aggregate as victims, icons, or the embodiment of a cause suggests that political change transpires without black female independence and leadership. Asserting black women's leadership in theory but minimizing the empirical record of African American women leaders, masculinizes black agency and implicitly relegates women to an inferior status as intellectuals.

Grappling with the strengths and limitations of Du Bois's legacy, we can see that non-specificity and erasure overlap to some degree. Non-specificity promotes the disappearance of the detailed historical or empirical record. In some respects, it erases the subjects, deeds and events, while simultaneously discussing them. With the solo appearance of the generic, the category becomes surrogate for the individual: the "black woman" replaces Ida B. Wells Barnett. The generic also supplants historical or empirical data in representation: black women's victimization stands in place for their political praxis in the suffragette movement or anti-lynching crusades. The documentary writer controls representation and memory in his or her use of the non-specificity of generic representations. Whereas with specificity, the historical subject appears to suggest her own ideas; at times, she interrupts the chronicler with her own voice. That intervention or corrective is no longer possible if her words are appropriated and her identity obscured, as happened with Du Bois's misuse of Cooper's intellectualism. If we understand "erasure" as the complete

absence of representation, the refusal of agency and identity altogether, we routinely recognize that representations that refuse to reference marginalized groups manifest as forms of erasure. However, erasure or exclusionary bias also appears in reflections discussions about disenfranchised peoples that lack specificity.

Some may argue that the absence of specificity implies neither a male or elite bias nor an attempt to erase the significant contributions of black women leaders. To be consistent, we must also maintain that generalizing and vague discourse concerning the achievements of black males and elites is also acceptable. Whatever the intentions, non-specificity promotes erasure. The end result is that such works engaging in form of representation misrepresent agency and intellectual ability as the purview of elites. If we discuss marginalized groups largely as categories or characterize them in symbolic and abstract terms, we detract from the specificity of political analysis. In the distance between our attentiveness to black women as a category and our dismissal of their political praxis, non-specificity will disassemble our progressivism.

CONCLUSION

Given the racialized and sexualized constructions of intellectual ability, it is unsurprising that black male intellectuals intentionally or inadvertently reproduce sexist thought. African American women's intellectual and political productivity is not often mentioned in the writings of their male contemporaries. Du Bois's writings—his profeminism notwithstanding—prove no exception.

Contemporary thought on African American politics reflects both Du Bois's profeminist politics and his gendered oversights. Gender conservatives resist his profeminism. Gender progressives embrace and expand upon his profeminist politics. (Both groups may ignore his repudiation of an intellectual aristocracy of class-based elites.) Profeminism permitted Du Bois to include women in democratic struggles; paternalism allowed him to naturalize the male intellectual.

We may build upon the gift of sight which Du Bois shared and continues to share with many progressives to better comprehend the deep meaning that manifests when two movements for justice, "women and color," combine. Evaluating our inheritance from Du Bois, as well as our own gender and class relationships to oppressed peoples, we may envision strategies to further anti-racist, feminist politics. Unpacking our legacy as the heirs of Du Bois might expand profeminist politics to serve democratic movements.

NOTES

1. Du Bois, 1920: 181.
2. I use the term "feminist" to denote women's gender progressive politics; "profeminist" refers to men whose politics advocate women's equality.
3. See "The Talented Tenth Recall," in Joy James, *Democratizing the Talented Tenth: Black Elites, Radical Women, and American Intellectualism*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
4. Aptheker, 1982: 78.
5. Aptheker, 1982: 78.
6. Aptheker, 1982: 77-88.
7. Hardnett, 1992: 66. Hardnett quotes from Jean F. Turpin's history of the Du Bois Circle.
8. Lewis, 1993: 328.
9. Du Bois, 172.
10. Du Bois, 164.
11. Lewis, 1993: 451.
12. Lewis, 1993: 449-50.
13. According to Lewis, after Du Bois's mother, Jessie Fauset and Mary Church Terrell figure peripherally in his political autobiographies.
14. Morton, 65.
15. Morton, 63.
16. Morton, 57.
17. Morton, 63.
18. Morton, 63.
19. Morton, 61.
20. Warren, 111. Warren uses Catherine Stark's definition of "archetype."
21. Warren, 111.
22. Du Bois, 1914: 105.
23. Du Bois, 173.
24. Giddings, 447.
25. Cooper, 31.
26. Cooper, 30-31.
27. Du Bois, 173. Mary Helen Washington also points this out in her introduction to Cooper's work.
28. Cooper, 31.
29. Washington, xxviii.
30. Washington, xlvi.
31. Wells, 1970: 280-81.
32. In 1889, revolutionizing journalism as an effective medium for anti-racist organizing, Wells-Barnett became the first woman secretary of the Afro-American Press Association. In addition to *Southern Horrors*, numerous newspaper articles, editorials, and the posthumously published memoir *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, Wells Barnett's written legacy includes: *A Red Record: Lynchings in the U.S., 1892, 1893, 1894 (1895)* and *Mob Rule in New Orleans (1900)*.
33. Du Bois, 1940: 29-30.
34. *Ibid.*, 67-68.
35. Lewis, 393-94.
36. Du Bois, 1940: 228.
37. Wells, 1970: 322-26.

38. Lewis, 397.
39. Holt, 50.
40. Holt observes that Wells-Barnett claimed to have elevated Du Bois to national leadership in 1899, by advocating that the Afro-American Council board of directors, whose anti-lynching bureau she headed, appoint him as director of their business bureau. This claim is likely overstated. Du Bois seemed destined for national prominence.
41. Lewis, 413.
42. Du Bois, 1940: 252.
43. *Ibid.*, 228.
44. *Ibid.*, 265.
45. *Ibid.*, 295-96.
46. *Ibid.*, 289.
47. *Ibid.*, 289.

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