

W. E. B. DU BOIS SELECTIONS

"The Conservation of Races" (1897)

Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. Oxford: OUP, 1996. 38-47.

Here, Du Bois attempts to define what it means to be a negro. His main query concerns the "essential difference of races" (39) and his finding is that a race cannot be defined solely in biological terms: "What, then, is a race?" (40), he asks. It is a "vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses" (40). He explains:

while race differences have followed mainly physical race lines, yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences--the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences--undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them. The forces that bind together . . . nations are, then, first, their race identity and common blood; secondly, and more important, a common history, common laws and religion, similar habits of thought and a conscious striving together for certain ideals of life. (41)

However, Du in attempting to grasp the ethnic identity of African Americans, Bois seems to abandon this culturalist model of identity in favour of a more racialist paradigm. He argues that, although negroes may be American by birth, citizenship, political ideals, language and religion (these are all cultural factors), they are nevertheless still, more importantly,

Negroes, members of a vast historic race that from the very dawn of creation has slept, but half awakening in the dark forests of its African fatherland. We are the first fruits of this new nation, the harbinger of that black tomorrow which is yet destined to soften the whiteness of the Teutonic today. (44)

It is at least as much to the common biology shared by all negroes as to some ill-defined shared 'ideal' that Du Bois seems to appeal: he contends that if the negro race is ever to take its place among the community of races each of which have something original to contribute to human civilisation, it must aim for unity, what Du Bois terms "Pan-Negroism" (43): "only Negroes bound and welded together, inspired by one vast *ideal*" (my emphasis; 42) can lead to the "development of Negro genius, of Negro literature and art, of Negro spirit" (42).

"Of Our Spiritual Strivings" (1897)

Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. Oxford: OUP, 1996.

Dubois is perhaps the most influential figure in African American social and political discourse during the early part of the Twentieth century and one of the earliest to identify himself as a Pan-Africanist. He was one of (if not the) first to pose the question of the African American's hybridity, that is, the dilemma of being both American and black at the same time. Here, drawing upon Hegel's notion of the Master/Slave dialectic, he addresses what he describes as the "double consciousness" (102) with which the African American is afflicted,

this sense of always looking at one's self from through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. (102)

The "history of the American Negro is the history of this strife--this longing to attain

self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost" (102).