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# WEB Du Bois and the "Negro Problem": Thoughts on Violence in Philadelphia

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# WEB Du Bois and the "Negro Problem": Thoughts on Violence in Philadelphia

## **Abstract**

This sermon, delivered at First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, might also be called "Why a white girl from New Hampshire is studying The Philadelphia Negro." This essay/sermon connects Du Bois's 1896 survey of Philadelphia to the violence currently plaguing Philadelphia.

## **Disciplines**

Urban, Community and Regional Planning

Amy Hillier Fraatz  
Talk at First Unitarian Church  
Sunday, July 22<sup>nd</sup> 2007

## **W.E.B. DU BOIS AND THE NEGRO PROBLEM**

My topic this morning is W.E.B. Du Bois and the “Negro Problem.” My current research at the University of Pennsylvania focuses on Du Bois and the book he wrote in 1899, *The Philadelphia Negro*. I want to tell you about my path in coming to this project and what this project means to me and to my understanding of racial inequality today. But first let me tell you something about Du Bois and his study of Philadelphia.

### **THE INVITATION**

The invitation to come to Philadelphia wasn’t a particularly good one. It involved only temporary work, not a permanent position. And while the invitation nominally came from the University of Pennsylvania, it was really the reform-minded ladies of the College Settlement Association who had the idea for a study of blacks in Philadelphia. Penn offered the temporary title of “assistant in sociology.” A faculty position would have been more fitting for one of the best educated men in the country—black or white—but William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was already well aware of how racism pervaded academia.

Still, the invitation was what he needed to escape the evangelism that dominated Wilberforce College, where he had spent his first years teaching after completing his Ph.D. at Harvard. He hoped that, if he could impress his new employer, the University of Pennsylvania might offer something more permanent. So, in the summer of 1896, he moved with his new bride, Nina Gomer, into a room above the settlement house just north of South Street at the edge of Philadelphia’s old Seventh Ward.

[describe boundaries of the Seventh Ward]

### **THE PROBLEM**

Like their counterparts in London, Chicago, Boston, and New York, the women who ran Philadelphia’s settlement house were dedicated to serving the poor in their neighborhood through a range of programs for children and adults, including classes in English, American history, and carpentry, gymnastic clubs, choir drill, and lectures. The women were also active in local politics, assembling a slate of progressive candidates to challenge the complacent Republican Party that had dominated Philadelphia politics for decades. But the Seventh Ward was a lock for the Republicans in part because blacks sold their votes in exchange for a very limited number of municipal jobs and protection

for their voting clubs, which were often illegal drinking houses. This was a major part of the so-called “Negro problem” that Du Bois was invited to study.

That blacks would sell their votes so cheaply indicated how deeply discrimination in employment ran in Philadelphia. Blacks had almost no access to the manufacturing jobs that allowed Irish, German, Russian, and Italian immigrants of the nineteenth Century to take care of their families. Municipal jobs offered a welcome alternative to the domestic service work that occupied 30 percent of black men and 70 percent of black women in Philadelphia at the turn of the century. The settlement ladies thought a black researcher would have more success studying this “Negro problem” and give authority to their ideas about what was needed to fix it. It seems only fair that Du Bois had ulterior motives in accepting the Philadelphia invitation given how little interest the University had in him and how sure the settlement association ladies were that they already knew what was wrong with the Seventh Ward.

## THE BOOK

Du Bois did not let any of this impact the quality of his research. He tirelessly interviewed members of the 2,500 black households within the densely-populated study area and identified the key institutions in the community. [mention connection to asset mapping]. His final report provided insight into black class structure which constituted an important intellectual contribution. [Describe pull-out color-coded map]. But his insistence on distinguishing among blacks also sounded like the personal plea of an accomplished black man who did not want to be confused with the poor people of the Seventh Ward. He wrote, “There is always a strong tendency on the part of the community to consider the Negroes as composing one practically homogenous mass. Nothing more exasperates the better class of Negroes than this tendency to ignore utterly their existence.” He would later coin the phrase “talented tenth” to refer to elite blacks like himself who, he insisted, had a moral obligation to uplift those in the lower classes.

Penn published *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899, listing Du Bois as the “some time assistant in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania,” as well as professor at Atlanta University, where he, Nina, and their infant son, William, had moved after he finished his fieldwork in Philadelphia. The book was regarded at the time as a sturdy piece of work by those who were willing to review research by a black scholar (the *American Journal of Sociology*, among others, was not). The University never did offer Du Bois a permanent position. Today, the book is considered a classic by sociologists, ethnographers, anthropologists, urban historians and others for its innovative methodology and detailed findings about black city life.

## MY CONNECTION

This book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, is now as the center of my own research. I've been working for the past two years with a wonderful bunch of student research assistants to assemble historical census data so we can recreate Du Bois's foot survey. Eventually we will make this available on the Internet using interactive mapping so that high school and college students reading the book will be able to virtually explore the Old Seventh Ward as Du Bois found it. We are also working on a documentary, a board game, walking tours, and, with the Mural Arts Program, a mural of Du Bois. So how did I get interested in this topic? Why is a white woman from New Hampshire so drawn to this story of *The Philadelphia Negro*? I always imagine that is what people, especially people of color, are wondering when I tell them about my project: why are you doing this? More likely, I am projecting my own insecurities on to them, so knowing the answer may be what I need to feel more confident about claiming to do research about this great African-American intellectual.

It's relatively easy to explain why an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania, a trained social worker teaching in a Department of City and Regional Planning, would take on a project like this. One reason is that this is, in part, Penn's story to tell. Du Bois came to work for Penn and the University failed to secure one of the twentieth century's greatest minds for its own faculty. There is penance to do, and it is appropriate that white people at Penn be a part of that. In addition, several of Penn's leading historians and sociologists—people like Elijah Anderson, Michael Katz, and Tukufu Zuberi—have written about *The Philadelphia Negro*, so there is a significant intellectual investment on which to build. [note that Elijah Anderson spoke at church, is now leaving Penn].

The more I've read about Du Bois, the more intrigued I am by him, but he is a difficult person to like. According to most accounts, he was harsh and arrogant in his professional dealings and not very attentive to his family. I feel increasing respect for his professional accomplishments but little warmth for the person. I feel much more empathy for the white ladies of the College Settlement Association who knew the world was unjust and searched—awkwardly and not without prejudice—for their role in making things better.

Even though I don't feel much of a connection to Du Bois, himself, I feel a strong connection to what he studied. Since taking an African American history course in college, I have felt drawn to cities and to being involved in African American communities. Or maybe it would be more honest to say I went searching for a connection to cities and African American communities after the L.A. riots, which I just could not comprehend. How could there be that kind of pain and anger that seemingly only touched my life through the news?

## **THE PROBLEM TODAY**

To assert that the “Negro Problem” —that is, the problems facing African Americans that Du Bois witnessed a century ago—is the same as what we have today is to oversimplify a complicated century of race relations. We now have legal safeguards against racial discrimination in employment, housing, education, and voting. Our public welfare system provides a layer—at least a thin layer—of economic security unknown 100 years ago. But we still have racism—reshaped, reinvented, and reinforced over the past 100 years. And we have vast racial disparities in nearly all of the areas that matter. One of the areas that matters most to me right now is gun violence in Philadelphia. While white children and adults are too often killed by guns, young black men are by far the most frequent victims. Or perhaps it is better to say that black communities are the chief victims, in order to acknowledge the terrible suffering of the mothers and girlfriends and children who disproportionately feel these losses.

Our newspapers regularly include maps showing exactly where each person has been murdered in the city, perfectly round dots clustered in the areas where they have died. Give me an hour and I can teach anyone how to make maps just like that. But what about a map of grief? How would you represent that? What symbols would you use? Is there a color scheme capable of representing the extreme difference between the collective grief felt by neighborhoods in our city? What color should be used for my upper middle class neighborhood in West Philadelphia where children choose between the swim club, violin lessons, and co-ed soccer leagues? And what color should be used for the neighborhood south and west of mine where dozens of young people have been shot and killed since New Year’s, where kids walk around with t-shirts spray-painted with the names of their murdered siblings and cousins and mothers clutch framed photographs of their slain children at rallies to stop the violence?

The count of people shot and killed in Philadelphia this year is 223. That’s just the people who have died; many more have been shot and survived. Sometimes I read the profiles of these victims in the newspaper and try to imagine what it feels like to be the mother, sister, or friend left behind. Most of the time I just can’t feel any connection. Where I live and work, I don’t worry very much about being shot or having someone I know shot. I know rationally that Philadelphia is losing so much from gun violence. Maybe we have already lost our next Poet Laureate, our next Senator or President, or people who were meant to become great teachers, singers or comedians. Maybe someone capable of brokering peace in the Middle East was shot and killed in our streets. I should be crying every day when I read the newspaper. The grief should be overwhelming.

Du Bois talked about the tendency for white people to distance themselves from the problems that blacks face by physically distancing themselves through separate work and social circles. Today, we insulate ourselves through segregated neighborhoods, schools, and churches. I live, work, and worship with predominantly white groups of people even though Philadelphia is 45 percent African American and my neighborhood,

employer, and this church are among the most liberal in the city. In the concluding chapter of *The Philadelphia Negro*, entitled "the meaning of it all," Du Bois explains that the real problem was that whites were denying the humanity of their black neighbors. The world was, in his words, "gliding... into a wider humanity." More different kinds of people were beginning to be accepted. But, as he wrote, "with the Negroes of Africa we come to a full stop... This feeling, widespread and deep-seated, is, in America, the vastest of the Negro problems...." Isn't this what Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes wrote about, being invisible, being denied the right to dream and hope and expect goodness from the world? Isn't this what Sweet Honey in the Rock sing about, wanting the killing of black men to be as important as the killing of white men? Isn't this what Jonathan Kozol laments, that we are slowing killing our children in homeless shelters and decrepit schools?

## THE ANSWER

Du Bois's intention was, in his words, to "lay before the public such a body of information as may be a safe guide for all efforts toward the solution of the many Negro problems of a great American city." He hoped it would serve as "the scientific basis of further study and of practical reform." But the book did not lead immediately to new research or legislation, save his own work at Atlanta University. I don't think it's too late to realize Du Bois's hope for this book. Despite the moralizing language and somewhat dated theories about race and economics, the book still has relevance for us today. It provides an opportunity for kids in Philadelphia to learn about the role of racism in shaping our city. I doubt most of them know that some of the expensive downtown Philadelphia neighborhoods were once home to thousands of African Americans or that blacks were denied access to jobs in the now abandoned factories throughout their neighborhoods. It provides an opportunity for suburban children to study discrimination and privilege in 1896 Philadelphia as a way of thinking more honestly about how they shape their own world today.

My research project about Du Bois is an academic project. It is about raising grant money, building databases, and publishing journal articles. But is also a spiritual project. It is about talking, listening, learning, building relationships, and feeling more connected to one another. This project is about pushing technology and doing cool things. I hope, for example, that we will succeed in creating a handheld version of our mapping database that people can access using GPS and wireless Internet technology while they walk through the Seventh Ward. But I pray that this project will change hearts. *The Philadelphia Negro* may not have the power to make people cry about what is happening in Philadelphia today, but it does have the power to remove some of the protective layers of insulation so that we all feel more of the love and sadness and joy that is meant to bind us together.

May it be so.