

Painting African Americans in Numbers: W. E. B. Du Bois' Data Visualizations

“Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.”¹

While black aesthetics offers an opportunity to foster black solidarity and preserve black culture in a largely anti-black space, it can also be restrictive and harmfully narrow by not taking into account a multiplicity of black experiences and attempting to construct a static black identity. Even though black aesthetics motivates and propels more positive images of blacks than white supremacist constructions of blackness, it still has the power to marginalize black artists and decide what is “authentic” and what is not. Both bell hooks and W. E. B. Du Bois believe that art should be political and serve a social utility while simultaneously being aesthetically innovative. W. E. B. Du Bois's data portraits demonstrate a “radical aesthetic” that is founded upon truth and beauty to narrate the progress of African Americans post-Emancipation and to challenge stigmatized and structural racial inequalities in the United States.

Although the term black aesthetics emerged in the middle of the 20th century when artists and critics began to theorize about black experiences, it has been alive in practice for much longer. Black aesthetics is often used in reference to the New Negro Movement of the 1920s-30s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s-70s, but it is important to understand that it also exists beyond evaluating black artistic and cultural production. According to Paul Taylor, black aesthetics can be used on a microscopic level as an artistic critical lens and also on a macroscopic level in regards to philosophical, historical, and ethical questions about beauty and art: “To do black aesthetics is to use art, analysis or criticism to explore the role that expressive

¹ W. E. B. Du Bois. “Criteria of Negro Art.” *The Crisis*, October 1926.

objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds.”² Black aesthetics can be a mode of critically looking at the way black artists make and observe art, but it can also be a way of looking at the everyday world.

However, bell hooks argues that black aesthetics is not as receptive to an array of black life-worlds as Taylor suggests. Hooks advances different ways of thinking about aesthetics such as an “aesthetic of existence” and a “radical aesthetic” that are not as rigidly defined as black aesthetics can be. “Rethinking aesthetic principles could lead to the development of a critical standpoint that promotes and encourages various modes of artistic and cultural production. As artist and critic, I find compelling a radical aesthetic that seeks to uncover and restore links between art and revolutionary politics...while offering an expansive critical foundation for aesthetic evaluation.”³ Hooks believes art should function with a pulsing resistance and unwillingness to assimilate, that it must detach itself from European and Western artistic styles and create a new artistic spirit to go along with African Americans’ newfound freedom. Hooks reminds us throughout her essay that “we must learn how to see,” to see beyond racial oppression, exploitation, and material lack, and to see the world’s beauty without turning a blind eye to systemic racial injustice.⁴

Since white supremacist ideology upholds the ideas that African Americans are innately and biologically inferior and that they lack the human capacity to feel and enjoy beauty, there is an emphasis on demonstrating the truth about black humanity and the worldly pleasures they can experience. W. E. B. Du Bois is fascinated and inspired by the mutual inclusiveness of truth and beauty: “I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with beauty and for beauty to set

² Paul Taylor. “Black Aesthetics.” *Philosophy Compass* (2010), 2.

³ bell hooks. “An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional” in *Yearning*, 111.

⁴ *Ibid*, 103-104.

the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect beauty sits above truth and right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable.”⁵ In a country where the pseudo-science of Social Darwinism and stereotyped black identities are pervasive, Du Bois is interested in revealing black subterfuge and illustrating a new vision of blacks in post-Emancipation America. Du Bois seeks to create beautiful images as a means of disseminating universal truths that warrant sympathy and understanding from an anti-black society.

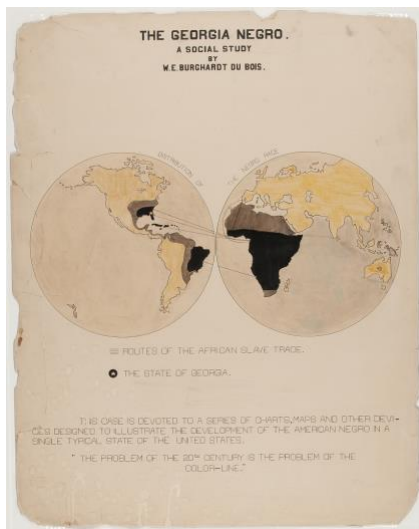
In 1900, Du Bois contributed nearly 60 data visualizations to the American Negro Exhibit that was displayed at the Pavilion of Social Economy at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in an attempt to illustrate the social progress of African Americans since Emancipation. At its heart, the American Negro Exhibit tried to create new images of African Americans as intellectuals, lawyers, doctors, and property owners, and to prove four general ideas: “The history of the American Negro, His present condition, His education, and His literature” by featuring various objects, photos, texts, paintings, and statues.⁶ Du Bois’s collection of infographics are split into 2 sets: *The Georgia Negro: A Social Study*, which colorfully surveys the largest and most diverse black population in any state, and *A Series of Statistical Charts Illustrating the Condition of the Descendants of Former African Slaves Now in Residence in the United States of America*, which artfully presents the distribution of black populations across America, employment rates, education, marriage, mortality, and other markers of social uplift. His data visualizations are artistic renderings of sociological studies, allowing them to function as both artworks and empirical reports. Du Bois employed alumni and students from Atlanta University to collect data

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois. “Criteria of Negro Art.” *The Crisis*, October 1926.

⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois. “The American Negro at Paris.” *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, vol. XXII, no. 5 (November).

and utilize statistics from the U.S. census and U.S. Bureau of Labor reports to create a series of graphs, charts, maps, and tables that clearly show the social advancements of black populations across America to a largely white audience. Du Bois and his team used watercolor, gouache, ink, graphite, and some photographic prints to create these artistically abstract yet empirically clear diagrams that were exhibited as a kind of “infographic activism.”⁷

His first set, *The Georgia Negro: A Social Study*, opens with a poignant map of the Black



Atlantic world and traces the routes of the African diaspora across two different faces of the globe, offering a visual history lesson of African Americans to white visitors.⁸ The bottom inscription reads: “The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color-line.”⁹ This halved globe emphasizes Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness in which African Americans are compelled to see themselves through a white lens.¹⁰ African

Americans are self-conflicted because of their “two-ness” and the contradiction that they “belong” to a country they helped build from the ground up but are denied their culture and basic human rights. Their self-consciousness is limited by the sociopolitical conditions of being black that is branded as a fundamentally biological inequality. Du Bois’s juxtaposition of two

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, et al., *W. E. B. Du Bois’s Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America: The Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. The W. E. B. Du Bois Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2018.

⁸ *Ibid*, 37

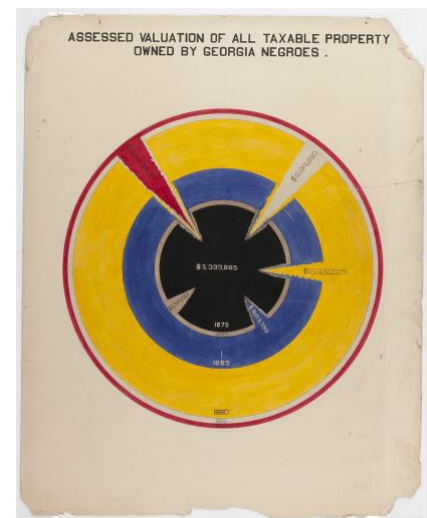
⁹ Hooks is also very much in agreement with this statement when she writes: “Much of what threatens our collective wellbeing is the product of dominating structures. Racism is a white issue as much as it is a black one” (“An Aesthetic of Blackness,” 110-111).

¹⁰ John Pittman. “Double Consciousness.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/#DoubConsSoulBlacFolk>

snapshots of the world illustrates his theory about African Americans existing in a liminal state, social and cultural worlds apart.

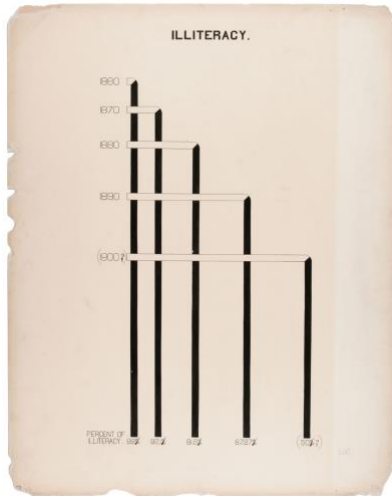
Du Bois's map *Distribution of the Negro Race* is geographical, but it is also a historical, anthropological, sociological, and theoretical study of African Americanism. Historically, cartography is a device that enabled Europeans to explore and colonize places such as Africa. Du Bois's use of this Western skill is his attempt to decolonize racialization by etching African Americans into the American historical narrative.¹¹ Du Bois uses a formal language his white audience is familiar with to communicate a piece of the roots of African American plight and struggle. "As artists we face our own past as a people" writes Du Bois, drawing attention to the idea that we must look towards the past in order to see and inform the future.¹² There is something bone-chilling and unnerving about seeing the massive continent of Africa that looms larger than either North or South America entirely shaded in dark brown hues as if it was tried to be effaced from the world, but was left instead as a permanent stain unable to be washed out of history.

Du Bois is dedicated to illustrating cold, hard statistics that exemplify thriving black populations in a radically new aesthetic that is artistically appealing and interesting to observe. W. E. B. Du Bois not only made critical advancements in data visualization, but also in terms of artistry. His brilliantly colored and curiously abstract renderings were published approximately a decade before the rise of European avant-gardism and 20 years



¹¹ Mabel o Wilson. "The Cartography of W. E. B. Du Bois's Color Line." November 12, 2018.

¹² W. E. B. Du Bois. "Criteria of Negro Art." *The Crisis*, October 1926.



before the founding of Bauhaus in 1919.¹³ Du Bois made African American history and studies more accessible and offered the public a new way of looking: “Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of beauty, of the preservation of beauty, of the realization of beauty.”¹⁴ Du Bois’s infographics are beautifully mesmerizing and hypnotic, yet educational and impactful in

that it also calls for the realization of the changing American culture.

Du Bois’s use of solid colors and geometrical shapes and patterns give his charts a formally minimalistic and modern tone, yet the actual content is essentially counter-modern and is opposed to a mainstream modernity. Modernity can be traced back to racist roots, in part being founded upon and perpetuating the myths that black peoples are primitive, uncivilized, and without culture.¹⁵ According to Taylor, counter-modern thinkers had three goals: first, they maintained the old goal of racial vindication and revealing the richness of African personhood and humanity. Second, they aimed to develop and celebrate Africa’s distinct culture. Third, they called for a “reorientation of African consciousness” and “decolonizing African minds.”¹⁶ Du Bois’s infographics function in a counter-modern vein because their content makes factual arguments that deny racial prejudgments that distort the truth and praise the long-sought opportunity for African Americans to reflect on and share their cultural depth and uniqueness: “We have thus, it may be seen, an honest, straightforward exhibit of a small nation of people,

¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, et al., *W. E. B. Du Bois’s Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America: The Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. The W. E. B. Du Bois Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2018, 46.

¹⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois. “Criteria of Negro Art.” *The Crisis*, October 1926.

¹⁵ Paul Taylor. “Black Aesthetics.” *Philosophy Compass* (2010), p.4

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 7

picturing their life and development without apology or gloss, and above all made by themselves... American negroes are here shown to be studying, examining, and thinking of their own progress and prospects."¹⁷ Du Bois's simple paintings offer rich information not only about the rise of African American communities and what they have the potential to accomplish in solidarity, but is also suggestive of the idea that African Americans, if treated equally and justly, can advance America as a whole, arguing for the social utility value of African Americans.

Du Bois used art and information as a means of teaching people how to see blacks in American society (including blacks themselves) and helping blacks be seen outside of the realm of otherness they have been subordinated into. These diagrams call for African American integration and are hopeful in tone, begging the question if African Americans continue on this upward path, how much more can America accomplish.

¹⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois. "The American Negro at Paris." *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, vol. XXII, no. 5 (November).