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Appiah examines Du Bois' intellectual influences in 'Lines of Descent'

February 20, 2014 Filed under METRO Posted by administrator

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BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

For much of his long life, W.E.B. Du Bois gave voice to his anger at racism in America.

Nonetheless, the distinguished scholar, co-founder of the NAACP, and convert to Marxism was deeply ambivalent about the nation to which he had been born.



W.E.B. Du Bois

Although he had recently become a citizen of Ghana, Du Bois sent a telegram of support to the 1963 March on Washington on the day he died. And in a posthumously published memoir, he invoked the dichotomy that characterized his thought: "how far can love for my oppressed race accord with love for the oppressing country?"

From Harvard to Berlin

In *Lines of Descent*, Kwame Anthony Appiah traces the intellectual influences on Du Bois – at Harvard in the 1880s and the University of Berlin in the 1890s – that shaped his extraordinarily influential ideas about race and social identity.

Appiah's beautifully written, lucid and sophisticated book takes the measure of "the alternating currents" of Du Bois' thought and of "both the souls of individual black folk and of the multiple black souls contending for possession of the collective black folk."

It's hard to imagine anyone better suited to these tasks than Professor Appiah. A philosopher and cultural theorist, he was born in England and raised in Ghana. Appiah has taught at Cornell, Harvard, Princeton and New York University. His many books include *Cosmopolitanism* and *The Ethics of Identity*.

Rejected concept of race

Appiah demonstrates that Du Bois' struggle to understand "the real meaning" of race remains eminently relevant in 2014. Drawing on population genetics, Du Bois rejected the then dominant biological conception of race (and refuted claims that blacks had fixed and inferior mental traits).

He sought to replace it with a model, grounded in history, culture and sociology.

Entertaining the idea that races were little more than hypothetical entities, Du Bois asked, "But what is this group and how do you differentiate it; and how can you call it 'black' when you admit it is not black."

With its implication that race was a social construction, his rejoinder was ahead of its time: "The black man is a person who must ride 'Jim Crow' in Georgia." The "concept of race might be a unicorn," Appiah adds, "but its horn could draw blood."

But then again, Appiah indicates, Du Bois was also acutely aware of the limitations of an identity based on experiences of injustice. Again and again, he tried to "ward off" this inference.

Vexed by subject of race

His "one life fanaticism," he insisted, "had been belief in my Negro blood." And Du Bois spent decades looking to African history (including stories and tradition that "might figure in the subject life of self-consciously black people") to help unlock "the secret of Negro identity."

Paradoxically, Appiah writes, Africa was alluring as well "because it was a land where he was not seen, or not seen primarily, as a Negro – a land where racial identity lost its salience." Where institutions didn't need to be "outward-facing, batteries meant to repel white racism."

According to Appiah, the subject of race continued to vex Du Bois. He doubted he had mastered the concept

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and speculated that it might be better to treat race "as a group of contradictory forces, facts, and tendencies."

Du Bois continued to search for an animating idea to unite and inspire blacks. He came to believe that social identity, an account from outside, lacked the potency "of some mystic spell of a shared memory and a pulsing sense of a common destiny." This view, Appiah concludes, along with his conviction that the arc of history bent toward justice, made him a romantic. And, I would add, an appealing one at that.

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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