

Du Bois, W. E. B. address at the Conference on the Encyclopaedia Africana

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December 18, 1962

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Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963

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Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

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Biographical / Historical

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, (1868-1963) was a Harvard trained historian, sociologist, journalist, and political activist. Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Du Bois grew up in a relatively tolerant and integrated community. After completing graduate work at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin and Harvard University, where he was its first African American to earn a doctorate, he rose to national prominence as a leader of the Niagara Movement (a group of Black civil rights activists seeking equal rights). Du Bois and his supporters opposed the Atlanta Compromise and insisted on full civil rights and increased political representation. He believed this would be achieved by the African-American intellectual elite. He referred to this group as the Talented Tenth, a concept under the umbrella of racial uplift. He felt that African Americans needed advanced education to develop its leadership.

Du Bois was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. He used his position in the NAACP to respond to racist incidents. After the First World War, he attended the Pan-African Congresses, embraced socialism and became a professor at Atlanta University. Once the Second World War had ended, he engaged in peace activism and was targeted by the FBI. He spent the last years of his life in Ghana and died in Accra on August 27, 1963.

Du Bois was a prolific author, who primarily targeted racism in his polemics. He protested strongly against lynching, Jim Crow laws, and discrimination in education and employment. His cause included people of color everywhere, particularly Africans and Asians in colonies. He was a proponent of Pan-Africanism and helped organize several Pan-African Congresses to fight for the independence of African colonies from European powers.

Du Bois made several trips to Europe, Africa and Asia. His collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, is a seminal work in African-American literature; and his 1935 magnum opus, *Black Reconstruction in America*, challenged the prevailing orthodoxy that Blacks were responsible for the failures of the Reconstruction era. Borrowing a phrase from Frederick Douglass, he popularized the use of the term color line to represent the injustice of the separate but equal doctrine prevalent in American social and political life. His 1940 autobiography *Dusk of Dawn* is regarded in part as one of the first scientific treatises in the field of American sociology. In his role as editor of the NAACP's journal *The Crisis*, he published many influential pieces. Du Bois believed that capitalism was a primary cause of racism and was sympathetic to socialist causes.

Content Description

This collection contains a mimeographed typescript of W.E.B. Du Bois's opening address at the Conference of the Encyclopedia of Africa held at the University of Ghana in Accra in 1962. Du Bois dreamed of editing an 'Encyclopedia Africana'. He envisioned a comprehensive compendium of 'scientific' knowledge about the history, culture, and social institutions of people of African descent. He argues for his project of an Encyclopedia Africana based in Africa and compiled by Africans. He notes that it is long overdue but that "such a work had to wait for independent Africans to carry it out." He acknowledges the excellence of the *Presence Africaine* (founded in 1947), which "has already brought to light much material written in the French language," and sees the project as a "living effort which will grow and change -- which will expand through the years as more and more material is gathered from all parts of Africa." Furthermore, he hopes that the project would dispense with divisive colonial distinctions such as "British," "French," "Black," or "Islamic" Africa and consider the continent as a whole.

Keywords

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African Americans