W. E. B. Du Bois provides an important, though often overlooked, Africana history, culture, and philosophy–informed framework for (a) redeveloping Africana studies and relating it to the crises and conundrums of the 21st century; (b) reconstructing critical social theory, making it more multicultural, transethnic, transgender, and non-Western European–philosophy focused; and (c) reinventing what it means to be an insurgent intellectual-activist (one who relates critical theory to radical political praxis). Du Bois has been hailed as an historian, sociologist, Marxist, and political activist but never an early interdisciplinary social theorist with concrete political commitments to not simply Black liberation and racial justice but to women’s liberation, the poor masses and working classes, and colonized
people of color worldwide. He has long been praised and criticized by scholars who have interpreted and reinterpreted his work, often overlooking its deep critical theoretical dimensions. In this article, Du Bois’s multifarious and ever-evolving social theory is situated at the center and examined for its significance to the discourse and development of Africana studies, contemporary radical political theory, and revolutionary social movements.

Keywords: W. E. B. Du Bois; Africana studies; critical social theory; radical politics; revolutionary movements

In the folds of this European civilization I was born and shall die, imprisoned, conditioned, depressed, exalted and inspired. Integrally a part of it and yet, much more significant, one of its rejected parts; one who expressed in life and action and made vocal to many, a single whirlpool of social entanglement and inner psychological paradox, which always seem to me more significant for the meaning of the world today than other similar and related problems.

Little indeed did I do, or could I conceivably have done, to make this problem or to loose it. Crucified on the vast wheel of time, I flew round and round with the Zeitgeist, waving my pen and lifting faint voices to explain, expound and exhort; to see, foresee and prophesy, to the few who could or would listen. Thus very evidently to me and to others I did little to create my day or greatly change it; but I did exemplify it and thus for all time my life is significant for all lives of men.

—Du Bois (1986, p. 555)

Underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable. They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not. Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force which violates the rules of the game and, in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game. When they get together and go out into the streets, without arms, without protection, in order to ask for the most primitive civil rights, they know that they face dogs, stones, and bombs, jail, concentration camps, even death. Their force is behind every political demonstration for the victims of law and order. The fact that they start refusing to play the game may be the fact which marks the beginning of the end of a period.

—Marcuse (1964, pp. 256-257)
The challenge to critical theorists to rethink their presuppositions according to the realities of non-European cultures and technologies remains the most underthematized aspect of critical theories new and old.

—Wilkerson and Paris (2001, p. 8)

**DU BOIS, AFRICANA STUDIES, AND (INTER)DISCIPLINARY DECADANCE**

One of the major themes of Du Bois’s discourse revolves around race and racism or, more specifically, the critical, systematic, and social scientific study of race and the political economy of racism. However, race and racism were only part of the problem that faced a dying humanity from Du Bois’s point of view. There were other important life-threatening and liberty-denying issues, some of them involving sexism, capitalism, and colonialism, among infinite others. But, no matter what issue Du Bois critically engaged, it should be emphasized that his major preoccupation was ever the dialectic of oppression and liberation—which is to say, the central dialectic (and defining characteristic) of critical theory.

“For Du Bois,” Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1996) asserted, “oppression always was the central issue” (p. 117). She continued, “Early in the history of sociology, W.E.B. Du Bois emphasized . . . gender, race, and class . . . . Sociology for Du Bois was a means to seek solutions to social problems” (pp. 112-113). Sociology, it should be duly noted, was simply one of many disciplines that Du Bois contributed to and methodologically drew from in his indefatigable efforts to “seek solutions to social problems.” His work was wide ranging and anticipated several contemporary theoretical revolutions and radical political positions and particularly Africana studies’ emphasis on linking academic excellence and intellectual innovation with political activism and social organizing and its interdisciplinarity and utilization of multiple methodologies (see Asante & Karenga, 2005; Gordon & Gordon, 2005, 2006; Marable, 2000, 2005; Rabaka, 2005a). One of the deans of Black biography and a noted Du Bois scholar, Arnold Rampersad (1996), recently declared,
I would like to suggest that Du Bois bears a special relationship to some of the more perplexing trends and currents in contemporary American intellectual life, and especially where the university is concerned. I refer here not to all of the intellectual ferment of this generation but to certain of its salient aspects. The most obvious, perhaps, is the rise of “Black Studies” in the last twenty years or so. Also germane is the rise of scholarly work emphasizing the diasporic aspect of African culture; with his publication of *The Negro* in 1915, Du Bois virtually inaugurated that aspect of African Studies. His career relates, in addition, to the general assertion of the importance of the troika of Race, Class, and Gender as the major tool in critical discourse across a wide range of disciplines in American universities. (p. 290)²

Here Rampersad identifies three key intellectual currents to which Du Bois, either directly or indirectly, contributes. Du Bois, first and foremost, contributes to the simultaneously intellectual and sociopolitical interdisciplinary discipline of Africana studies. The second intellectual tradition he contributes to (or, actually, establishes) is a branch of or subdiscipline internal to Africana studies commonly referred to as diaspora studies. And, the third thought-tradition Du Bois’s work helps to highlight foreshadows the modern mantra of and politico-philosophical focus on race, gender, and class that has offered countless contemporary academics a transdisciplinary lingua franca. Du Bois’s contributions to each of the aforementioned intellectual currents enables contemporary Africana studies scholars and critical theorists to engage his discourse from their respective interdisciplinary angles and provides useful paradigmatic tools and discursive devices that could be employed in the reconceptualization and reconstruction of both Africana studies and critical social theory.

Du Bois’s contributions to the history and development of Africana studies have yet to be adequately treated. Although many Africana studies scholars consider him the architect of Africana studies, they have not produced the kinds of critical studies, systemic analyses, and discipline-specific detailed discussions of his corpus and its relationship to Africana studies that would corroborate their claims. This essay aims to open this long closed and deeply buried intellectual history and to explore the relationship among Africana studies, radical politics, and critical social theory.
However, it should be pointed out that Africana studies scholars are not alone in their neglect of Du Bois and his discourse.

### THE DEPRESSING STATE OF DU BOIS STUDIES

Highly regarded as one of the preeminent scholars of not simply Black but American intellectual history, it is amazing that there is such a shameful paucity of scholarship and critical discourse on Du Bois. Returning to Rampersad (1996), he characterized the depressing state of Du Bois studies best when he wrote

> Until now, the record of such scholarship has been uneven at best and poor by almost any standard when one considers the importance of Du Bois. I refer not to the quality of the books published on Du Bois by skilled scholars such as Francis Broderick and Elliott Rudwick, but to the quantity of such work, which has never matched or even approached the conspicuous importance of Du Bois as an American writer on the subjects of race and African American history, sociology, and culture. The notable exception in scholarship has been, of course, Professor Herbert Aptheker. Nevertheless, scarcely half a dozen scholarly books have been published on Du Bois’s life and work. (p. 289)

One of the reasons that there are so few studies on Du Bois involves the racial exclusionary practices and/or the institutionalized racism of many traditional academic disciplines. Du Bois has never received his due recognition in disciplines he helped to establish or significantly contributed to—disciplines such as sociology, history, political science, and education, among others (see E. Anderson & Zuberi, 2000; Bell, Grosholz, & Stewart, 1996; Katz & Sugrue, 1998; Logan, 1971; Rudwick, 1969, 1974). He and his discourse, consistently defying and redefining conventional academic culture, radical politics, and social thought, serves as heresy for many monodisciplinary scholars. Deeply connected to the Western academy, state-sanctioned politics often point to academic anxieties over not simply radical social change, but also theoretical revolution(s). Also similar to academics in a repressed society, the politics of the established order repudiates transformations of consciousness that incite treasonous thoughts and/or
seditious acts against the state. The highest treason, then, is that which lays hold of the hearts and minds of the masses and problematizes and destabilizes the “divine” authority and “democracy” of the government and their academic arm.

Du Bois’s discourse urges unorthodox and heretical states of consciousness that advance theoretical revolutions and radical politics that threaten the established order and its educational institutions and ideological hegemony. Therefore, as his In Battle for Peace eloquently illustrates, the government attempted to suppress and harass Du Bois and disrupt the educational institutions, political associations, and social movements with which he allied. The government and its academic arm and intellectual infantry has a long history of co-opting critical thought and radical movements, modifying and elevating them into the mainstream so as to weaken their radical or revolutionary potential. However, unofficial narratives consistently and critically shadow official documents. Censored and heavily edited heretical texts continue to challenge conventional views and values. Hidden histories and unofficial stories do not usually make it into the mainstream, but the fact remains that they often subtly and silently reach and raise consciousness amongst radicals, providing them with alternative narratives and critical paradigms of self and social transformation. As Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) recently wrote,

Without new visions we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us. (p. xii)

The influence of unorthodox and unofficial politics and academics is often widespread and incalculable and subject to emerge at any moment, rupturing the rules of the repressed society. Accompanying official texts and history, alternative narratives and critical paradigms foster dialectical thought on official orthodoxy and unofficial heterodoxy that complicate, contradict, and sometimes even complement each other. Kelley (2002) contends,

The desires, hopes, and intentions of the people who fought for change cannot be easily categorized, contained, or explained.
Unfortunately, too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they “succeeded” in realizing their visions rather than on the merits or power of the visions themselves. By such a measure, virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact. And yet it is precisely these alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change. (p. vii)

Nowhere, perhaps, is this more evident than in Du Bois’s discourse and the intellectual and political debates surrounding and framing the radical and/or revolutionary potential of Africana studies and critical theory.

James Stewart (1984) argues that another reason scholars have a hard time with or simply do not engage Du Bois’s oeuvre is because “Du Bois rejected the fragmentation of experience into disciplinary compartments, the attempt by the social sciences to use the natural sciences as a developmental model, because he believed that it was, in fact, man who causes ‘movement and change’” (p. 305). Thus, it is Du Bois’s interdisciplinarity in the interest of radically transforming the conditions of Africa and Africans, along with other oppressed and struggling people, that challenges and, perhaps even, dumbfounds traditional monodisciplinary theorists and at the same time accents the fact that he was indeed an architect of the interdisciplinary discipline of Africana studies and a critical social theorist. But, again, Africana studies scholars and critical theorists must do more than merely claim Du Bois as an interdisciplinary intellectual ancestor; they must comprehensively and accessibly engage his corpus for its contribution to their respective intellectual arenas and political agendas.

A third reason Du Bois has been and continues to be overlooked in the academy is because of his unorthodox appropriation and eclectic utilization of multiple methodologies, what Stewart (1984) dubbed “Du Bois’s increasing belief in the complementarity of methodologies” (p. 302). This issue is directly and deeply connected to Du Bois’s interdisciplinarity and, again, helps to highlight his status as a doyen of Africana studies discourse and a major contributor to critical theoretical discourse. His multimethodological approach manifested itself most in: groundbreaking scholarly books,
such as *The Philadelphia Negro*, *The Souls of Black Folk*, *The Negro, Darkwater*, *The Gift of Black Folk*, *Black Reconstruction*, *Black Folk, Then and Now*, *Color and Democracy*, and *The World and Africa*, among others; innumerable efforts at autobiography, for instance, *Darkwater*, *Dusk of Dawn*, *In Battle for Peace*, and *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*; edited volumes, specifically the Atlanta University studies; editorship of and publications in periodicals, such as *The Moon*, *The Horizon*, *The Crisis*, and *Phylon*; literally hundreds of critical essays and scholarly articles on a staggeringly wide range of topics; public intellectualism, political activism, and participation in national and international social movements, such as pan-Africanism, the Niagara Movement, the NAACP, the Harlem Renaissance, the civil rights movement, the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the Peace Movement, among others; and countless creative writings, which encompass novels, short stories, poetry, and plays. Stewart also stated that “Du Bois’s early rejection of his socialization as a classically trained traditional Western scholar and the subsequent self-definition of an alternative program bear strong similarities to Black Studies” (p. 303). From this angle, then, Du Bois is not simply an architect of Africana studies, but a paradigmatic figure who could (and, I think, indeed does) provide many Africana studies scholars (and critical theorists) lost in the labyrinth of the academy with intellectual guidance and political direction.6

Du Bois’s multimethodological approach prefigures contemporary Africana studies’ methodologies in that it was deeply dialectical, critical of traditional disciplines’ omission of important race, gender, class, and cultural issues, and interested in drawing from and contributing to continental and diasporan African political-theoretical and social-activist traditions. His conception of the “complementarity of methodologies,” along with his consistent focus on pan-African social and political issues, simultaneously places him in the interdisciplinary intellectual arena now known as Africana studies and challenges those theorists in traditional disciplines who would, in a monodisciplinary manner, claim Du Bois for their specific disciplines or disciplinary agendas. Commenting on Du Bois’s conception of the “complementarity of methodologies,” Stewart (1984) asserted that Du Bois’s multimethodological approach to the
Africana experience was not simply theoretical eclecticism on his part but a conscious effort to critically comprehend continental and diasporan African history, culture, and struggle in its totality and complexity. Stewart stated

Du Bois perceived that certain methodologies of analysis and styles of presentation were more appropriate than others for capturing the complexity of the Black experience and for communicating that complexity in a manner that generated new insights for non-Blacks and self-reflection among Blacks leading to social action. There is no doubt that Du Bois’s methodological predilections violated traditional standards of historical research. . . . To understand Du Bois’s methodology it is necessary to examine the connotation of the word “fact” as it relates to social science. What constitutes fact in social science is that which can be verified with respect to a particular paradigm. Throughout his career, Du Bois operated from a mind-set that posited the existence of systematic biases in the determination of what constituted “fact” with respect to the Black experience. Consequently, to seek substantial correspondence between his interpretation and the conventional wisdom was necessarily self-defeating. A more salient strategy was to construct alternative explanations and subject them to testing procedures that were indigenous to the alternative paradigm. This is what Du Bois did. At the same time, Du Bois was always concerned with preserving his reputation as a bona fide scholar among traditionalists. . . . Du Bois’s increasing disenchantment with the methodology of the traditional social sciences took a variety of forms. (pp. 303-305)

Du Bois’s emphasis on “alternative explanations,” the development of an “alternative paradigm,” and, as Stewart put it elsewhere, “a non-traditional program of instruction” does not simply resonate with Africana studies, it is the interdisciplinary discipline’s very conceptual core (p. 307). Therefore, Du Bois’s multimethodological approach is inextricable from his interdisciplinarity, both of which place him well beyond the boundaries of traditional disciplines. As I have argued elsewhere, Du Bois’s philosophy of education points to Africana studies’ “non-traditional program of instruction”; it reveals Africana philosophy of education to be a critical educational theory that is geared toward translating theory into progressive social praxis (Rabaka, 2003d). However, the range and reach of Du Bois’s discourse amazingly does not stop here.
Constantly cutting across disciplines and breaking through artificial academic boundaries, Du Bois’s discourse is dialectical, meaning it does not simply challenge traditional disciplines, but it also offers an internal challenge to, and critique of, nontraditional disciplines, such as—and I am thinking here especially of—Africana studies. Du Bois challenges Africana studies scholars, and particularly the self-conscious discipline definers and developers, to beware of the pitfalls of disciplinary development and the poison of intellectual esoterica. If, indeed, Africana studies is a progressive social praxis-promoting interdisciplinary discipline, then Africana studies scholars must constantly be concerned with consciousness raising, radical politics, theoretical revolutions, and, I should strongly stress, world historical, national, and international, real-life, social and political revolutions and movements for freedom, justice, and egalitarian alternatives.

Once again Rampersad (1996) enters the intellectual fray and offers insights. He argues that there are aspects of Du Bois’s work that are actually *antidisciplinary*, by which he means that Du Bois’s corpus contains several texts that not only problematize but go against the whole notion of an academic discipline. As he pointed out, particularly in his autobiographical writings, soon after he published his 1899 classic, *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois lost faith in a purely social scientific or academic solution to Black and pan-African social and political problems (see Du Bois, 1952, 1968a, 1968b, 1969; see also Lewis, 1993, chap. 9). Along with his loss of intellectual faith came an intense critique of the academy and, more specifically, academic disciplines. His intellectual soul searching led him to develop scholastic and political positions that, Rampersad contends, parallel many of the thought-traditions en vogue in “the volatile dynamic of American intellectual life today.” Rampersad punctiliously revealed

If it would be difficult to relate Du Bois directly . . . to those intricacies of deconstruction and postructuralism that have seized the attention of large sections of the American academy in the past dozen years or so, his life and career are connected nevertheless both to certain direct aspects of these intellectual forces and to certain germane trends and tensions. I refer both to the rise of relatively
new and discrete disciplines and departments and to our vastly increased sense of the benefits of the interdisciplinary approach. I am thinking also about the growing tension between traditional humanistic discourse and the new antihumanist and posthumanist emphasis that has surfaced so strongly among the latest generation of scholars, and definitely among many of the brightest and most politically engaged among them. In Du Bois, I would suggest, one sees elements of this antihumanism and posthumanism peering out in spite of the deep commitment to humanism that Du Bois long cherished.

I have referred to disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity; but I am also thinking of the increasing tendency of the cultural studies movement toward an anti-disciplinarity that is distinct from interdisciplinarity. In other words, I refer to important elements in the volatile dynamic of American intellectual life today, which is itself but a token of the volatile and sometimes ominous quality of contemporary American culture in general; and I see Du Bois, born almost 125 years ago and dead now almost 30 years, as having been intimately involved, in one way or another, in many of these questions I have mentioned. (Rampersad, 1996, pp. 290-291)

Du Bois’s discourse can be said to prefigure not only posthumanist, postructuralist, and postmodernist thought, but also several thought-traditions internal to contemporary Africana studies. For instance, Rampersad (1996) observed above that Du Bois was instrumental in establishing the diasporan dimension of Africana studies with his seminal 1915 text, *The Negro*. Furthermore, in his modern classic, *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson argued that Du Bois was one of the first persons of African descent to systematically and critically study Marxism, developed many of the first race-class theories and, consequently, aided in inaugurating Black Marxism. And, elsewhere I contended that Du Bois’s discourse both contributes to and critically destabilizes postcolonialism because it points to a period or stage-state in between colonialism and postcolonialism, what Du Bois conceptually characterized as “quasi-colonialism” or “semi-colonialism” (Rabaka, 2003a). This means, then, that Du Bois’s discourse shows striking similarities with contemporary Western European thought as well as contemporary Africana thought-traditions, displaying its epistemic openness and antidisciplinarity, breaking through both intellectual and social barriers, crossing cultural and political borders, and demonstrating
an unusual philosophical and filial connection to both Black and White theories.

Du Bois’s thought resists restriction to a single academic discipline and does, indeed, harbor aspects of what could be called an antidisciplinary approach to knowledge and phenomena. However, Du Bois’s antidisciplinarity dovetails with Africana studies’ emphasis on interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, and supradisciplinarity. In this sense, Du Bois was intellectually and politically prophetic, not necessarily in his ability to foresee the future but in his ability to anticipate future political developments and discursive dilemmas. Du Bois’s antidisciplinarity offers contemporary Africana studies scholars a caveat: We must be wary of those among us who would attempt to make Africana studies a Black version of traditional White disciplines, severing the connection between Blacks on the campus and the Black community, creating an intellectual oasis in the academy that caters to the wishes and whims of Whites and only speaks of and to the Black community in condescending and acrimonious tones.

**DU BOIS, THEORETICAL REVOLUTIONS, AND THE CRISSES OF CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY**

Du Bois’s work has previously been engaged and presented in one-dimensional ways that obscure its resilience and relevance for contemporary cultural critique, radical politics, and social movements. One-sided biographical and intellectual-historical studies of Du Bois that read and render his thought and texts in arbitrary and artificial terms not only obfuscate Du Bois’s intellectual past—and, therefore, much of modern Black intellectual history—but also adumbrate (classical and contemporary) Africana studies’ contributions to the quickly emerging interdisciplinary intellectual present. As I have endeavored to illustrate in the foregoing sections of this essay, Du Bois was an early interdisciplinarian whose history- and culture-centered theorizings consistently identified key sociopolitical problems and utilized a wide range of work from various disciplines in an effort to produce solutions to
those problems. The problems with which Du Bois’s thought sought to grasp and grapple went well beyond the realm of race and racism and often encompassed other enigmatic issues, such as sexism, civil rights, capitalism, (neo)colonialism, and education, which all remain on the radical political agenda.

Though his work is most frequently read for its contributions to the critique of racism, and White supremacy specifically, Du Bois actually understood racism to be one of many interlocking oppressive systems that threaten not only the souls of Black folk but also the heart and soul of humanity. As Du Bois developed his discourse, various themes and theories were either embraced or rejected contingent on particular historical and cultural conditions, which, reiteratively, helps to highlight the fact that his social and political theory was deeply grounded in history and culture. The deep historical and cultural dimension in Du Bois’s thought suggests that he took seriously the role of a critical social theorist as someone who is concerned with crises in human life and who is committed to constantly (re)conceptualizing what is essential to human liberation and creating a new social world. As a critical social theorist, Du Bois’s distinction is undoubtedly apparent when we note his ability to synthesize historical studies, cultural criticism, radical political theory, and economic analysis with social philosophy and public policy in an effort to (a) discover the fundamental features of contemporary society, (b) identify its most promising potentialities and paths to a liberated future, and (c) accessibly advance ways that the current society could be transformed to realize these newly identified egalitarian goals.8

As far back as his 1898 essay, “The Study of Negro Problems,” Du Bois (1978) declared,

Whenever any nation allows impulse, whim or hasty conjecture to usurp the place of conscious, normative, intelligent action, it is in grave danger. The sole aim of any society is to settle its problems in accordance with its highest ideals, and the only rational method of accomplishing this is to study those problems in the light of the best scientific research. (p. 75)

Sidestepping the scientism and quest for rationalism in the quote, Du Bois seems to suggest two things. First, just as society
changes, so too must the social theory that seeks not simply to chart those changes but to have an emancipatory influence on them. And, second, social theory must be much more critical, meaning it is imperative for it to constantly carry out ideological critique as there are many imperial and neo-imperial “impulse[s], whim[s]” and “hasty conjecture[s]” that are blocking human beings from realizing their “higher ideals.”

Conventionally, Du Bois’s corpus has been categorized as falling into three distinct stages: first, his early elitist, social scientist, and quasi-cultural nationalist stage, from 1896 to 1903; second, his pan-African socialist or Black Marxist middle stage, from 1904 to 1935; and, third, his revolutionary, radical humanist, internationalist, and peace activist final stage, from 1936 to the end of his life in 1963 (see Broderick, 1959; DeMarco, 1983; Moore, 1981; Rudwick, 1968; Wolters, 2001). Many problems, however, arise when Du Bois is periodized and interpreted in this way. At first issue is the simple fact that this scheme shrouds the complexity and interdisciplinarity of the first and second stages and, therefore, does not adequately prepare or equip social theorists of the present age with the intellectual history and conceptual tools necessary to critically interpret and understand Du Bois’s later life (third stage) ruptures with his early elitism and midperiod political radicalism. Earlier in this essay, I have demonstrated that Du Bois’s thought does not fit into the nice and neat conceptual categories of traditional disciplines but may best be interpreted by examining it as interdisciplinary theory with emancipatory intent. What appears to many Du Bois scholars and critics as three distinct stages in his oeuvre is actually a single, protracted, critical, and conjunctive thought process that—on careful and close reading—reveals recurring themes of epistemic openness and radical political receptiveness.

Throughout each of the three stages, Du Bois’s writings return again and again to the critique of domination and discrimination, human liberation, democratic political action, and social transformation. Though he began with bourgeois (and sometimes even Eurocentric imperial) notions of social uplift, by the so-called second stage Du Bois was clearly collapsing conventional social scientific categories and exploring new social identities and programs of political action. He incorporated a wide range of academic
theory and grassroots political praxis into his burgeoning critical social theoretical framework; thus, his thought displays an unusual openness to and critical engagement of Black nationalism, Black separatism, pan-Africanism, African communalism, Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, German romanticism, German nationalism, British socialism, American pragmatism, Third Worldism, multiculturalism, and feminism (and/or womanism), among other thought-traditions.

It would seem that the leitmotifs in Du Bois’s thought would make his ideas more accessible and easier to interpret. However, it must be emphasized that though there are many recurring themes in his writings, he consistently revised his social theory and political analysis throughout each of the three stages. Consequently, there are specific issues—usually race, gender, and class issues—that transgress the traditional three stages conceptualization of Du Bois’s corpus and that are persistently and, perhaps, perplexingly present at each stage. I argue, once more, that it is the interdisciplinary nature of his work that makes it so difficult to interpret in a one-dimensional or monodisciplinary (as opposed to multidisciplinary) manner. Also, Du Bois’s interdisciplinarity, coupled with his accent on political economy and social theory and his consistent emphasis on race, gender, and class issues, make his work an ideal model for reconceiving and recreating critical theory of contemporary society as well as Africana studies.

Interpretations of Du Bois based on the tripartite paradigm, then, are extremely problematic and often theoretically myopic, frequently displaying the disciplinary desires of the critic to fashion a Du Bois for his or her specific (postmodern) purposes. However, Du Bois will not be anyone’s theoretical straw man (or “race man” either), if you will. His thought, like that of other provocative thinkers, must be approached from an angle that is sensitive to intellectual, historical, and cultural context to be adequately, and one could say correctly, interpreted. As I have argued elsewhere, for instance, Du Bois carried out one of the most devastating critiques of Black leadership and liberation thought in the first half of the 20th century. But, one will hardly be able to fully appreciate the originality of his arguments, the radicalism of his political actions, and their relevance to critical theory of contemporary society unless his antiaccommodationism is
linked to his antiracist, anticapitalist, anticolonial, and antisexist social theorizing (see Rabaka, 2005a, 2005b).

By taking a conceptual (as opposed to the conventional chronological) approach to Du Bois’s writings, I have been able to accent some of the significant developments of his thought that speak to ongoing and important issues revolving around race, gender, class, and the reconstruction of critical theory. Instead of viewing changes in his thought as signs of confusion, vacillation, or intellectual inertia, I have emphasized the subtle logic of the modifications Du Bois made in his thinking by placing it in the context of continental and diasporan African intellectual history, culture, and struggle, as well as world intellectual history, culture, and struggle. In addition, engaging Du Bois’s corpus conceptually has also enabled me to stress its strengths and weaknesses as a paradigm and point of departure for developing a more multicultural, transethnic, race- and gender-focused critical theory of contemporary society. Similar to several other critical social theorists, Du Bois oriented his political theory toward what he perceived as the most progressive political struggles (or lack thereof) of a particular moment and, thus, articulated possibilities and potentialities specific to his contemporary society and social reality rather than putting forward a blueprint for future social change or an architecture for emancipation in an epoch to come.12

This means, then, that we are on our own—as the post-Marxists and postfeminists regularly remind us (Aronson, 1995; Gamble, 2002). However, it does not mean that we should abandon those aspects of Du Bois’s social thought that may aid us in our endeavors to develop a new, more multicultural, race- and gender-centered, and sexual orientation-sensitive critical theory of contemporary society. Critical theory seeks to comprehend, critique, and offer alternatives to the contradictions of current culture and society. Therefore, it is always in need of revision and, literally, demands development because its basic concepts and categories are time and situation sensitive. In other words, the basic concepts and categories of critical theory are historical; and history, to put it plainly, has never bowed to the wishes and whims of any human being or human group. Hence, history is always unfolding and playing itself out in new and unimagined ways. Critical theory, then, being a form of historical
and cultural critique, must remain receptive to the various ways in which the world is changing if it is to truly transform contemporary culture and society (see Gramsci, 1975, 1985, 1995; Rasmussen, 1999; Rasmussen & Swindal, 2004; Ray, 1993).

DU BOIS, THE SOULS OF BLACK RADICAL FOLK, AND THE RACE(IST) POLITICS OF CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

In this essay, I have endeavored to elucidate ways in which Du Bois contributes to critical theory in general and a new, broader-based critical theory that seriously engages and takes as its point of departure the social and political thought of Africana radicals and revolutionaries. Throughout his life, Du Bois’s critique of racism was relentless and, however flawed, remains one of his greatest contributions to both classical and contemporary social theory. But, as this essay illustrates, Du Bois’s much-heralded concepts of race and critiques of racism are virtually incomprehensible and seemingly incoherent without taking into consideration his bravura and often simultaneous critiques of Eurocentric and bourgeois education, sexism (and particularly patriarchy), Black civil rights and social justice struggles, colonialism, and capitalism, among other issues. Where most critical theorists, at least in the Frankfurt School and other Western Marxist critical thought-traditions, identified capitalism as the primary problem and essential source of human suffering and social misery, Du Bois’s critical thought, though it began with a race base, ultimately developed a conjunctive model that did not privilege one social or political problem over another.

This study has also analyzed and explained the many tensions and ambiguities in Du Bois’s corpus by demonstrating how his thought and texts are deeply connected to and, as is usually the case, in dialogue with specific historical happenings, cultural conditions, and political practices. This dual emphasis approach enables us to see, first, how Frankfurt School and Western Marxist critical theory has long overlooked racism, sexism, and colonialism, thus making it the very one-dimensional thought that Marcuse (1964) warned
against and, second, how Du Bois and Africana studies relates to the reconstruction of critical theory. During the past quarter of a century, there have been consistent calls within critical theoretical discourse for a return to Marx to reconstruct critical theory and make it more viable in light of the vicissitudes of contemporary capitalism. However, what many of these otherwise sophisticated critical social theorists fail to perceive is that it was and remains their overdependence on Marx and Marxism that has made so much of their work theoretically myopic and intellectually insular.

Like a dog chasing its own tail, many White Marxists and critical theorists have locked their discourses into a vicious cycle, going round and round, covering a lot of the same theoretical terrain and identifying similar economic issues as the infinite cause of contemporary social suffering without opening their conceptual universes to the world of ideas and the radical thought-traditions of those of “other races and other colors,” as Marcuse (1964, p. 256) aptly put it in _One-Dimensional Man_. Many of these same Marxists and critical theorists bemoan the sorry state of contemporary critical social theory but are either too intellectually timid, intellectually elitist, or, dare I say, racially exclusivist to move beyond merely mentioning the fact that critical theory should be antiracist, antisexist, and anticolonial. Mentioning racism, sexism, and/or colonialism in passing, at the end of an article, or at the back of a book, and always in subordination to “the evils of capitalism” does not do the billions of human beings who suffer at the hands of these interlocking oppressive systems a favor.

If, indeed, critical theory is theory critical of domination and discrimination and a social theory that simultaneously offers accessible and ethical alternatives to the key social and political problems of the present age, then any theory claiming to be a critical theory of contemporary society must thoroughly theorize not only capitalism but racism, sexism, and colonialism and how each of the aforementioned interconnects and intersects to deform and destroy life and the ongoing prospects of liberation. Du Bois, thus, emerges from this study as an interdisciplinary, multifaceted, and philosophically fascinating paradigmatic figure whose work indisputably contributes to contemporary efforts to reconceptualize and reconstruct critical theory. Critical theory cannot and will not be able to revise itself
unless and until it seriously considers the contributions of social theorists and activists of color. This generation of critical theorists, then, has a unique and time-sensitive task before it, and, simply said, it is as follows: We must put into principled practice immediately what critical theory has so long advanced theoretically. In terms of the Africana tradition of critical theory, that critical theoretical admonition has been captured best by Frantz Fanon (1967), in *Black Skin, White Mask*, when he wrote,

> I, the man of color, want only this:
> That the tool never possess the man. That enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another. That it be possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be.
> It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world.
> Superiority? Inferiority?
> Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?
> Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*? (pp. 231-232)

**DU BOIS, INTERDISCIPLINARITY, CONCEPTUAL INCARCERATION, AND NEW CRITICAL THEORY**

In summary, it must be openly admitted that the theoretical tensions noted in the previous paragraphs point to and produce an extremely uneasy combination of criticisms and interpretations that defy simple synopsis or conventional conceptual rules. Consequently, most of Du Bois’s critics have heretofore downplayed and diminished the real brilliance and brawn of his work by failing to grasp its antinomies and have, therefore, put forward a divided and distorted Du Bois who is either, for example, a pan-Africanist or Europhile, a Black nationalist or radical humanist, a social scientist or propagandist, a race man or radical women’s rights man, a bourgeois elitist or dogmatic Marxist. Each of the aforementioned superficial ascriptions falls short of capturing the complex and chameleonic character of Du Bois’s discourse and the difficulties
involved in interpreting it using one-sided, single-subject theory and/or monodisciplinary devices.

Many dismiss Du Bois and charge his work with being dense because it employs a wide range of theory from several different disciplines, although others, such as myself, are attracted to his work because it is theoretically thick, rich in both radicality and originality and boldly crosses so many academic and political boundaries. No matter what one’s ultimate attitude toward Du Bois, I believe the fact that his thought and texts continue to cause contemporary controversies and that it has been discussed and debated across the disciplines for more than a century in some degree points to the multidimensionality and interdisciplinarity of his ideas, which offers enigmatic insights for everyone to either embrace enthusiastically or demur definitively. Hence, the dialectic of attraction and repulsion in Du Bois studies can partly be attributed to the ambiguities inherent in his thought and the monodisciplinary anxieties of many of the interpreters of his work. Suffice to say this is the case, then several previous studies of his thought are seriously flawed because they have sought to grasp and grapple with Du Bois’s oeuvre using a monodisciplinary instead of a multidisciplinary model.

Whatever the deficiencies of his thought and the problems with his approach to critical issues confronting Africana and other oppressed people, Du Bois forces his readers to think deeply, to criticize thoroughly, and to move beyond the imperial impulses of the established order. Many critics have made solid criticisms of some aspect of Du Bois’s thought but, when analyzed objectively, his lifework and intellectual legacy are impressive and inspiring, as is his loyalty to the most radical thought and practice traditions in Africana and world history. His impact and influence have been widespread, not only cutting across academic disciplines but setting aglow several social movements and political programs.

Where some theorists dogmatically hold views simply because they are fashionable or politically popular, Du Bois’s work draws from a diverse array of often eclectic and enigmatic sources and, therefore, offers no closed system or absolute truths. His thought was constantly open and routinely responsive to changing historical and cultural conditions, both nationally and internationally. There are
several, sometimes stunning transformations in his theory that are in most instances attempts to answer conundrums created by changing sociopolitical, historical, and cultural conditions. In conclusion, then, I want to suggest that it is the openness and consistently nondogmatic radicalism of Du Bois’s project, the richness and wide range and reach of his ideas, and the absence of any finished system or body of clearly defined truths that can be accepted or rejected at ease that constitute both the contemporary philosophical fascination with and continuing critical importance of W. E. B. Du Bois and his discourse, especially in how it relates to Africana studies.

NOTES

1. I advance this study, then, as a continuation of the Africana critical theory project that was initiated with my doctoral dissertation, “Africana Critical Theory: From W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James’s Discourse on Domination and Liberation to Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral’s Dialectics of Decolonization” (Rabaka, 2001). It need be noted at the outset, and in agreement with David Held (1980), “Critical theory, it should be emphasized, does not form a unity; it does not mean the same thing to all its adherents” (p. 14). For instance, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1991) employ the term critical theory in a general sense in their critique of postmodern theory, stating: “We are using ‘critical theory’ here in the general sense of critical social and cultural theory and not in the specific sense that refers to the critical theory of society developed by the Frankfurt School” (p. 33). Furthermore, Raymond Morrow (1994) has forwarded that the term critical theory has its origins in the work of a group of German scholars [of Jewish descent] (collectively referred to as the Frankfurt School) in the 1920’s who used the term initially (Kritische Theorie in German) to designate a specific approach to interpreting Marxist theory. But the term has taken on new meanings in the interim and can be neither exclusively identified with the Marxist tradition from which it has become increasingly distinct nor reserved exclusively to the Frankfurt School, given extensive new variations outside the original German context. (p. 6)

Finally, in his study of Marx, Foucault, and Habermas’ philosophies of history and contributions to critical theory, Steven Best (1995) uses the term critical theory “in the most general sense, designating simply a critical social theory, that is, a social theory critical of present forms of domination, injustice, coercion, and inequality” (p. xvii). He, therefore, does not “limit the term to refer to only the Frankfurt School” (p. xvii). This means, then, that the term critical theory and the methods, presuppositions, and positions it has come to be associated with in the humanities and social sciences (a) connotes and continues to exhibit an epistemic openness and style of radical cultural criticism that highlights and accents the historical alternatives and emancipatory possibilities of a specific age and/or

2. I rely heavily on Rampersad’s (1990) recent reflections on Du Bois and Du Bois studies throughout this section and would suggest those interested in his more detailed discussion of Du Bois consult his classic treatment in *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*.

3. For Aptheker, Broderick, and Rudwick’s major contributions to Du Bois Studies, please see Aptheker (1948, 1949, 1961, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1971, 1973, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1989, 1990, 1997), Broderick (1955, 1958a, 1958b, 1958c, 1959, 1974), and Rudwick (1956, 1957a, 1957b, 1957c, 1958a, 1958b, 1959a, 1959b, 1960a, 1960b, 1968, 1969, 1974, 1982a, 1982b). Although I utterly agree with Rampersad’s assertion that these scholars significantly contributed to the discourse and development of Du Bois studies, I also think that it is important to point out that none of the aforementioned transgressed the boundaries of their traditional disciplines and consciously sought to simultaneously contribute to both Du Bois and Africana (or Black) studies. At this point, that is, at the dawn of the 21st century, it is extremely important for Du Bois scholars to draw from the wide range of methodological and theoretical work that Africana studies has to offer because many of the new Africana studies theories emerge from discursive communities that Du Bois either directly or indirectly established or influenced. In terms of Africana studies scholars interested in Du Bois, Du Bois’s discursive contributions (especially with regard to *The Philadelphia Negro* and *The Souls of Black Folk*) are often overlooked or taken for granted because of his popularity both within and outside of Africana studies, causing many to claim (often before they seriously engage his work) that Du Bois belongs to this or that traditional discipline. However, prejudgment and petty intellectual turf wars will not suffice. There simply is no substitute for Africana studies scholars doing the long and hard work that needs to be done (especially on his work after *The Souls of Black Folk*) to assess Du Bois’s intellectual and political legacy for its contribution to the discourse and development of Africana studies.

4. For critical discussions of the racial exclusionary practices and/or the institutionalized racism of traditional academic disciplines, see Eze (1997), Goldberg (1993, 2002), and Kelley (1997).

5. Here and throughout this section, I am generously drawing from Antonio Gramsci’s conceptual contributions: ideological hegemony, organic intellectual, historical bloc, war of position, war of maneuver, and ensemble of ideas and social relations, and so on. His work has deeply influenced my conception of critical theory as a form of ideological and cultural critique and a radical political praxis-promoting social theory. In particular, Gramsci’s assertion that class domination is exercised as much through popular and unconscious consensus (or the internalization of imperialism) as through physical coercion (or the threat of it) by the state apparatus, especially in advanced capitalist societies where education, religion, law, media, and popular culture, among other areas, are controlled by the ruling class, his work innovatively emphasizes the ideological and counter-hegemonic dimension that
radical politics and critical social theory today must deepen and further develop. However, in terms of Africana critical theory of contemporary society and the lifeworlds of people of African origin and descent, and people of color in general, class domination and capitalism represent one of many interlocking systems of domination and discrimination that must be ideologically and physically combated and discontinued. Therefore, Gramsci’s work provides several insights but must be synthesized with other theory, especially critical race theory, antiracist feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and liberation theology, among others, if it is to aid in the (re)construction of a new, more multicultural, radical antiracist and gender justice-seeking critical theory of contemporary society. For further discussion, see Gramsci (1971, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1978, 1985, 1994, 1995, 2000).


8. With regard to the last three points, which provide a basic outline for my conception of critical theory, I have drawn heavily from the work of Joy James (1996, 1997, 1999), whose texts have consistently raised the issue of connecting theory to praxis, the realities of the “ugliness” of antiracist, antisexist, and anti-imperial struggle (both inside and outside radical thought-traditions and movements), and the need for progressive intellectual-activists to move “beyond literary insurgency or rhetorical resistance to bring the element of the fight into our daily lives with the specificity of political struggles around economic, sexual, and racial violence” (James, 1996, p. 23). Here I am also borrowing, however loosely, from the theoretical orientations and methodological work of Marcuse (1969, 1972, 1997, 2001), Habermas (1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1987), and Foucault (1997, 1998, 2000). Foucault’s conception of and contributions to critical theory, in particular, helped me to hone a critical methodological perspective that transgresses not only the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines but also the Frankfurt School critical theorists’ obsession with Marx and Marxism as the major theoretical thread that connects one version of critical theory to another. Where Foucault turned to Nietzsche and other counter- or post-Marxist thinkers to develop his critical theoretical discourse, I, of course, have labored with Du Bois and have plans to call on several other Africana social and political theorists.


10. Wilson Moses (1978, 1996, 1998) and Paul Gilroy (1993) have demonstrated that the “Eurocentric imperial” aspects of Du Bois’s early social uplift theory was derived, in part, from his affinity to German nationalism, which he admired, arguably, since his undergraduate days at Fisk. For further discussion, see also Lewis (1993), Reed (1997), and Zamir (1995).

12. In terms of the time sensitivity and theoretical specificity of critical theory, Herbert Marcuse (1970) made an excellent statement regarding the critical theorist’s primary task of wrestling with the most pressing issues of their epoch, as opposed to pointing to or pointing out the future “forces of transformation.” In his own words

If Marx saw in the proletariat the revolutionary class, he did so also, and maybe even primarily, because the proletariat was free from the repressive needs of capitalist society, because the new needs for freedom could develop in the proletariat and were not suffocated by the old, dominant ones. Today [in 1967] in large parts of the most highly developed capitalist countries that is no longer the case. The working class no longer represents the negation of existing needs. That is one of the most serious facts with which we have to deal. As far as the forces of transformation themselves are concerned, I grant you without further discussion that today nobody is in a position to give a prescription for them in the sense of being able to point and say, “Here you have your revolutionary forces, this is their strength, this and this must be done.” The only thing I can do is point out what forces potentially make for a radical transformation of the system. (p. 70)

This means, then, that critical theorists need not feel compelled to accept the call of the prophet. Critical theory is, or at its best should be, deeply rooted in empirical and historical research, and its theoretical positions are linked to concrete social and political struggles. Therefore, though a part of its focus is on the future, critical theory is ultimately a theory of the present whose philosophical foundation rests on and revolves around classical and contemporary radical thought and practices.


I think we need a much fuller appropriation and use of Marx than is going on in either postmodernism or Habermasian critical theory. If capitalism is deeply pathological and unjust, as I think it is and as I have argued in all of my works, then we need the resources of what still remains the deepest and most comprehensive critique of capitalist political economy, which that occurs in the late Marx in the pages of the Grundrisse, Capital, and Theories of Surplus Value, a total of seven volumes that are more relevant than ever. For these reasons, I draw on Marx’s theory of exploited labor in the workplace, his theory of tyranny, in which the economy and money impinge on noneconomic aspects of the lifeworld in a way that is absurd, his theory of a marginalized industrial reserve army, his theory of value and surplus value, and his account of substantive socialism. Capitalist pathology is not just colonization of life-world by system, although that is certainly an important part of such pathology, but includes exploitation, tyranny, domination, and marginalization as well. (Marsh, 2001, p. 57)

14. I want to clarify here so that my critical comments are not confused with being anti-Marxist. I am in complete intellectual and political sympathy with Douglas Kellner (1995), in “The Obsolescence of Marxism?,” when he contends
We need to build on viable political and theoretical perspectives and resources of the past, and I would argue that Marxism continues to provide vital resources for radical theory and politics today . . . . In sum, I believe that we need new theoretical and political syntheses, drawing on the best of classical Enlightenment theory, Marxian theory, feminism, and other progressive theoretical and political currents of the present. Key aspects for such new syntheses, however, are found in the Marxian tradition, and those who prematurely abandon it are turning away from a tradition that has been valuable since Marx’s day and will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. Consequently, Marxism is not yet obsolete. Rather, the Marxian theory continues to provide resources and stimulus for critical theory and radical politics in the present age. (pp. 25-26)

Kellner and I, however, part company when and where he gives a detailed discussion of the relevance of European derived and developed theories or, rather, Eurocentric theories—Enlightenment theory, Marxism, and feminism—and only alludes to the work of non-European theorists or, as he put it, “other [italics added] progressive theoretical and political currents” for renewing radical politics and critical theory in the present. To his credit, Kellner states, “Radical politics today should be more multicultural, race and gender focused, and broad-based than the original Marxian theory” (p. 20). But he does not identify or critically engage the “other progressive theoretical and political currents” the way, and to the depths to which, he does a plethora of White male radical thinkers whose thought, he believes, contributes indelibly to the reconstruction of critical theory. How will radical politics and critical theory become more multicultural and race and gender focused if it does not turn to the thought and texts of the most progressive race and gender theorists, some of whom happen to be of African origin or descent and some of whom are, of course, women? My conception of critical theory, Africana critical theory, utterly agrees that Marx and Marxism have long provided the most comprehensive class analysis and critique of capitalist political economy. But, it finds Marxism shamefully deficient where the critiques of racism, sexism, and colonialism are concerned. For these reasons, Africana critical theory, in addition to Marx and Marxism, draws on Black Marxism, philosophy of race, and critical race theory; Black radical feminism, Marxist-feminism, antiracist feminism; feminist philosophy, male feminism, and womanism; and pan-Africanism, postcolonialism, African socialism, Fanonian philosophy, and decolonization theory, among others. Developing this argument any further would constitute the basis of another essay, which I intend to write, but for the time being I offer this study on Du Bois’ (and Africana studies’) contributions to the reconstruction of critical theory.

REFERENCES


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Du Bois published The Souls of Black Folk in 1903, while growing increasingly involved in campaigning against lynching and Jim Crow segregation. In 1909, he co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and became the editor of its journal, The Crisis in 1911. When Du Bois wrote The Souls of Black Folk, the African-American intellectual tradition was still in its infancy. The earliest African-American writers were freedmen who wrote books that were often autobiographical in nature and sought to persuade white readers to support the abolition of slavery. The Souls of Black Folk is a passionate and eloquent autobiography. It tells the life story of an individual, W. E. B. Du Bois, and of a group, African Americans. In the process of telling his personal autobiography, Du Bois shows how he is shaped by his community’s story. Du Bois inhabits a world in which a color line divides all life into two parts. One part is privileged and white, and it exploits the other part that is constrained and black. The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches is a 1903 work of American literature by W. E. B. Du Bois. It is a seminal work in the history of sociology and a cornerstone of African-American literature. The book contains several essays on race, some of which had been published earlier in The Atlantic Monthly. To develop this work, Du Bois drew from his own experiences as an African American in American society. Outside of its notable relevance in African-American history, The Souls of Black Folk also