



W.E.B. DU BOIS'S DATA PORTRAITS: VISUALIZING BLACK AMERICA

Edited by Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Rusert

Princeton Architectural Press, 2018

144 pages

Hardcover: \$29.95, ISBN 978-1-61689-706-2

Review by: Brandyn Friedly

STRAIGHT AWAY, the brightly colored infographic on the front cover of this slim, 7 by 10-inch hardcover volume grabs your eye, rivets your attention, and draws your hand to pick up and open *W.E.B. Du Bois's Data Portraits*. The first glimpse of that “unusual and complex configuration of the spiral diagram” that is “simultaneously easy to read and hypnotic” (caption Plate 25) stops you in your tracks with questions about the story to be told inside.

W.E.B. Du Bois's Data Portraits collects the complete set of infographics for the first time in full color, making their insights and innovations available to a contemporary audience while exploring their context in social and design history. (back cover)

The stunning spiral diagram on the front is just one of the sixty-three data portraits, or “infographics,” created by Du Bois and his team as part of the American Negro Exhibit at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* in 1900—an exhibit “dedicated to the progress made by African Americans since Emancipation” (8).

Opening either cover, the endpapers display all sixty-three infographics as small multiples, each popping off the bright white page background. This view of the whole collection offers a quick overview of the diversity of chart types, the vibrancy of the graphics, and the unified visual aesthetic Du Bois and his team employed in telling the narrative of African American progress. Each of the small images on the endpapers is numbered, to make it easy to

find its full-page reproduction in the Plate section of the book. These reproductions allow close, detailed reading, and each is accompanied by sharp analysis by designer Silas Munro.

In their Introduction, the editors give a broad overview of the historical context within which the American Negro Exhibit was assembled, their motivations for highlighting Du Bois's data visualizations, and the goals they sought to achieve by presenting this book to contemporary audiences over 100 years after the exhibit was first displayed. This essay provides contextual background that helps bring the visualizations alive for a contemporary audience, and appears with an interdisciplinary set of three more essays preceding the reproduced infographics: a social history of the exhibit by sociologist Aldon Morris, an analysis by cultural historian Mabel O. Wilson of the cartographic imaginary employed, and Silas Munro's “Introduction to the Plates.” Here, alongside his individual Plate captions, Munro's insightful comments frame Du Bois's graphics within design history.

The historical context and goals of the American Negro Exhibit are critical to understanding the logic behind Du Bois's data visualizations. Fewer than forty years after the end of slavery, and only four years after *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized racial segregation, “the installations that comprised the American Negro Exhibit were meant to educate patrons about the forms of education and uplift occurring at black institutions and in African American communities across the US South” (9). The production of the exhibit



© by the author(s). This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

was highly collaborative and included “an eclectic set of objects, images, and texts” (9). One year after the publication of Du Bois’s groundbreaking sociological study, *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 2014), the organizer of the exhibit, Thomas Junius Calloway, asked Du Bois to “contribute a social study about African American Life” (9).

It is hard to overstate the meaning and goals of the American Negro Exhibit, or of Du Bois’s data visualizations. Overall, the Paris *Exposition* marked the turn of the century and a world in the midst of the industrial revolution. As Aldon Morris writes in his essay “American Negro at Paris, 1900,” the “fair presented a global stage for nations to strut their sense of national pride” (23). It was also a unique opportunity for Du Bois and his collaborators to directly challenge the myth of Western progress and black inferiority. Morris finds in Du Bois’s data visualizations “an attempt to give, in as systematic and compact a form as possible, the history and present condition of a large group of human beings” (28). This is echoed by Mabel O. Wilson in the third essay: “The Cartography of W.E.B. Du Bois’s Color Line”, when she states that the “data visualizations, and the American Negro Exhibit as a whole, rebuked beliefs that were foundational to the modern ethos of social progress . . .” (42).

Aldon Morris states that “the compilation of data displayed at the exhibit stressed one message: black progress since slavery,” and that it was a “masterpiece of sociology, celebrating black humanity on a world stage” (35–36). This directly contradicted prevalent Western beliefs of black inferiority, beliefs based on social Darwinism and scientific racism.

The exhibit had to be strong, as Morris points out, because of the physical constraints imposed by the disadvantageous location of the Negro Exhibit “in the right corner of a room.” This meant that in order “to garner attention from this unenviable location, this exhibit would need to radiate its own sparkle and originality” (27). This drove Du Bois and his team to avoid “unmoving prose and dry presentations of charts,” for “hand-drawn graphs, charts, and maps arrayed in lively, vibrant colors” (33–34).

Economic constraints, linked to the general lack of funding for African American scholarship, also complicated the preparation and installation of the exhibition’s data portraits. Du Bois himself had to travel “across the Atlantic in steerage,” (17) which highlights the importance of the

American Negro Exhibit to Du Bois and his collaborators, and underlines their accomplishment in bringing the exhibit together despite the lack of funding. It also aligns with the narrative told in the data portraits themselves, that:

the gains that had been made by African Americans *in spite of* the machinery of white supremacist culture, policy, and law that surrounded them. In this way, the data portraits actually challenged the dominant framework of liberal freedom and progress that characterized both the American Negro Exhibit and the Paris Exposition.” (22)

After the thorough contextualization of the Exhibit, and the role the data portraits played within it, come the sixty-three data portraits, each reproduced in full color, one to a page. The portraits include innovative and striking charts, maps, tables, and diagrams. Silas Munro provides a caption for each, analyzing the aesthetic logic employed and describing how the design accomplishes Du Bois’s goal of communicating black progress.

The portraits are split into two distinct, but related, series to tell this story: *The Georgia Negro: A Social Study* (Plates 1–36), and *A Series of Statistical Charts Illuminating the Condition of the Descendants of Former African Slaves Now in Residence in the United States of America* (Plates 37–63). While the “first set . . . used Georgia’s diverse and growing black population as a case study to demonstrate the progress made by African Americans since the Civil War . . . establishing the Black South’s place within and claim to global modernity,” the “second set . . . was more national and global in scope” (11).

Cartography plays a central role in framing Du Bois’s narrative. The first Plate of the series is a map of the Black Atlantic world, which Munro says “visually represent[s] hundreds of years and thousands of miles of oppression” (*caption* Plate 1). Progressing through the set, Du Bois’s employment of various thematic mapping techniques becomes increasingly more detailed, and the maps are used to frame the information on the intervening charts and diagrams. The first group—*The Georgia Negro: A Social Study*—finishes with three detailed dot maps of selected Georgia counties, showing the distribution of African Americans’ residences based on socio-economic class (Plates 34–36).

Munro comments that “Du Bois and his team used information design as a rhetorical device,” (45–46) and this can be seen clearly in the maps on Plates 41 and 42. The first of these maps in the second group—*A Series of Statistical Charts Illuminating the Condition of the Descendants of Former African Slaves Now in Residence in the United States of America*—shows the outlines of various counties, sized proportionately by total population, in comparison to the United States sized by its African American population alone. The second map makes a similar comparison of the total and African American populations of the United States between 1800 and 1890, in four 30-year steps. In both of the maps, as Morris states, “organizers of the exhibit bestowed nationhood on the recently freed slaves, referring to them as a small ‘nation within a nation,’” (24), and by representing the United States based on African American population alone, Du Bois asserts a corporate existence for that African American ‘nation within a nation’ on equal footing with that of other nation states. Plate 41 also subverts the white social darwinist narrative of black erasure in the United States—by not including white population on the map, it appropriates the patriotic symbolism attached to the country’s outline.

This example illustrates a key lesson about visual communication for social change that can be learned from the Du Bois’s data portraits—beyond the direct cognitive effects of perception, visual variables can encode cultural meanings that can evoke emotion to help tell a story and connect with an audience. Munro suggests that the recurring “color palette of red, green, and black is likely an allusion to the Pan-African flag,” (*caption* Plate 42), a good example of the politics of color. In all the diagrams, “Du Bois and his design team used clean lines, bright color, and a sparse style to visually convey the American color line to a European audience” (16), and by leveraging this visual language, Du Bois was able to both immediately and subtly convey the message of “the Black South as an integral part of modernity” (16).

The visual variable of shape, too, can hold cultural meaning. On Plate 1, “The Georgia Negro: A Social Study by W. E. Burghardt Du Bois,” Georgia is symbolized with a star. Prior to abolition, the north star represented liberation for enslaved people—both literally and in Frederick Douglass’s 1847–1851 abolitionist newspaper *North Star*. In Du Bois’s narrative of independent racial uplift, the symbol of Georgia as a star could be interpreted as

symbolizing liberation in an independent “small nation within a nation” (24).

Much of Du Bois and his team’s visual innovation comes from the understanding that emotion is central to storytelling. Wilson places this work within the context of a “cartographic gaze that cultivated a way of seeing the world through evolving cartographic technologies and new modes of representing a world no longer ruled by God and monsters but guided by reason and science” (41). Du Bois and his team, however, understood that while “unmoving prose and dry presentations of charts and graphs might catch attention from specialists, this approach would not garner notice beyond narrow circles of specialists” (33). Morris finds that “breaking from tradition, Du Bois was among the first great American public intellectuals whose reach extended beyond the academy to the masses,” by “using a variety of writing styles . . . that deeply touched readers’ emotions” (33).

Reading *W.E.B. Du Bois’s Data Portraits* prompted me to re-examine my education in cartography and information design, and to ask some critical questions about pedagogy and representation. I found Du Bois’s absence from the indices of *Thematic Cartography and Geographic Visualization* (Slocum et al. 2005), *Envisioning Information* (Tufte 1990), and *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (Tufte 2001)—texts widely considered foundational for cartographic or information design study, and regularly assigned reading in introductory classes—to be a loud omission. In particular, Slocum et al.’s, claim that “the notion of social and ethical issues in cartography was first developed in the context of postmodernism” seems to ignore Du Bois’s important work (Slocum et al. 2005, 15).

In his “Introduction to the Plates,” Munro concludes that the “visualizations offer a prototype of design practices that were not widely utilized until more than a century later, anticipating new trends . . . of design for social innovation, data visualization in service to social justice, and the decolonization of pedagogy” (50). Considering the ways that these groundbreaking data visualizations were rooted in the social and material conditions of their creators made me reflect on the importance of representation of cartographers from oppressed groups in today’s professional and social spaces—in meetups, conferences, online spaces, and in pedagogy. How has cartography been—and how is it still being—held back by the marginalization and erasure of the contributions made by oppressed people,

and who and what else is missing from traditional cartographic history?

The design theorist Tony Fry observed that “design is profoundly political . . . it either serves or subverts the status quo” (Fry 2007, 88). In the American Negro Exhibit in 1900, “Du Bois and his team redeployed the Western methods of cartography that had been used to marginalize and exploit black life by inscribing the black world back into history and geography” (42). How is modern map-making serving or subverting the status quo?

I cannot count the times I’ve heard the story of how the power of mapping was shown by John Snow’s 1854 cholera map, but this was the first time I have ever heard of how W.E.B. Du Bois used mapping to address racism—a social disease that continues to affect millions across continents and generations. Why has the Snow story been constantly repeated, while Du Bois goes unmentioned? I am grateful for the way *W.E.B. Du Bois’s Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America, The Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* challenges existing pedagogy and shows the power of visual communication toward social justice, and I think that this book is a major contribution to cartography and data visualization. I was drawn to mapping because I experienced the way maps can shape how one sees and understands the world, and I recognize that power in Du Bois’s work. How can this power be used toward liberation today?

The editors, Battle-Baptiste and Rusert, along with their collaborators, give us a clear vision of the historical moment behind the groundbreaking data portraits in the American Negro Exhibit, and leave the reader to envision, in our own historical moment, “how data might be reimaged as a form of accountability and even protest in the age of Black Lives Matter” (22).

REFERENCES

- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1899) 2014. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Reprint, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fry, Tony. 2007. “Book Review: The Archework Papers.” *Design Issues* 23 (3): 88–92. <http://doi.org/10.1162/desi.2007.23.3.88>.
- Slocum, Terry A., Robert B. McMaster, Fritz C. Kessler, and Hugh H. Howard. 2005. *Thematic Cartography and Geographic Visualization, Second Edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.
- Tufte, Edward R. 1990. *Envisioning Information*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.
- . 2001. *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information, Second Edition*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.

