



# W.E.B. Du Bois: The background

## Note on language for *today's material*:

- W.E.B. Du Bois uses the words “Negro,” “black,” and “colored” almost interchangeably in his published work, to refer to people with African heritage or of African descent living in the US – and sometimes elsewhere
- He always writes “Negro” with a capital “N” (and seems to use this word most frequently to refer to actual people)
- He never writes “black” with a capital “B” (unless it is in a title)
- Most scholars working today, including those writing about Du Bois’s work in the materials we are reading, use only “black” (not “Negro” or “colored”) to refer to people of African descent living in the US; following Du Bois, they do not capitalize the word; this holds for black scholars and scholars from other backgrounds
- I will follow this practice and use “black” (with a small “b”) in this slideshow and this lecture today

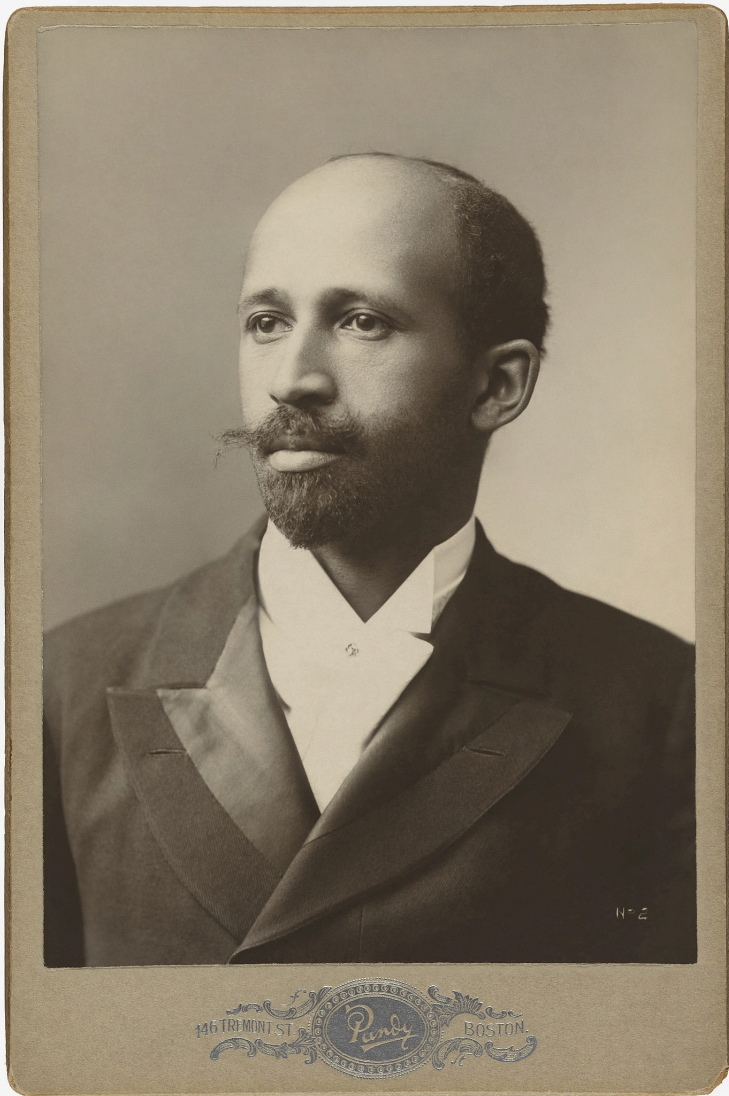
## Note on French translations and *your choices*:

- In French, the word “Negro” and the “n-word” are translated by a single word; there is no distinction possible between these two words in French; **this French word appears in some of our course materials for today: specifically, in the French text on the data visualizations/posters** (the “n-word” does not appear, in English, on the posters, though it does appear in the short story, “The Comet”)
- In English, the word “Negro” is not in wide usage today and is considered to be less and less acceptable in contemporary usage
- Recognizing this, I plan *\*only\** to use the word “Negro” in this class when I am reading a title in which it appears OR when I am reading a quotation from Du Bois; I will *\*never\** use the “n-word” – I will never say it aloud, nor will I say its French equivalent aloud in class – and I ask that you also never say it aloud in class
- I wish to consult you and honor your choices about the language we use to discuss race and racial identities here together:

Apart from (or in addition to) never saying the “n-word” aloud in class, which I am asking that we honor as a universal practice in this classroom, is this plan OK?

Would you like to propose another one?

Do you need or want time to talk about this in small groups? (*Discussed in affinity groups.*)



## **William Edward Burghardt “W. E. B.” Du Bois**

**Born:** 1868, Great Barrington, Massachusetts

**Died:** 1963, Accra, Ghana

American sociologist, historian, civil-rights activist,  
Pan-Africanist, author, and editor

(Became a citizen of Ghana in 1961.)

Photograph: James E. Purdy, *Portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois*, 1907



Portrait of Du Bois with his mother, Mary Silvina Burghardt. She was raised in a longstanding free black community in Great Barrington. She had African, English, and Dutch heritage. Her black ancestors had owned land in MA since the late 18<sup>th</sup> C.

### Well-known publications:

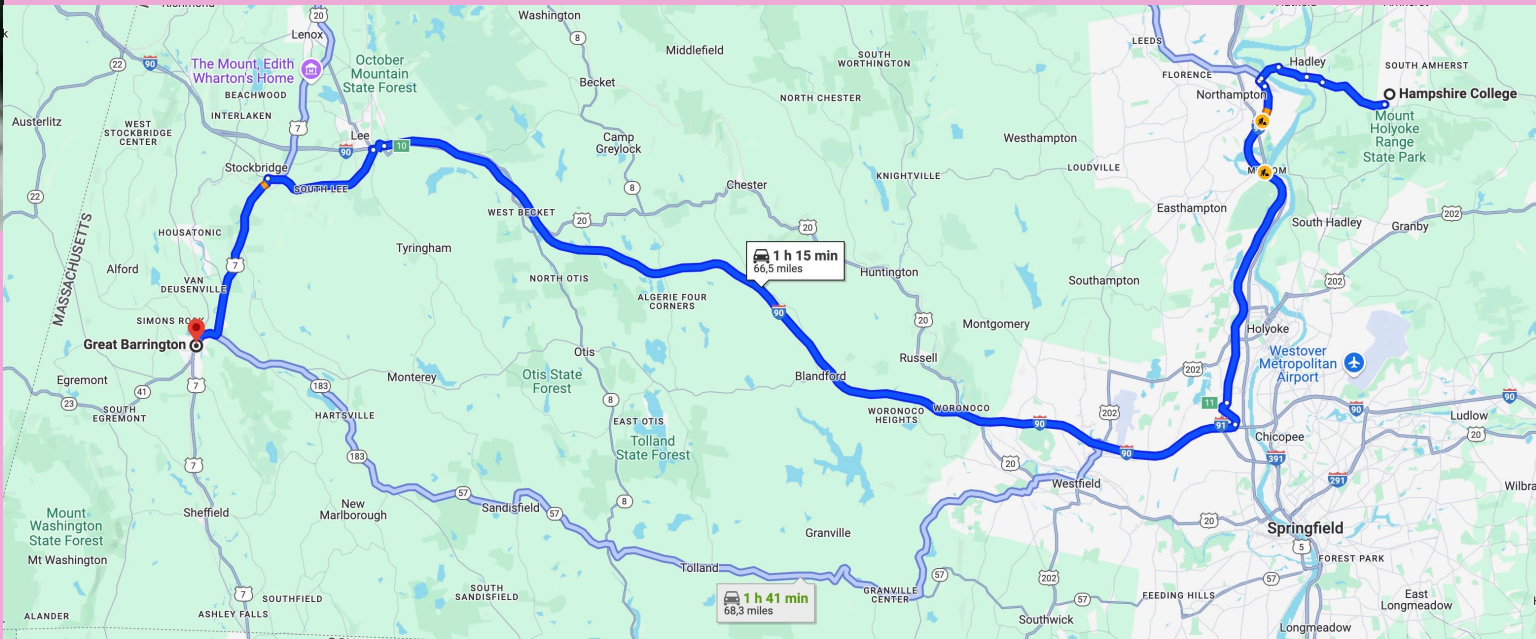
*The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

*Black Reconstruction in America* (1935)

### Well-known concepts/arguments:

--“double consciousness” (a citation of Ralph Waldo Emerson); first used by Du Bois in 1897; made famous by him in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903

--“the color line” (a citation of Frederick Douglass); first used by Du Bois in 1899; made famous by him in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903





Identified with three major historical movements or moments:

### **SOCIOLOGY**

(Its establishment as an empirical social science discipline.)

### **CIVIL RIGHTS**

(The movement to demand equal rights specifically for black Americans, and to fight for those rights in the legal and political arena.)

### **PAN-AFRICANISM and/or BLACK INTERNATIONALISM**

(20<sup>th</sup>-C. movements linking the African diaspora to people living in Africa, often with an explicit focus on decolonization in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.)

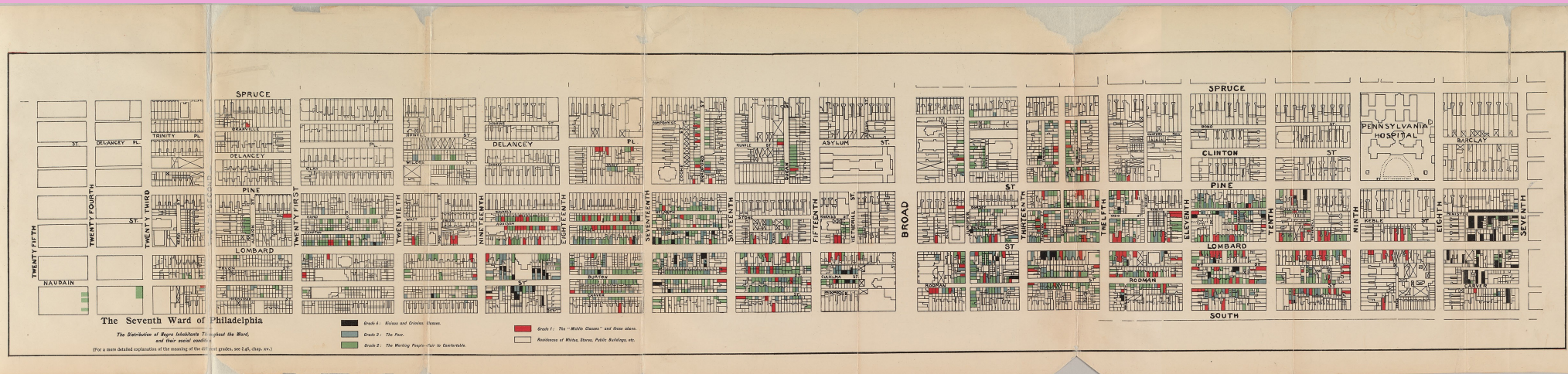
# SOCIOLOGY (Its establishment as an empirical social science discipline.)

Du Bois is not just the most famous black American sociologist. He is the most famous American sociologist, period.

His contributions to sociology were hugely significant and are widely considered to have been way ahead of their time.

Today, much of the language that he used in his work, which started in the 1890s, may seem problematic and outdated to us. (For example, in his 1899 book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, he is attempting to get to the causes of what he dubbed the “Negro Problem.”) But Du Bois was the first person, period, of any racial identity or background, to focus his attention on collecting data about black people in America, **and he actively sought to use the data he collected in the service of black liberation.**

His 1899 book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, is thought to be the first detailed study of a black community in the US.



## Why does data (or why do data) matter?

Data, numbers, metrics, measurable facts, and the interpretations and arguments we make about them = **POWER**.

Especially in an era of industrialization / modernization / the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

During the period of slavery / in a plantation culture, VERY few data were collected about black people.

This is in part because very few data were collected about anyone, as compared with now. The forms of records that were most common, like birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates, deeds showing ownership of land or of property – for many years, throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – were often not all that common and were more frequently created only for white people.

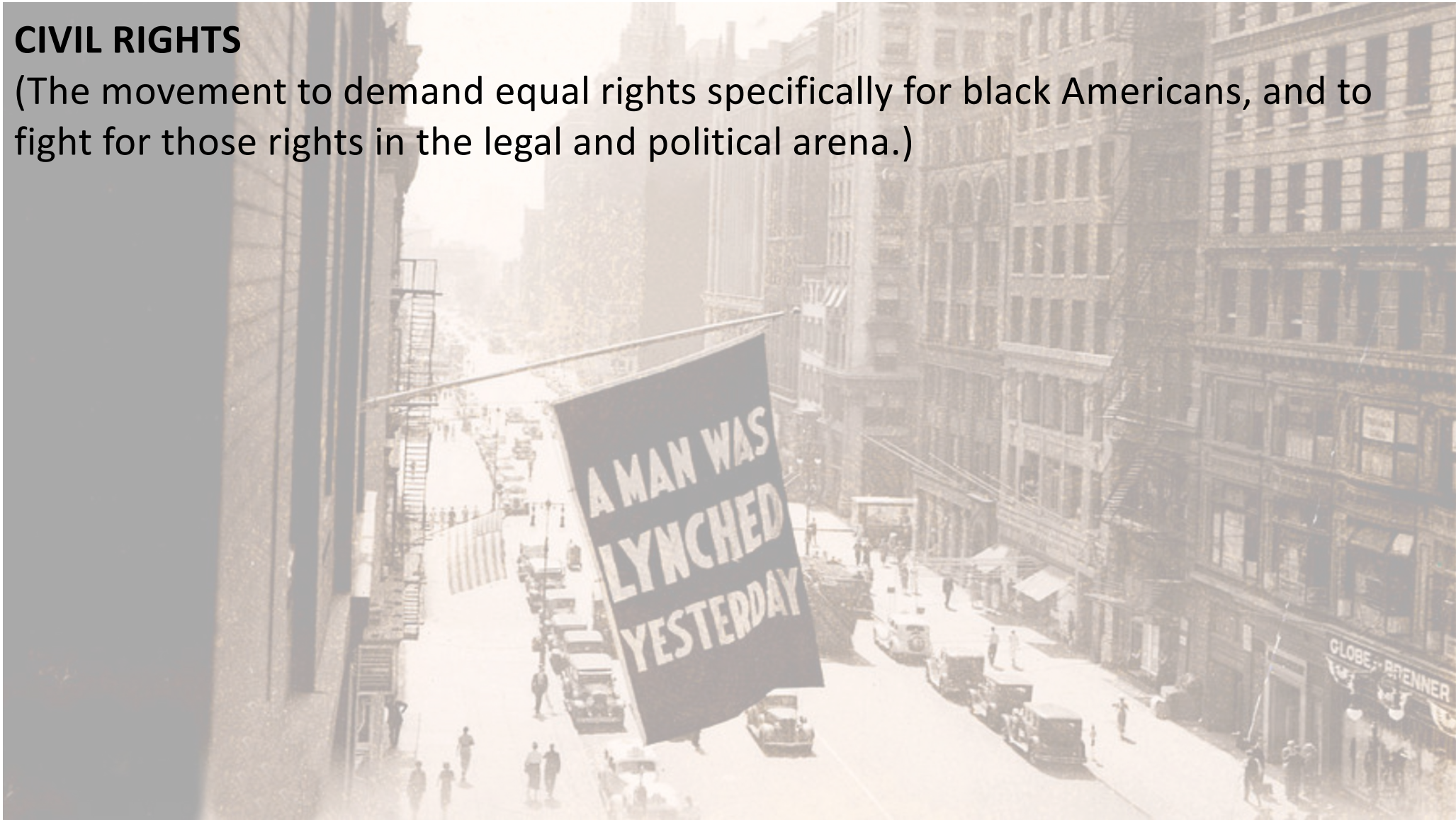
It is also because government records, including significantly census records, reflected dominant (white supremacist, patriarchal) ideas about who should be counted and who should be named. The first Federal US Census takes place in 1790. For the next 80 years, enslaved people were “counted” (but not really as people) and free black people were counted, but, if they were not the head of the household, they were not named. (White women were also not named.) Free black people only begin to be named in the census in 1850 and 1860. The first Federal US Census to “count” all black people in America was the 1870 census.

You can look at census records – and questions (which continue to reflect changing ideas about race and racial identities) – here: [www.census.gov/history/through-the-decades/index\\_of\\_questions/1790\\_1.html](http://www.census.gov/history/through-the-decades/index_of_questions/1790_1.html)



## CIVIL RIGHTS

(The movement to demand equal rights specifically for black Americans, and to fight for those rights in the legal and political arena.)



## **CIVIL RIGHTS** milestones associated with Du Bois

In **1905** he attended the first meeting of the Niagara Movement, of which he was a founding member.

The NM believed that black people in the United States should have exactly the same rights as white people, and that black people should fight for their rights using the courts and politics; they rejected the idea that “separate but equal” could ever be acceptable. They were considered a militant group.

The NM was founded to oppose Booker T. Washington. After Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) (which enshrined the principle of “separate but equal” in American law, and paving the way for the Jim Crow era), Washington basically said, OK, we’ll take it.

The NM rejected this position, and they are often considered to be one of the beginning moments of the US Civil Rights movement.



From L to R (back row):  
Clifford, J. R. (John  
Robert)

Hershaw, Lafayette M.

Murray, Freeman  
Henry Morris

Front row (seated):  
Du Bois, W. E. B.  
(William Edward  
Burghardt)

**Niagara Movement** members, Harpers Ferry, 1906.

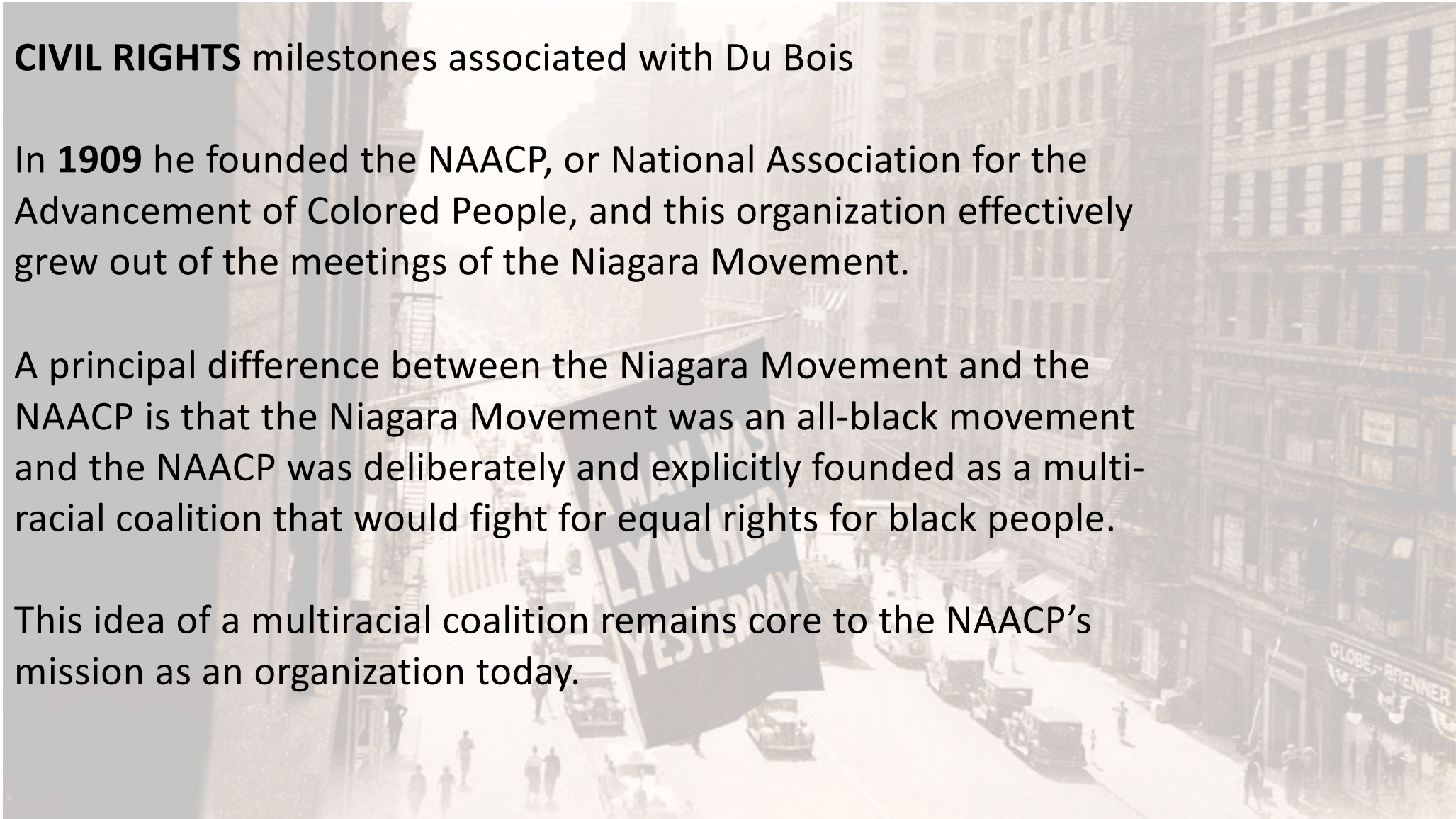
W. E. B. Du Bois Papers. Special Collections and University Archives, UMass-Amherst Libraries

## **CIVIL RIGHTS** milestones associated with Du Bois

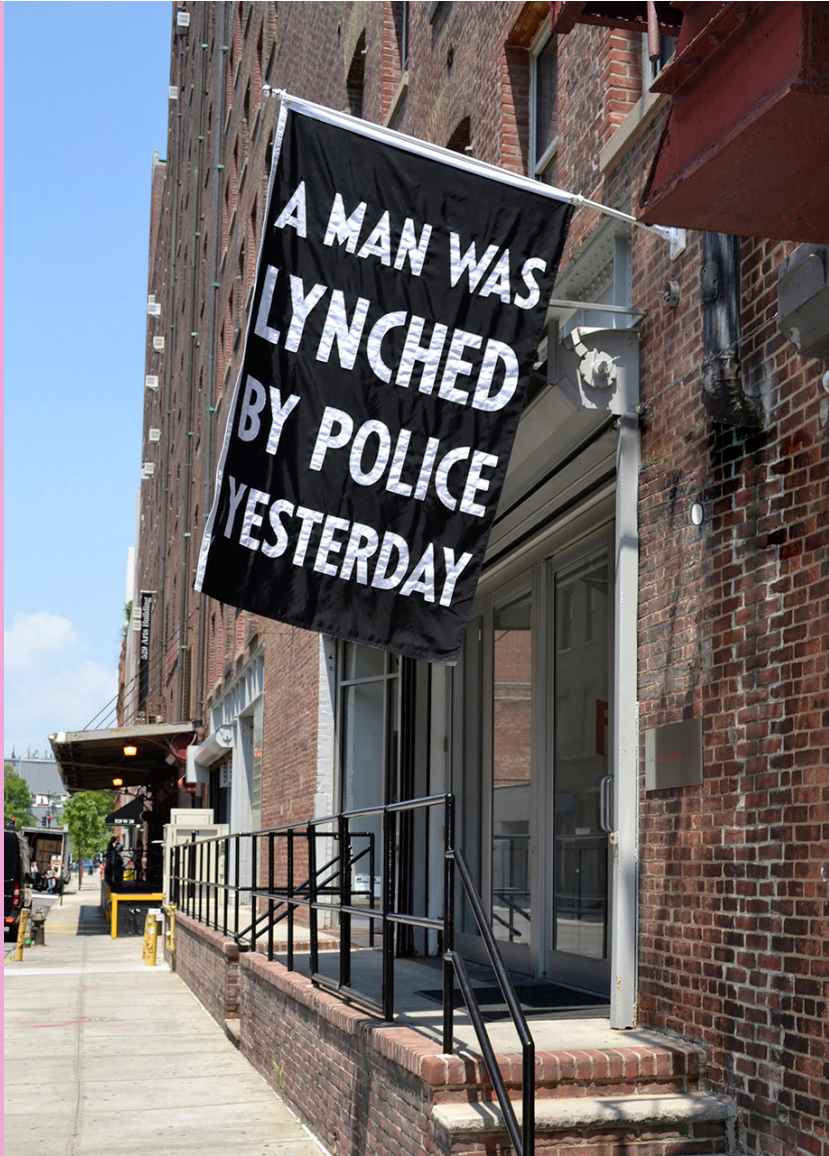
In **1909** he founded the NAACP, or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and this organization effectively grew out of the meetings of the Niagara Movement.

A principal difference between the Niagara Movement and the NAACP is that the Niagara Movement was an all-black movement and the NAACP was deliberately and explicitly founded as a multi-racial coalition that would fight for equal rights for black people.

This idea of a multiracial coalition remains core to the NAACP's mission as an organization today.





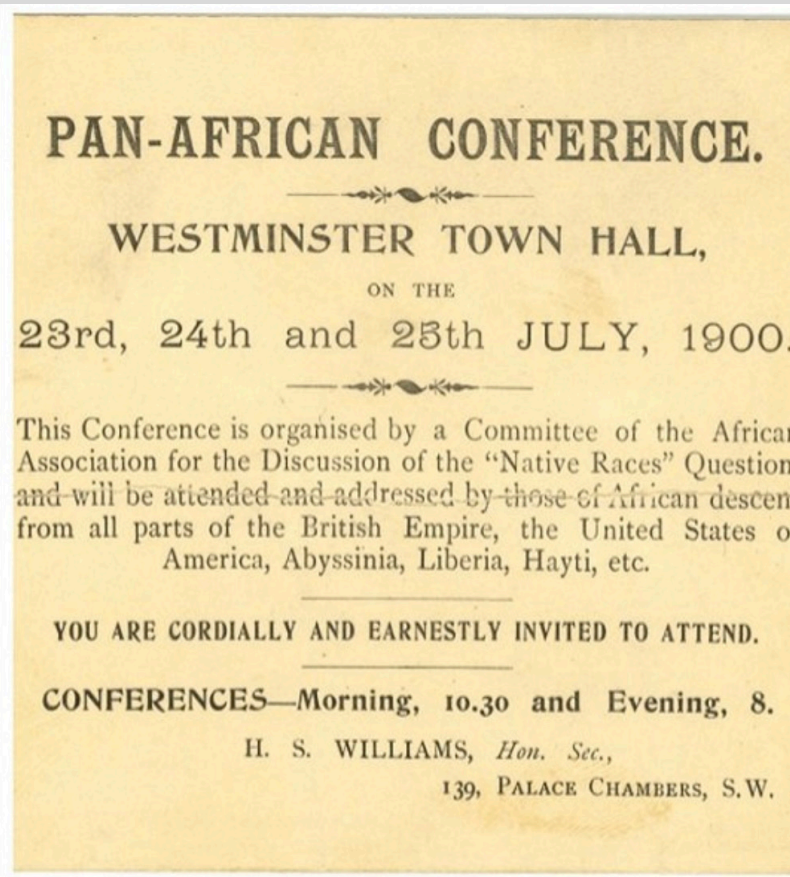


Artist: Dread Scott, *A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday*, 2015

The artist Dread Scott made this work, in a direct citation of the NAACP's historic anti-lynching flag, in 2015, after police in North Charleston, South Carolina, killed a black man named Walter Scott. Scott was fatally shot in the back by a police officer as he was running away, and this was captured on a bystander video. Scott had been stopped in a "routine traffic stop" (allegedly for having a brake light out).

(This was in April 2015, about 8 mos. after Michael Brown's murder by police in Ferguson, MO.)

## PAN-AFRICANISM / BLACK INTERNATIONALISM (20<sup>th</sup>-C. movements linking the African diaspora to people living in Africa, often with an explicit focus on decolonization in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.)



Du Bois was a very active participant in the Pan-African movement of his day.

He was a founder of the Pan-African Congresses and he attended the very first Pan-African Congress in London in 1900 – on his way to the 1900 Paris Exposition (where his data visualizations were displayed as part of the “American Negro Exhibit”).

At the first Pan-African Congress, he gave a famous speech called “To the Nations of the World,” in which he spoke the sentence “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” for the first time...

# PAN-AFRICANISM / BLACK INTERNATIONALISM

Du Bois's arch-enemy was Marcus Garvey, who was one of the principal advocates of the "back-to-Africa" side of Pan-Africanism.

The two were really on opposing sides of the movement. (Du Bois was a Marxist, and his main critique of Garvey seems to have been that Garvey's ideology and worldview were very pro-capitalist.)

This does not mean that Du Bois was not interested in Africa. He traveled widely in Africa and Asia as well as Europe, and in 1961 he moved to Ghana, at the invitation of Kwame Nkrumah.

He died in Accra, Ghana, at the age of 95. He was buried in Ghana.



ACCRA, GHANA

## *Site History and Significance*

### The Final Home of a Leading Black Intellectual

W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the most prominent Black writers and philosophers in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University, he dedicated his life to advocating for racial equality and was one of the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Many African leaders of the mid-twentieth century admired him for his anti-colonial activism and his participation in the founding of the Pan-African Congresses of the early 1900s.

In 1961, at the age of 93, Du Bois accepted Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah's invitation to move to Accra, where he and his wife, Shirley

The home is a bungalow constructed from dressed stone, timber, and corrugated tin sheeting, with a mix of linoleum and carpet floors. It is open to visitors and houses both Du Bois's personal library and his collected publications. However, the roof is in poor condition and has not been properly maintained, allowing for water ingress into the building. World Monuments Fund (WMF) is advising on the conservation of this structure as part of a broader plan to convert the last home and final resting place of Du Bois into a museum and memorial complex.

### *Learn More*

World Monuments Fund safeguards cultural heritage around the globe, ensuring our treasured places are preserved for present and future generations.





**W.E.B. Du Bois:  
Afro-futurism?**

