Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality, and W E. B. Du Bois

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Review
Reviewed Work(s): Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality, and W. E. B. Du Bois by Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum
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forces that brought about the phenomenon in the first place, reveal the contradictions found within the act of lynching itself. Goldsby refutes the most basic of viewer assumptions: white photographers presenting images to a white audience for celebratory purposes, and to a secondary black audience for cautionary purposes. She proposes that the photographs, with their incongruous backgrounds of stable social structures, reinforce the impotence of those structures to ameliorate and control the foregrounded images of brutality and unconscionable mutilation. These images of “mob justice” contradict the serene complacency of the background courthouses and churches. In fact, the victims of the brutality are secondary (often not even the focal center of the photographs) to the impassive nonchalance of the white male perpetrators and attendees.

For Goldsby, “lynching calls into question . . . why we presume modernity necessarily means ‘progress’ that promotes human liberty and happiness” (286). Ultimately, lynching “challenge[s] the meaning of modernity; how to value black death as central to our processes for building a nation” (287). Goldsby seems to suggest that if we continue to revise our past, as Billie Holiday tried to do with the authorship of “Strange Fruit,” we run the risk of a dangerous sanitizing, eliminating the ugly and brutal and repulsive to imagine ourselves as the glorious city on the hill with nothing to hide. The US has become what it is because of its history. In spite of our attempts at historical revision, these images persist (as the recent case of the Jena Six and its aftermath have shown), and lynching, as a part of that history, has contributed to who and what we are right now. Only by acknowledging and understanding lynching can we come to any real or significant understanding of who we were then and who we are now. We devalue those deaths by denying that lynching was a part, for good or for ill, of the modernizing of US society. The effect of these deaths becomes cumulative, as one adds each to each, creating a significance that the nation has been unwilling to admit. Seen in this light, Jacqueline Goldsby’s A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature becomes essential reading for those seeking to reconcile and understand the immense gap between the appearance of the modern US and its reality.


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cholars have devoted their careers to addressing W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1900 prediction that racism and its consequences would remain an insolvable problem for the twentieth century. The “problem with the color line” is how and why the line is drawn. Du Bois and his contemporaries reasoned that white supremacy was primarily at fault, but now in the twenty-first century we evaluate the juxtaposition of gendered and sexualized notions of difference implicit in Du Bois’s position as “prophet.” Consider, for instance, Du Bois’s anti-racist, anti-imperialist activism exemplified in Darkwater (1920): “The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause.” The “women and color” movements have “a
deep meaning” because a Du Boisian black masculinist (heterosexual) stance appears predominant. According to Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum, the editors of Next to the Color Line, the “politics of juxtaposition” clarifies this black masculinist stance, “position[ing] multiple political issues and related world historical movements for social justice as associated, as necessarily juxtaposed, if not fully interlinked, or self-consciously interwoven” (3).

Gillman and Weinbaum’s collection bridges the body, racial politics, and gendered discourses. Vilashini Cooppan examines how the progressive implication of linear movement in “the color line” depends on fixed gender ideologies, especially about black women. Cooppan questions a domestic model of racial uplift by considering how black women act as both cause and cure for Du Bois’s “race problem.” This conceptual conflict occurs in Du Bois’ early writings on race and nation, including “The Conservation of Races” (1897), The Philadelphia Negro (1899), and The Souls of Black Folk (1903). As a “profeminist,” Joy James asserts, Du Bois nevertheless found ways of “mystifying the agency of African American women.” To counter romanticized imagery of black women as inactive figures in his literature and activism, James considers Du Bois’s rhetorical posturing of black patriarchy against the intellectualism and militancy of iconic black feminists Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett. James calls attention to the erasure of these “race women,” which ironically undermines Du Bois’s profeminism and racial progressivism.

Articles by Weinbaum, Brent Hayes Edwards, Claudia Tate, Michele Elam, and Paul C. Taylor further explore similar contradictions. Darkwater and Du Bois’s romance novels—Dark Princess (1928) and trilogy, The Ordeal of Mansart (1957), Mansart Builds a School (1959), and Worlds of Color (1961)—are treated as tools of imperialist propaganda and aesthetic experiments. The interracial romances and fantasies of black internationalism in these works question Du Bois’s status as a public figure and private individual. Both Weinbaum and Hayes take to task Du Bois’s edict “all art is propaganda.” Tate shifts to Du Bois’s eroticism, specifically that in service of propaganda, in her recovery of Dark Princess. Tate’s psychoanalytic reading of race and desire anticipates Elam’s and Taylor’s new scrutiny of Du Bois’s “perfectionist agenda” of “growth” through “the ethics of self-realization” in Dark Princess. Their respective readings of the novel’s heightened sensuality suggest how the text and writer are products of 19th-century ideas of ethics. Du Bois’s “erotic fantasies and desires” are intimately “inextricable from his political and literary work,” concludes Tate, Elam, and Taylor.

The second half of Next to the Color Line largely concerns Du Bois’s own duality. Hazel Carby and Roderick A. Ferguson dissect Du Boisian iconography: the man, message, and mythical figure. Excerpted from Race Men (1998), Carby’s sociohistorical critique in “The Souls of Black Men” is vital in black masculinity studies. Building on Carby’s work, Ferguson distinguishes Du Bois the “real,” “historical figure” from “a discourse whose power is concealed by the apparent transparency of its referent’s fame and notoriety, a discourse that convinces us not to scrutinize its deployment” (269). Ferguson argues that “Du Bois the discourse” has significantly influenced African American studies, even as black feminism and queer studies problematize Du Bois’s iconic status. However, Ferguson’s analysis of Du Bois’s role in the 1920’s Fisk University student protests and the radical discourse in Dark Princess falls short. By not addressing the role of female students in the protests and only the feminization of accommodationist faculty, for instance, Ferguson may recreate the same gendered problem that the collection seeks to correct. The bodies of black women again are dismissed or under-emphasized.
Mason Stokes and Fred Moten both explore the theme of deviance—sexual and criminal, respectively—in Du Bois’s life and writings. Stokes looks at Du Bois’s involvement in his daughter Yolande and gay son-in-law Countée Cullen’s relationship to examine “‘heterosexuality’ as the public face of the ‘New Negro’” (289). Stokes argues that Du Bois, as “father of the bride,” conceived heterosexual standards for progressive black marriages. The Du Bois/Cullen wedding spectacle and Du Bois’s subsequent role as marriage counselor (evident in rare, intimate correspondences) reveal how Du Bois could manipulate the gender performance of heterosexual black masculinity. Moten continues this look at “deviant” behavior in Du Bois’s juxtaposition of black criminality and radical uplift politics. For Moten, a “fugitive voice” finds fault with the black masses as a criminal element in need of uplift in Du Bois’s moralism.

Final contributions by Shawn Michelle Smith and Susan Gillman move Du Boisian scholarship forward with archival study of visual culture. Examining photographs Du Bois assembled for the 1900 Paris Exposition, Smith scrutinizes the creation of idealized images of New Negroes. “Ultimately,” Smith argues, “Du Bois appropriates a scientific, white masculine gaze to dismantle its racist vision, to disrupt its image of the ‘Negro type,’ and finally, to scrutinize African American bodies on his own terms” (357). Likewise, Gillman examines black pageantry under Du Bois’s gendered vision. Her investigation of early black racial drama shows again how Du Bois used art for propaganda. If the portraits in Smith’s estimation were filtered through a black patriarchal gaze, rare pageants—namely, “The Star of Ethiopia”—were staged to underscore black womanhood, particularly a “maternal genealogy” for the color line. The politics of juxtaposition are most prominent in these two works as each scholar excavates problems in Du Bois’s misappropriation and/or displacement of black women. In total, this collection forces us to recognize issues of gender and sexuality that may escape detection when the concern is not on the who and where one falls in the matrix of racial ideology.

For more than 30 years, social science scholars and historians have made cases for school integration. This book continues this task. John Charles Boger and Gary Orfield collected a series of deeply researched articles to explain why the integration campaign of the 1960s did not achieve many of its objectives, and why the South has regressed toward resegregation. Orfield’s introduction addresses obvious failures to integrate schools after the landmark Brown decision, along with a discussion of differences between earlier failures and the book’s focus on resegregation in the South. Boger and Orfield are keenly aware that many integration-minded intellectuals believe that the continued segregation of schools in the South reveals the limits of the Judicial system in social justice battles, but Orfield contends instead that the problem lies with the Courts’ rulings on integration cases. Orfield’s reading of the cases is extensive, but texts like Peter Iron’s Jim Crow’s Children: The Broken Promise of the Brown Decision, published in 2002, may do a better job of representing these court failures.