



Clark Atlanta University

Department of
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Photo: Horace Henry

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OF DREAMS, DEEDS AND MEMORY:
Honoring the Life and Legacy of Dr. Du Bois
Opening Comments by Du Bois Legacy Project Organizer and Conference Co-Chair

WELCOME TO THE HOMECOMING

President Brown, Trustee Aldridge, Clark Atlanta University colleagues, Atlanta community, friends, mentors and esteemed guests—especially Mr. Arthur McFarlane the great-grandson of Dr. Du Bois, it is my honor to welcome you to the W. E. B. Du Bois and the Wings of Atlanta, 50th Anniversary Commemorative Conference.

Before I begin, I ask that all Clark Atlanta University alumni please stand and be recognized: welcome home. During the 2012 yearlong Du Bois Major Works Seminar Series, I opened each session with 'welcome to the sojourn', but this conference gathering is returning the legacy of Dr. Du Bois to the HBCU where he served for 23 years and it is attracting alumni back to their alma mater, so I will say, welcome to the homecoming.

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Formed in 1988 by the consolidation of Atlanta University, 1865 and Clark College 1869

I will offer brief comments here, before proceeding to introduce those who will also formally welcome you to campus and will then introduce the opening panel that will begin this four day commemorative dialogue. The two words that comprise the cornerstones of my comments are life and legacy.

LIFE

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life. Specifically, we are gathered here this week of February 20-23 to celebrate, commemorate, and discuss the work of Dr. Du Bois who loved life, lived life well, who sought to understand and to improve the quality of life. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois achieved not merely success in his lifetime, but achieved many successes that are worthy of emulation in our own. Certainly most of us are familiar with the now-seemingly mythological catalog of facts. Condensed, we can breezily summarize his life this way:

- Born in the early Reconstruction era New England
- Attends Fisk University, Harvard, University of Berlin
- Teaches at Wilberforce, University of Pennsylvania and Atlanta University
- Eminent scholar publishing books including *Suppression of the African Slave Trade* (1896), *Philadelphia Negro* (1896), *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and *Black Reconstruction* (1935),
- Publishes journals and magazines including *Atlanta University Publications*, *Phylon*, *Moon and the Crisis*.
- Activist in organizations from the Niagara Movement, NAACP, Communist Party, Peace Information Center and candidate for U. S. Senate
- Died in Accra, Ghana on the eve of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

But these basic facts are insufficient to encompass a comprehensive truth and, more importantly, Du Bois is no myth. He was human...invested in humanity. At the University of Pennsylvania conference in February of last year where he was awarded posthumous Professor Emeritus status, I characterized Dr. Du Bois as a conductor: a social engineer, a symphony maestro, and a body that facilitated transfer of intellectual energy. This year, at our Clark Atlanta University conference the title, *The Wings of Atlanta*, seemed fitting. As a chapter in the *Souls of Black Folk*, it references both Atlanta the city and Atalanta the Greek goddess. Reflecting on the life of Du Bois in general and his life and writing in Atlanta in particular befit an historic-minded and future-focused urban institution. Clark Atlanta University, like the city of Atlanta, is an ever-changing, booming montage of southern classic and worldly cosmopolitan. Like the goddess, Du Bois noted the city of Atlanta has often had a penchant for shiny distraction and an admirably never-ending ambition, but that the inhabitants are also admirably swift and awe-inspiring in the potential for unmatched victory. Ironically, much like the city of Atlanta and like the campus of Clark Atlanta, Dr. Du Bois himself was a mash up of ancient and modern, of European classical and African Diasporic, of speed and endurance, of humility and hubris.

The life of Dr. Du Bois demands attention and as his academic home, this is the time and place to do so. As he prepared for his final transition and penned his last of several autobiographies, he wrote about joining the Ancestors, the Forever Dead. Fifty years after his passing, the details of his life have now translated into an enduring legacy.

LEGACY

The following words were Dr. Du Bois's final prayer to the Ancestors. I find it worthy of our meditation for his birthday. "In every name of God bend out and down, you who are the infinite majority of all mankind and with your thoughts, deeds, dreams and memories overwhelm, outvote and coerce these remnants of human life.... Let your memories teach these willful fools all which you have forgotten and ruined and done to death. Teach us...***there is no Dream but Deed, there is no need but Memory.***" We find these words by Dr. Du Bois, in 'Postlude' at the end of *Soliloquy, the Autobiography of W. E. B Du Bois*, (pp. 422-23), his final autobiography

initially published in Russian, then in English in 1968. The legacy of Du Bois is one of dreams, deeds and memories.

Electric word life, that means forever, and that's a mighty long time, but I'm here to tell you, there's something else. The afterworld. It is to the inhabitants of this afterworld, the afterworld of the forever dead (the Ancestors) to whom I also feel most accountable. Du Bois wrote in the *Souls of Black Folk* about the function of a university. He concluded, "the worker must work for the glory of his handiwork; the thinker must think for truth, not for fame"...I understand truth to encompass far beyond our time and place. Grounded in the past, our present actions must *decisively* impact the future and I feel that progressive action is a measure of how well we have internalized the values of the past, for without *radical* progression, we would still be in chains. The world is, indeed, always going CRAZY and to maintain sanity, we must fight a collective amnesia because our heads, hands and hearts are needed in national politics, spiritual strivings, on schools in campuses, and certainly in popular culture. I think of what has happened in the past few months and wonder how Dr. Du Bois would have addressed our issues:

We can see with one topic, "violence" there are an infinite number of potential research topics that would have kept him busy: Troy Davis, Treyvon Martin, Sandy Hook, Chicago. Christopher Dorne. Django. [Let's study Du Bois...the D is not silent.] Yet, I am more interested in emulation than speculation. Du Bois's commitment to disciplinary and interdisciplinary research would have ensured that the questions he would form about these topics would border on meditation, the research methodology he would engage would be strenuous, and the action that he would take to *correct* problems he identified would move beyond simple commentary. He was, certainly, a scholar-activist. Scholar activism is his legacy and that is Clark Atlanta University's inheritance.

As I acknowledged in the commemorative conference program welcome letter, there have been several CAU gatherings around Du Bois, in 1975 and in 2004, with several meetings in between. However, the scale of this international conference will magnify the reach of Du Bois's message globally and new ways of thinking will emanate from CAU with an expanded strength, similar to the increased reach of the 91.9 WCLK—"Jazz of the City"—radio waves.

It has been a pleasure to organize and carry out a yearlong reading seminar and this conference. However, of course, I feel inadequate. My research is Black women's intellectual history and, more recently Black autobiography and travel memoirs. To be clear, I am no expert on W. E. B. Du Bois, I am simply an observer and steward of the legacy and someone touched by the ideas and actions of a man I deem a timeless contributor to the cause of Black freedom...of human freedom. What I know about Du Bois is only about the size of a golden apple and what I don't know about Du Bois spans a galaxy. But, I cannot help cherish the small amount of wisdom I have gained in this process and the sweetness of the desire to share it. So, in the name of the life and legacy of one indubitable scholar-activist, I joyfully and humbly open our conference discussion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Academic program committee and advisory board: Dr. Sandra Taylor and Dr. Ron Finnell, Dean Shirley Williams-Kirksey, conference coordinator Audra Jackson, conference staff and volunteers, Dean Ernita Hemmitt, CAU Student Leaders, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated-Alpha Pi Chapter, AWH Department, ASO Leaders, and Clark Atlanta University/Atlanta University Center community. Lastly, and firstly, I want to thank my husband, Mr. Curtis D. Byrd.

CLOSING

Welcome to the Wings of Atlanta conference. We will hear from over 150 panelists in 30 sessions over the next 4 days. Thank you for coming to contribute to the legacy. Please visit the website <http://cauduboislegacy.net/> to support the continued growth of Dr. Du Bois's work and the growth of scholarship at Clark Atlanta University.