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Social Science, Historical Fiction, and the American University in W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Flame* Trilogy

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Abstract

This study turns to W.E.B. Du Bois' late-career works of fiction for insights about the importance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), especially Black public Land-Grant universities in promoting racial justice in the United States. Commentators often argue that Du Bois' early career endorsement of the emancipatory power of liberal education and social science research was later abandoned in favor of political activism. The present study challenges this assumption by demonstrating that an important, but generally underappreciated, source of continuity in Du Bois' thoughts on education was his belief that German-inspired social science research could be a means to combat racial injustice in America. In his major work of fiction, the historical novels *The Black Flame Trilogy*, Du Bois expounded the positive role Black public universities, and their Presidents have historically played in what he called the "racial uplift" of African American people. Du Bois focuses on the impact of the Second Morrill Act of 1890, which established the legal framework for the system of Black Land-Grant universities and colleges, and which he believed provided the institutional foundations for social science research led primarily but not exclusively by Black scholars in projects that center Black experiences. I conclude with reflections on how Du Bois' literary representation of the importance of historically Black public universities sheds light on current concerns about state coercion and systematic underfunding of Black Land-Grant Universities.

Keywords: W.E.B. Du Bois; *The Black Flame Trilogy*; historical fiction; social science; Land Grant universities; Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)

1. Introduction

The scholarship on W.E.B. Du Bois' political legacy often attributes a fundamental discontinuity with respect to the development of his thought. Du Bois' early career endorsement of the emancipatory power of liberal education and social science research was later abandoned in favor of political activism in the NAACP and the Pan-African Movement (Broderick 1958; Sanders 2007, p. 236; Buschendorf 2017, p. 567). Similarly, on a parallel political track, it is widely acknowledged that Du Bois started his professional life as a progressive liberal democrat, but gradually shifted further left, eventually even becoming an, albeit not uncomplicated, apologist for Soviet communism. While I concur with the broad strokes of this Du Boisian biographical narrative, I would like to amend it somewhat by highlighting an important, but arguably underappreciated, source of continuity spanning Du Bois' long, fruitful career; that is, his enduring hope that social science research could be a means to ameliorate racial injustice in America and the world.

As we know from the posthumously published collection of speeches and short essays *The Education of Black People*, Du Bois spoke and wrote continuously throughout his life



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about African American higher education (Du Bois 1973). While scholars have illuminated Du Bois' skillful use of rhetoric in his early classic study *The Souls of Black Folk* to "enlarge America's political and ethical imagination regarding the status of African-Americans (Rogers 2012, pp. 188, 201)," there has been much less attention paid to the extent to which Du Bois' promotion of social science research focused on historically Black Land-Grant public universities and colleges, and the role they played in the works of fiction in the latter part of Du Bois' career. Indeed, it is remarkable that at the end of his long career Du Bois set his enormous analytical and creative powers toward the goal of representing the regenerative potentiality of the Land-Grant public university in his trilogy of historical novels *The Black Flame*.

These works cumulatively with his posthumously published *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois* constitute the last books written in the final years of his life. The *Black Flame* trilogy comprising three books—*The Ordeal of Mansart* (1957), *Mansart Builds a School* (1959), and *Worlds of Color* (1961)—is not, of course, Du Bois' only offerings of fiction, but in terms of their enormous scope and deployment of the literary device of historical fiction they are extraordinary in Du Bois' vast corpus. Traditionally, the *Black Flame* has been sorely neglected by commentators who often judged it unfavorably as a work of literature.¹ However, thankfully in recent times it has received more attention as scholars have considered the trilogy in terms of its relation to the socialist realist literary style (Phillips 1997), Marxist political economy (Buschendorf 2017), Du Bois' concept of psychic duality or "double-consciousness" (Stewart 1983, pp. 96, 98, 101–3), and as a demonstration of Du Bois' lack of feminist convictions (Simpson 2015). I share the view of these commentators who see the *Black Flame* as an important work for understanding Du Bois' political thought. Indeed, I hope to build on Rampersad's insight that the trilogy is remarkable as a "final reevaluation of his perception of a nation and its history...in light of new experiences" (Rampersad 1976, p. 266). But my premise is that central to this "final reevaluation" was Du Bois' aspiration to highlight the importance of the American public university as a potential source of racial progress in America.

This focus on the role of higher education in the trilogy aligns most directly with Byerman (1994, p. 138) who views the *Black Flame* as a demonstration of Du Bois putting art in the service of science and Christian's interpretation of the novels in terms of their exploration of "multigenerational educational trauma" and the historical "dehumanization" of African American students (Christian 2014, pp. 1–9). My reading of the *Black Flame* follows a related, but distinct theme, focusing on the modern research university as more than an incidental setting in the novels, but rather serving as a discrete, reified institutional character in the story. Recent renewed interest in the role HBCU Presidents played in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s invites us to reconsider Du Bois' intriguing examination of the racialized university in the early twentieth-century American South.² The putative hero of the *Black Flame* is Manuel Mansart, who is for much of the trilogy the President of a fictional African American land-grant university in Macon, Georgia. I will argue that the black land-grant university made possible by the Second Morrill Act of 1890 stands in the *Black Flame* as an institution perhaps uniquely capable of providing the organizational structure and critical mass of intellectual energy required to produce the sophisticated German-inspired sociological research that Du Bois believed can inform fundamental political, social, and economic reforms aimed toward improving the lives of African Americans and oppressed peoples of the world.

Several scholars have highlighted the influence of German scholarship on Du Bois' thought (Moses 2004, pp. 193, 218; Schafer 2001; Barkin 2000, p. 99; Morris 2015, pp. 16–22). But they typically do not apply this to the *Black Flame* and commentators on the *Black Flame* often overlook that central to the plot development of the final book of the trilogy is

the struggle to establish a network of research universities dedicated to compiling on the German model an enormous body of empirical data on African American communities that will provide the basis for a series of annual studies on specific topics including employment, education, health and family life. This is to say, in the *Black Flame* Du Bois employed qualitative means to produce quantitative ends. In the context of the trilogy, the proposed studies and the academic conferences intended to accompany these studies are set in contrast to the periodic glimpses of an elaborate white supremacist global conspiracy that finances and directs the dishonest, racially biased social science research by America's prestigious elite universities. But the research project in the *Black Flame* is in essence hardly fictional at all inasmuch as it is unmistakably drawn from Du Bois' own experience as the director of the celebrated Atlanta University Studies from 1898–1910 and his failed effort to revive and expand these studies among black southern public universities in the 1940s. Thus, I believe one of the key interpretive tools for understanding the *Black Flame* is Du Bois' own ambitions and legacy as a social science researcher.

The *Black Flame* and Du Bois' posthumously published (and wonderfully titled) *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century* (Du Bois 1968) were written around the same time. In this final installment of Du Bois' autobiography, capping two earlier efforts including *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920) and *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) released when he was 50 and 70 years of age respectively, Du Bois offered a reassessment of his life project from the perspective of a nonagenarian. Remarkably at the very end of his long career Du Bois devoted much of his time and effort to a majestic study of African American higher education. From the vantage point of his last major works, we recognize that in contrast to the discontinuity interpretation, Du Bois retained throughout his career a profound belief in the emancipatory potential in German sociological research methodologies he imbibed in his graduate training at the University of Berlin. Indeed, much of the pathos in the third book *Worlds of Color* (Du Bois [1961] 2007) derives from Du Bois' underlying anxiety about the still unrealized possibilities of black higher education offered by the land-grant public research universities and his fears that future black scholarship will be colonized by racialized white universities.

Du Bois' use of historical fiction as a means to convey a relatable, moving narrative about the admittedly dry and erudite subject of advanced empirical social science research was calculated to present characters such as Manuel Mansart who represent the metaphorical development of expanded race consciousness beyond what Du Bois identified as the "narrow provincialism" of Booker T Washington's accommodationist Atlanta Compromise and the ideological confines of traditional American liberalism. In the African American land-grant public university, Du Bois discovered a model of black self-government and racial solidarity that not only resisted the dehumanizing effects of segregation but also could serve as a platform for global outreach and empowerment of colonized peoples. While Du Bois was not naïve about the grave challenges to racial equality posed by American Financial Power, Cold War hysterics about communist subversion, and persistent attempts to co-opt and control African American studies by white academics, his final major works situate the public university at the heart of any potential national and international struggle for racial equality.

In what follows, I will consider Du Bois' late-career embrace of Black Land-Grant universities by examining his *Autobiography*. I will then examine in detail his presentation of these themes in *The Black Flame* trilogy. I will conclude with some reflections on how a Du Boisian intervention illuminating the salutary effects of the growth and flourishing of Black Land-Grant public universities can add perspective to current debates about the problems confronting HBCUs.

2. The Autobiography

The final installment of Du Bois' autobiography was written contemporaneously with the *Black Flame* in the 1950s. Together these works comprise a grand reassessment of Du Bois' remarkable career from the perspective of nine decades of experience. We should be mindful, however, of Wilson Jeremiah Moses's caution against simply reading Du Bois' account of his life story in terms of the Marxist teleology he later so consciously sought to justify (Moses 2004, p. 187). Recognizing the transformation produced by the inevitable, eventual realization of full class-consciousness and his growing commitment to global anti-imperialism should not blind us to the unifying threads spanning Du Bois' long career, especially his abiding fixation on higher education and the establishment in the American academy of German-inspired social science.

After first matriculating at Fisk University in Tennessee, it was Du Bois' senior year work at Harvard University on the suppression of the African slave trade that set him on a path toward graduate studies. For Du Bois, at this time graduate research required training in Germany: "The German universities were at the top of their reputation." As such, "any American who wanted preferment had to go to Germany for study" (Du Bois 1968, p. 150). The University of Berlin would not accept a Harvard degree (perhaps educational karma for Harvard's refusal to accept Du Bois' Fisk courses for credit). His experience in Germany had an enormous impact on Du Bois' development as a scholar. First, in his social contact with his German professors and fellow students, he records a kind of liberation from "American narrowness and color prejudice" (Du Bois 1968, p. 157). Du Bois relates that in Europe from 1892–1894 he was treated more as a member of a privileged class of post-graduate students than as a racial minority. He also for the first time truly appreciated the importance of academic freedom as he studied with Professors in Wilhelmine Germany who were much more openly critical of their country's government than he had ever known in America.

But perhaps the greatest impact his experience in Germany had on Du Bois related to his developing sense of the scientific meaning of scholarship. Du Bois recounts that studying with scholars such as Gustav Schmoller and Adolf Wagner, luminaries of the German school of historical economics, provided his first real encounter with scientific research. Schmoller, in particular, was a formative influence on Du Bois. From Schmoller, Du Bois learned about the organic connection between culture and economics. Du Bois intimated that in Schmoller's presence he believed he was participating in a wave of the future, learning from the "molder of coming scientific thought" (Schafer 2001, p. 933). Schmoller's social science model was not, however, empirically reductive. Rather in keeping with the overarching Hegelian premise of the *Volksggeist*, an assumption arguably Du Bois would maintain his entire career, Schmoller rejected the classical liberal individualism of Wilhelm von Humboldt or J.S. Mill in favor of a vision of the role of the liberal arts in the ethical development of social groups (Moses 2004, pp. 187–88). Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Schmoller's methodology was his use of the case-study *Verein* model according to which a research group including economists, sociologists and historians would generate detailed scholarly reports on contemporary issues and problems. Between 1872 and 1914 the *Verein* associated with Schmoller produced 134 volumes of studies designed to influence policy makers, while also possessing enough scientific rigor to be perceived as being above the tumults of partisan politics (Barkin 2000, p. 93). Writing in his diary one day after attending one of Schmoller's lectures, Du Bois wrote admiringly: "From this gradually increasing basis of scientific facts, they attempt to recommend remedies for certain more obvious social ills" (Barkin 2000, p. 94).

As Broderick explains: "W.E.B. Du Bois went to Europe in 1892 an historian; he returned two years later a sociologist" (Broderick 1958, p. 367). The first real fruition of Du Bois' German training would appear in his role as the chief organizer of the project that

would become arguably the groundbreaking work in American sociology, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899). The context of this project reveals much about both Du Bois' academic commitments and his personal situation at the time. The initial impetus for a comprehensive sociological study of the African American community in Philadelphia came from white progressives in city politics, who were disappointed by the lack of interest in reform among black voters (Lewis 2009, p. 132). Having already acquired a reputation as the German-educated author of a dissertation on the suppression of the slave-trade, Du Bois accepted a position at the University of Pennsylvania as a researcher albeit with the humiliating, contrived rank of "assistant instructor" and without the official departmental membership a white academic certainly would have enjoyed. The positive response to the *Philadelphia Negro* which painstakingly compiled empirical data covering the education, medical history, migration patterns, family structures and employment status of this representative microcosm of the urban African American community in the North would establish Du Bois' reputation as one of the most important young social science researchers in the country.

Today Du Bois' social science research is perhaps best known by the handful of sociological studies showcased in his masterpiece *The Souls of Black Folk*. However, arguably at the time Du Bois was at least as well-known as the Director of the Atlanta Studies based in Atlanta University. In 1897 Du Bois was hired essentially to found the sociology department at Atlanta University, an historically black university founded in 1865. With the institutional support provided by the admittedly cash-strapped university, Du Bois was able to provide a durable, if often embattled, foundation for creating a body of research similar to the *Philadelphia Negro*. On a shoestring budget, Du Bois embarked on this task to, as he phrased it "put science into sociology through a study of the conditions and problems of my own group" (Du Bois 1968, p. 206). From 1898–1910 Du Bois directed an ambitious series of studies and annual conferences conveying results and findings related to a host of socio-economic issues confronting the African American community in the South.³ In keeping with the progressive developmental model of the German school of historical economics, Du Bois envisioned the Atlanta Studies adopting recurring ten-year cycles in which researchers would return to prior study subjects with "sharper tools and methods" (Du Bois 1968, p. 217). At this point in his life, Du Bois believed African Americans were a uniquely important study group inasmuch as while many social scientists were fixated on discovering "vast and eternal laws" of society, African Americans were a "concrete group of living beings artificially set off by themselves and capable of almost laboratory experiment" (Du Bois 1968, p. 217).

Du Bois would later boast that "between 1896 and 1920 there was no study made of the race problem in America which did not depend in some degree upon the investigations made at Atlanta University" (Du Bois 1968, pp. 217–18). On reflection, he conceded there was a certain naiveté in the Atlanta Studies arising from his own lack of familiarity at the time with the economic theories of Karl Marx and the psychological work of Sigmund Freud (Du Bois 1968, pp. 246, 228). But the real villain in the demise of the Atlanta Studies was, predictably, Booker T. Washington. Du Bois was convinced that after his rupture with Washington following the publication of *Souls*, the "Tuskegee Machine backed by White Capital" ruthlessly drove Du Bois out of Atlanta University by promising increased financial support for the resource-starved school, if Du Bois were marginalized or even removed from his post. Du Bois never felt he enjoyed as a scholar the kind of academic freedom his German mentors took for granted, confiding "very early in my work in Atlanta, I began to feel. . . pressure being put upon me to modify my work" (Du Bois 1968, p. 232).

Du Bois' resignation from Atlanta University in 1910 to become editor of *The Crisis*, the official journal of the fledgling NAACP, signified his first departure from academia.

However, even from the vantage point of New York City, Du Bois would write in 1933: “The university must become not simply a center of knowledge but a center of applied knowledge and guide of action” (Warren 2010, p. 84). Du Bois’ return to Atlanta University in 1934 differed from his previous service with respect to his outreach to African American public universities in the South encouraging them to expand the Atlanta studies model into each state in the region. In this second academic career, Du Bois strove to establish a “Conference of Negro Land-Grant University Presidents,” which in 1943 made him the “official coordinator” of an ambitious project involving studies anchored in black public universities across the South (Du Bois 1968, p. 319). In an unmistakable foreshadowing of the *Black Flame* trilogy, it was at this point that Du Bois first expressed an interest in writing a novel about the President of an African American public university (Edwards 2007, p. 128).⁴ Du Bois’ abrupt forced retirement in 1944—effectively killing the project—was, in Du Bois’ view, nothing short of a “catastrophe” (Du Bois 1968, p. 321). The unrealized possibilities of the *Autobiography* would become the basis of historical fiction in the *Black Flame*.

3. Historical Fiction

The *Black Flame* recounts a long and eventful period in African American history from 1876–1954. This span is also entirely within Du Bois’ life (1868–1963). The pivotal elements in this era include the end of Reconstruction in 1876, the death of Frederick Douglass in 1895, the rise and fall of Booker T. Washington, two World Wars, an economic depression, and the ushering in of the Cold War and the *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court that ordered the de-segregation of public schools in the United States. The *Black Flame* weaves this grand historical narrative through the study of several interconnected families: the African American Mansarts, the white southern planter Breckenridges, the politically ambitious Baldwins and the Du Bignons, an old New Orleans family with both white and black branches. Du Bois situated the *Black Flame* within the context of his corpus as a “fictionalized sequel to *Black Reconstruction*,” the paradigm-shifting 1935 study in which he challenged the prevailing academic view of Reconstruction as an unmitigated disaster unleashed by the national government on southern whites (Sanders 2007, p. 239). By contrast, Du Bois discovered in institutions such as the Freedmen’s Bureau and the extension of the franchise to African American men examples of potential African American self-government.

The *Black Flame* undoubtedly reflects continuity with the central themes of *Black Reconstruction* inasmuch as the trilogy also contains in-depth treatment of historical examples of African American agency, especially in the southern land-grant universities. But why did Du Bois employ historical fiction to complete, as it were, his earlier more established historical research model in *Black Reconstruction*? Du Bois helpfully provided his own rather specific explanation for his adoption of this literary genre in a “Postscript” to the first book of the trilogy in which he insisted that the *Black Flame* is not a historical study à la *Black Reconstruction*. He insists: “On the contrary, I have used fiction to interpret those historical facts which otherwise would not be clear.”⁵ Du Bois acknowledges what he calls “the eternal paradox of history,” according to which “every historian is painfully aware how little the scientist today can know accurately the past” (1: 229). The past is particularly daunting with respect to “the great tragedy of Negro slavery in the United States and its aftermath,” wherein “much of the documented history is lacking” and among the dominant white community there is a “fierce desire” to defend “their fathers and themselves” (1: 229). The use of “creative imagination” and personal recollection is permissible provided the method is acknowledged and clear to the reader. Nonetheless, Du Bois hoped that the *Black Flame* will be seen as “more history than fiction” (1: 229). That is to say, Du Bois turned to the “method of historical fiction to complete the cycle of history” as a recourse after the

demise of the Atlanta Studies and the later thwarted efforts at reviving these studies within a consortium of African American public universities (1: 230). This fusion of art and science would take the improbable course of using literature to celebrate social science research.

Manuel Mansart and his family are arguably the most pivotal figures in these novels precisely because the reader experiences through them genuine contact between the races in the South that Du Bois famously found exceedingly difficult to measure by normal empirical means (Jaima 2017, p. 591). The historical form also frees the author from many of the bonds of conventional narrative. At times the *Black Flame* has virtually a Tolstoyan aura as fictional characters regularly interact with important historical figures. There are memorable scenes with the populist leaders Tom Watson and Huey Long, New Deal architect Harry Hopkins, black leaders Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey, and no less than Franklin Delano Roosevelt—arguably the historical hero of the trilogy—humming African American spiritual songs as he contemplates a new, post-colonial world order. Even Hitler, Stalin and Ghandi make cameo appearances.

In addition to a certain epic grandeur, the historical fiction method in the *Black Flame* also allowed Du Bois to introduce some remarkable, highly symbolic events into the structure of the plot. For instance, the trilogy is practically bookended by spectacular episodes involving meetings of a vast global white supremacist conspiracy. Mere months after the end of Reconstruction, the aristocratic South Carolina planter Colonel Breckenridge is whisked off to an unnamed Caribbean Island in which American and European government and business leaders elect the young arch-imperialist Cecil Rhodes as chief of their secret organization for world domination. Seventy-eight years later the older Manuel Mansart receives an invitation to a gathering of co-opted political and cultural leaders from Africa and the African diaspora hosted by a villainous Russian Princess in which the white imperial powers lay out the terms for future (somewhat more indirect) domination of the non-white world in the context of the Cold War crusade against communism. What is the reader to make of these dramatic projections of the conspiratorial forces of white supremacy?

I am inclined to agree with those commentators who identify the purpose of conspiracy in the *Black Flame* as amounting to more than a mere plot device to produce dramatic effect. Even if the more improbable scenes in the story are much more fiction than history strictly speaking, it is important to recognize as *Black Flame* expert Lily Phillips argues that conspiracy was very much “a way of thinking Du Bois saw at work in the world” (Phillips 2015, p. 161).⁶ Du Bois deployed conspicuous conspiracy theory as a means to illuminate the basic socio-economic fact that white supremacists believed racial segregation had to be preserved in the American South or else a united, biracial labor movement “would threaten Capital North and South” (1: 165). That is, arguably Du Bois spoke through semi-mythical conspiracy theory as a way to convey the deeper reality in a “prophetic” or quasi-mystical voice (Byerman 1994, p. 140). But even these forays into “pure imagination” were launched in service of communicating historical truth.

Historical fiction also allowed Du Bois to almost perfectly co-align parallel development structures on the individual and international level. The intertwining of fictional characters and real events presented a unique opportunity to chart the increased race-consciousness of individuals such as Manuel Mansart and his family. America’s racial history is projected into the intimate relations of Mansart’s family in great detail. But the literary rendering of deepening race consciousness also operates in terms of political and geographical scope. Book 1 *The Ordeal of Mansart* traces Manuel Mansart’s origins and is situated almost entirely in Georgia and South Carolina. In Book 2 *Mansart Builds a School* (Du Bois [1959] 2007) the plot takes on a more national character as Mansart’s grown children move to other parts of the United States and important characters and new

plot lines emerge in New Orleans, New York, Chicago, New England, and the nation's capital. With the final book *Worlds of Color* (Du Bois [1961] 2007), the reader witnesses the assimilation of America's race problem into a global struggle against imperialism and the forces of late-industrial capitalism. The unifying thread throughout this gradually expanding narrative web is the life and career of an African American President of a public university one generation removed from slavery.

4. University President as Protagonist

Commentators generally agree that Manuel Mansart is not an extraordinarily complex character. He is rather, as Rampersad put it, "intelligent but not brilliant," and he offers few moments of deep introspection (Rampersad 1976, pp. 267–68). But this does not mean Mansart is peripheral to the action of the novels. He is rather a living symbol of what he called in *Souls of Black Folk* the psychological "veil" separating White and Black Americans, a literary vessel that provides the reader a greater degree of visibility through the typically distorted lens of American race relations.⁷ Born on the night his labor organizer father was lynched by a white mob on election day in Charleston in 1876, Mansart represents a link between America's African heritage and the African American future. Old Aunt Betsy, the keeper of ancient wisdom (and secrets), is a symbol in her own right of African spiritual power as she presents the blood-soaked new-born to the collection of black Charlestonians seeking refuge in the Emmanuel Church and announces: "the Black Flame. . . His name is Manuel. He is called! (1: 46)"⁸ While there is clearly an important autobiographical dimension of the *Black Flame*, Mansart is not simply a poeticized version of Du Bois himself. It is more accurate to say Du Bois' presence in the novels is felt in a composite of characters. Perhaps the most obvious is James Burghart (Du Bois' mother's maiden name), described as "a Northern Negro" teaching at Atlanta University. A graduate of Yale with a PhD in History, in the context of the *Black Flame* Burghart is both a projection of Du Bois' academic personality and Mansart's more radical alter ego. Burghart's main contribution to the plot of the *Black Flame* was his influence on Mansart. Burghart taught Mansart that America's race problem needed to be addressed scientifically, not emotionally. This manifested concretely in Burghart's direct criticism of Booker T. Washington. In fact, the first glimpse of the famous Du Bois versus Washington controversy in the novels arises indirectly by proxy through Burghart who established a series of sociological studies at Atlanta University intended to challenge the authority of the "Tuskegee Machine." After pressure from the northern industrialist and Atlanta University Board Chair John Baldwin on the university's president to fire Burghart, this Du Bois proxy follows the example of the original and leaves Atlanta University in July 1910 to join the fledgling NAACP.

Another Du Boisian-inspired personae is Jean Du Bignon, a mixed-race female scion of an *ancien régime* New Orleans family. Du Bignon has 1/8 African ancestry and appears white, but she chooses to participate in the African American community. Educated at Radcliffe and having earned a PhD in Sociology at the University of Chicago, it is not surprising that some commentators identify her as "the female Du Bois" (Simpson 2015, pp. 57–58).⁹ As principal secretary to President Mansart at Georgia State, Du Bignon is the driving force behind the ambitious Atlanta Studies-type research project involving studies in each southern state under the auspices of an organization of black land-grant universities, which is one of the highlights of Book 3. Du Bignon's plan is the same basic project Du Bois himself proposed in his second stint at Atlanta University in the 1940s. Towards the end of the trilogy, Du Bignon also embodies Du Bois' personal bitterness about his own political persecution as she is eventually driven out of Georgia State and charged by the US government with espionage for her supposed communist sympathies. Like Du Bois, Jean Du Bignon was acquitted at trial but left badly damaged professionally.

There is also, remarkably, the faint presence of Du Bois, the actual historical figure, scattered throughout the novels. At one point Mary Ovington, an early white supporter of Du Bois and co-founder of the NAACP, is introduced into the novel as someone whose race-consciousness was sparked after “she had read the *Souls of Black Folk*” in 1903 (2: 42). Later the narrator refers to the “editor of *Crisis*”—for 24 years Du Bois himself—as a strong promoter of the concept of the National Urban League (2: 47). But the protagonist Manuel Mansart is not reducible to a simulation of Du Bois. Critically, in their respective responses to racism Mansart and Du Bois differed dramatically. Unlike Du Bois, Mansart never left the academy and always maintained a certain emotional distance from social and political activism. Du Bois and Mansart also occupied differing positions on the spectrum of reaction to the towering figure of Booker T. Washington. Even though he had cordial relations with Washington early in his career—even considering an appointment at Tuskegee—Du Bois was a comparatively early and vociferous opponent of Washington. In this respect Mansart was more typical of the respectful attitude most African Americans held toward Washington and his cautious approach toward civil rights. The tension within Mansart’s soul between resistance and acceptance was largely alien to Du Bois for whom Mansart partially represented the frustratingly unimaginative black political leadership in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Doubtless, the most significant character development in the trilogy is Manuel Mansart’s transformation from a disciple of Booker T. Washington’s program to his adoption of a much more radical stance against white supremacy, imperialism, and global capitalism. Mansart’s educational background differed considerably from that of Du Bois. Mansart enjoyed a basic liberal arts education at cash-strapped Atlanta University, but he never had the benefit of the level of graduate training pursued by Du Bois or other characters in the novels such as James Burghart and Jean Du Bignon. Mansart’s ascent from a grade-school teacher to university president was due more to the accidents of fortunate circumstances and extended family connections than to personal ambition or radical ideology. Early in his life Mansart adopted what the narrator calls a “pragmatic solution to the race problem,” which meant “he was going to avoid white folks when he could. When brought in contact with them he was going to be pleasant” (1: 83). This posture was in keeping certainly with the spirit of Washington’s famous Atlanta Compromise, which Mansart first heard in an address in 1895 and which he thought a “shrewd speech” (1: 89). This attitude toward race also translated into an unreflective American patriotism. As the subject of his graduation address at Atlanta University Mansart chose the topic of the recent Spanish-American War in which he lauded the American army and navy, and “the philanthropy of America the Emancipator” (1: 140).

Even after becoming President of the fictional Georgia State Colored Agricultural and Mechanical College at Macon, Mansart was still committed to a Washingtonian economic vision for the final settlement of the race problem in the South involving a condition in which “the Negro settled on the land to furnish raw materials and food for the nation; [and]...white workers would live mainly in the cities and process these raw materials” (2: 185). Arguably Mansart’s radicalization process never completely eliminated a vestigial American patriotism. For example, long after his conversion to socialism and the cause of anti-imperialism, Mansart tried to console his disillusioned grandson, scarred by the horrors of combat in the Korean War, with the claim: “I know how you feel, son. There have been times when I have felt the same. But you are wrong. This nation has been cruel to us—cruel and unfeeling. Yet at bottom, its heart is right. It will do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God” (3: 188). In the context of the trilogy, his grandson’s silent stony-faced response and later marriage to a Vietnamese communist agent in France speaks volumes.

The poetic representation of Mansart's transformation is captured in three mystical, even prophetic, scenes built around Mansart. The first scene occurs at the very end of Book 2 and is constructed as a pathetic fallacy generated by FDR, Harry Hopkins and Mansart, who each experience similar visions at the identical moment in different locations in America. Looking up at the night sky from the balcony of the White House in 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II, FDR sees a "Great White Flame," symbolizing European civilization blaze, spread over the world and then fade out. The President: "wept as it faded" (2: 266). At the same moment, walking through the back streets of DC, Harry Hopkins sees a "Red Flame" in the sky, a "flame of revolution" which swept across the globe: "It frightened him, but he could not stop it. He did not want to stop it" (2: 266). Meanwhile, six hundred miles south, Mansart wandered sleeplessly around the grounds of his university, and saw in the sky a "Black Flame," but he puzzled over how a flame can be black and how it is possible to see it at night. Then he realized this symbol of African civilization represented a world changed into a place of "Power and Peace, of Freedom and Law, of Force and Love" (2: 266). But he also realized the time for this change was "not yet, not for a long, long time yet" (2: 266).

The other two prophetic visions are darker and more menacing. Book 3 begins with recognition that world war and depression had shaken Mansart to his core: "All the old certainties were gone" (3: 1). Nonetheless, the outbreak of the Second World War absolutely "astonished" Mansart. During a long train ride to visit his son, a Judge in New York, Mansart experienced a nightmare involving an enormous, hellish green spider: "It sat in a pool of blood, which gushed down from China, flowed from Spain and seeped through Mississippi. The spider seemed to be spinning out thin tendrils of American gold, linking strand to strand" (3: 109). This terrifying image of global capitalism and its web of colonial and militaristic projects reveals how "the White World fought the Dark World and both faced Death" (3: 109). Mansart comes to realize that the cause of African American civil rights is inextricably connected to a more fundamental critique of the entire diabolical system of liberal capitalist political economy. Mansart's dying vision which practically concludes the trilogy is a combination of previous scenes—both nightmare and hope for a better future. In his final moments of life in 1954 surrounded by his extended family, Mansart recounts alternating visions of thermonuclear war and Third World liberation. With a hoarse voice he exclaims: "I have come from Hell—I saw bombs filling the skies—I heard the scream of death. Moscow was aflame. London was ashes, Paris was a clot of blood, New York sank into the sea. The world was sorrow, hate and fear—no hope, no song, no laughter. Save me, my children. Save the world" (3: 239). After a brief rest Mansart whispers:

I am back from a far journey. I saw China's millions lifting the soil of the nation in their hands to dam the rivers which long had eaten their land. I saw the golden domes of Moscow shining on Russia's millions, yesterday unlettered, now reading the wisdom of the world. I saw birds singing in Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaya. I saw India and Pakistan united, free; in Paris, Ho Chi Minh celebrated peace on earth; while in New York. . ." (3: 240).

This never-completed final sentence with its dramatic, inchoate allusion to a post-colonial, post-capitalist New York perhaps indicates Du Bois' own ambivalence in his last years about the possibility for true racial equality in America. In this sense, even as Mansart embodies the journey of expanded race-consciousness in America, he also projects an uncertain future for a world in the latter half of the twentieth century that will either eliminate the color-line or be destroyed by it.

5. The Public University

Du Bois situated Mansart for practically all of his professional life within the context of active engagement with institutions of higher education. That is to say, insofar as Mansart's life is given meaning and structure by his institutional identity, then the public university is arguably one of the real heroes in the trilogy. Du Bois foregrounds through the second and third books of the trilogy Mansart's challenges—at first dangerous and later more manageable—against a white political establishment deeply hostile to the very notion of black higher education. A running theme of *The Black Flame* is the determined policy of white business elites who want cheap black labor to undercut the white populist movement by appealing to white racism to make it impossible to mobilize an interracial working-class alliance. Embedded in this Marxist analysis of political economy is Du Bois' accusation that Booker T. Washington's program of political quietism only serves the economic interests of white capitalism. One Georgia politician stated it bluntly: "Mansart, we have been counting on the southern Negroes as a conservative force in this country. We are going to see that they are or we are going to smash them" (3: 173). *The Black Flame* identifies the emergence of the black research university as the major development in American higher education that altered conventional assumptions about race-consciousness and helped to make effective resistance to segregation possible.

Mansart's fictional institutional home, Georgia State, is modelled on the very real black colleges and universities established by the land-grant system. The land-grant system originated in the Morrill Act of 1862 inspired by Vermont Congressman Justin Smith Morrill's belief that the national government should help promote education of the "industrial classes" (including farmers). With this legislation, states were granted an amount of federal land determined on a per capita basis, the income from the rent or sale of which could be used to endow "at least one college" providing "education in agriculture and mechanical arts" (Menand et al. 2017, pp. 165–66). Significantly, in a move of which Du Bois' German mentors would no doubt approve, Morrill insisted that practical instruction must be combined with studies in traditional liberal arts and sciences. State governments would be eligible for this federal grant if they either adapted existing colleges to its terms or established new public or private universities.

The Morrill Act of 1862 did not, however, directly confront the harsh reality of race in America. In the South and border states, land grant colleges and universities discriminated against, and did not admit, people of color. The Second Morrill Act of 1890 sought to address this racial disparity by pressuring southern governments to either de-segregate their public institutions or establish separate black institutions of comparable quality. The 1890 Act inaugurated a wave of new black colleges and universities across the South including Prairie View A&M in Texas, Southern University in Louisiana, Alabama A&M, Florida A&M and North Carolina Agriculture and Technology State University. Mansart's fictional Georgia State imaginatively merged into this pre-existing parallel system of chronically underfunded black public universities in the segregated South.

In *The Black Flame* Du Bois recounts the white South's response to the Second Morrill Act, which was to try to ensure the subordination of black universities to the interests of the white-dominated educational system. White controlled "Big Business in its national philanthropic cloak, planned and began to endow a select set of private Negro colleges in the South like Fisk, Atlanta and Dillard" that it hoped would reinforce the pliant, accommodationist message of Booker T. Washington's doctrine (3: 6). But Du Bois insists that it would prove impossible to reverse the prevailing trends whereby in both the South and the North, "the state university would eventually bear the burden of higher education" (3: 7). Du Bois indicates that inevitably over time, and despite the worst intentions of southern state governments, African American land-grant universities "became larger and

better equipped" (3: 2–4). But perhaps most importantly, as the black land-grant schools became more established, this produced a change in the leadership culture of African Americans in the South. Originally black administrators were aggressively subordinated to white trustees, but over time a new kind of African American administrator emerged "who was quite as capable as the white presidents and sometimes better educated. He tended to become an independent president of a really separate Negro college" (2: 89). The working partnership between President Mansart and his white supervisor, the progressive Arnold Coypel reflected perfectly this new, non-hierarchical (and radically non-Southern) relation: "Coypel signed checks, but Mansart as president planned expenditures and reported directly to the state" (2: 89).

Insofar as the Second Morrill Act signified the first direct support by the federal government for African American education since the Reconstruction period, then *The Black Flame* trilogy is truly the sequel to Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*. The ambivalence the white South expressed toward federal assistance to higher education reflected deep concerns about what it saw as the social and even political costs produced by any real effort to redress the racial imbalance of resources allocated to education. As Du Bois explains: "If a federal administration was ever tempted by the growing Negro vote to administer federal funds equitably, the Southern Negro State college might soon equal and even overshadow the White. The South was scared" (3: 7). The exemplars of this potential emergence of new black leadership was typified by African American administrators like Mansart. Du Bois calls these men "social statesmen," they were more than educators because inasmuch as they were building a new academic culture "on a singular biracial basis" (3: 3). They were "statesmen" in the sense that they learned to deal adroitly with the white trustees and politicians. Of the cut and thrust of bureaucratic and administrative politics, Du Bois informs the reader: "It was a great game and Mansart enjoyed it" (3: 3).

Black university presidents had a unique role in promoting African American self-government. Unlike black private colleges that almost always were underfunded and vulnerable to corruption by white philanthropy, the black public universities seemed to have more autonomy in practice than they did in theory. Du Bois indicates that "as president of a state school, Manuel Mansart became a real center of power" (2: 101). The public university was an area of black control that white authorities would only rarely enter. In the segregated South where lynch law reigned, white police were always at hand and white civilians always prepared to help execute racist judgments and policies towards African American people. But on "Mansart's campus," we are told "the President ruled over a physical kingdom" (2: 102). Du Bois' use of the rhetoric and logic of sovereignty and agency to describe the demesne of the public university is striking in a segregated South in which African Americans typically enjoyed neither.

In the spring 1936 biennial meeting of the Presidents of the Colored Land-Grants hosted by Southern University in Louisiana, the reader is provided a wonderfully descriptive series of vignettes introducing several of the most prominent black university presidents who are described like state governors or US Senators representing unique constituencies and wielding power in a complex relationship with the various stakeholders in the institution, especially their state governments. At this 1936 meeting the university presidents reached agreement on two substantive issues. First, they decided to make Georgia State the center for a new series of research studies constituting a "plan for cooperative, continuous sociological investigation in each state" as a "scientific beginning" to a rigorous study of the African American community (3: 7). In terms strongly reminiscent of Du Bois' own autobiographical assessment of the unique character of his Atlanta Studies, the narrative voice of *The Black Flame* extols this research plan as a "controlled laboratory test on a grand scale unequalled in history" (3: 7). The organization of black university presidents

also encouraged Mansart to take a sabbatical to travel abroad in order to “broaden his vision of the Race Problem” (3: 7). The ensuing half-year tour of Europe and Asia brought Mansart into contact with types of people he had never encountered including English aristocrats, German industrialists, a persecuted German rabbi, and academics in Japan and China. He saw first-hand nations in the fierce grip of fascism, the radical chauvinism of Imperial Japan, and the endless, brutal imperial entanglements that permeated absolutely all aspects of great power politics. It was arguably only after leaving the United States that Mansart could truly appreciate the intersection of racial and class conflict that was so characteristic of Du Bois’ conception of socialism.

The effects of his time abroad were apparently considerable on Mansart. He was able to begin the process of “escaping his racial provincialism” (3: 53). This meant that he now could understand better America’s race problem as part of a colonial project extending across the globe and manifest in diverse forms. As such, this expanded international horizon made him see more clearly than previously the fundamental economic factors underlying both racism in America and European imperialism. In the years following this pivotal 1936 meeting of the national organization of black land-grant university presidents, Mansart and Jean Du Bignon helped establish annual conferences clearly modelled on Du Bois’ Atlanta Studies. The task of the African American sociology professors and university administrators in these conferences was to ascertain “truth about race relations in the US, gathered scientifically and presented to the world without bias” (3: 53). As Director of the study, Jean Du Bignon grappled with the question of how to apply these findings to public policy. In the context of the *Black Flame*, it is Du Bignon who delivers the most trenchant criticism of an earlier version of Du Bois himself. In an unmistakable oblique reference to Du Bois, this heroine of the *Black Flame* recalls “one of our Negroes once had a vision of a ‘talented tenth,’” a cadre of highly educated men devoted to the social uplift of African American people (3: 66). In *Souls of Black Folk* wherein Du Bois made the talented tenth a central element of his critique of Booker T. Washington’s program, he identified this concept with a philosophy of “higher individualism” opposed to “our modern socialism” and our degraded cultural “worship of the mass” (Du Bois [1903] 1994, p. 66). In this later correction of the earlier Du Boisian conceit, Jean Du Bignon argues that Du Bois the younger did not understand “the labor group in industry,” and as such “his Talented become too often selfish money grabbers” (3: 66). Du Bignon contrasts the economic naïveté of the author of the *Souls of Black Folk* with the novel’s own Professor Burghart (another Du Bois proxy) whose Pan-African vision correctly understood the need to fuse research into race in America into an “understanding of a greater black world and its problems” (3: 66). The reader of the *Autobiography* will doubtless find in this exchange a dialogical reconstruction of Du Bois’ admission that in his earlier works, he lacked a sufficient understanding of Marx and Freud.

The literary structure of *The Black Flame* allows the reader to contrast the university-sanctioned, scientifically rigorous conferences of black researchers with numerous secret meetings of white supremacist power brokers. At one such meeting in Atlanta in the fall of 1950 a group of white scholars and industrialists meet to discredit Du Bignon’s research project and Black Studies more generally. But white research into race in America is also decisively parasitic on black scholarship, as one white politician declares:

For a time, the Negroes controlled the study of their race in America, and they put out some vicious propaganda; which, even if true, was bad publicity for the South and the white race. We can know the truth and publish as much of it as is good, and color it our way (3: 158).

White researchers in elite universities want to mold the discussion about race in order to buttress the argument for continuing segregation. Fearing a Supreme Court

decision that will start to overturn segregation, the agents of white higher education feel the importance of discrediting independent research by black scholars like the program centered at Mansart's Georgia State. The mastermind behind this conspiracy is the "oil millionaire," a Texan named Vanderburg, who insists that preserving segregation requires undercutting every institutional expression of black autonomy: "we've got to cut down, for instance, the power of those Land-Grant college presidents and keep power in our own hands to be carried out by our own puppets, in place of the present gang who've got too much brains" (3: 160). Vanderburg tries, but ultimately fails, to have Mansart removed from his post at Georgia State.

Over the course of the last book *Worlds of Color* (Du Bois [1961] 2007), we detect among the characters a shifting attitude toward empirical research. The early optimism that inspired the intercollegiate race studies in the 1930s dissipates markedly by the time of the onset of the Cold War. Mansart survives Vanderburg's attempt to destroy him, but Jean Du Bignon, the director of the study, is driven out of the academy at the height of the Red Scare for attending a concert in Paris by the African American left-wing activist Paul Robeson. Disillusioned, Du Bignon comes to view empirical studies a fraught enterprise: "We have come down from our high horse of measured certainty to the business of collecting with infinite pain the facts, and coming to possibilities and probabilities as to the real conclusions of science" (3: 215). A World War, economic depression and ideological censorship, she concedes, have sapped the life out of her ambitious project. As she admits: "This plan failed. Today white men without benefit of the judgment and experience of blacks, are telling the world what black folk think and are" (3: 218). The institutional prestige and economic advantages of white higher education threaten to stifle authentic minority voices in the academy. The persecution of Mansart and Du Bignon serves in the context of the novels to register Du Bois' conviction that white authority fears independent African American research into the causes of political and economic inequality.

Throughout *The Black Flame*, globalism is set in contrast to what Du Bois presents as the false realism proffered by Washington's vocational education program. Indeed, Du Bois complains that the long "fight against Booker Washington's ideas" in America had led many African American intellectuals to assume an unnatural "enmity between teacher and laborer just when in the world labor was forging forward to its own" (3: 7). The obvious limits of the narrow and parochial industrial education of the Tuskegee model tended to discredit the significance of organized labor among African American activists advocating black higher education. It is only with the advantage of a global perspective that African American leaders can fully appreciate the possibilities for an alliance between labor and the academy. By the twentieth century, the university had become a transcultural, international phenomena that extended the reach of sophisticated modern research methodology beyond America to Europe, and its colonies. In the course of his travels, Mansart as an individual who is both a public figure and attached to a university, enjoys something like what Immanuel Kant called the right of "hospitality" in the various countries he visits as representatives of other universities or organizations welcomed his presence (Kant 1991, p. 105). The modern university in *The Black Flame* is by no means immune from politicization, but Du Bois sees it as an institution ideally and constructively cosmopolitan in the tastes and sympathies of its natural denizens.

Perhaps the fruition of the university's cosmopolitan potential in *The Black Flame* is its connection with the international peace movement in the early Cold War period. The closing chapters of the trilogy focus on Mansart and Du Bignon's gradual integration into the Peace Information Bureau, associated by many Americans (including the national government) with communist propaganda. It was due to his role as a public university president that Mansart secured an invitation to participate in the Cultural and Scientific

Conference for World Peace held at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York in March 1949. The reader is informed that Mansart was invited to this conference along with “the best intellects of all the world to plead and argue for peace” (3: 169). This is another wonderful example of fiction melding into autobiography inasmuch as Du Bois himself was one of the “best intellects” who took part in the New York meeting (Klefsstad 2012, p. 13). In terms of the plot of *The Black Flame*, the most significant feature of this episode is Mansart’s stunned reaction to the public backlash against the conference, which included delegates from the Soviet Union, most notably the composer Dmitry Shostakovich. Mansart was appalled that even the American universities—ideal ground for cross-cultural contact—succumbed to Cold War hysterics: “How could one of our greatest universities refuse to let Shostakovich give a concert on its campus” (3: 169).¹⁰ It is in these moments of moral clarity that Mansart realizes that America’s race problem can never be truly separated from the “greater and wider causes—Peace, Socialism, and the meaning of life” (3: 169).

The unrealized promise of an open, transparent international summit contrasts sharply with the conspiratorial meeting in Rockefeller Center in 1954 recounted near the end of the trilogy. In this fantastical gathering organized by the international forces of white supremacy under the auspices of the “Big Business” controlled Negro College Fund, an elderly and physically failing Mansart is invited along with dozens of political and social leaders from Africa and the African diaspora (including African Americans) to attend a party hosted by a heavily bejeweled, exiled Russian princess who calls upon them: “Will you join the White European race to help crush and beat back the crazy Russian and Chinese Communists, help bring the world back to its normal procedures; or will you join this rebellion against established authority—this revolt against civilization” (3: 232–3)? In one of his most admirable moments in the entire work, the supremely dignified Mansart is unceremoniously removed from the opulent banquet hall after he uncharacteristically spoke up insisting that “the uplift of mankind is limited neither by color, race nor descent” as history moves toward the “social ownership and conduct of industry by all for all” (3: 233). While this study in contrasts is a familiar literary device throughout the trilogy, Mansart’s courageous intervention at Rockefeller Center—at the heart of American media—holds a distinctive sense of finality both in terms of the novels and with Mansart’s approaching death and the dimming of any real hope for peace, at least in the near term, in a period of great power nuclear rivalry.

6. Conclusions

The challenges facing HBCUs today are stark. The crisis in American higher education is perhaps nowhere demonstrated more clearly, and indeed urgently, than in the case of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The valuable role HBCUs perform in training America’s Black leaders is indisputable as eighty percent of Black judges, forty percent of Black members of Congress (including one former Vice-President), fifty percent of Black public school teachers and over seventy percent of Black dentists are products of an HBCU education (Alridge 2024, p. 761). HBCUs have long faced perennial challenges relating to the lack of investment in infrastructure and the pressures of faculty bearing higher average teaching loads than colleagues in non-HBCUs. Today public HBCUs in particular face arguably unprecedented threats to their very existence given their vulnerability to systematic underfunding by state governments. For example, a 2023 investigation by the US Department of Education reported that governments in sixteen states had underfunded historically Black Land-Grant Universities by \$13 billion over three decades (Knott 2023). These findings demonstrated an enormous gap in relation to predominantly White Land-Grants, which by law are supposed to be funded equitably.

HBCUs also face specific challenges in terms of political pressures corroding the norms of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. In its 2024 “Statement on Political Interference in Higher Education” the American Association of University Professors defined “state coercion” as government interference in universities and colleges through legislative actions such as the mandates in states including Florida, Texas and Missouri that seek to restrict teaching on so-called “Divisive-Concepts” including the history of slavery and segregation in America ([American Association of University Professors 2024](#)). Combined with recent federal government actions employing financial incentives to compel universities to comply with a specific political agenda, these examples of state coercion represent a potentially severe threat to academic freedom for faculty in HBCUs.

We have seen both from his career biography and his late-career writings that Du Bois was committed to highlighting the vital role HBCUs played in the origins of American social science ([Wright 2024](#), pp. 719–21). In Du Bois’ late-career literary opus, *The Black Flame*, he crafted a vision of Black social science, which is led by Black researchers and centers Black experiences, that he believed was an antidote to White scholarship mired in prejudice. While Du Bois reached the conclusion vividly portrayed in *The Black Flame* that many White scholars were incapable of objective analysis of issues of race in America, he also believed that White intellectuals more broadly, would benefit from the kind of unrestrictive research about race conducted by a consortium of Black public universities. At the very moment he was processing the disappointment of the demise of the resurrected Atlanta Studies, Du Bois published an article in the *American Journal of Sociology* entitled “Prospect of a World Without Race Conflict” in which he appealed to “these leaders of white culture who are willing to take action” ([Du Bois 1944](#), p. 456). Du Bois argued, “White leaders and thinkers have a duty to perform in making known the conclusions of science on the subject of biological race” in order to combat the “race fiction” then still taught in American universities ([Du Bois 1944](#), p. 456). The consortium of Black public Land-Grant universities sketched in *The Black Flame* was no doubt a projection of Du Bois’ ambitions to confront the color-line in the American social science community.

Du Bois believed the public university, shaped in different ways by law, is not an ivory tower impervious to the effects of racism. [Cole’s \(2020\)](#) recent study *The Campus Color Line: College Presidents and the Struggle for Black Freedom* confirms Du Bois’ intuitions about the role of the universities in providing Black leadership as Cole recounts in great detail the vital part that the presidents of historically Black land grant public universities and colleges played not only in dismantling segregation in higher education, but also in opposing racial discrimination in housing and employment, while at the same time protecting academic freedom and promoting innovative programs to recruit talented African American students and researchers. That is to say, Manuel Mansart’s successors at the helm of Black land grant public universities, these legatees of the Second Morrill Act, would be true “social statesmen” of the Civil Rights Movement. Du Bois no doubt would call on today’s leaders of Black higher education, especially the Land-Grant Presidents and administrators that regularly interact with the federal and state governments, to revive the spirit of consortium to pool resources and share experiences of best practices in response to state coercion and systematic underfunding. A prime example of this institutional infrastructure is The HBCU Center for Research, Leadership and Policy at Howard University. This Center organizes an annual conference to build community among HBCU and ally-researchers, is home to a Research Repository that facilitates partnerships with faculty, external researchers, philanthropic organizations and policy stakeholders, and provides the vital institutional support for the HBCU Campus Climate Study which engages HBCUs in a mixed-method study designed to understand how campus climates influence student success.

Du Bois would no doubt also be leery of the potential for cooptation and censorship embedded in the recent moves which aim to strengthen private sector and philanthropic support for HBCUs to promote professional development and workforce readiness in key industries (Weissman 2025). While cuts to federal funding would affect all HBCUs, arguably the impact would be more serious for Black public Land-Grants, many of which are already struggling with decades of systematic underfunding. The concrete impact of federal funding cuts on public health, an issue central to Du Bois' moral vision, can already be seen in Florida Agricultural and Mechanical State University's recent loss of a \$16.3 million National Institute of Health grant to study racial disparities in rates of colorectal cancer in the United States (Brown 2025). Du Bois would perhaps encourage us to wonder if such race-conscious humanities and social science research as Robert Bullard's pioneering studies about the racial impact of environmental policies will still be possible in the future (e.g., Bullard 2000, 2009).¹¹ Indeed, the pioneering work of scholars in public HBCUs like Daryl Scott's (Morgan State University) studies of African American intellectual history and Merline Pitre's (Texas Southern University) research on Black Leadership arguably opened the path for the transformational research by African American scholars such as Annette Gordon-Reed and Matthew X Vernon working in traditional "White" subjects like American presidential history and medieval studies. In the face of these current political pressures, Du Bois would likely enjoin Black public university leaders not only to act as social statesmen and stateswomen in their engagement with governments. He also would likely call upon supporters of HBCUs today to mobilize public support through outreach informing the various community stakeholders about the enormous contributions HBCUs make to racial justice and higher education in America. But as the trials and frustrations of Manuel Mansart, not to mention Du Bois himself, so evocatively reveal, the social scientist-poet should hardly be naive about the scope of the challenges confronting HBCUs today.

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Notes

- ¹ For criticism of the *Black Flame* as literature, see (Davis 1957; Aldridge 2008, p. 138; Phillips 2015, p. 161; Edwards 2007, pp. 124–25). McLeod (2023, pp. 28–29) identifies aesthetic shortcomings in *The Black Flame*, but attributes this to Du Bois' long subscribed idea of "Art as Propaganda" by which he was willing to sacrifice literary sophistication for the political purpose of exposing white supremacy. With respect to *The Black Flame's* neglect among scholars, see (Sanders 2007, p. 232) and Lewis' magisterial biography of Du Bois, which only mentions the trilogy briefly in passing (Lewis 2009, p. 687).
- ² See for instance Eddie Cole's wonderful recent study (Cole 2020).
- ³ For a comprehensive list of the Atlanta Studies, see (Warren 2010, pp. 66–75). For a detailed scholarly account of Du Bois' role in founding the sociology department at Atlanta University, see (Morris 2015, chap. 3).
- ⁴ Interestingly, Christian (2014, p. 25) attributes the origins of the *Black Flame* even earlier to Du Bois' 1935 discussion of his plans to write a three-part history of Atlanta.
- ⁵ Du Bois ([1957] 2007, Book 1, p. 229). Hereafter in notes and text all references to the *Black Flame* are simply Book and page number.
- ⁶ Phillips (1997, pp. 257, 261) also observes that even as Du Bois displayed fidelity to socialist realist literary theory, he did not pledge political allegiance to the Soviet Union in a "crude way" and was not completely lacking distrust of the Soviet Union.

- ⁷ In this sense Du Bois' use of Mansart as a literary device parallels Ralph Ellison's treatment of the theme of Black invisibility in his *Invisible Man* (1952) published while Du Bois' was working on *The Black Flame*. For a treatment of the comparison between Ellison and Du Bois, see (Morris 2015, pp. 177–78).
- ⁸ For a discussion of Aunt Betsy as a symbol of African culture, see (Terry 2008, p. 59).
- ⁹ Simpson (2015) and Rogers (2012, 199 n.12) criticize Du Bois for his patriarchal assumptions. McLeod (2023, p. 31) argues that Du Bignon is one of the most interesting characters in mid-twentieth century American literature given her key role in Du Bois' effort to explore the range of white subjectivities. For another more positive reading of Du Bois' position on equality for women, see (Balfour 2011, chap. 5). In the context of *The Black Flame*, I am inclined to agree with McLeod and Balfour, primarily due to the important role the female scholar Jean Du Bignon plays as Mansart's de facto co-president of Georgia State.
- ¹⁰ For the role of Shostakovich at the conference, see (Klefsstad 2012).
- ¹¹ Bullard himself is a product of the historically Black land grant Alabama A&M and long-time professor and administrator at another historically Black public institution Texas Southern University.

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