

“All Art is Propaganda”: W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Crisis* and the Construction of a Black Public Image

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Abstract

This article explores W.E.B. Du Bois’s political thought through his use of rhetoric in his *The Crisis* writings (1910s–1930s). I argue that Du Bois used *The Crisis* to build an interracial dialogue on civil and political rights to draw support for federal intervention in favor of African Americans. Du Bois’s views on artistic expression were an organic part of his program to build a black public image for political purposes. As Du Bois’s political strategy started shifting after 1925, so did his position on the political use of interracial dialogue and, thus, his ideas on artistic expression.

Keywords: W.E.B. Du Bois; *The Crisis Magazine*; NAACP; Double Consciousness; Cosmopolitan Patriotism; Harlem Renaissance

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In June 1926, the African-American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, editor of *The Crisis*, delivered a speech at the Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), later published in the association's magazine under the title "Criteria of Negro Art." In this widely circulated article, Du Bois talked about the political standing of African American art in explicit political terms. Its most controversial passage stated:

All art is propoganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propoganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propoganda.¹

"Criteria of Negro Art" came in the middle of a long and heated discussion about the political meaning of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s. This debate opposed "pure" artistic expression—a representation of African Americans devoid of racial connotations—to "propaganda," a pejorative term used to discredit black artists who depicted racism and/or exhibited racial dignity in their literary and artistic creations. Many studies about African-American art and its political implications focus on this decade, which saw Du Bois trying to reconcile artistic expression with political commitment during most of the 1920s, and heavily criticizing the Harlem Renaissance after 1925.² Indeed, both Du Bois and *The Crisis* were at the front and center in the discussion, as the New Negro movement grew thanks to the monthly and its editor, and the magazine hosted most of the debate on its pages.³ Literary scholars, as well as historians who focus on the 1920s, largely agree that "at a time when some black intellectuals found safe harbor in the doctrine of art for art's sake, *The Crisis* as an agent of black print culture pushed a confrontational aesthetics that revalued traditional categories of the beautiful."⁴

However, this interpretation does not apply only to the 1920s. If we consider Du Bois's work as editor of *The Crisis* from a long-term perspective, it is evident that he understood the political importance of cultural production and artistic expression since the first issues of the magazine. As early as 1911, Du Bois started encouraging and promoting writers through *The Crisis*, and he launched its first literary contest in 1917.⁵ Du Bois's *The Crisis* also made a sophisticated use of visual arts to both challenge racial stereotypes and dignify blackness since the early 1910s.⁶ Hence, Du Bois's ideas about artistic expression and his political commitment were strongly linked since the beginning of his editorial experience, and even earlier.⁷

In this context, the question raised by "Criteria of Negro Art" is not, then, whether Du Bois changed his mind about the political significance of artistic expression in the 1920s, but what caused him to talk about art by using an explicit political terminology and why. In fact, just a few years earlier, Du Bois had disputed the rhetoric connecting art and propaganda.⁸ As Kirschke, Alessandra Lorini, and others have argued, this does not mean that Du Bois did not see artistic expression as essentially political, but

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis*, 32 (1926): 295.

² Eric K. Watts, "Cultivating a Black Public Voice: W.E.B. Du Bois and the 'Criteria of Negro Art,'" *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 4 (2001): 181-201. David Levering Lewis has also suggested that Du Bois's decision to publish the article was influenced by Langston Hughes's essay on artistic freedom, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which appeared in *The Nation* in June 1926. See David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois. The Fight for Equality and The American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2000), 179; Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 23, 1926, 692-4.

³ Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 56-7; Robert Bone, *Down Home: A History of Afro-American Short Fiction from Its Beginning to the End of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Putnam, 1975), 109-38.

⁴ Russ Castronovo, "Beauty along the Color Line: Lynching, Aesthetics, and the 'Crisis,'" *PMLA*, 121 (2006): 1443.

⁵ See L. A. Proctor, "My Sweet Love Salome," *The Crisis*, 2 (1911): 34; W.E.B. Du Bois, "To Our Young Poets," *The Crisis*, 9 (1915): 236; W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Best Summer," *The Crisis*, 14 (1917): 111.

⁶ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis. W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 2. See also Jenny Woodley, *Art for Equality. The NAACP's Cultural Campaign for Civil Rights* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

⁷ Ross Posnock, "The Distinction of Du Bois: Aesthetics, Pragmatism, Politics," *American Literary History*, 7 (1995): 500-24.

⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Negro Art," *The Crisis*, 22 (1921): 55.

just that he avoided talking about the political role of art explicitly.⁹ According to Ross Posnock, Du Bois's use of the term "propaganda" in 1926 was widely misunderstood by his contemporaries, as he tried to challenge the dichotomy between art and propaganda, and thus to turn "the aesthetic into a militant part of a political, economic, and cultural movement." This misreading was caused by "a context of fiercely contested cultural politics, a climate that took a toll on the generosity of all the combatants."¹⁰

While Posnock's interpretation is correct, this essay argues that the reasons behind the rhetoric used in "Criteria of Negro Art" are not found exclusively in the contingencies of the debate about the Harlem Renaissance. "Criteria of Negro Art" also reflects a shift in Du Bois's political strategy, a change that started during the mid-1920s. Before, Du Bois had understood art, literature, and culture both as an end in itself and as part of a multifaceted political program, whose realization was based on the construction of a black public image, and the engagement of a wide interracial audience. After World War I, as Du Bois struggled to see his political strategy succeed and searched for a solution, his commitment to interracial diplomacy gradually shifted and so did his ideas on artistic expression. This study will analyze how Du Bois employed his editorial role to address both his white and black readers, and thus will look at his 1926 statement on artistic expression as a turning point in Du Bois's thought, connected to his elaborate rhetoric and evolving political strategy. In particular, three aspects will be analyzed: Du Bois's editorial project and position within the NAACP, his political program for African Americans, and the connection between art and rhetoric, both of which he used to construct a positive black public image for political purposes in the historical context of the 1910s and 1920s.

1 Du Bois, *The Crisis* and His Political Program for Racial Equality

Du Bois's role as editor of *The Crisis* is central to understanding the connection between art and politics, and between artistic expression and rhetoric in the development of his political program. Du Bois contributed to establishing the magazine in 1910, one year after the founding of the NAACP, and became its only editor after a few years.¹¹ In 24 years of Du Bois's editorship, the NAACP's magazine reached a wide circulation, and hosted several articles penned by black and white progressive intellectuals, from social worker and NAACP co-founder Jane Addams to poet and writer Langston Hughes.¹² From the very beginning, Du Bois fought within the NAACP to ensure his editorial autonomy, and his strong personal imprint on the magazine emerges from the very first issue, as he penned *The Crisis* manifesto. The document clearly stated the moral and political mission of *The Crisis* and its editor's, by advocating for

the rights of men, irrespective of color or race, for the highest ideals of American democracy, and for reasonable but earnest and persistent attempt to gain these rights and realize these ideals.¹³

As Daniel Levering Lewis's biographical work has detailed, *The Crisis* was mostly shaped as Du Bois's own personal project, and became a public platform for its editor's ideas on African-American culture and politics.¹⁴ Du Bois's stubbornness and provocative arguments often put him at odds with the board of the NAACP, and eventually prompted him to leave the association and the magazine.¹⁵

⁹ Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*; Alessandra Lorini, "The Spell of Africa is Upon Me': W.E.B. Du Bois's Notion of Art as Propaganda," in *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking back at the Harlem Renaissance*, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 159–76.

¹⁰ Posnock, "The Distinction of Du Bois," 520–1.

¹¹ Daniel Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois. Biography of a race, 1868-1919*, 466–500.

¹² Elliott M. Rudwick, "W. E. B. Du Bois in the Role of Crisis Editor," *The Journal of Negro History*, 43 (1958): 214–40.

¹³ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Crisis," *The Crisis*, 1 (1910): 10.

¹⁴ Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois, 1868-1919*, 466–500.

¹⁵ Elliot M. Rudwick, "Du Bois' Last Year as Crisis Editor," *The Journal of Negro Education*, 27 (1958): 529–31; Raymond Wolters, *Du Bois and His Rivals* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 78; Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois, 1868-1919*, 477.

Specifically, after the market crash of 1929 *The Crisis* hosted a lengthy debate on Communism, while urging its readers to embrace a "new racial philosophy."¹⁶ In 1934, Du Bois was in open conflict with the association, and—in an extreme attempt to raise a discussion within the ranks of the NAACP—he publicly advocated for auto-segregation as the only feasible way to both preserve the dignity of black culture and safeguard the African Americans' economic interest during the Great Depression.¹⁷ However, until he started questioning the association's political strategy in the second half of the 1920s, Du Bois's outlook was mostly similar to the NAACP's, and it included unconditional opposition to racial separation and a strong commitment to interracial dialogue and federal intervention. The magazine then became a powerful weapon in putting forward this agenda, but it also retained its editor's personal take on the matter. For this reason, *The Crisis* is an essential source to trace the evolution of Du Bois's thought and examine his ability to adapt his rhetoric and theoretical arguments to the contingencies of the moment.

As he had stated in *The Souls of Black Folk*, one of Du Bois's cultural and political dilemmas was to find a way for African Americans both to retain pride in their blackness and to be recognized as full citizens of the United States. "He [the American Negro] would not Africanize America," Du Bois wrote in 1903,

for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.¹⁸

On one hand, Du Bois's lifelong commitment to reconcile the aspects of the "double consciousness" resulted in an attempt to redefine the concept of blackness (and of whiteness by contrast), by celebrating black culture and constructing a nationwide, positive, and unifying black identity. On the other, it meant exposing racial prejudice—and its practical consequences—as a powerful tool of social control and domination, and as a means of political exclusion.¹⁹ Until the second half of the 1920s, the cornerstone of Du Bois's political strategy is explained by the concept of "cosmopolitan patriotism." Historian Jonathan Hansen has used this expression to describe a heterogeneous group of progressive intellectuals, such as Jane Addams, socialist union leader and presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, and Du Bois himself, who tried to push the boundaries of liberalism between 1890 and 1920, by challenging the link between liberalism and laissez-faire theories about economics and social regulation. During this period, social reform was widely discussed, and it was ultimately made possible through the growth of the role of the federal government.²⁰ This was also a moment when the concepts of whiteness and citizenship were under revision. The arrival of millions of migrants from southern and eastern Europe pushed the boundaries of what being "white" meant, but ultimately prompted a series of immigration reforms, which employed a quota system based on ethnic and racial hierarchies.²¹ In the 1920s, Du Bois was increasingly influenced by these changes, as well as by the lack of recognition reserved to black troops who fought in World War I, and by the absence of federal commitment to racial equality. The latter aspect was especially reflected in the never-ending stalling of the anti-lynching bill in Congress, despite the numerous campaigns launched by the NAACP and other activists in favor of its passage.²²

¹⁶ Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois, 1919-1963*, 265; W.E.B. Du Bois, "Toward a New Racial Philosophy," *The Crisis*, 40 (1933): 20–2.

¹⁷ See for example W.E.B. Du Bois, "Segregation," *The Crisis*, 41 (1934): 20.

¹⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Rockville, 2008, 1st ed. 1903), 12–3.

¹⁹ See for example W.E.B. Du Bois, "Logic," *The Crisis*, 6 (1913): 81.

²⁰ Jonathan M. Hansen, *The Lost Promise of Patriotism: Debating American Identity, 1890–1920*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), i–xxii.

²¹ See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color. European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival. Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²² See Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1900-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980);

Even though it started to diminish after World War I, Du Bois's commitment to cosmopolitan patriotism is visible at least until 1925, and is traceable through his writings in *The Crisis*. As a cosmopolitan patriot, Du Bois celebrated "individual autonomy and cultural diversity," while exhorting "Americans to embrace a social-democratic ethic that reflected the interconnected and mutually dependent nature of life in the modern world." Firmly believing that "Americans could best secure the blessings of liberty and property by ensuring their universal distribution," Du Bois openly advocated for federal support to public education, as well as federal intervention against racial segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching.²³ However, as much as Du Bois believed in the right to equal opportunity and universal access to citizenship, for example by supporting the women's right to vote, he was—very practically—aware that a broad political alliance was needed in order to push the federal government to take a stand in favor of African Americans. During the 1910s and 1920s, the majority of African Americans held no political power where segregation was institutional, a situation only slightly improved by the increasing numbers of African Americans living in northern cities during the Great Migration.²⁴ Hence, Du Bois used his editorship of *The Crisis* to build an interracial dialogue on political and civil rights, and to construct a wider political alliance, composed of other discriminated groups and northern liberal whites. In order to achieve this goal, he employed an elaborate rhetoric, which encompassed a variety of political and social issues—like distribution of taxation and Congress representation—and linked them directly with the fight against racial prejudice.

2 Black Artistic Expression as a Multilayered Political Discourse

In the context of Du Bois's editorship of *The Crisis*, artistic representation of black subjects emerges as instrumental to his political program for racial equality. At a time when African Americans were rarely featured in mainstream magazines—and when they were it was often in racist terms—promoting a black art was more than just a way to build a strong cultural identity for African Americans.²⁵ In Du Bois's view, reaffirming the dignity of African Americans as artistic subjects was also a powerful political weapon. It was a means to reinforce their public image as both citizens and individuals in the eyes of the American nation, while directly challenging the power relationship implicated by the concepts of blackness and whiteness regarding access to citizenship. Through *The Crisis*, artistic expression was theorized and employed to dignify the image of African Americans as humans, and their contribution to society and history.

During this period, Du Bois's belief in the political significance of art and his commitment to interracial dialogue is well represented by his pageant *The Star of Ethiopia*. Written between 1911 and 1913, *The Star of Ethiopia* debuted at the New York Emancipation Exposition, set to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Even though staged only four times between 1913 and 1923, the pageant was widely publicized in *The Crisis*, and Du Bois used it to explain his views about the political role of art. Written with the purpose of celebrating "the gifts of black men to this world,"²⁶ *The Star of Ethiopia* implicitly expressed "Du Bois's concept of art as propaganda—that is, an art conveying a message of racial uplifting and equality."²⁷ The dual and equally important cultural and political role artistic expression occupied in Du Bois's thought is summarized in a 1916 article in

Sarah Silkey, *Black Woman Reformer: Ida B. Wells, Lynching, and Transatlantic Activism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

²³ Hansen, *The Lost Promise of Patriotism*, xiv.

²⁴ See Alferdteen Harrison, ed., *Black Exodus: The Great Migration of from the American South* (Jackson, MS, 1991); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet. Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

²⁵ Jenny Woodley, *Art for Equality*, 63; Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 2.

²⁶ In 1913, *The Star of Ethiopia* was published under the title *The People of Peoples and Their Gift to Men*. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The People of Peoples and Their Gifts to Men," *The Crisis*, 7 (1913): 339. See also Rebecca Hewett, "'Looking at One's Self through the Eyes of Others': Representations of the Progressive Era Middle Class in W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Star of Ethiopia*," *Theatre History Studies*, 30 (2010): 187–201.

²⁷ Lorini, "The Spell of Africa is upon me," 167.

The Crisis titled "The Drama among Black Folk." In this text, Du Bois referred to *The Star of Ethiopia* as a demonstration that "pageantry among colored people is not only possible, but in many ways of unsurpassed beauty and can be made a means of uplift and education ..."²⁸

On one hand, Du Bois thought that *The Star of Ethiopia* showed his commitment to the development of an authentic black art, consecrated to an original ideal of "beauty" not conforming to white standards. On the other, by showing that people of African descent could be both artists and artistic subjects, as well as agents—and not merely objects—of history, *The Star of Ethiopia* was bound to reinstate the African Americans' role in Western civilization and, thus, to legitimate their claims to equal citizenship. On this last matter, the people who needed to be "educated" were the white readers of *The Crisis*.

"We should set the black man before the world as both a creative artist and a strong subject for artistic treatment," Du Bois wrote in an article in *The Crisis* titled "The Immediate Program of the American Negro," as he listed artistic development alongside the fight for political and civil rights.²⁹ The editor also emphasized the need to "bring into closer contact and mutual knowledge the white and black people of this land" and, thus, to fight prejudice with direct knowledge.³⁰ It is no coincidence that this piece was published in 1915, only a few months after D. W. Griffith's transposition of Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* was released, prompting the Ku Klux Klan to be refounded in its wake. Set during the Civil War and Reconstruction, *The Birth of a Nation* highly glamorized the KKK, and it featured actors in blackface who played the African-American characters.³¹ Most of all, the movie reiterated the widely accepted idea that Reconstruction represented "a tragic time when white Southern rights were compromised by a corrupt and overbearing federal government supported by the votes of African Americans who were ignorant and easily manipulated."³² The NAACP launched a boycott campaign against the movie, but *The Birth of a Nation* was a huge cinematic success and was the first full-length movie to be screened at the White House.³³ In this context, if art and literature painted a multifaceted image of African-American society and culture, Du Bois thought, they also served as a means to strengthen an interracial alliance and advance the cause of civil rights.

3 Defying Stereotypes through a Black Public Image: The Political Link between Art and Rhetoric

Du Bois's interpretation of art as a multilayered discourse is directly reflected in his elaborate use of rhetoric to describe African Americans as fit for citizenship and reclaim their space in the history of the modern nation. This is evident in Du Bois's non-fiction writings, and especially in his historical studies on the Reconstruction period. Du Bois's first contribution on Reconstruction was published in the *American Historical Review* in 1911, after being presented as a paper in 1909. In this article, titled "Reconstruction and its Benefits," Du Bois stressed the positive influence freedmen had on Southern administrations before Jim Crow laws were passed. In particular, Du Bois's article stated that:

We may recognize three things which negro rule gave to the South:

1. Democratic government.
2. Free public schools.

²⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Drama among Black Folk," *The Crisis*, 12 (1916): 173.

²⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Immediate Program of the American Negro," *The Crisis*, 9 (1915): 312.

³⁰ Du Bois, "The Immediate Program," 311.

³¹ Michael Rogin, "The Sword Became a Flashing Vision: D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation," in *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith Director*, ed. Robert Lang, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 250–93.

³² James M. Campbell and Rebecca J. Fraser, "Introduction," in *Reconstruction: Peoples and Perspectives*, James M. Campbell and Rebecca J. Fraser (eds.), (Santa Barbara, CA, 2008), xix. About Reconstruction, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2011, 1st ed. 1988).

³³ Rogin, "The Sword became a Flashing Vision," 240.

3. New social legislation.³⁴

As this passage suggests, Du Bois's analysis of Reconstruction provided several arguments in favor of his political program for racial equality. It stated the African Americans' fitness for citizenship, rectified their role in US history, and demonstrated the positive impact a direct federal intervention could have in guaranteeing equal rights for African Americans. As we have seen, Du Bois's studies challenged the mainstream narration about Reconstruction, which provided cultural and political legitimacy for White Supremacy. Since Du Bois meant to widen the support for civil rights along the color line, Reconstruction became a recurring theme in his writings in *The Crisis*.³⁵

That Du Bois was committed to constructing a positive black public image, necessary to engage an interracial audience, emerges clearly also if we look at the issue of racial responsibility. Through his editorship of *The Crisis*, Du Bois used the concept of racial responsibility to inspire his African-American readers to undertake the task of "uplifting the race," while at the same time assessing their dignity as individuals. As he had stated in his 1903 article on the "Talented Tenth," Du Bois sustained the need to develop an African-American elite to lead the fight for racial equality, and *The Crisis* reflected this idea.³⁶ The magazine hosted a page entirely dedicated to the "Talented Tenth," and achievements by African-American citizens were celebrated as accomplishments and sources of inspiration for the entire racial group.³⁷ As we have seen before, Du Bois referred to *The Star of Ethiopia*, and to artistic expression in general, in the same terms. As historian Kevin Gaines has noted, this was part of Du Bois's struggle to reconcile citizenship with blackness and "to transform a pejorative concept of race into an affirming vision of cultural distinctiveness."³⁸

However, the notion of racial responsibility had also been historically problematic, since it was used in the public discourse to support negative stereotypes about African Americans. The concept was deeply entangled with pseudo-scientific theories about the biological inferiority of non-white racial groups, their tendency for abnormal behavior, and their unfitness for citizenship.³⁹ In this context, Du Bois did not dismiss the notion of racial responsibility altogether, but he challenged its negative outcomes.⁴⁰ The magazine featured several articles on this topic, and presented scientific evidence to dispute the existence of racial hierarchies.⁴¹ Du Bois also made extensive use of visual references to stress his point. A notable example is a cartoon drawn by the African-American artist Lorenzo Harris and picked by Du Bois for the June 1913 issue. In the picture, titled *American Logic*, one finely dressed white man stands next to a "rough-looking white hoodlum."⁴² On the left, two black men stand next to each other, mirroring the two white men on the other side of the picture. The caption below the two whites reads: "THIS MAN [referring to the finely-dressed man] is not responsible for THIS MAN even if they do belong to the same race." By contrast, the caption below the two black

³⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Reconstruction and its Benefits," *The American Historical Review*, 15 (1910): 795.

³⁵ See for example W.E.B. Du Bois, "Social Equality," *The Crisis*, 12 (1916): 30. Du Bois also referred to his political program as a "coming Reconstruction." W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Ballot," *The Crisis*, 17 (1918): 62. In 1935, Du Bois published his major work about Reconstruction, *Black Reconstruction*. See W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 2011, 1st ed. 1935).

³⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem*, ed. Booker T. Washington, (Redford, VA, 2008, 1st ed. 1903), 11–25; NAACP, "Sixth Annual Report, 1915, § 12: The Talented Tenth," *The Crisis*, 11 (1916): 254.

³⁷ Furthermore, Du Bois's own purpose as editor was to contribute to the education of the *Talented Tenth* of the future, and *The Crisis* published special issues dedicated to children. See *The Crisis*, 4 (1912): 261–312.

³⁸ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Du Bois's work as a sociologist in Atlanta in the early 1900s played a major part in challenging scientific arguments about racial inferiority. See Michael Yudell, *Race Unmasked: Biology and Race in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014): 95–109; Aldon D. Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

⁴¹ Franz Boas, "The Real Race Problem," *The Crisis*, 1 (1910): 22–23; W.E.B. Du Bois, "Races," *The Crisis*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Aug., 1911): 157–8; W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Macon Telegraph," *The Crisis*, 19 (1920): 110–1.

⁴² Kirschke, *Art in Crisis*, 168.

figures says: "THIS MAN is responsible for all that THIS MAN does because they belong to the same race."⁴³

In order to capture the attention of his white audience, mainly based in the North, Du Bois did not limit himself to criticizing stereotypes about African Americans, but he designed some of his own. In opposition to the vilified honest black citizen, Du Bois placed the trope of the unlawful white citizen of the South, and thus challenged the link between whiteness and fitness for citizenship. In many of his writings for *The Crisis*, he confronted racial segregation and disfranchisement of African Americans by describing white Southern citizens and their state administrations as corrupt and disrespectful of the law.⁴⁴ This was the case with a series of articles written between 1911 and 1920, in which Du Bois challenged the widespread idea that white taxpayers' money funded schools and services for African Americans. In order to prove his point, Du Bois published data showing irregularities in how tax expenditures were calculated, thus invalidating the economic argument used by state and county administrations to justify poor quality services for African Americans in the South.⁴⁵ In some cases, Du Bois sustained that African-American taxpayers were the ones who funded the same schools and facilities they were barred from attending, because of Jim Crow legislation.⁴⁶

The pejorative stereotype about white Southern citizens was employed at length in Du Bois's editorials on lynching as well as in his writings about disfranchisement. In particular, Du Bois's rhetoric about white Southern citizens and administrations portrayed the segregated South as a threat to the whole democratic system of the United States. Du Bois argued that since the distribution of representatives per state was calculated according to the total number of citizens, the disfranchisement of African Americans allowed white Southern voters to proportionally elect more representatives than the average per citizen. He often gave detailed accounts on how this disproportion affected the balance of power on the federal level.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Du Bois argued, the de facto one-party system in the South affected the balance of power in the Senate, because white Southern Democrats were certain to be elected and most of them were able to hold office for more terms than the average congressional representative.⁴⁸ This argument was presented to appeal to a wider interracial audience, and thus to cement an alliance between African-American citizens and white northern citizens in favor of federal intervention.

The campaign Du Bois conducted at the end of the 1910s in support of women's suffrage represents another fundamental example of how he made use of his rhetorical skills to construct a wide political alliance. Du Bois, as many scholars have confirmed, genuinely supported votes for women as part of a cosmopolitan democratic project "which knows no race or sex."⁴⁹ In his articles in *The Crisis*, however, Du Bois's arguments in favor of women's suffrage also served as a means to attract support for civil and political rights for African Americans. Firstly, Du Bois tried to unite the supporters of the two causes by comparing women's struggle for suffrage to the struggle against the disfranchisement of African Americans.⁵⁰ Secondly, he tried to convince his African-American readers that their backing of women's suffrage could reopen the "discussion of the right of black folk to vote in America,"

⁴³ Lorenzo Harris, "American Logic," *The Crisis*, 6 (1913): 80.

⁴⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Sterling Discrimination Bill," *The Crisis*, 27 (1924): 200.

⁴⁵ See W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Cost of Education," *The Crisis*, 3 (1911): 69; W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Macon Telegraph," 19 (1920): 110-1.

⁴⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Taxation Without Representation plus Theft," *The Crisis*, 7 (1914): 240.

⁴⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The South and the Saddle," *The Crisis*, 7 (1914): 188. See also W.E.B. Du Bois, "Disfranchisement," *The Crisis*, 27 (1923): 9.

⁴⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The White Primary," *The Crisis*, 1 (1911): 20.

⁴⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Woman's Suffrage," *The Crisis*, 6 (1913): 29. In another occasion, Du Bois had described the struggle for woman's suffrage as a "great human question". W.E.B. Du Bois, "Votes for Women," *The Crisis*, 4 (1912): 234. See also: Garth E. Pauley, "W.E.B. Du Bois on Woman Suffrage: A Critical Analysis of His Crisis Writings," *Journal of Black Studies*, 30 (2000): 406; Amy Helene Kirschke, "DuBois And 'The Crisis' Magazine. Imaging Women And Family," *Notes in the History of Art*, 24 (2005): 40.

⁵⁰ He was not the only NAACP member who wanted these two issues united: for example, *the Crisis* hosted articles on this topic penned by Jane Addams. See Jane Addams, "Social Control," *The Crisis*, 1 (1911): 22-3.

and implicated that their public image could benefit from their support for women's right to vote.⁵¹ Finally, Du Bois used the trope of the undemocratic and unlawful Southern state administrations both to associate the two causes and to stress the need for federal intervention. These rhetorical connections are summarized in the October 1920 editorial of *The Crisis*, published to celebrate the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment. "Who oppose Woman Suffrage?" Du Bois asked his readers, before concluding:

With but few exceptions those states which oppose ... universal education; those which advocate and practice lynching, mob violence and government by minority. These states are:

Alabama Virginia

Georgia Maryland

Mississippi Delaware

South Carolina North Carolina

Louisiana.⁵²

After the victory represented by women's suffrage, Du Bois initially hoped that, if the federal sphere could successfully challenge the link between masculinity and citizenship, it could also intervene in favor of African Americans. It became increasingly clear that this was not the case, and Du Bois's commitment to cosmopolitan patriotism faltered. Du Bois's uncertainty was deeply influenced by a profound change of public opinion about social reform and citizenship, a shift that started after World War I. The Progressive Era had brought an array of reform possibilities and "economic, social and political regulations [were] adopted, new public services were offered, and the management of national resources expanded."⁵³ After the Russian Revolution, with the surge in nationalism due to the war and the return of black troops, the United States faced a period of sharp social and political conflicts, against "the Reds," foreigners, and African Americans. This political unrest influenced federal legislation during the 1920s, e.g., immigration restriction, and had immediate violent consequences, such as the race riots of the "Red Summer" of 1919.⁵⁴ In 1918, Du Bois had sustained that the support of African Americans for the war would have been essential to their recognition as citizens.⁵⁵ For these declarations, he had already faced severe backlash within the African-American community.⁵⁶ When, after the war, the results he expected did not materialize, Du Bois had to confront his own disappointment. As the immigration quota system of 1924 paved the way to the future inclusion of European migrants as white citizens, the shifting concept of whiteness continued to be associated with citizenship and defined in opposition to African Americans.⁵⁷ By the second half of the decade, the enduring Jim Crow system, the Congressional halt to the anti-lynching bill, and the increase in cases of school segregation in the North made it increasingly clear to Du Bois that he but also the NAACP needed to change their strategy, and rethink the connection between citizenship, identity, and the public image of African Americans.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Du Bois, "Votes for Women," 234.

⁵² W.E.B. Du Bois, "Triumph," *The Crisis*, 20 (1920): 261.

⁵³ Ballard C. Campbell, *The Growth of American Government. Governance from the Cleveland Era to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 4. See also Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967).

⁵⁴ # Daria Frezza, *The Leader and the Crowd Democracy in American Public Discourse, 1880-1941* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010, 1st Italian Ed. 2001), 136.

⁵⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks," *The Crisis*, 16 (1918): 111.

⁵⁶ Mark Ellis, "'Closing Ranks' and 'Seeking Honors': W. E. B. Du Bois in World War I," *The Journal of American History*, 79 (1992): 96-124.

⁵⁷ See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness. Race and the Making of American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*.

⁵⁸ See Eugene F. Provenzo Jr., "Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?," in *Du Bois on Education*, Eugene F. Provenzo Jr. (ed.), (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2002), 133-34; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002, 1st ed. 1940), 264; James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 266-7.

4 Forging a New Political Alliance through Artistic Expression: Du Bois's Criteria of Negro Art

As Du Bois looked for a new political strategy, his ideas about artistic expression as a way to bridge the gap between black and white Americans changed as well. This emerges clearly if we look at his rhetoric about art as propaganda. As Daria Frezza has noted, the war boosted the debate about the negative use of propaganda by enemy forces. After the end of the conflict, propaganda was discussed in popular magazines, and the word "came to have a substantially negative meaning that included the diffusion of false and misleading news, similar to the appeals put out by the enemy powers."⁵⁹ In 1921, Du Bois confronted the topic head-on, and penned an editorial with the purpose of distancing African-American artistic expression from a pejorative notion of propaganda. "Negro art is today plowing a difficult row," Du Bois wrote,

chiefly because we shrink at the portrayal of the truth about ourselves. We are so used to seeing the truth distorted to our despite, that whenever we are portrayed on canvas, in story or on the stage, as simply human with human frailties, we rebel. We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one. This is wrong and in the end it is harmful. We have a right, in our effort to get just treatment, to insist that we produce something of the best in human character and that it is unfair to judge us by our criminals and prostitutes. This is justifiable propaganda. On the other hand we face the Truth of Art. We have criminals and prostitutes, ignorant and debased elements just as all folk have. When the artist paints us he has a right to paint us whole and not ignore everything which is not as perfect as we would wish it to be.⁶⁰

In this editorial, Du Bois tried to distinguish between a "positive" propaganda, that is a truthful portrayal of African-American society, and a "negative" propaganda, which was harmful, because it was partial and misleading. Even though there was a first attempt to reconceptualize the word "propaganda," the tone of the article profoundly differs from "Criteria of Negro Art." By advocating for a realistic and diverse representation of African-American society, Du Bois was still tied to the ideas he expressed in *The Immediate Program of the American Negro*, about the need of increasing interracial contacts and improving the dialogue between the two races.

Notwithstanding Du Bois's efforts, the use of the word "propaganda" as a pejorative term spilled into the debate about the Harlem Renaissance, and it served as a weapon to discredit a part of the movement. By the mid-1920s, as Watts put it,

Harlem artists who dared to paint images of dignified racial difference were branded as 'propagandists' precisely because their stories undermined or indicted (racist) conventional wisdom promoted by 'pure art.'⁶¹

In this context, it is correct to say that Du Bois's sharp language and his use of the word "propaganda" in "Criteria of Negro Art" were a direct response to what he perceived to be dangerous drifts of the movement. Specifically, in January 1926 Du Bois warned Alain Locke that his commitment to "a search of disembodied beauty" devoid of political purpose was detrimental to cultural advancement as well as political attainments for African Americans. He added that, if Locke's thesis was "insisted too much," it was going to "turn the Negro renaissance into decadence."⁶² The editor of *The Crisis* was also critical of the depiction some artists of the Harlem Renaissance gave of African-American neighborhoods, because he thought that they merely confirmed racist prejudices and catered exclusively to

⁵⁹ Frezza, *The Leader and the Crowd*, 126.

⁶⁰ Du Bois, "Negro Art," 55.

⁶¹ Watts, "Cultivating a Black Public Voice," 182.

⁶² W.E.B. Du Bois, "The New Negro," *The Crisis*, 31, (1926): 141.

a white audience. This issue is evident in the negative reviews Du Bois wrote about Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* in 1926 and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* in 1928.⁶³

Nonetheless, when Du Bois penned "Criteria of Negro Art," it is highly unlikely that he was unaware of the wider public debate surrounding the word "propaganda" in the 1920s. Even if, as Ross Posnock has argued, Du Bois was trying to change the meaning of the term "propaganda" to get rid of its negative implications, he knew that the language he used to appropriate the word was going to have a shocking effect on his audience. As someone who had always constructed his arguments with care and used elaborate rhetoric to engage in a multilayered discourse about race, citizenship, and identity, it seems simplistic to sustain that Du Bois did not expect to be misunderstood at least by a part of his audience. This was especially true for the ones not directly involved in the debate about the Harlem Renaissance. If we look at an article like "Criteria of Negro Art" from this point of view, his 1926 speech says as much about Du Bois's position within the Harlem Renaissance as it does about his changing political plan for African Americans and its consequent rhetoric. Until then, Du Bois's political program included engaging with a wide interracial audience and building a positive public image of African Americans, in order to draw action from the federal government. Even when he advocated for freedom and truth in art, Du Bois did so partly because he hoped that an honest depiction of the daily lives of African Americans could help to tear down racial barriers. As we have seen before, Du Bois had always supported African-American artists, and encouraged them to feature black subjects in their work. Du Bois's commitment to interracial dialogue never meant that his white audience had a say in what black art should be about. They could, though, participate in its beauty and, through it, improve their understanding of African-American culture and society. Hopefully, this knowledge would foster their support for civil rights.

What changed after 1926 was that, as the political climate shifted, art assumed a different political purpose: forging a pact of political alliance solely among African-American citizens. Just a month after he pronounced his speech, and before its publication as "Criteria of Negro Art," Du Bois published the manifesto of the Crisis Guild for Writers and Artists (KRIGWA). First founded in 1924, this group called for a new black artistic production catering exclusively to an African-American audience.⁶⁴ Its message excluded, then, the white audience who had been part of the readership of *The Crisis* and of the NAACP from the founding of the Association. "The plays," it stated,

must be: 1. *About us*. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. *By us*. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. *For us*. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. *Near us*. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.⁶⁵

This detachment from the magazine's previous editorial policy was increasingly reflected in Du Bois's writings concerning education, lynching as well as federal elections, and it finally reached a peak in the 1930s, when Du Bois put forward his new political strategy.⁶⁶ As Joy Carew has noted, since the mid-1920s Du Bois increasingly dedicated himself to the study of Marx, and he took his first trip to Soviet Russia in 1926.⁶⁷ The editor gave a positive account of his journey in *The Crisis*, whereas he

⁶³ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Books," *The Crisis*, 32 (1926): 81–2; W.E.B. Du Bois, "Two Books," *The Crisis*, 35 (1928): 202.

⁶⁴ Ethel Pitts Walker, "Krigwa, a Theatre by, for, and about Black People," *Theatre Journal*, 40 (1988): 347–56.

⁶⁵ "'Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre'. The Story of a Little Theatre Movement," *The Crisis*, 32 (1926): 134.

⁶⁶ In a 1933 article, with which he presented his new program for economic self-help and black education, Du Bois looked back to the Harlem Renaissance and described it as "a literature written for the benefit of white people and at the behest of white readers, and starting out privately from the white point of view. It never had a real Negro constituency and it did not grow out of the inmost heart and frank experience of Negroes; on such an artificial basis no real literature can grow". W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Negro College," *The Crisis*, 40 (1933): 176. See also: Du Bois, "Toward a New Racial Philosophy," 20–2.

⁶⁷ Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 49–64.

had expressed skepticism towards the Russian political experiment in the first half of the 1920s.⁶⁸ "I stand in astonishment and wonder at the revelation of Russia that has come to me," he stated in his November 1926 editorial:

I may be partially deceived and half-informed. But if what I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my ears in Russia is Bolshevism, I am a Bolshevik.⁶⁹

Just two years after "Criteria of Negro Art" appeared in *The Crisis*, Du Bois admitted the failure of his political program in a two-part article titled "The Possibility of Democracy in America,"

For several years after the World War I used to talk concerning the results of the War, and to say that notwithstanding the slaughter and the upheaval that always accompany war we were going to have in the world an extension of democracy as a result of the fighting But I write today to apologize and change my thesis. I was wrong in what I was predicting. I see today without any doubt that instead of the great question of democracy being an extension of democratic control into further territory, the problem that faces us in America and faces the world is the question as to whether we can keep the territory which we thought democracy had already conquered; ... here in the United States, here where we have essayed the greatest experience in democracy, we have perhaps the greatest failure.⁷⁰

In the same issue of *The Crisis*, he called for a protest vote in the next federal election.⁷¹ By the turn of the decade, Du Bois's disenchantment towards a federal strategy was strengthened by the economic crisis, and it became evident as he started advocating for self-help and grew weary of the NAACP, finally leaving his editorial position in 1934.⁷² However, Du Bois's work for *The Crisis* reveals that his political position started shifting before the 1930s and that this change is closely linked to Du Bois's views on artistic production as a means to strengthen the public image of African Americans. From this point of view, the multilateral nature of Du Bois's rhetoric—carefully adapted by the editor to the contingencies of the moment—opens up many research possibilities about the wider political implications of cultural production in black political thought. Specifically, a focus on the relationship between African-American public intellectuals and their audience, the composition of this audience, and its evolution over time and geographical context can provide useful insights into the public discourse about black identity, citizenship, and representation, especially during the pre-Civil Rights era.

⁶⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Negro and Radical Thought," *The Crisis*, 22 (1921): 104; W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Class Struggle," *The Crisis*, 22 (1921): 151; W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Spread of Socialism," *The Crisis*, 22 (1921): 199–200. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Socialism and The Negro," *The Crisis*, 22 (1921): 245; W.E.B. Du Bois, "The World and Us," *The Crisis*, 23 (1922): 247. See also: Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois, 1919–1963*, 195–6.

⁶⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Russia, 1926," *The Crisis*, 33 (1926): 8.

⁷⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Possibility of Democracy in America," *The Crisis*, 35 (1928): 336.

⁷¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "How Shall We Vote?," *The Crisis*, 35 (1928): 346.

⁷² W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Negro College," 175–7; W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Right to Work," *The Crisis*, 40 (1933): 93–4. On black unemployment during the Depression, see William A. Sundstrom, "Last Hired, First Fired? Unemployment and Urban Black Workers During the Great Depression," *The Journal of Economic History*, 52 (1992): 415–29.

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