

EDLI 7833 Culture and Critical Theory

Du Bois, W. (2004). *The souls of black folk*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Critical Commentary (pages 1-40)

My reading of this text occurs during my first trip to Washington DC since I was a child. I was raised on the East Coast, and grew up during the very turbulent 1960's, where racial tension was a part of life for someone growing up in New Jersey. I have lived with what Du Bois calls the "color line" and as I read this first passage of his book, I am in the backdrop of the legacy and memory of other groups who felt their collective voices were silenced.

As I walk through the memorial of the Vietnam War, I am reminded of those people I knew growing up – black and white – that didn't have a voice as to whether or not they fought in a war they had no "ownership" of. Mothers were robbed of their sons, just as Du Bois described (chapter one), wives pried away from husbands, children who never knew their daddies. Some men returned in boxes...with a letter attesting to their bravery in battle and how those at home can bury them, living forever with the memory of a little boy's heroism. Other's came back so horribly handicapped by the horrors of war that nothing in life could go on as before. If there was peace, it was never again going to be in their lives. Once of my middle school teachers had just returned from service and would duck for cover when he heard helicopters overhead. In the end, did any of these people have a voice? Did the champions who embodied their cause affect change, or were their protests as dust in the wind?

A little later my explorations took me to the Holocaust Museum. There is the archival evidence for an entire race of people who had their voice extricated as if to steal one's own soul. The Jews were as anyone else: hardworking...loved their families and their God...productive members of society. In what seemed to be an instant, the actions of one lunatic changed the Jews' day into night. No longer could these people own property, marry outside their race, or even be considered citizens of the country they resided in. Initially they were able to flee the oppression but ultimately, they were marched off to "camps" where their hair was shorn, their gold removed from their teeth, and their bodies dismembered for experiments as if recycling parts of an automobile. Who embodied their collective voice? Who demanded the person responsible be held accountable? The entire world turned its head, even though it knew of the atrocities, until the carnage had become so global that it could no longer be ignored.

When I look at the imposing statue of Abraham Lincoln and read the words he spoke on that fateful day in Gettysburg, I realize that cause Du Bois embodied had many voices-many champions who were in a position to verbalize the injustices of slavery and it's aftermath. In reading of Du Bois's history in the forward, he is connected to the plight of the black man seemingly only by color; he was raised as a free man in the north, well traveled, and had an academic pedigree that would be the envy of a man of any color. Any parent would be sympathetic to Du Bois's loss of this firstborn son, but how many children of all colors suffer that same fate *today* because of either a lack of health care, or procedures that health insurers refuse to cover? Is that any less prejudicial? If anyone had a legacy that was similar to those he sought to liberate, it was Lincoln; born poor, lost his mother at an early age,

lived in poverty and self-taught, thanks to the graces of his school-teacher stepmother, who taught him to read. Men such as Du Bois and Booker T. Washington (who is described in an almost condescending fashion in the book) were champions *after* the fact; it was Lincoln and others who were the collective voice of a people living in oppression.

In summary, the reading doesn't oppose my views as much as it reinforces my conviction that the "color line" was no bigger an issue in society as "The Jewish Question," The Vietnam Conflict, or even the issues my own Italian-American immigrant family had to face when they came to this country through Ellis Island in 1902. On the walls of the Holocaust Museum are these words written by Elie Wiesel, Nobel laureate and Auschwitz survivor:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night (in camp), which turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never.

Couldn't this same description of agonizing pain have been the memoirs of a slave? Freedom is a process, made more vocal by those who embody the cause and by those who are willing to cry out for justice, no matter the cost. The goal for all of us should be to leave society in a better state than we found it, and to not compromise our ideals and the rights of others in the process. Thankfully, Du Bois, Washington and others were articulate voices in a time of great struggle and their efforts raised the awareness necessary to address the injustice, even if the process is still incomplete.