The Digital Construction of the Color Line: A DuBoisian Sociology of Black America in the 21st Century

Tressie McMillan Cottom, PhD, Virginia Commonwealth University

When W.E.B. DuBois published "The Study of Negro Problems" in 1898 he was speaking, as he put it, to "the present period in the development of sociological study" (1898:1). DuBois took U.S. sociology to task for not recognizing the opportunity staring it in the face. Namely, U.S. sociologists were at ground zero of one of the most massive moments of social change to unfold since the development of global capitalism. He was, of course, talking about the kind of natural experiment conditions about which sociologists should dream. The enslavement, forced internal and external migration, caste-ification, and eventual partial assimilation of American Negroes was an opportunity to make social scientific study *mean* something. The only way forward for sociology was through identifying and systematically examining what DuBois called the Negro problem (and what might more accurately be described as the white man's problem with the Negro). A little over 100 years later, editors Elijah Anderson and Tukufu Zuberi revisited DuBois' call for U.S. sociology to link its epistemological and empirical fate to observing the color line in the 20th century (2000). Anderson opens the special issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* by encouraging contemporary scholars to take up the spirit of DuBois' work as much, if not more than, its letter. Anderson notes that not much else is possible given that to "advance 'the study of the negro problems'" scholars must take into account how much the political economy has changed and in what ways it has not. In this paper, I take up Anderson's invitation for scholars to reimagine DuBois' work by attending to the present day transformation of social, political and economic life *as it is experienced by black Americans.* I start this massive task with a caveat: I can only advance the beginning of a research agenda and even that I cannot fully treat in one paper. Instead, I aim to do two things. First, I intend to argue that the field of sociology can no more neglect the systematic analysis of technological change as it has been enacted on and through black lives than it could credibly ignore the formerly enslaved in the 19th century. The construction of the color line in the 21st century must engage digital technologies, digitally-mediated geo politics, and technological change in economic relations. Second, I aim to sketch out a set of critical sites of inquiry related to these technological and digital social processes that are particularly critical to understanding what I will call the a DuBoisian sociology of Black America in the 21st Century. The argument advancing these two aims begins with a summary of the three characteristics of a DuBoisian sociology of black life. Next, I make the case that technology is a central social process for the organization of capital and the construction of self. Based on this, I then sketch a set of organizing themes for bridging the empirical and theoretical focus of the DuBois school of sociology to the study of social problems created by technology. These themes center black people as theory and method for examining social structure and stratification.

Three Characteristics of DuBoisian Sociology

Scholars have argued that DuBois is best understood as a school of thought and practice, what Aldon Morris calls the DuBois-Atlanta school (2015). This discursive move is important for fully parsing DuBois as more than just a man doing sociological work and to instead understand DuBois oeuvre as a system of knowledge production. With that move, we can identify what characterizes DuBoisian sociology. Given the premise of my paper (and the title), this is important. DuBoisian sociology of black life is systematic, relational, and constructive.

DuBoisian sociology is *systematic*. Like the researcher himself, this approach to knowledge production privileges empirical data, systematic observation, and mixed methods. There isn't much of a way around it: DuBoisian sociology is empirical. As evidenced in DuBois' development of data collection, use of triangulation, and copious (often beautiful, hand drawn) data visualizations, any sociological paradigm bearing his name must center empirical analysis. However, this focus on empirics should not be confused for empiricism. There is ample evidence from DuBois' writings and research that he did not espouse objective rationality so much as he valued primary data collection and reproducibility. This could be attributed to DuBois' clear interest in empire building within the discipline of sociology. Any school of thought must have a system of inquiry and reproducibility encourages attribution which develops cumulative knowledge. Practical issues of disciplinary empire aside, DuBois' commitment to empirics is also about his rejection of the racist ideology that black people's inferiority is self-evident. In challenging the evidence of "self-evident" that continue plague some corners of sociological thinking about non-white people, empirics can still matter. Empirical data must be collected systematically, increasing its validity and reliability. Systematic data observation must, within reason, be primary. DuBois put great emphasis on fieldwork. This stems from his interest in systematic analysis. Primary data may not be perfect data but knowing intimately how a data set is created is a corrective against bad analysis and conclusions. Given that DuBoisian sociology is always committed to defending the idea of black humanity, the imperative to resist faulty analysis and conclusions is particularly high.

DuBoisian sociology is *relational*. Systematic inquiry and empirical social science can replicate the hierarchies being observed (as noted by Collins, 2016) if it is not also relational. I borrow R. L'heureux Lewis-McCoy's extension of Charles Tilly's treatment of relational mechanisms that reproduce categorical inequality (2014). Lewis-McCoy argues that relational analysis resolves some of the tensions between cultural and structural explanations of racial inequality and other effects of racism. It does this by giving equal theoretical weight to how ideology shapes institutional arrangements and how those institutional arrangements, in kind, shape ideologies. This view of relational analysis focuses on studying the mechanisms by which race is constructed in any given situational context of a political economy's conditions. These mechanisms account for structural conditions as well as the lived experiences of people who resist and reproduce those conditions in their everyday interactions. For this reason, relational

analysis is well-suited to long-term analysis of which any system of knowledge production must be concerned. A relational analysis also helps us situate intersectional systems of oppression through which race operates, as has been convincingly argued for generations by black feminist theory.

Finally, DuBoisian sociology is *constructive*. When DuBois proclaimed that the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" it matters that he didn't say the problem of the 20th century is the Negro (DuBois 1903). In this famous intonation, DuBois makes clear his position that it is the social construction of race and racism that produces social stratification and its attendant social problems. "Race" was not a biological fact but a social one, constructed through economic, political, and social processes. The color line euphemistically refutes biological essentialism that naturalizes racial differences and undermines scientific inquiry of the social world. That the color line is durable does not mean that race is durable. It only means that a global system of racialized oppression has proven durable. By separating the people -- black people and by extension colonized people all over the world -- from the problem of racism and oppression, DuBois sets forth a model of systematic inquiry that does not reify the racial hierarchy.

There is a great deal to be said about DuBois and his method of social inquiry, not to mention his impact on science, policy, and letters. However, a knowledge building project requires defining characteristics specific to an identifiable domain. For the purposes of this paper, a DuBoisian sociology can be defined as a systematic and relational study of black life that observes the construction of hierarchies through observations of people and mechanisms.

Technology and the 21st Century

DuBoisian sociology, both then and now, endeavored to study social problems. Social problems is a theoretical orientation. It generally believes that the iteration of capitalist production, resource allocation and alienation produce specific but generalizable conditions that people experience as problems for political participation, stability and well-being. There is general agreement that technological change is a major social process whose production and consequences meet the definition of social problem (Castells 2011, DiMaggio 2001, Lewis-McCoy 2012, McMillan Cottom 2015, Sassen 2002). Often understand as the study of the internet, technological change is not just about the diffusion of internet technologies. It is also about how technologies shape and are shaped by modernization, global stratification and the contemporary practices of capitalism.

DuBois was concerned with the causes and consequences of industrialization. He argues that the "Negro problem" is not "one unchanged question", i.e. it isn't static and naturally occurring (1898:14). The problem of the color line then and now, "has had a long historical development, has changed with the growth and evolution of the nation; moreover, that it is not one problem but rather a plexus of social problems, some new, some old, some simple, some complex"

(1898:14). In the 19th and early 20th century industrialization was re-organizing capital flows, shifting the nature of work, shaping population patterns and defining race in terms that today seem common-sense: urban, manual labor, service work, and ghettos. Similarly, the 21st century is defined as the information transformation. Technological advancements are re-organizing capital flows, shifting the nature of work, and shaping population patterns. These subfields of study are fairly robust in the sociological literature. Less theorized and observed is something that DuBois argued was a logical consequence of structural change. Yet, here sociological work has been anemic at best. If technology is the defining force for social change in our society, it must have a consequence for how race is constructed.

Concerns for a DuBoisian Sociology of the 21st Century Color Line

DuBoisian sociology is a system of knowledge production. It has three characteristics which order its approach to that knowledge production: it is systematic, relational and constructive. Given that the color line, by definition, is contextual and contingent this framework must systematically observe, measure and theorize the relational and constructive mechanisms of technological change. In the 21st century, DuBoisian sociology would empirically construct black life through the systematic study of how technological change is creates and recreates racialized, relational processes. There are dozens of ways to observe this social problem in this framework. I will lay out two areas where DuBoisian sociology is particularly critical. I call these areas critical because they are foundational to how technology is shaping social processes and because their implications for black people are particularly immediate and dire. These two areas are: predatory inclusion and contingent work arrangements.

Predatory inclusion is the "process whereby members of a marginalized group are provided access to a good, service, or opportunity from which they have been historically excluded but under conditions that jeopardize the benefits of access" (Seamster and Charron-Chenier 2017:2). Predatory inclusion spans credit markets that now determine where people can bank, how they finance college educations, and what kinds of college educations they can finance (McMillan Cottom 2017). Modern capitalism increasingly relies on complex financial arrangement to organize every day life and people's interaction with critical institutions. This *financialization* of economic relations requires inclusion from groups historically excluded from high status rewards for several reasons. For one, rent-seeking of financial arrangements requires an indebted group. And, financialization relies heavily on data to justify and refine the numerical scoring models used to process massive amounts of financial arrangements everyday, around the world. Financialization needs the data from "bad" financial risks and it needs the profit-taking allowed for serving those bad financial risks. Technology makes this kind of identification, scoring, and inclusion efficient, scalable, and profitable (Fourcade and Healy 2013, Mader 2016). Given the historical construction of black people as the excluded groups, predatory inclusion necessarily seeks to include black people for rent-seeking and financial marginalization. DuBoisian sociology would observe how black people take-up, experience, and situationally benefit and lose in these predatory inclusion processes. Examples of this include

studying how black people, across class and status strata, experience debt, automated scoring of their data, data sharing, and data privacy. Do black people opt-in or opt-out of predatory data extraction regimes like discount cards that improve targeted financial arrangements by figuring who is and is not black? Do black people experience student loan debt differently than white or Asian people? Do black people engage in digitally-mediated financial arrangements in ways that mark them as a social problem?

On the other side of the relational process of financialization there is the issue of changes in how we work. Like DuBois, any sociology of the color line in the 21st century must consider how we work. There is a plethora of research about changes in work. Broadly, work has become more contingent, income has become spikier, and workers now shoulder more of the cost of working. Some call this the "new economy". Like the old economy, black people are systematically excluded from the high status work (Hamilton et al 2015). In the 21st century this means statistical underrepresentation in technology jobs (Brown 2014), elite service professions (Rivera 2014), and high-capital entrepreneurship (Hout and Rosen 1999). At the same time, social policy and employers have used technology to facilitate shifting the cost of things like retirement, health care and education to workers. Technology has made work more efficient and consequently made workers more vulnerable. Again, black workers are especially vulnerable to these technologically-facilitated economic conditions. And, they are systematically excluded from the limited set of market "solutions" for the problem: entrepreneurship and elite school attendance. How are black workers constructing meaningful work amidst this technological change? How are black people organizing their adoption of digital technologies to disrupt or adapt to these changes? How much of the political favor bestowed upon these technological changes to work use racialized discourse to legitimize eroding worker security? How is 21st century work underscoring the color line? These kinds of questions attend to what DuBois once said of the 19th century, "the form under which the Negro problems present themselves today" (1898:17).

Moving Forward

DuBoisian sociology can contribute critical theory, methods and analysis to the study of contemporary stratification in the information society. The attention to mechanisms and empirical data would revitalize the importance of qualitative and quantiative methods of how and to what ends groups experience technology change. The empiricial and relational focus of DuBoisian sociology holds great promise for making sense of big data but also for exploring what big data cannot tell us: how people live with and experience the micro-processes of technology change through the social construction of race. But, these opportunities alone aren't reason enough to pursue what I believe is a worthwhile intellectual project. DuBoisian sociology should not just save sociology from irrelevance in the digitally-mediated socity. Ultimately, DuBoisian sociology is concerned with black lives, in the U.S. and across the globe. For that reason, pursing a DuBoisian sociology of technology and digitality is vitally important in the 21st century.

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