

Yale, Margot. "Data Consciousness," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2025.

BROOKLYN RAIL

ARTSEEN | NOVEMBER 2025

Data Consciousness

By Margot Yale



Data Consciousness: Reframing Blackness in Contemporary Print, curated by Dr. Tiffany E. Barber for the Print Center New York, features five artists and one urbanist: Tahir Hemphill, Julia Mallory, Silas Munro, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, and William Villalongo and Shraddha Ramani. Underscoring the potential of reproductive media to produce knowledge, their expansively defined prints affirm the multivalences of Blackness and resist the statistical flattening of racial representation through recourse to the legacy of African American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois produced sixty-five modernist data visualizations of his research on Black life in the post-Reconstruction United States for the world stage of the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris. This was three years before he coined the term "double consciousness" to describe the African American experience of reconciling self-perception with the imposed identity of a prejudiced, white-dominated society. Combining big data and double consciousness, the exhibition's neologistic title bridges the historical specificity of Du Bois's infographics with our contemporary moment in which big data and its algorithms operate most often as mechanisms of racialized mass surveillance.

In the lobby, Munro's video work *Wave Time with W.E.B.* (2024–25) primes visitors by asking: is knowledge acquisition alone adequate to advance racial justice? Du Bois concedes it is not in a clip from his 1961 recorded autobiography that accompanies Munro's animation of undulating white lines across two stacked black halftoned screens. This abstraction is discordant with Du Bois's recorded admission that his "faith in knowledge as a solution of the Negro Problem was shaken," following his horrific discovery that the dismembered digits of Sam Hose, a Black man, were on public display after a white mob brutally lynched Hose in Newnan, Georgia in 1899. Du Bois's words recast Munro's swelling lines from pure form into a perpetual quasi-representational reconstitution of Du Bois's adage "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line."

The works within the main gallery take up the friction between data analysis as a creative form of Black agency and visual obfuscation as a strategy for resisting a dominant white gaze. The exhibition is anchored in "Printing Black America: W.E.B. Du Bois's Data Portraits in the 21st Century," an ambitious six-part set of print portfolios produced by Villalongo and Ramani (the aforementioned urbanist) in partnership with six print publishers—Powerhouse Arts, Brooklyn; Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa; Island Press, Washington University, St. Louis; Highpoint Center for Printmaking, Minneapolis; Paulson Fontaine Press, Berkeley; and Mallowney Printing Company, Portland, Oregon. Each portfolio takes inspiration from Du Bois's original hand-drawn data visualizations, but recasts his visual strategies by using contemporary data sets and experimental printmaking techniques to communicate the challenges of definitively enumerating complex identities.

Two screenprints from the portfolio published by Powerhouse Arts centrally hung on the right wall exemplify this task. Calligraphic, high-gloss, and color-coded lines wind into increasingly illegible knots in *Amalgamation of the Black Population with Other Races* (2025) to address how ethno-racial categorization is structured by the terminology and options provided on the U.S. census form. The data portraits by Du Bois that inspired this visualization, reproduced in miniature in the screenprint's lower left corner, demonstrate an outmoded racial binarism. A second screenprint in the set, *Visualizando La Afrodignidad: Skin Color & Race in Puerto Rico* (2025), contrasts these same ethno-racial categories with the self-perception of Puerto Ricans, using a numerical skin color scale developed by José Caraballo-Cueto and Isar P. Godreau to research colorism on the island. Gradients reveal Puerto Ricans' self-perception of skin color as immeasurable relative to the narrow strictures of the U.S. mainland's racial categorization. Such pairing demonstrates that while data is said to be representative, its analysis—and the information it generates—is still conditioned by dominant sociopolitical constructions of identity.

In some cases, Villalongo and Ramani's prints register first as aesthetic objects, occluding the primacy of their informational function. This is not a shortcoming, but rather a demonstration of how Villalongo and Ramani designed visualizations that compositionally amplify the expertise of each printmaking workshop. At the research-based printmaking workshop Island Press, the duo collaborated with DSLUE, a descendant-led nonprofit researching and honoring Jesuit-enslaved ancestors in St. Louis. The resulting etching features tenderly incised branches that connect ancestors in an outward stretching family tree. Links between the last enslaved and first free generations are represented by fine lines that fade into the paper's ground. Evoking the living descendants who can trace their families to ancestors enslaved in St. Louis, these delicate dendrites privilege an image of Black futurity over data analysis. *Black LGBTQ+ Population in California* (2025), published by Paulson Fontaine Press, a workshop specializing in intaglio prints, also appears to be an aesthetic composition at first. What stands out most in this print is not the statistical representation of queer-identifying Black individuals in California, but the striking visible texture of the pride flag's weave and weft captured by expertly pressing the flag

directly into an etching plate prepared with soft ground. Such an example, in which the exquisite materiality of print effectively overwhelms the legibility of gathered data, suggests a kind of subversive obfuscation.

This sort of defiant approach to knowledge acquisition structures Rasheed's *Plot It/Point Moving* (2025), which occupies the rear right corner of the main gallery. Like much of Rasheed's practice, this site-specific installation refuses a desire for clarity or precision. Instead, viewers encounter errant information that amasses on—then rapidly disappears from—junctional screens in this corner. With racing phrases such as “everyone will be saved by the algebra” and “the requested resource is not available” (as footnote to “I woke up to find my hands empty”), punctuated by an innervating soundtrack, Rasheed uses the accretion of language and its illegibility to resist what, elsewhere, she describes as a white compulsion to gather information about Black subjecthood.

Dexterously traversing historical context and the present moment, Barber argues for a renewed examination of the potential and limits of data analysis as a tool for Black artists and communities to self-represent in the age of mass surveillance. Providing a framework for continued engagement with Du Bois's legacy as a modernist designer, *Data Consciousness* proposes that data visualizations can materialize Black sociality and offer deliverance from data collection rooted in—and intended to uphold—racial stratification. The included artists demonstrate that although our relationship to racial data and its accessibility has drastically changed, the need for developing new strategies to visualize, disseminate, and safeguard data as a representation of knowledge in reproductive media persists.