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Printing Black America: Du Bois's Data Portraits in the 21st Century

An artist and an urban planner update W. E. B. Du Bois's underappreciated project with data on Black life in the United States today.

BY SHRADDHA RAMANI & WILLIAM VILLALONGO

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My partner Shraddha and I had been gifted *W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits*, edited by Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Rusert, sometime before 2020 and began thinking about Du Bois's project against the backdrop of the pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests. Shraddha is an urban planner who specializes in data visualization, and I was extremely intrigued by the graphics Du Bois created for these portraits and their relationship to protomodernist forms of abstraction. The more we discussed them, it became apparent that Du Bois showed a hopeful picture of Black people's progress and participation in all facets of American life after emancipation at a time when people thought the Black race would become extinct. But today, when presumably so much progress has been made since Du Bois completed these portraits in 1900, we still exist in this infuriating conundrum of fighting for the validity of Black life. In *Printing Black America*, updating Du Bois's portraits with new data was a way to process this condition.

We worked on six portfolios with six printshops in six cities. Some shops were affiliated with research institutions—Graphicstudio is part of the University of South Florida, for instance—and we had direct access to professors and scholars in Black studies and sociology. We used *Printing Black America* to engage those faculty in conversation. Sometimes that led us to include in a portfolio data from their research or a condition in the local area that they found compelling. Not all the scholars were familiar with Du Bois's portraits. A persistent part of this project has been educating people about Du Bois and making an argument for why this work is relevant in this moment. We also worked with printshops in Minneapolis and Saint Louis, cities that are still going through tremendous pain from the very events that led Shraddha and me to this project: the killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson and George Floyd in Minneapolis.

It struck me that the unique, hand-drawn quality of Du Bois's portraits had made them precarious and obscure. They're delicate, so the Library of Congress doesn't show them often. Single authorship also struck me as detrimental to the historical project. So, I thought we should use a collaborative process and work in multiples for *Printing Black America*. Printmaking is extremely hands-on, and an artist can do a lot with the hand that gets translated through the press. We made the prints in conversation with the printers, and I drew sketches on paper and laid out ideas in Adobe Illustrator for them.

Sometimes Shraddha wanted to present the data analysis in a more interesting way than a bar chart, and there might be something latent in Du Bois's original graph, whether the color or the relationship of the data, that would lead me toward an image.

The shops themselves specialize in specific printmaking processes. Paulson Fontaine Press in Berkeley, California, exclusively does intaglio, which is a complicated, beautiful, and time-consuming process. Most of our graphics and ideas for that portfolio happened to be extremely complicated and required a lot of drawing, which became a deep dive into etching. We were in the Bay Area and trying to address the fact that Du Bois did not see the queer community in his survey of Black America in 1900. We thought it would be an oversight if we made the same mistake in the twenty-first century. So, we tried to find the original Pride flag and the colors that Harvey Milk had commissioned and grounded ourselves in that as a visual reference.

The patina of time has pulled back the intensity of the original colors of Du Bois's data portraits. At the beginning, we knew we wanted to limit ourselves to a palette and play within that parameter. We made swatches of about nine colors based on Du Bois's originals and took them from printshop to printshop. I wanted the colors to be bold and bright and fresh in the way that I see them in the 1900 data portraits. I also wanted to establish a relationship between how information is presented in Du Bois's drawings versus in our prints. This is part research and part art, and we approached the project like a researcher would a dissertation. Our references are cited in the appliqué inkjet reproductions of Du Bois's portraits at the bottom of the print. Sometimes we directly engage with Du Bois's original work, and sometimes we find a twenty-first-century relationship that is not one-to-one with the presentation of his data. In our time, I think it's important to not simply redo something and try to claim it. Citing the original is another way of bringing awareness to Du Bois's project, which is still somewhat unknown to the public.

Du Bois effectively used loops and spherical forms in the originals to visualize data, like the distribution of the Black population in urban and rural locales. Those forms were on our minds as we started the project. The first prints in *Printing Black America* are conscious of the loop and how it connects, and the loop became a visual language as we moved ahead in the process and contemplated the work. *Black Migration 2/2* was one of our first pieces. We wanted to represent as simply as possible the changing face of Black America as an even more diverse group of people, a large portion of which is continental Africans who have migrated to the US. Even though we are looking at different cultures not often linked to the history of the transatlantic slave trade in the United States, being Black in America means that you're still haunted by or placed in contention with that history. It affects us through an invisible, systemic way. The loops reveal the historical situation and the transformations of Black America. In *Increase of the Black Populations in the United States*, there's a dark whimsy evoked by the rope, which recalls the noose and its unravelling. You start to see the full length of the rope by mentally straightening out those loops.

I'm an artist who usually doesn't do data visualization. I wouldn't have come to this without my relationship with Shraddha. My studio practice is visually and materially different from this particular project, and that might suggest it's completely outside of my practice, but it's not. For the last ten years or so, I've been thinking about the Black body as a progenitor of meaning for what Blackness is and who Black people are. That surface read of the body, of skin tone and fashion choices, is not enough. It doesn't reveal the erasures or rich diversities in Black cultural idioms. In my studio work, I'm moving through material culture and Black presence in a larger scope of time. *Printing Black America* is very now. I see it in relationship to this question: How do you show Black people without the body being present? There's a corollary in our contemporary culture between the image of a Black person and all meaning that is Black. It's an efficient means to say extremely complex things, but I'm interested in pulling at the seams and examining the threads of that complexity.