

## LITTLE-KNOWN DOCUMENTS

## “A Creed for the ‘New Negro’” and “A Negro on Etiquet of Caste”

W. E. B. DU BOIS

INTRODUCTION

BY MARTHA H. PATTERSON

## Introduction

On 13 December 1895, less than three months after Booker T. Washington gave his Atlanta Exposition Address and was hailed as the nation’s first nationally known New Negro, W. E. B. Du Bois published “A Creed for the ‘New Negro.’” At this point in his career, Du Bois, who was teaching at Wilberforce University, had not yet publicly voiced objections to Washington’s worldview and, in fact, had congratulated Washington on his “phenomenal success at Atlanta—it was a word fitly spoken” (*Correspondence* 39).<sup>1</sup>

Before being published in the *Iowa State Bystander*, Du Bois’s “Creed” first appeared in a now lost issue of the *New York Age*, whose editor, T. Thomas Fortune, was well known in the early 1890s Black press for his militant campaign against lynching and for civil rights (Thornbrough 117–25). Founded in Des Moines in 1894, the Black-owned, “fighting” *Bystander* relied on more established Black newspapers for its national coverage (Cotton 1; see 23).<sup>2</sup>

By calling his list of principles a “creed,” Du Bois appealed to the religiosity and fortitude Black people drew on to withstand escalating degradations and violence within the “nadir” of Jim Crow (see Logan). The first five years of the 1890s witnessed over seven hundred documented lynchings of African Americans, continual efforts to disenfranchise Black voters, and the proliferation of laws segregating transportation and public facilities in southern states, culminating in the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 (Johnson; Seguin and Rigby).

In its emphasis on moral purity, self-reliance, and “industrial training and cooperation,” as well as its accedence to social segregation, Du Bois’s creed reads like one Washington would endorse. Yet Du Bois, even this early in his career, distinguishes his position from Washington’s. In addition to industrial education, Du Bois emphasized the need for “the cultivation of our best intellectual ability.” He calls for the “founding of a university of the negro,” later realized in the formation of Alexander Crummell’s American Negro Academy (1897), in which Du Bois served a prominent role. In urging the “preservation of our best race characteristics and products” as expressed in Black music and folklore, he celebrates Black culture in itself rather than as measured by white achievement. Finally,

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Du Bois expresses a commitment to limited political involvement, which Washington had had to forego in Alabama, at least publicly. The order of the numbered items in Du Bois’s “Creed”—especially the fact that the “strictest moral purity” must be observed before the affirmation of Black culture—suggests the hazards of celebrating Black culture and higher education when most southern whites associated Black men with criminality and Black women with sexual immorality.

The creed’s placement among other *Bystander* articles, including another one by Du Bois, emphasizes the importance of bolstering Black manhood during Reconstruction’s rollback. An article on the left quotes Washington’s response to South Carolina’s recent ratification of a new constitution disenfranchising Black men: “Men ask if measures like those being enacted in South Carolina do not hurt the negro. I answer, ‘No’. Men may fetter the ballot, but cannot make laws that will bind or retard the growth of manhood” (“At a Meeting”). In his second article, “A Negro on Etiquet of Caste,” Du Bois adopts the rhetoric of “caste,” a term often invoked in the abolitionist movement and in the fight against Jim Crow.<sup>3</sup> Du Bois reflects on how, despite racist degradations, “manly conduct” could be maintained through “a studied niceness of distinction.” These articles assured readers that a dignified Black manhood was possible despite Jim Crow attacks on Black civil liberties and self-worth even as it enjoined them to engage in “the politics of respectability” (Higginbotham 186; see 186–87).

Reading Du Bois’s creed in conjunction with his speech at the American Negro Academy in 1897, “The Conservation of Races,” which included its own “Academy Creed,” suggests that Du Bois’s vision of the New Negro depended on voluntary social segregation and moral purity to “conserve” the best attributes of the race, those characteristics Du Bois considered best capable of making a significant contribution to the world (Du Bois, “Conservation”). Du Bois, at this point in his career, adopts what Anthony Appiah calls a “sociohistorical concept” of race where each race has a “‘message’ for humanity” (“Uncompleted Argument” 25).<sup>4</sup> Since the Negro race had not yet delivered its full “message,” the “advance guard of the Negro people,” according to

Du Bois, had a particular responsibility to “unswervingly follow Negro ideals,” which he defines in part through an appreciation of Black culture (“Conservation”). For Du Bois, the “pathos and humor” of Negro folklore and spirituals countered the “mad money-getting plutocracy” of the Teutonic race. The mission of Du Bois’s New Negro, then, was as much a spiritual ideal—“to soften the whiteness of the Teutonic to-day”—as a Black survival mechanism during one of the bleakest periods in American history.

## NOTES

1. See also Lewis 120–25.
2. On 3 Dec. 1895, the *Springfield Republican* also reprinted on its front page Du Bois’s creed from the *New York Age*.
3. W. C. N. laments the “foul spirit of caste” in “The Colored Convention.” In his dissent from *Plessy v. Ferguson*, John Marshall Harlan asserted, “There is no caste here.”
4. Appiah notes that instead of adopting the prevailing view of race as biological, Du Bois compares African Americans to a nation. Drawing from Johann Gottfried von Herder’s concept of *Volksgeist*, or “national soul” (Appiah, “Ethics” 27), and the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini, who extolled the “grand solidarity of all nations in the conquest of the rights ordained by God for all his children” (qtd. in Appiah, “Ethics” 36), Du Bois embraces what Appiah calls “cosmopolitan nationalism” (“Ethics” 35).

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## A Creed for the “New Negro”

In the year of God, 1896, let the new negro turn to the new creed, which though not perfect, not satisfactory to all, yet is broad and practicable:

1. The strictest moral purity of family life.
2. The cultivation of our best intellectual ability, in part through the best existing universities, in part through the founding of a university of the negro.
3. The careful preservation of our best race characteristics and products; as negro music, and negro folklore.
4. Industrial training and cooperation, and the formation of habits of steady, honest, manual toil, saving of earnings and providence, in order that the race may become self-supporting, and may aid in the development of Africa.
5. Social separation from all people who for any reason do not desire our company, until such time as they shall voluntarily remove all barriers.
6. Political activity confined solely to the placing of such men in office, as will competently and honestly administer the government.

## A Negro on Etiquet of Caste

We await breathlessly the gifted author of an *Etiquet of Caste*, and more especially his fifth and sixth chapters, where he leaves the elite, and stoops to common clay—to the ostracized and socially unbidden. We all know, down to the minutest detail, just what the divine circle of society’s leaders must do, under all circumstances and accidents; how they must bow at a drawing room, how they must lace their shoes, how [they] must dress for a ball, and how they must butter their bread. But if democracy means anything (and great America has conclusively proved that it does not mean the absence of a smart set) it means that there are numberless other sets and circles, who heed for their own use a code of guiding good form.

Take ourselves for instance: How shall a negro conducted [sic] himself when, by accident, he finds himself among persons who do not like his company? How much of assertiveness and how much of modesty, how much of firmness and how much of compliance ought a negro gentleman to exhibit there? Or again, a black man and his wife, in a strange city enter a restaurant for lunch; the guests stare and bridle; the proprietor says politely, but firmly: “We do not accommodate colored people here!” What would the gentleman’s book of *etiquet* say was good form here?

Indeed, this half-mocking inquiry has really its serious side. We are all the time finding ourselves in situations, arising from our peculiar social position in America, which demand a careful, consistent line of manly conduct—a studied niceness of distinction which shall preserve our self-respect on the one side, and avoid unmerited and unnecessary offense on the other.