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Reflection 6

Honors 220 B

Reflect on what you have learned during this week in class. Some prompts that might be helpful to get you started (or not! Feel free to go rogue!). What have you learned about possible motivations Du Bois might have had when designing the visualizations for the Paris exhibit? What struck you about Du Bois the man? What surprised you about what you have learned this week? What do you wonder about? What are you learning about that is the most satisfying? The most frustrating? What do you want to know more about?

As we're finishing up the readings in "W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America," I've been thinking about the people and families behind these portraits we're examining. In part one: "A social study," there are several plates that stood out to me as they emphasize the "public sociology" and the humanity behind that concept which Du Bois revolutionized. Namely, plate 32, "Income and Expenditure of 150 Black Families in Atlanta, GA, U.S.A.." There is a personality behind this plate that is wholly distinctive— part of that is the sheer volume of handwriting. The plate lists eight black households, with the head of the household and total family income, then, a list of questions and family attributes including working hours to medical bills. Each of these eight questionnaires has been answered in eight different, characteristic penmanshipes— presumably by DuBois' researchers at Atlanta University. Handwriting is a powerful form of expression, with every curve of a letter or strike across the page to cross one's t's revealing something entirely unique to them. Hence, the use of eight extraordinarily singular scripts evokes a personhood behind the piece, and allows a diversification of voices that you don't see in many of the other portraits. There is a realism in this plate, that is different from just confronting data. To me, this is the plate that reveals a softness to DuBois, as well as a testament to his comprehension of intersectionality and his recognition of the ingrained relationships between categories of social oppression.

Additionally, the comparison between trades and professions emphasizes the ideological conflict between DuBois and Washington on the most effective path for Black Americans to achieve social progress and equality in the US. Given the context of several other of DuBois' labor plates, we can note the occupation segregation occurring at this time period, resulting in the fractional number of black engineers compared to black painters or blacksmiths which are represented in this portrait. Notably, the engineers and firemen make the least household income, while trades like painters, barbers, or blacksmiths earn the most. The systemic barriers leading to accessibility limitations may account for this wage disparity, as well as industry dynamics (especially in regards to professional careers). Professional industries would provide fewer or limiting opportunities for career advancement— discrimination and biases which Black employees experienced disproportionately, whereas trades with predominantly black employees did not share the same career, and therefore income, advancement challenges as professions.

This notion, in combination with the intimacy of the handwriting, has the viewer, or at least me, reflecting on the stories and family dynamics behind the families in this data. It's yet another effort at making sociological findings more accessible to a broader, diverse, multilingual, international audience.