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What's the Word? W.E.B. Du Bois

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FACULTY



When Professor Cheryl Townsend Gilkes was a child in Cambridge, Mass., her father would lean down to her and ask: “Daughter, what’s the word?” The question was the lead-in to a popular urban street rhyme, but in the Townsend household another reply was expected. “I’d say, ‘Du Bois, Daddy,’” she recalled. “‘Du Bois. D-U-B-O-I-S. Du Bois.’”

Gilkes, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Professor of Sociology and African-American Studies, was steeped in the influence of the great sociologist and scholar from a young age. Her father, Murray Townsend Jr., who worked at the Internal Revenue Service, was a sociology major at Morehouse College. And as Gilkes put it, “If you took sociology at historically black colleges, Du Bois was taught.”

Gilkes remembers vividly her first inkling that she was considered a problem. It was a day on a Cambridge playground when a Greek-American playmate had an argument with her mother—in Greek. “I said, ‘Is this about me?’” Gilkes remembers asking. The friend said, “No!” but Gilkes knew better. Even with the language barrier, she knew. “Her mother didn’t want her playing with these ‘N-word’ children,” she said.

It was a part of the black coming-of-age experience that was inevitable at the time—and remains so for many children now. Asked about progress in the area of race relations, Gilkes said simply, “In conflict theory, there are two sides to the conflict, and people on the losing side do not just give up on the civil rights battlefield and go home.”

What’s the Word? W.E.B. Du Bois

Professor Cheryl Townsend Gilkes keeps preaching the message of the iconic African-American scholar

By Gerry Boyle '78

She has been teaching Du Bois, especially his seminal 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, for many years at Colby. Du Bois’s message, Gilkes says, needs to be heard now as much as ever.



Du Bois is probably the original Black Lives Matter sociologist.”

— Cheryl Townsend Gilkes,
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur
Professor of Sociology and
African-American Studies

“Du Bois is probably the original Black Lives Matter sociologist,” she said. “This is what *The Souls of Black Folk* is all about. We are human, too, and we need to be included in your consideration of this nation and how it came to be.”

That was a bold thesis when Du Bois advanced it at the turn of the 20th century—defining the problem of race not only in the context of the United States but as a global challenge.

“In addition to the psychological and literary power of Du Bois’s analysis, there is a socio-historical dimension to be explored that asserts the distinctive value of the black experience for human progress generally,” Gilkes writes in her afterword to a 100th anniversary edition of *The Souls of Black Folk*. “Yet, he begins by simply asking, ‘How does it feel to be a problem?’”

That is apparent now, as racial tensions have grown in recent months and years. It’s a continuum that goes back centuries, Gilkes and Du Bois point out, with European colonization of Africa, slavery that

was the foundation of the industrialization of America, and the post-slavery effort to keep one class of subjugated workers and people in their place and on the job.

“The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea,” Du Bois wrote.

In an article titled, “The Margin as the Center of the Theory of History,” included in the book *W.E.B. Du Bois on Race and Culture* (1996), Gilkes points out that Du Bois argued that oppression wasn’t just a problem for African Americans, but for women, the poor, the “unrepresented laboring millions throughout the world.” (Cont. on page 45)