

“To Make the World So Damn Uncomfortable”: W.E.B. Du Bois and the African American Prophetic Tradition

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In the December 1918 issue of *The Crisis* magazine, W.E.B. Du Bois celebrated the end of the First World War with a loud and enthusiastic call for the right of all Americans to vote. Du Bois wrote, “Now that the war is over, we have but one word and one thought—the Ballot. We want that ballot safeguarded by every reasonable and decent limitation, impartially applied; but it can no longer be limited by race and sex (Du Bois, 1983, p. 165). Du Bois not only advocated for the right to vote, but also called for African Americans to utilize their right to vote and participate in democracy as fully-fledged citizens of the United States of America.

Almost forty years later, however, Du Bois’ attitude of voting had changed. In the October 20 issue of the *Nation*, Du Bois lamented,

I shall not go to the polls. I have not registered. I believe that democracy has so far disappeared in the United States that no “two evils” exist. There is but one evil party with two names, and it will be elected despite all I can do or say.... I have no advice for others in this election. Are you voting Democratic? Well and good; all I ask is why? Are you voting for Eisenhower and his smooth team of bright ghostwriters? Again, why? Will your helpless vote either way support or restore democracy to America?...Is the answer the election of 1956? I will be no party to it and that will make little difference. You will take large part and bravely march to the polls, and that also will make no difference. (Du Bois, 1956, par. 4, 8, 10)

While many scholars have examined the life and legacy of Du Bois across disciplinary lines and using multiple methods, important aspects of Du Bois’ use of rhetoric have yet to be studied or accounted for, which is surprising given the copious amount of written and spoken material we have by Du Bois. Anyone studying Du Bois and his use of rhetoric would have to wade through an abundance of material. For example, the Du Bois corpus consists of not only speeches and essays, but also short stories, poems, novels, editorials, and sermons. While there have been volumes devoted to the writings and speeches of Du Bois, there has not been one volume devoted to an analysis of those writings. Moreover, outside of a few dissertations¹ and conference

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proceedings and articles,² Du Bois' use of rhetoric has surprisingly not garnered much attention.

In addition, the few treatments of Du Bois' rhetoric do not examine his use of religious rhetoric. Previous scholarship about Du Bois has downplayed the role of religion in his life, which has in turn influenced rhetorical studies. Biographers have argued that Du Bois was so hostile to religion that others examining Du Bois followed suit and have, thus, rarely examined him through the lens of religion. This however, as scholars such as Zuckerman (2000) and Blum (2007) note, was far from the truth. Du Bois, far from being hostile to religion, was deeply committed to a rational understanding of religious views and though many saw his practice of religion as not ascribing to societal norms, Du Bois found comfort in his construction of religion.

His familiarity with the religious tradition led Du Bois to use prophetic rhetoric as a mode of discourse. In the May 1913 issue of *The Crisis* Magazine, Du Bois, penned a response to Rev. Charles Dole, who believed that *The Crisis* and Du Bois were not patient enough for change to happen regarding the civil rights of African Americans. Du Bois published Mr. Dole's letter and, in the same issue, offered a response. Du Bois grounded his response to "Mr. Dole's notion of gradualism" in the Hebrew prophets of the Bible. "When the Hebrew prophets cried aloud, there were respectable persons by the score who said: "Unfortunate Exaggeration, Unnecessary Feeling, and Ungodly Bitterness! Yet the jeremiads were needed to redeem a people (Du Bois, 1983, p. 74). In writing about the progression that many believed humanity made during this time, Du Bois reminded his friend that this progress was made possible by the

[S]oul-torn strength of those who can never sit still and silent while the disinherited and the damned clog our gutters and gasp their lives out on our front porches. These are men who go down in the blood and dust of battle. They say ugly things to an ugly world. They spew the lukewarm fence straddlers out of their mounts, like God of old; they cry aloud and spare not; they shout from the housetops, and they make this world so damned uncomfortable with its nasty burden of evil that it tries to get the good and does get better. (Du Bois, 1983, p. 76)

He closed his editorial by reminding Mr. Dole that with the "sainted spirits of such as these *The Crisis* would weakly but earnestly stand and cry in the world's four corners of the way; and it claims no man as friend who dare not stand and cry with it" (Du Bois, 1983, p. 77).

By equating *The Crisis* and his own role as editor in the same spirit of the biblical Hebrew prophets, Du Bois saw his position as more than just an editor and writer of editorials. That is, he saw his role as editor as one divinely given to him, one that he must answer and accept. Du Bois cast himself in the role of a prophet and throughout his life, by using prophetic rhetoric and adopting prophetic personas, he reached out and attempted to persuade his audiences.

In this essay, I briefly examine the prophetic rhetoric of W.E.B. Du Bois. By examining his editorials while editor of *The Crisis* and other writings, I argue that Du Bois employed different types of prophetic discourse grounded primarily within the

African American Prophetic Tradition (AAPT). For purposes of this essay, I specifically highlight Du Bois' use of mission-oriented prophecy as a way to call African Americans to a divine mission of social uplift. In so doing, my aim is three-fold. First, I seek to build upon the fledgling rhetorical scholarship on Du Bois. Second, following Zuckerman and Blum, I seek to (re)introduce to readers and (re)claim Du Bois as a religious rhetor. Finally, I seek to add to the scholarship on prophetic rhetoric.

Prophetic Rhetoric

To talk about the prophetic tradition, we must first talk about prophetic rhetoric—or the language that shapes the tradition. Prophetic rhetoric or prophetic discourse is not easy to define. Part of the quandary may lie in the fact that prophetic rhetoric “does not descend from our traditional, systematized, Greco-Roman model of rhetoric.” Prophetic rhetoric “comes from the Hebraic tradition found in the writings of the Old Testament in which there is no systematic theory of rhetoric.” Indeed, as James Darsey (1999) reminds us about Old Testament prophets, they “left us with a considerable body of discourse, but they were not theorists and were not prone to spend time examining or articulating the assumptions on which their discourse was built” (p. 7).

Perhaps another reason for the difficulty in defining this type of rhetoric may “lie in the unwillingness of some to deem credible anything having its foundation in the Bible, religion, or prophecy” (Johnson, 2012, p. 7). Darsey echoes this point when he writes:

In our everyday usage, we acknowledge the possibility of something like a religious commitment at the base of radical social movements: we talk of revolutionary “faith” and “zeal”; we refer to radical leaders as “prophets”; and we analyze radical rhetoric according to its “God terms” and “devil terms.” At the same time, while we admit of the existence of some blatantly “messianic” or “millennial” or “revitalization” movements that have unmistakably religious roots, we are also victims of our own enlightenment and generally prefer explanations of a more secular order. (Darsey, 1999, p. 8)

Therefore, to understand the prophetic, one has to suspend modern tendencies toward rationalized incredulity and “humble ourselves before what we understand only incompletely” (Darsey, 1999, p. 8).

Elsewhere, I define prophetic rhetoric as discourse grounded in the sacred, rooted in a community experience that offers a critique of existing communities and traditions by charging and challenging society to live up to the ideals they espoused while offering celebration, encouragement and hope for a brighter future. It is a rhetoric “characterized by a steadfast refusal to adapt itself to the perspectives of its audience” and a rhetoric that dedicates itself to the rights of individuals. Located on the margins of society, it intends to lift the people to an ethical conception of whatever the people deem as sacred by adopting, at times, a controversial style of speaking (Johnson, 2012, p. 7).

Moreover, the rights of individuals that prophetic rhetoric dedicates itself to is, especially that of the poor, marginalized, and exploited members of society. It intends to

lift the people to an ethical conception of the Deity (Heschel, 1955, p. 413). In addition, prophetic rhetoric also acts as social criticism because it “challenges the leaders, the conventions, the ritual practices of a particular society” by way of what society deems sacred (Walzer, 1996, p. 33). Prophetic rhetoric becomes, then, a critical rhetoric that “examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercised in relativized world” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91).

This definition of prophetic rhetoric also explicates a four-part rhetorical structure. *First, speakers must ground prophetic discourse in what the speaker and the audience deem as sacred.* In short, the speaker must appeal to something that both speaker and audience hold as sacred and that is recognizable. For a speaker to appeal to anything “*sacred* that the audience does not recognize as such would render that message unimportant and meaningless. This means that the prophet is indeed part of the community fabric and understands the beliefs of the audience. Therefore, there is no prophetic discourse outside of community” (Johnson, 2012, pp. 7-8). For people adopting prophetic personas, they must speak out of a recognizable tradition and appeal to those sacred beliefs and values within that tradition. People who adopt prophetic personas cannot do so as rugged individualists, but must root their “prophecy” within communal traditions, beliefs and expectations.

Second, there is an element of consciousness-raising through a sharing or an announcement of the real situation. In short, the proclaimer pronounces what is “already known” and “bears witness to what the speaker believes as truth” (Johnson, 2012, p. 8). Thus, instead of unveiling the hidden, the prophet reveals the hidden in plain sight. In other words, “the prophet goes beneath the surface and states the obvious that others might be afraid to speak. It is consciousness-raising because once it is out in the open; the prophetic desire is that the audience reflects on the situation with the hope of changing its ways” (Johnson, 2012, p. 8).

The third element in the rhetorical structure is the charge, challenge, critique, judgment, or warning of the audience(s) (Johnson, 2012, p. 8). Moreover, the prophet does not just address the primary or initial audience, but the much wider audiences—those that include institutions, governments, and society in general. The prophet usually does this by offering reinterpretations of what is sacred and casting a vision of the world not as it is, but as it could and should be.

The final part of the prophetic rhetorical structure is the offer of encouragement and hope (Johnson, 2012, p. 8-9). There are two types of hopes in prophetic rhetoric. First, there is an *eschatological hope*. It is a hope that things will get better in some afterlife or some other spiritual transformation to some other world. The second type of hope is a “pragmatic hope.” It is a more “this-worldly” and earthy type of hope. It is a hope that grounds itself in the prophet’s belief in the Divine to make right order in this world. It is also similar to what Cornel West calls “tragicomic hope.” About this experience, West (1988) writes,

Tragicomic hope is rooted in a love of freedom. It proceeds from a free inquisitive spirit that highlights imperial America’s weak will to racial justice. It is a sad yet sweet indictment of abusive power and blind greed run amok. It is a melancholic yet melioristic stance toward America’s denial of its terrors

and horrors heaped on others. It yields a courage to hope for betterment against the odds without a sense of revenge or resentment. It revels in a dark joy of freely thinking, acting, and loving under severe constraints of unfreedom. (216)

It is a hope that sees a new day coming—a hope that again grounds itself in the prophet's deep connection to the Divine—the One that gives the prophet the strength to make it one more day.

Traditionally, critics studying prophetic rhetoric tend to situate the discourse within two primary traditions.¹ The first tradition is apocalyptic prophecy. Barry Brummett offers a working definition of apocalyptic rhetoric by calling it a “mode of thought and discourse that empowers its audience to live in a time of disorientation and disorder by revealing to them a fundamental plan within the cosmos.” Further, he writes that apocalyptic rhetoric is “discourse that restores order through structures of time and history by revealing the present to be a pivotal moment in time” (Brummett, 1991, p. 9). In addition, apocalyptic rhetoric “assumes a position of having knowledge through visions, dreams, or meditations that the prophet/speaker shares with the audience. It is a secret or divine revelation revealed only to the prophet and it becomes the speaker's job to disclose the previously hidden (Johnson, 2012, p. 10).

For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on the second type of tradition—the jeremiad. The term jeremiad, “meaning a lamentation or doleful complaint,” derives from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, who warned of Israel's fall and the destruction of Jerusalem. The fall came because of the people's failure to keep the Mosaic covenant. Even though Jeremiah denounced Israel's wickedness and prophesied destruction in the short term, he always looked for the day when the nation would repent and be restored (Howard-Pitney, 2005, p. 5).

The jeremiad became part of the American rhetorical tradition around the seventeenth century among the New England Puritans as a way to express their self-identity as a chosen people. Believing that they had a divine plan to “flee from corrupt European religious and social establishment,” the Puritans, as many would later call them, felt the need to establish a “holy society” in the wilderness of America (Howard Pitney, 2005, p. 5). According to Bercovitch (1978), the Puritans, once they settled in America, started to reshape the jeremiad (7). Drawing from the biblical story of the Exodus, the Puritans saw themselves as the “New Israel” leaving the bondage of Europe to come into a new world they believed to be the “Promise Land.” They felt sure of themselves because in being the “New Israel,” the Puritans believed themselves to be the

¹Alan D. DeSantis argues for the inclusion of a third type, Amostic prophecy. Derived from the biblical prophet Amos, this is when the speaker (prophet) speaks as one outside the covenant as she exhorts the audience to live up to their own covenant. See Alan D. DeSantis, “An Amostic Prophecy: Frederick Douglass' The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,” *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 22 (1), 65-92. In addition, I argue that prophetic rhetoric is a genre unto itself associated with the aforementioned four-part rhetorical structure. I see apocalyptic and jeremiad forms of rhetoric as types of prophetic rhetoric or subgenres. See Johnson's *The Forgotten Prophet* and Robert Terrill's *Malcolm X: Inventing Radical Judgement*.

“chosen ones” whom God had called and ordained to be an instrument of His will. With the chosen people leading the way, America was to become the “city on a hill” whose light shined for all to see.

When the Puritans fell short of their call and ideal, typically the ministers in the community called the people to task. According to Howard-Pitney,

As Puritan society fell short of its goal of civic perfection, the jeremiad became a ubiquitous ritual of self-reproach and exhortation. Puritan ministers deplored a long list of perceived social failings, denounced the people for their sins and social misconduct, and warned of worse tribulations and divine punishments to come if they did not strictly observe once more the terms of their covenant with God. (7)

The terms of the covenant were spelled out in unambiguous form: God has called us to be a peculiar and special people. We are the New Israel and America is the new Promised Land. We must remember this and act accordingly. When we forget this, God’s judgment will come upon us.

Not only did the jeremiad come with “self-reproach and exhortation when things went wrong, it also had what Bercovitch calls an “unshakable optimism.” In short, what the Puritans believed was that when turmoil and trouble came upon them, it was indeed God’s punishment for sin, *but the punishment was a “corrective” and not for “destruction.”* In other words, God may be angry with them, but He had not replaced them with anyone else. As Bercovitch notes, “Here, as nowhere else, [God’s] vengeance was a sign of love, a father’s rod used to improve the errant child. In short, their punishments confirmed the promise” (8).

In one of the few treatments of Du Bois’ rhetoric, Howard-Pitney suggests that one can situate most of Du Bois’ earlier protest rhetoric within the jeremiad tradition. Du Bois, he argues, began his career with “great faith in the ability of reason to persuade people and foment reform.” He grounded his sacred appeal in scientific evidence and reasoned that his audiences would be appreciative of sound “solid scientific facts” (95). It is with these “facts” that Du Bois would now share his findings and presents the *real situation* in the lives of black folks—in hopes that it would raise awareness about the plight of black folk and hopefully produce some much needed reforms. In Du Bois’ *Philadelphia Negro*, while he “vividly portrayed Philadelphia’s black slum as a center of crime and vice, his reasoning for these conditions “deviated sharply from conventional wisdom” (Howard-Pitney, 2005, p. 96). That is, Du Bois argued that the poor conditions of blacks are not because of an unchangeable heredity, but as a product of the socialization and history of African Americans.

Du Bois’ critiques early in his career focused on challenging black people to rise up and take charge of their own situations. Grounded in the rhetoric of social uplift, Du Bois chastised blacks for their “promiscuity, criminality, and laziness.” Moreover, he lamented over what he felt was a “lack of racial purpose and unity and the ineffectuality of black institutions” (Howard-Pitney, 2005, pp. 96-97). Correction would only come, Du Bois maintained, through “Negro homes,” which he argued must stop being places of “idleness and extravagance and complaint.” While arguing that “White prejudice was not

responsible for all or perhaps the greater part of the Negro problem,” Du Bois suggested that work, be it menial or poorly rewarded, would lead to the road of salvation (Howard-Pitney, 2005, p. 97).

Du Bois’ concluded his prophetic rhetoric during this period calling both Blacks and Whites to do their duty towards each other. Offering encouragement and hope, Du Bois believed that when each race did their own duty, mutual benefit and progress would happen. Du Bois believed in the American covenant system and called both Blacks and Whites to return to its principles and ideals. For African Americans, it was the ideals of hard work, self-help and thrift that would help them succeed, while with Whites, Du Bois gently reminded them of the ideals of liberty, freedom and justice should apply to African Americans as well. The hope to which Du Bois called his audiences grounded itself in the belief that a return to the covenant would produce the peace and prosperity needed in the land.

However, as time passed and as racism gave way to more lynching, deprived more African American rights from Whites, and an ever-increasing bigoted and racist society emerged, Du Bois’ rhetoric changed. While Howard-Pitney has noted this shift, he argues that Du Bois remained in the jeremiadic tradition of prophetic rhetoric. I suggest, however, that Du Bois moved away from the jeremiad and begins to offer a prophetic discourse that we find primarily within the African American Prophetic Tradition—mission-oriented prophecy.

African American Prophetic Tradition

Unlike the prophetic rhetoric of the jeremiad, the African American Prophetic Tradition (AAPT) does not have its origins in freedom. Birth from slavery and shaped in Jim and Jane Crow America, the African American version of the prophetic tradition has been the primary vehicle that has comforted and given voice to many African Americans. Through struggle and sacrifice, this tradition has expressed black people’s call for unity and cooperation, as well as the community’s anger and frustrations. It has been both hopeful and pessimistic. It has celebrated the beauty and myth of American exceptionalism and its special place in the world, while at the same time damning it to Hell for not living up to the promises and ideals America espouses. It is a tradition that celebrates both the Creator or the Divine’s hand in history—offering “hallelujahs” for deliverance from slavery and Jim and Jane Crow, while at the same time asking, “Where in the hell is God?” during tough and trying times. It is a tradition that develops a theological outlook quite different at times from orthodoxy—one that finds God very close, but so far away.

It is, also, a tradition that does not exclusively reside in either the apocalyptic or the jeremiad forms of prophetic discourse. Though African Americans have used both forms of prophetic discourse, the contextual restraints and rhetorical exigencies have not always allowed for an apocalyptic or jeremiadic appeal. For example, what if the speaker does not believe that God will cause a cataclysmic event that will bring in a new age—an apocalypse. What if a speaker does not appeal to a covenant—or for that matter, does not believe the covenant is available to the people—a jeremiad. What if the covenant itself is the problem—can one still engage in prophetic discourse?

For many African Americans, the jeremiad at times posed a huge problem. Inherent in the jeremiad is that its proponents never question the foundational premise of its belief—or in prophetic terms, it never questions the *sacred*. People primarily using the jeremiad never once questioned their belief in America's promise and destiny. They never questioned their belief that they were the New Israel or chosen people or that America was indeed the Promise Land. Whenever calamity happened, the Puritans may have believed it was because they had sinned and deviated from the covenant, but belief in the covenant never faltered. When calamity came, many Puritans interpreted the calamity or judgment as God showing His love as parents do from time to time. Once the people started living up to what the people hold as *sacred*, then the calamity would cease and God would "heal the land." However, many African Americans did not have confidence or think that the covenant would work for them. If African Americans adopted a prophetic persona to appeal to their audiences, they had to find other means.

In my work on the career of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, I identify at least four other types of prophetic rhetoric found primarily, but not exclusively in the AAPT. The first is *celebratory prophecy*. I define celebratory prophecy as a prophecy, typically grounded in a sacred covenant that calls the people to celebrate an event that leads the people to celebrate the sacred (covenant). In other words, before the event, the prophet could not invoke the covenant because the audience that the prophet represents was not included in the covenant. Moreover, the prophet links the event to the will of God, thus it becomes a sacred event worthy of celebration (Johnson, 2012, p. 10).

The second type of prophecy used by African Americans is a *prophetic disputation* or *disputation prophecy*. Disputation occurs when the speaker offers a "quotation of the people's opinion" within the speech context and offers a refutation "which corrects this opinion" (Graffy, 1984, 105). Prophetic disputations function rhetorically by giving the speaker a chance not only to speak about the evils perpetrated by her opponents, but also to do so in a way that creates a sense of empowerment; not only for the speaker, but also for the community the speaker represents (Johnson, 2012, p. 10). In this way, prophetic disputations are similar to Gregg's (1971) ego-function of protest rhetoric because the prophet aims the rhetoric at the "protestors themselves," the ones who are in need of affirmation of their personhood (74). While the prophet aims his rhetoric towards his opponents, the main thrust of his message appeals to his supporters.

Prophetic disputations and, for that matter, prophetic rhetoric in general, do not follow Gregg's view that the speaker needs *self-affirmation* and that the speaker is the *primary audience* of the message. What Gregg assumes is that the speaker also needs "psychological refurbishing and affirmation"—and perhaps in protest rhetoric, the speaker does. With prophetic rhetoric, the speaker needs no such affirmation. With prophetic rhetoric, before the speaker speaks, affirmation comes from the Divine. In other words, the speaker does not need approval or affirmation from anyone to speak. The prophet's ego is in check because the ego, the self—in fact the whole person of the speaker—belongs to God.

The third type of prophecy use by African Americans is a type of prophetic discourse that I call *pessimistic prophecy* or *the prophetic lament*. For many black orators, finding the racism too entrenched and the American covenant ideals not realistic for black Americans to ascertain, they become wailing and moaning prophets within what

I call the *lament tradition of prophecy*. In this tradition, the prophet's primary function is to speak out on the behalf of others and to chronicle their pain and suffering, as well as her or his own. By speaking, the prophet offers hope and encouragement to others by acknowledging their sufferings and letting them know that they are not alone (Johnson, 2012, p. 14).

For the purposes of the essay, I focus on the fourth type—*mission-oriented prophecy*. A mission-oriented prophecy is a constitutive rhetoric that calls a people to participate in a divine mission by reconstituting the people from their perceived identities. While a constitutive rhetoric assumes that audiences are already a rhetorical effect and uses that identification to shape the message, a mission-oriented prophecy finds the constructed identities problematic and offers a new vision or identity for the people. Therefore, what the prophet does is to (re)constitute the people in an identity that would fit the divine call (Johnson, 2012, p. 13).

I argue that in his early years as editor of *The Crisis* (1911-1925), W.E.B. Du Bois established a mission-oriented prophecy that attempts to call into being a people who would fight for righteousness and justice and stand firm in the face of trouble. Directed initially at the "talented tenth," Du Bois soon targeted his prophetic zeal to all African Americans as a response to Booker T. Washington's program of accommodation. This *new people* would be emboldened to stand up and speak out and demand their rights afforded to them by the Constitution and by their Creator.

Du Bois' Mission Oriented Prophecy

During the early years at *The Crisis*, to establish his mission-oriented prophecy, Du Bois grounded or appealed his rhetoric to both the religious and secular conceptions of the sacred. As for a secular conception of the sacred, Du Bois readily grounded his prophecy in an understanding of the sacredness of citizenship—of being an American citizen first. He starts an editorial titled *A Philosophy for 1913* by stating, "I am by birth and law a free black American citizen. As such, I have both rights and duties. If I neglect my duties, my rights are always in danger. If I do not maintain my rights, I cannot perform my duties" (Aptheker, 1983, p. 47).

Those sacred rights and duties meant supporting the country during the First World War. Du Bois urged African Americans to support the war effort because, as he argued, "this is our country" and if it is our country then "it is our war." By appealing to the sacredness of citizenship, Du Bois was then able to offer a critique of America as "not perfect," but "its continued existence and development is the hope of mankind and of black mankind" (Aptheker, 1983, p. 160).

Understanding citizenship as a sacred entitlement led Du Bois to support women's suffrage. In his 1914 editorial "Votes for Women," Du Bois called on African Americans to help "bring it to pass." Du Bois argued first, "any extension of democracy involves a discussion of the fundamentals of democracy. Second, he argued, "if it is acknowledged to be unjust to disenfranchise a sex, it cannot be denied that it is absurd to disenfranchise a color" (Aptheker, 1983, p. 80). Finally, he saw women as potential allies in the ongoing struggle for African American civil rights.

In another editorial arguing for equal treatments of all races, Du Bois grounded his appeal in the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Golden Rule. In writing about Jesus, Du Bois called the church to live up to the standards espoused by Jesus. By offering a biblical interpretation of Jesus' life, Du Bois situated Jesus within the life of African Americans by way of analogy. After lamenting blacks were not welcome in white churches, Du Bois writes

Yet Jesus Christ was a laborer and black men are laborers; He was poor and we are poor; He was despised of his fellow men and we are despised; He was persecuted and crucified and we are mobbed and lynched.... Why then are His so-called followers deaf, dumb, and blind on the Negro problem—on the human problem. (Aptheker, 1983. p. 69)

In order to establish unity and build camaraderie, Du Bois often recounted the atrocities that African Americans faced throughout his editorial writings. In one, he confessed that he was taking an “indefensible joy” at the “lynching, licking, and mob rule” against some whites that went on during this time in the United States. Then he gives the reason why.

For fifty years you have murdered our men, raped our women, stolen our property and maimed our children's body and soul; and when we told you that this failure of government, decency, morals and mercy was your problem more than ours, you grinned at us pityingly.... But it's coming home, Old Top—it's coming home. (Aptheker, 1983, p. 364)

One of Du Bois' main critiques was against the church—but more specifically the black church and its leadership. In one editorial, after lamenting that “All is not well with the colored church,” Du Bois focused on what he found to be the problems with the church's leadership. In writing about the bishops and pastors of the church, Du Bois argued, “the paths and the higher places are choked with pretentious ill-trained men and in far too many cases with men dishonest and otherwise immoral.” Further he wrote, “the church is still inveighing against dancing and theatergoing, still blaming educated people for objecting to silly and empty sermons, boasting and noise, still building churches when people need homes and schools, and persisting in crucifying critics rather than realizing the handwriting on the wall” (Aptheker, 1983, pp. 34-35).

He also challenged African American churches to “stop building and purchasing new church edifices and start investing the “money of the church in homes, land and businesses and philanthropic enterprises for the benefit of the people.” He called for churches to adopt a cooperative economic model reasoning that if “a group of people can buy and pay for a hundred-thousand-dollar church,” they can purchase a hundred-thousand-dollar apartment house and run it” (Aptheker, 1983, p. 238).

Du Bois typically ended his editorials with encouragement and hope to his readers. After critiquing the country for its negative attitude against blackness, Du Bois challenged his readers to “gird up [their] loins, because a “great day is coming.” Though he reminded them “we have crawled and pleaded for justice and we have been cheerfully

spit upon and murdered and burned,” he closed by writing, “we will not endure it forever” (Aptheker, 1983, p. 17). This spirit moved Du Bois to proclaim hope that one day that society would afford all of the rights and privileges of citizenship to African Americans.

Conclusion

After the NAACP removed him as editor of *The Crisis* in 1934, Du Bois prophetic persona shifted. Though not examined in this essay, Du Bois would later become a pessimistic prophet—critiquing both African Americans and the wider society to live out the meaning of the ideas they espoused. For instance, Du Bois eventually no longer believed that the talented tenth could lead African Americans because they too had capitulated to the rapacious capitalism that he had begun to critique as harmful to Blacks. Moreover, Du Bois also argued that an international socialism would benefit Blacks more.

While earlier in his life, he was hopeful that scientific inquiry and education would solve the race problem, in his book *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace*, he lamented, “It is with great regret that I do not see after this war, or within any reasonable time, the possibility of a world without race conflict” (as cited in Howard-Pitney, 2005, p. 133). Du Bois earlier in his life thought that the First World War would bring the peace and prosperity that many wanted. Later in his life, however, his views on war had changed. He argued for peace with the Soviet Union on two fronts. First, he realized that war was not the “path to the millennium” and second; he argued that war came from capitalists wanting to “stem the worldwide tide toward socialist democracy” (as cited in Howard-Pitney, 2005, p. 133). Marginalized as his prophetic pessimism became stronger, Du Bois still wrote and spoke out until the end of his life—a life that would lead him to Ghana where he died in 1963.

Typically, in my study of the AAPT, prophets start as optimistic prophets—who see themselves as universal prophets for all people; believing that if, their audience would just live up to the ideals espoused by what they hold sacred, that somehow everything would work out. It is also during this stage that the prophet sees America and its covenantal blessings as available to African Americans.

However, as time goes on, African American prophets—finding the racism too entrenched and the American covenant ideals not realistic for black Americans to ascertain—become wailing and moaning prophets within what I call the *lament tradition of prophecy*. In this tradition, the prophet’s primary function is to speak out on the behalf of others and to chronicle their pain and suffering, as well as her or his own. Just a cursory examination of Du Bois life and works would suggest that he also followed this trajectory. Du Bois started as an optimistic prophet believing that if blacks would just return to American covenantal ideals, then African Americans’ living would improve. At the end of his life, however, Du Bois rejected American covenantal ideals as being the harbinger for black success. He began to look toward an international socialism as the only route to a kinder and more meaningful humanity.

In this essay, I first sought to build upon the fledgling rhetorical scholarship on Du Bois. Again, while scholars from other disciplines are doing good work examining

Du Bois, rhetoric scholars simply have not taken advantage of the textual corpus that Du Bois left behind. For example, his editorials in *The Crisis* would make for a good study on any number of themes or topics beyond what I have studied here.

Second, by (re)introducing Du Bois and (re)claiming him as a religious rhetor, scholars may want to examine the large amounts of writings devoted to the topic. While Religious Studies scholars such as Gary Dorrien (2015) connect Du Bois to the Black Social Gospel movement in the early twentieth century, scholars of religious rhetoric may want to study the way Du Bois used and constructed religion in his attempts to persuade audiences. In addition, writings found at WEBDuBois.org, curated by Robert Williams, Associate Professor of Political Science at Bennett College, offer a good starting point for such analyses.

Finally, I wanted to also make a contribution to scholarship on prophetic rhetoric and more specifically, the African American Prophetic Tradition. While there have been studies on prophetic rhetoric in general, until recently, outside of David Howard-Pitney's work, there has not been much in the way of understanding prophetic discourse through an African American lens. Thankfully, this is beginning to change. In addition to my own work *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition*, there are two others works that center on the African American Prophetic Tradition: Willie J. Harrell Jr.'s *Origins of the African American Jeremiad: The Rhetorical Strategies of Social Protest and Activism, 1760-1861* (2011) and Christopher Hobson's *The Mount of Vision: African American Prophetic Tradition, 1800-1950* (2012). I suggest that studying Du Bois as prophet is another way to understand his life, legacy and challenge to all of us to continue to fight structures, institutions, and governments that continue to oppress—no matter where they may be.

Endnotes

¹ See Carl McDonald Taylor's *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Rhetoric of Redefinition* (1971), Vanessa Wynder Quainoo's "*The Souls of Black Folk*": *In Consideration of W. E. B. Du Bois and the Exigency of an African-American Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1993), and Fendrich R. Clark's *W.E.B. Du Bois and the Rhetoric of Social Change, 1897—1907: Attitude as Incipient Action* (2009).

² See Robert Terrill and Michael Leff's "The Polemicist as Artist: W. E. B. Bois' 'Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others'" (1995) and Aric Putnam's "The Ethos of Pan-Africa: The Rhetorical Visions of Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois" (2008).

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