



**PRINTING
BLACK
AMERICA**

**DU BOIS'S
DATA PORTRAITS
IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

On view at Central Library
February 23 through May 31, 2026

PRINTING BLACK AMERICA: DU BOIS'S DATA PORTRAITS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

WILLIAM VILLALONGO AND SHRADDHA RAMANI

Printing Black America is a responsive, transhistorical project that portrays aspects of Black life in the 21st century. Urbanist Shraddha Ramani and visual artist William Villalongo reinterpret and respond to the data visualizations innovated by luminary activist and educator W.E.B. Du Bois—what he called “data portraits”—that debuted among a collection of materials at the 1900 Paris World’s Fair in “The American Negro Exhibition” (ANE). One hundred and twenty-five years later, Ramani and Villalongo expand on Du Bois’s methodologies of data collection and visual storytelling, centering “living projects” in local communities across the country to consider new possibilities for Black life today and to probe at the meaning of these historical works when held up against our contemporary moment.

Printing Black America builds on the history of The American Negro Exhibition (sometimes referred to as the Exhibit of American Negroes) in the 1900 Paris World’s Fair, which was co-organized by a collective of leading African American scholars, activists, and human rights advocates: Thomas J. Calloway (leading the project; a lawyer and principal fundraiser for the exhibit), Daniel A.P. Murray (the Assistant Librarian of Congress), and W.E.B. Du Bois. The varied materials that figured in the exhibition included Du Bois’s data visualizations, as well as the portraits rendered in the burgeoning medium of photography, musical scores, poetry, and over 400 patents by inventors. This grand prize-winning World’s Fair exhibition offered a powerful



William Villalongo and Shraddha Ramani, *Occupations of Black Americans, 1900–2021, 2025*. Screenprint and digital pigment print collage. 28 x 22 in. Published by Island Press, St. Louis.

encapsulation of Black progress despite structural oppression and a counter-narrative against the mainstream ideology of racism, celebrating Black life and achievement in America's post-Reconstruction era.

It was in the ANE that William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963), the luminary Black leader, sociologist, educator, and founder of America's largest and oldest civil rights organization, the NAACP (National Association of the Advancement of Colored People), created this series of innovative data portraits with students from Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University). These informationally rich, hand-drawn graphics distilled aspects of African American experience into a Modernist aesthetic language and helped launch the field of sociology. Du Bois's data portraits were based on data collected by hand-written surveys, workshops and the limited national data on Black lives in the U.S. census.

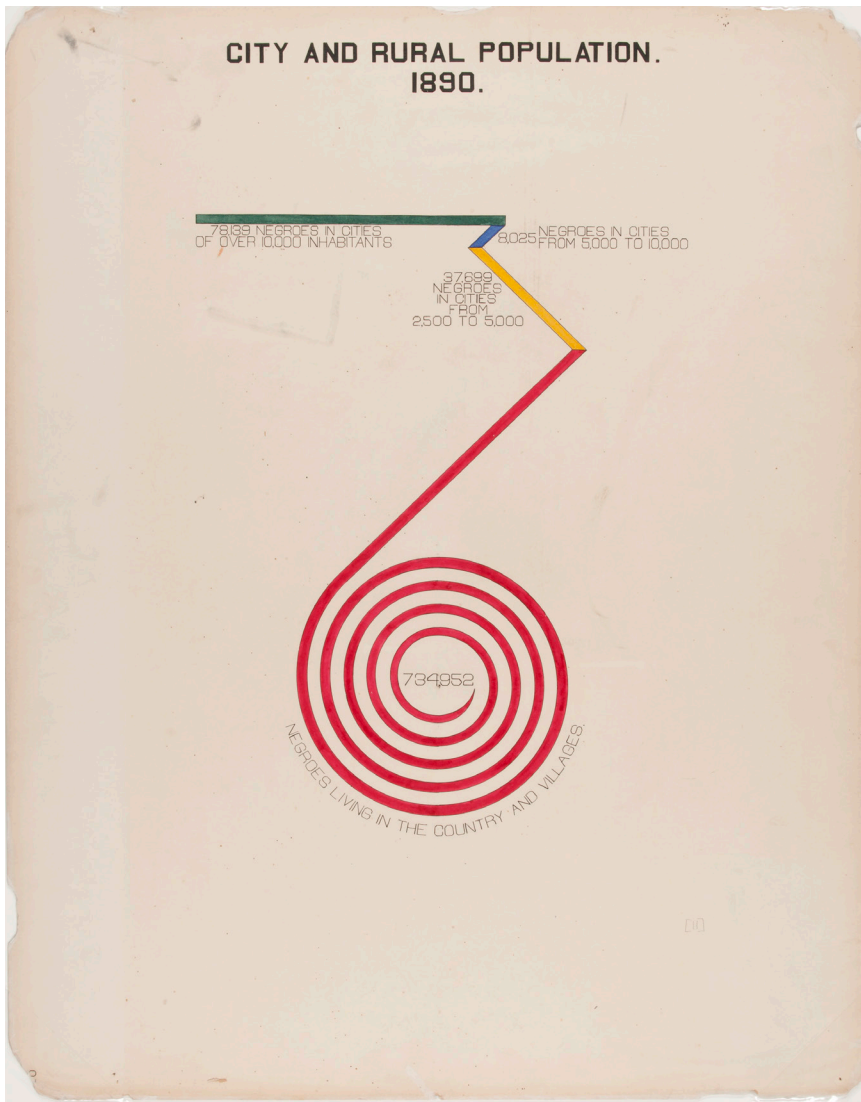
For *Printing Black America*, Ramani and Villalongo discussed each original Du Bois visualization with historian Nell I. Painter and in workshops at Clark Atlanta University's Center for Africana Digital Humanities. These discussions considered the original Du Bois work, and new realities that our time brings to his inquiries to raise probing questions of race and our collective existence.

Importantly, *Printing Black America* employs the means of mechanical reproduction in image-making—printmaking—that was contemporary with Du Bois's era, using various fine art printing techniques to create vivid imagery. *PBA* was editioned across a national network of printshops, from Graphicstudio in Tampa to Highpoint Center in Minneapolis, Island Press in St. Louis to Mollowney Printing in Portland, Paulson-Fontaine in San Francisco to Powerhouse Arts in Brooklyn.

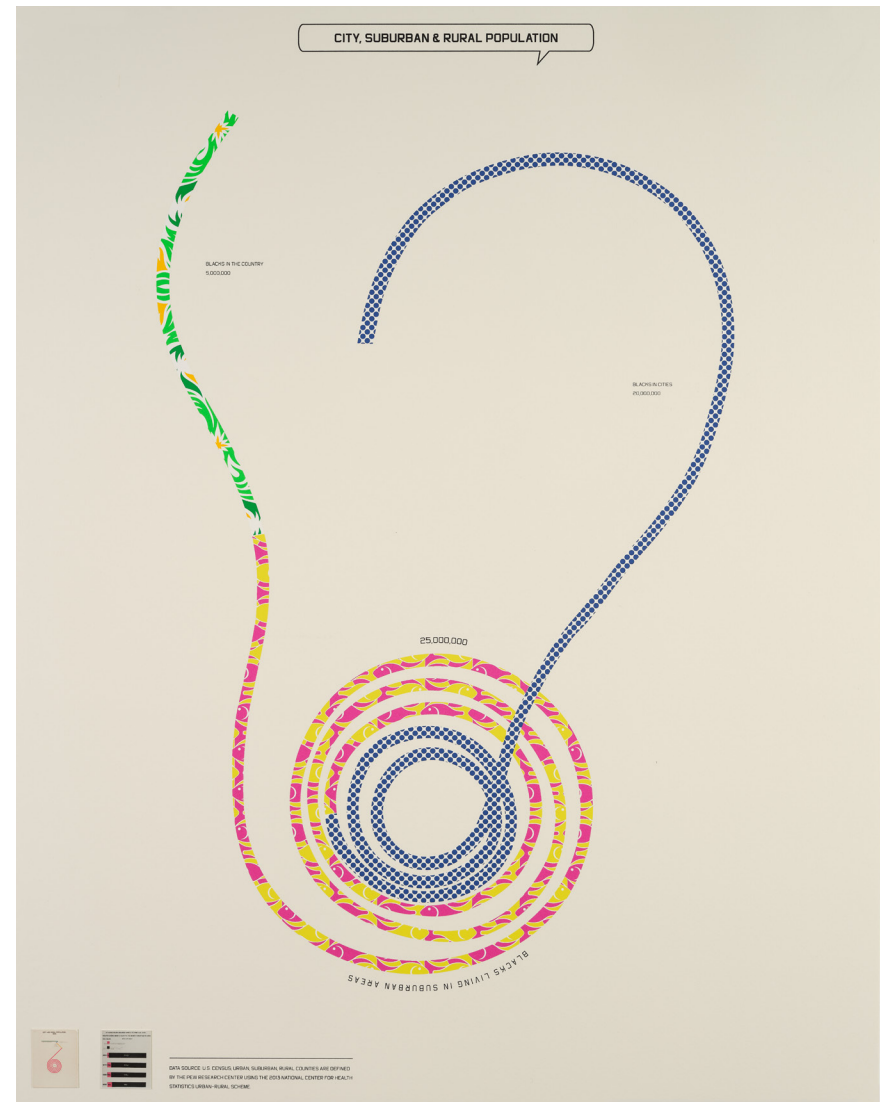
Progress is a slippery term. Again we find ourselves today in a moment of racial backlash and regression. Scholars, artists, activists, entrepreneurs, advocates, community members, educators, and citizens continue to rail against a myriad of forms of violence impacting BIPOC communities and the collective social fabric: racialized data surveillance, incarceration, police brutality, the diminishment of voting rights, gentrification, disparities in income, the dismantling of educational opportunity, and the erasure of Black history from school curricula. Alongside these assaults on Black life, the acknowledgment of the construction of race itself—as a capitalist enterprise benefiting a predominantly white ruling class—and the narratives of racial justice continue to be boldly asserted.

The celebration of Black culture and life was central to Du Bois's work. It is central, too, to *Printing Black America*. Like Du Bois's incisive inquiries, his demographic methodologies, and his fight for civil rights, *PBA* offers far more than a reinscription of the issue Du Bois named in his 1903 masterpiece, *The Souls of Black Folk*, the defining problem of the 20th century: the problem of the color line. Like its source, *Printing Black America*, gives visibility to the shapes of collective, creative resistance, and to Black joy, dignity, and continued self-determination.

—Cora Fisher,
Curator of Visual Art,
Brooklyn Public Library,
BPL Presents



W.E.B. Du Bois, *Data visualization*, circa 1900, Courtesy the Library of Congress.



William Villalongo and Shradha Ramani, *City, Suburban & Rural Population 2020, 2025*. Screenprint and digital pigment print collage. 28 x 22 in. Published by Pow-erhouse Arts, Brooklyn.

**W.E.B. DU BOIS, THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS,
AND THE GLADNESS OF STUDY**
DOMINIQUE JEAN-LOUIS

“John,” she said, “does it make every one—unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?”

He paused and smiled. “I am afraid it does,” he said.

“And, John, are you glad you studied?”

“Yes,” came the answer, slowly but positively.

—W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of the Coming of John,”

The Souls of Black Folk, 1903

This quote is a piece of dialogue from W.E.B. Du Bois’s foundational 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. The excerpt comes from a less-heralded short story in the publication, titled “Of the Coming of John.” The solemnity of this exchange has always struck me, especially considering its author at the time. Just 35 years old, he held a doctorate from Harvard, had completed a groundbreaking case study of Black life in Philadelphia, and returned from his award-winning presentation of photographs and data visualizations, “The Exhibit of American Negroes,” at the Paris Exposition in 1900. He was a scholar ascendant, a thought leader in the making. So why the ambivalence about the downside of study?

One clue is where the study for the exhibition took place. While working on the research project in Atlanta that produced these data visualizations, the brutal lynching of a Black man named Sam Hose took place just outside the city. When Du Bois first heard that a mob intended to lynch this man, he decided to write “a careful and reasoned

statement concerning the evident facts” to try to change the course of events. He began to walk his letter over to the local newspaper office...only to find the lynching had already happened, and in fact some of Hose’s remains were threateningly displayed in a shop window on the very street he was walking on. Carefully studying and making an informed case for justice had not stopped the murder. In fact, it only heightened the acute feeling of moral outrage. “One could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist,” he later reflected, “while Negroes were lynched, murdered, and starved.” So where does that leave someone whose great talent was to “study and learn lots of things”?

This question is meaningful to consider amidst these displays of Du Bois’s data visualizations installed here at Brooklyn Public Library, alongside the contemporary prints of Villalongo and Ramani that comprise *Printing Black America*. Brooklyn was the last place in America that he and his wife Shirley Graham Du Bois lived, before the couple permanently relocated to Ghana in 1961. In 1951, the Du Boises bought a residence from playwright Arthur Miller at 31 Grace Court in Brooklyn Heights. It would be from this home that the couple would follow the unfolding Civil Rights Movement, reading newspaper stories of Emmett Till’s murder and the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, seated under the sharp gaze of a nearly life-sized portrait of Frederick Douglass that they hung in their front parlor. I often walk by this residence, mere blocks from the Center for Brooklyn History. I think of this octogenarian, passing quiet hours in Brooklyn, perhaps reflecting back on the more than a half century of fighting ignorance and injustice—like John, did it still bring him unhappiness to continue collecting data, to continue bearing witness to injustice?

I hope, even at the end, Du Bois remained glad he studied. Not just for the pursuit of truth as an end unto itself, but the way he did it as an act of care. With “Of the Coming of John,” he doesn’t just craft an essay, he serves as a griot, conjuring a short story as an allegory. He doesn’t just craft charts and graphs with his Paris Exposition infographics, he brings every shade of the rainbow to the black and white of empirical data. He made the sacrifices necessary to study and to learn, but he brought new ways of seeing, understanding, and *feeling* the knowledge, from Atlanta to Brooklyn to Ghana to the ancestral plane. It may not always make us happy to study, but may we always feel glad we join him in that work.

DOMINIQUE JEAN-LOUIS is Chief Historian at Brooklyn Public Library’s Center for Brooklyn History.

KAROLE DILL BARKLEY

The “American Negro Exhibition” (ANE) in Paris at the 1900 World’s Fair was a great success, evidenced by the plethora of prizes, by the flurry of contemporaneous articles, and by the continued interest that its elements spark today. Contributors coalesced in a remarkable moment when national and community interests aligned to acknowledge, to examine, and to visually represent the progress of African Americans at the turn of the 20th century—just 35 years after the end of American enslavement. THE ANE was celebrated in Paris, and was highly complimented in the overall report to the US President by Ferdinand Wythe Peck (Commissioner-General of the United States to the Paris Expedition of 1900).

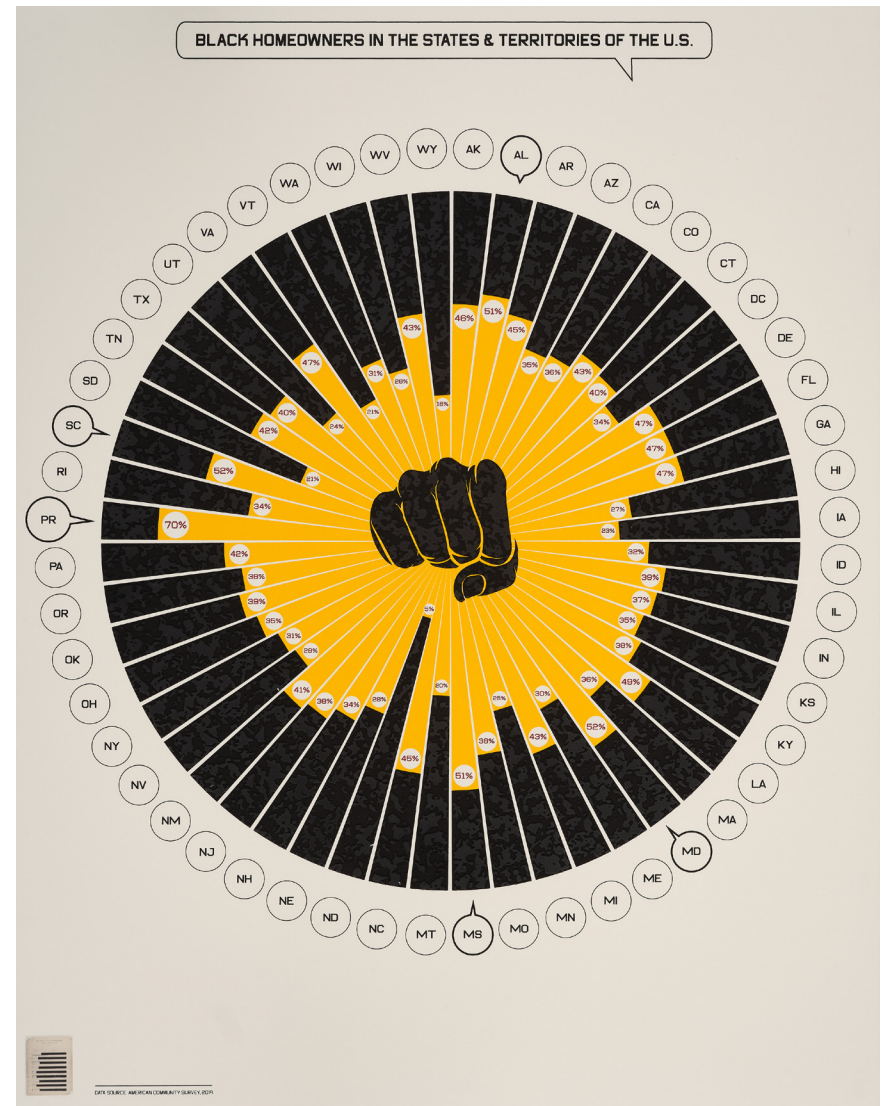
1900 Paris also offered an opportunity to show success from both sides of a complicated philosophical difference within education; that is, the debate between Booker T. Washington’s advocacy of basic education, trade skill development, and labor, as contrasted with the newly emerging Du Bois ideals of the *talented tenth*, the idea of an emerging professional elite that could and should be present and contributing in every discipline.

The success of the American Negro Exhibition began with Booker T. Washington’s advocacy and Thomas J. Calloway’s leadership, and leaned on tremendous contributions from W. E. B. Du Bois and Daniel A.P. Murray. Most importantly, the ANE demonstrated that African Americans, *united*, had made considerable progress and demonstrated many accomplishments. That included hundreds of books to pass on collective wisdom and hundreds of patents

demonstrating that more success was on the way. That Du Bois is so widely and sometimes solely credited today for the success of the *Exposition des Negres Ameriques* at Paris does not take away from the other organizers and the hundreds of other contributors and ideas that made the display such a resounding success. The awards also confirm that Calloway's objective for the ANE to "do a great and lasting good in convincing thinking people of the possibilities of the Negro"¹ was met to great acclaim within the community, on behalf of the US government, and in front of the world.

As you consider the various elements of the Exposition des Negres Ameriques at Paris—the books, data visualizations, patents, photographs, and other materials—what would you most want to explore further?

KAROLE DILL BARKLEY is a retired finance professional and Museum Studies student, based in Harlem. Her work on the ANE was completed for a course at Pratt Institute. Karole was born in Bed-Stuy, and her first library was BPL's Macon Library.



William Villalongo and Shraddha Ramani, *Black Homeowners in the States & Territories of the U.S., 2025*. Screenprint and digital pigment print collage. 28 x 22 in. Published by Graphicstudio, University of South Florida, Tampa.

1. Thomas J Calloway, *The Freeman*. (Indianapolis, IN) 14 Oct. 1899, p. 4. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/sn82016211/1899-10-14/ed-1/.

**BEYOND PROBLEM TO POSSIBILITY:
W.E.B. DU BOIS AND THE SOUL OF KNOWLEDGE
COREY D. B. WALKER**

“To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.” With these words in his 1903 classic *The Souls of Black Folk*, pioneering scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois refused to be defined as a problem. The problem lies in a society that would define Black existence in such terms. Du Bois’s conviction that Black life is not a problem is signaled by his silence—his refusal to “answer seldom a word.”

Du Bois’s silence is not acquiescence. It is a refusal to answer a false question. Du Bois firmly believed in the infinite possibilities of Black existence. Over the course of his life, he would explore these possibilities in multiple forms—autobiography, criticism, drama, fiction, history, journalism, memoir, poetry, and sociology. With his expansive vision of the possibilities of Black life, thought, culture and history, Du Bois sought to render this elegant truth visible to the world. The 1900 Paris Exposition offered Du Bois a global stage to share the spirit of a people and a deeper knowledge of humanity. Du Bois sought to reveal the knowledge of the soul of Black people. This knowledge would not conform to the dominant ideology imposed by a segregated society. With artistic power, ethical clarity, and imaginative depth, Du Bois would pioneer “data portraits” in rendering Black life legible to the world.

In so doing, the knowledge of the soul of Black people would expand the possibilities for human existence by teaching the world new ways of seeing all of humanity.

What new ways of knowing do you need to see to imagine a new world and a new humanity?

COREY D. B. WALKER is Dean of the School of Divinity and Wake Forest Professor of the Humanities at Wake Forest University.

Printing Black America: Du Bois's Data Portraits in the 21st Century is organized by Cora Fisher, BPL Curator of Visual Art, BPL Presents with William Villalongo and Shraddha Ramani. Exhibition essay contributions by Karole Dill Barkley, Stephanie Dinkins, Dominique Jean-Louis and Corey D.B. Walker. Karole Dill Barkley is Curatorial Researcher and contributor to the section on The American Negro Exhibition on view in Central Library's Languages & Literature. DuBois facsimiles printed by Picto.

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