When you hear the name W. E. B. Du Bois, what comes to mind? Perhaps you think of his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, or his storied conflict with Booker T. Washington over the best approach to racial justice. Maybe you recall his study *Black Reconstruction in America*, or his membership in the Communist Party and subsequent move to Ghana. Chances are that the image of Du Bois conjures thoughts about a cerebral intellectual, college professor, ardent activist, and brilliant author. But what if we think about Du Bois as a lecturer and speaker, as a public intellectual whose spoken words contributed as much to the quest for racial and economic justice as his written work did?

This article offers a brief overview of a richly documented yet largely overlooked and understudied aspect of Du Bois’s long and distinguished life: his annual lecture tours. Hundreds of his lectures and speeches survive in his archives at UMass Amherst and other collections around the country, as do his own observations about these public presentations. Enriching our understanding of these aspects of Du Bois’s life and career, black newspapers across the country such as the *Los Angeles Tribune*, *Broadax*, and *Washington Bee* reported on his speeches. This article utilizes numerous streams of primary source evidence; however, it draws significantly on the rich digital holdings of *African American Newspapers, 1827-1998*, and *African American Periodicals, 1825-1995*, to document several moments in the
fascinating history of Du Bois’s lecture tours.

The public talk for Du Bois was an event in which he worked out some of his key ideas or announced developments in his thinking. His work in public lectures and presentations began at his Fisk University and Harvard University commencements. At Fisk, he gave a talk on the German leader Bismarck in 1888, and two years later at Harvard the young scholar held forth on the necessity of democratic participation with remarks on Jefferson Davis. The more routine and regular speeches to local churches, learning societies, book clubs, as well as his annual tours, started after he took a job at Atlanta University in 1897. This practice continued through 1909, when Du Bois left for the NAACP in New York City, while it was also part of his second stint at Atlanta University from 1934 to 1944. In addition to his role as professor and scholar, Du Bois wrote new lectures and spent several weeks each spring and fall semester traveling across the country to spread his ideas. Between his teaching posts at Atlanta University, from 1910 until 1933, and then again during the years 1944 to 1948, Du Bois lectured to audiences on behalf of the NAACP. Coupled with his work as research director and editor of *The Crisis*, Du Bois crisscrossed America to speak on various topics connected to politics, economics, culture, and history. International travels also presented Du Bois with speaking opportunities, in locations such as Japan, Russia, and Germany.[1]

Given Du Bois’s competing responsibilities during the first half of his career, whether it was teaching college or working for the NAACP, there existed limits on the frequency of his lecture trips. Thereafter, starting in the 1930s he undertook a more extensive speaking schedule not only because he had bills to pay and family finances to consider, but also because his increasing identification with the radical left in the 1930s and 1940s rendered his institutional affiliations more difficult to obtain. After 1951, when anticommunists blacklisted and indicted Du Bois under suspicions that he worked for Moscow, he was part independent scholar, part public intellectual. He made ends meet by speaking, by writing newspaper columns, and by receiving book and publication royalties, and small pensions from Atlanta University and the NAACP.[2]

Du Bois’s reputation as a scholar and race leader brought frequent invitations to lecture. However, during the first few decades of his public career, he used agencies such as the Open Lecture Forum as well as the NAACP’s speaker’s bureau to book speaking engagements. Historian Arthur S. Meyers, the only scholar to address substantially Du Bois’s lecture tours, writes of the black intellectual’s visits
to both Indianapolis and Boston in the 1920s. Meyers comments on how Du Bois’s orations presented Progressive era statements calling for political change and moral formation. Otherwise, Du Bois hustled by writing to presidents of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, ordinary citizens he knew through the NAACP, or prominent black Americans across the nation, to offer lectures on topics of historical importance and contemporary relevance.[3]

The subjects on which Du Bois lectured varied as widely as the locations in which he delivered addresses. On some occasions, he repeated lectures, particularly if he had engagements several days in a row. However, more often Du Bois wrote new lectures, sometimes for a specific event like a college or high school commencement, sometimes in response to a world event such as a war or an election. Some of the more frequent topics included black history in the United States and the world; the necessity of black higher education to remain culturally relevant and scientifically sound; the opportunity associated with powerful black economic cooperation; imperialism, colonialism, post-colonialism; African history and culture; economic, political, and racial democracy; and, later in life, eulogies of friends, colleagues, and comrades.[4]

The history of Du Bois’s lecture tours appears in newspaper sources, most especially the black press. He documented routinely his extensive travels for public audiences in Horizon and The Crisis as well as his columns in Pittsburgh Courier, Amsterdam News, and Chicago Defender. Other leading black newspapers such as the Los Angeles Tribune and the Plaindealer also reported on Du Bois’s travels. In columns Du Bois identified where he lectured, the topics on which he spoke, the estimated the number of people in attendance, as well as his general thoughts and impressions of his visits.

Two examples illustrate the richness of everyday black history contained in black newspapers, and point to some of the wonderful recourse available through Readex’s Afro-Americana digital archives.
After a lecture tour in 1907, during which time he was a professor at Atlanta University, Du Bois wrote a short article in Horizon magazine titled “Journeying.” In it he recorded, “I have been journeying, and voices and faces have passed before me like the mirage of whispering winds. Souls, I have seen faintly, as perfume flies, and bodies beautiful, alluring, ugly, curious. I feel as though I had dipped me in the deeper world and thrown my naked form athwart foam-crested waves, kicked my feet against the muddied eddies of the shallow pool and the dark waters curling, lapping, cursing had clasped themselves behind me and forgotten. I have not forgotten, shall not forget, the whispering sea of dark, kindly faces at Bethel, Chicago; the colder, scanter curiousness at the University; the cosmopolitan catholicity of Hull House. I remember the great round pit of Carnegie Hall in New York and the silent, black coated throng that lined its floor, and the sweet, merry girl faces of St. Faith’s. Vaulted churches pass before me and the churchly, staid and doubting,

know it is unproven. You know that their innocence is so near proven that the nation sits dumb before their testimony. The nation is watching you. The black millions are waiting. Theodore Roosevelt, are you an honest man? If you are, speak!

JOURNEYING.

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Some of Du Bois’s audiences appreciated the perspective he labored to bring them, while others seemed hostile to his emphatic call for civil rights and racial equality. Although the lectures from his 1907 trip do not survive, reports in the black press provide additional snapshots of his journey. Chicago’s *The Broad Ax* covered Du Bois’s February visit to the city, where he lectured on Abraham Lincoln. The paper reported that the eminent scholar “eloquently eulogized the great emancipator,” spoke at the University of Chicago, and gave a talk on Frederick Douglass at Bethel Church. In Washington, D.C., as the *Washington Bee* explained, Horizon editor, attorney, and Niagara Movement associate L. M. Hershaw organized a dinner in honor of Du Bois who “was received with enthusiastic applause.” The *Bee* noted that in his dinner speech—a presentation “received with greatest enthusiasm and approval”—Du Bois covered his political and academic work after which he “gave an account of the audiences he had been addressing at the North, and the difficulties which confronted a speaker addressing such audiences.”[6]
During the 1950s, Du Bois continued to travel for lectures, and both his speeches and the black press documented this period particularly well. He stumped when he ran for the U. S. Senate, for example, and sometimes printed the text of his speeches or lectures as his weekly newspaper column, especially in the *National Guardian*. As Cold War anticommunism heated up during this decade, so did the U. S. government’s surveillance of the noted black scholar whose progressive politics incessantly called America to live fully up to its democratic creed. The massive FBI files on Du Bois document some of his presentations. Not only did the U. S. government track Du Bois’s publications, but also in 1951 and 1952, at the height of Du Bois’s anticommunist persecution, the FBI monitored his lectures in California. One informant relayed to the Bureau that in a June 1951 talk Du Bois “referred to the policies of the United States Government as an attack on civilization.”[7]
Travels to Chicago and California illustrate the political controversies that surrounded Du Bois’s resolute commitments to socialism and communism. In early 1958, a group of Chicagoans invited Du Bois for a lecture and a celebration of his ninetieth birthday where the invitation committee named him “Man of the Century.” A substantial crowd of 1000 gathered on May 21 at Dunbar High School for his lecture on business, economics, and politics. In the talk he proclaimed a faith in socialism and decried war; he advocated economic organization, fair wages, and cultural growth. The Plaindealer covered Du Bois’s trip to Chicago, and reported that in his presentation “He defended Communism as one way of achieving socialism” and “He challenged Negro Americans with the responsibility of taking the lead in the salvation of our civilization.”[8]

As the Los Angeles Tribune reported, Du Bois’s travels to the West Coast were far less celebratory, and immensely more combative. Controversy about lectures in 1958 and 1959 in San Francisco and Los Angeles centered on the extent to which...
local NAACP chapters supported or decried his open advocacy of socialism and communism. In a dilemma it dealt with starting in the late 1940s, the national office of the NAACP was loathe to associate with its founder due to Du Bois’s radical affiliations; local chapters experienced the political heat of this Cold War controversy as well. As the Association seemingly got cozier with Washington on a national stage, Du Bois’s Leftist positions made him one of Washington’s political targets. An April 15, 1958, article in the Tribune described the “NAACP a reluctant host to DuBois at [a] reception” in Los Angeles and that one of the black scholar’s presentations in Northern California had “torn the San Francisco branch asunder.” Moreover, a representative of the Los Angeles NAACP branch wrote to the Tribune in an effort to both embrace Du Bois but distance the chapter from Leftist politics. “I should also like to state for the record,” Maurice Dawkins stated in a letter to the editor, “that Communism and Communist sympathizers should not derive any aid or comfort from the fact that some of us who are non-Communist or Anti-Communist are intelligent enough to appreciate the pioneering efforts, the brilliant scholarship, and the historical significance of Dr. W.E.B. DuBois.”[9]
In November 1959, the Tribune gave Du Bois front-page space with the headline “See Russians as ‘people,’ too says DuBois in L.A. talk, bares NAACP snub.” The report noted Du Bois’s revelation that the NAACP in 1958 had stiff-armed its founder for an Association event, and commented on his lecture about Russia and China at First Unitarian Church in Los Angeles. The paper described his lecture as “a caustic, but earnest, plea for American recognition of people in the socialist countries as ‘people’ just like everybody else, who ‘laugh . . . cry, play, sing, love . . . as we do.’” About China, the Tribune continued, “Dr. Du Bois noted that the Chinese feel that the western nations stand for domination of backward countries and are filled with prejudices against non-white people.” Officially, the Tribune adopted a middle way between outright support of Du Bois’s comments and patent dismissal of them, as editor Almena Lomax remarked that “Somewhere between capitalism and communism there ought to be a chance for people.” Unlike Lomax, First Unitarian minister Stephen Fritchman gushed about Du Bois’s visit in a follow-up letter in late November. “Just a word of repeated gratitude to the Du Boises,” wrote the pastor,
“for the wonderful weekend they gave the Unitarians of Los Angeles and their friends. It was a triumph indeed and we all rejoice that you could make it.”[10]

In all, Du Bois’s spent nearly six decades as a public lecturer and sought after speaker. The speaking in which he engaged, whether to black or white or integrated audiences, constituted as important an impact as a public intellectual as his publications did. It is truly surprising that today, over five decades after Du Bois’s death, that his lecture tours, and the central role they played in his cultivation and growth as a public figure both respected and reviled, remain an under-examined part of his remarkable life. Vivid descriptions of Du Bois sprinkle the papers and archives of black thinkers and writers, white radical activists, justice organizations,
and the black press. The sound of his delivery of information, facts, and stories, collected in the memories of many who heard him speak, give voice to the impact of his historical presence. The weight of his ideas moved the hearts and animated the minds of those who shared a commitment to self-determination, economic democracy, and political equality. And the collective impact of the black intellectual’s longevity and legacy has inspired the actions of generations. W. E. B. Du Bois speaks still.

**Footnotes:**


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*Phillip Luke Sinitiere*

*College of Biblical Studies*

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*African American Newspapers*

*African American Periodicals*

*Los Angeles Tribune*

*Plaindealer*

*Broadax*

*Washington Bee*

*Lecture tours*

*The Crisis*

*Horizon*