

Reconstructing America, Reconstructing History: W.E.B. Du Bois' Vision of the United States after the Civil War

Context

This collection of documents from the W.E.B. Du Bois Papers helps students and teachers to explore:

- The role of African Americans in Reconstruction (1860–1880)
- The New Negro Movement (1920–1935)
- The use of source material in historical scholarship

Background and Introduction

Provide students with a brief overview of Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America*, and, if necessary, a brief biography of Du Bois. Consider assigning excerpts from *Black Reconstruction in America* such as Du Bois' preface, "To the Reader" or the summary of what American school children commonly learned about Reconstruction at beginning of Chapter XVII, "The Propaganda of History." Photographs from Du Bois' papers could also be used in an introductory presentation and are available on the UMass Special Collections and University Archives [web site](#).

Emphasize that *Black Reconstruction in America* was a major departure from previous writings about Reconstruction because:

1. It focused on the agency of African American in reconstructing American democracy, rather than treating freed slaves as a backdrop to a national political drama, and
2. It began with the assumption that "the Negro in America [...] is an average and ordinary human being [who] develops like other human beings."¹

In *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois explicitly refuted the assumption that African Americans were "distinctly inferior creation, who can never successfully take part in modern civilization." He implied that this assumption was held by many of his potential readers as well as historians who had previously written about Reconstruction.

Discussion

Distribute copies of the Du Bois letters available on *Source, Story, History*. Ask each student to examine one letter or set of correspondence and answer the following questions:

1. What are "the facts" of the document?
2. What does this document reveal about Du Bois' world in the early 1930s?
3. How was Du Bois' world different from our own?

After students have reviewed their document, open the floor to discussion. Project an image of the document for the entire class to see, while each student summarize his or her findings for the class.

1 See Du Bois' 1934 preface, "To The Reader," at the beginning of *Black Reconstruction in America*.

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Discussion (continued)

Guide the discussion to explore themes such as:

- The process of conducting historical research without the internet, and by extension, the difficulty Du Bois would have faced if he tried to access original sources in southern libraries and historical societies.²
- The reactions of readers, black and white, to *Black Reconstruction in America*, and the merits and limits of learning about the reaction to the book by looking at letters from Du Bois' papers.
- The connection between Du Bois' emphasis on African American agency in *Black Reconstruction in America* and the development of the New Negro Movement after World War I.³

Assignments and Additional Questions for Discussion

- Du Bois began researching and writing *Black Reconstruction in America* on the eve of the Great Depression, but inspiration for the book is rooted in the themes of the New Negro Movement: racial pride and fuller participation in American society. What evidence of the New Negro Movement can you find in this collection of documents?
- Imagine that some of the correspondence from Du Bois' readers had been published as an open letter in your local newspaper. Draft your own one-page letter, responding to both *Black Reconstruction in America* and the views of Du Bois' readers.
- Draft five questions this collection of documents does not answer about the process of writing, and the public reaction to, *Black Reconstruction in America*. List actual or hypothetical sources that would help answer these questions.
- Find the photograph Du Bois discusses with his publisher in June 1933. Review both Du Bois' and his publisher's opinions about using the photograph in *Black Reconstruction*. Write your own letter indicating whether or not the photograph should be included, and why.
- How does Du Bois' vision of Reconstruction compare to what you have learned about Reconstruction previously? How is Reconstruction presented in the text book for this course?

2 See David Levering Lewis' brief discussion of Du Bois' source material in his introduction to the 2007 Oxford Press edition of *Black Reconstruction in America* (xxvii).

3 Also see Lewis' introduction for a discussion of other publications, including *The Tragic Era*, a blatantly racist reading of Reconstruction, that inspired Du Bois to write *Black Reconstruction in America* (xxvi–xxviii).