Michelle Chen Ideas that Change the World

12/16/17 Honors 201H

Du Bois Final Research Paper

What do Du Bois’s handwritten edits tell us about his process of articulating his ideas, and is

there any difference between his ideas and the ideas he allows to be publicized? Additionally, is

there any information about Du Bois’s motivations and convictions we can gain from analyzing

the first drafts of his final autobiography? I first became curious about W.E.B. Du Bois’s

handwritten manuscript edits when I noticed copious amounts of them while handling primary

sources, primarily the first draft of Du Bois’s autobiography that was initially titled *A soliloquy*

*on viewing my life from the last decade of its first century*. This draft was created in 1958 when

Du Bois was ninety years old, and while later the title would begin as *The Autobiography of*

*W.E.B. Du Bois*, he states in the first draft that “this book then is the Soliloquy of an old man on

what he dreams his life has been as he sees it slowly drifting away; and what he would like

others to believe.”[[1]](#footnote-1) As a result, I saw Du Bois’s edits as indicators of the extent to which he was

willing to edit his original, often incendiary ideas for the public. It was also clear from this quote

that there was a drastic divide between this autobiography’s great importance to Du Bois himself

and the comparatively mild impact *A soliloquy* has had on how Du Bois has been memorialized.

This autobiography has often been overshadowed by *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) in

the American intellectual community and been excluded from the literary and historical canon

because Du Bois wrote it later in life, when he became a member of the Communist Party during

the Cold War. I chose to investigate his first draft of this ideologically charged autobiography in

hopes of discovering insights into its creation that may have been overlooked due to Du Bois’s

support of Communist ideas in the text and his reputation suffering because of this endorsement.

*The Autobiography* is Du Bois’s last work and significant for its wide span of his career as well

as the ideological positions within that explain Du Bois’s problematic reputation at the end of his

life.[[2]](#footnote-2) Additionally, I was intrigued by public discomfort around *The Autobiography*, which

brought up questions of authorship and editorializing despite similarities between its text and

passages in *The Souls of Black Folk* and other texts, and was fascinated by how these questions

have also been a controversial central trend of the African-American autobiography tradition.

Because many scholars have equally discounted *The Autobiography* on political grounds for its

pro-Communist views as for the bibliographical questions it raised historically[[3]](#footnote-3), Du Bois’s first

draft and edits seemed essential for me to research in order to gain unbiased insight into his

original ideas and what he later decided he would allow the public to know. In his edits, I found

trends where Du Bois would edit out certain incendiary statements while allowing his other

controversial beliefs to remain, and a tendency to emphasize the urgency of the African-

American experience in America while being careful about striking a balance between conveying

this urgency and depicting blacks as inherently capable of shaping their destinies. I drew

inspiration from Du Bois’s words that this text is a soliloquy of an old man “on what he dreams

his life has been…and what he would like others to believe,”[[4]](#footnote-4) which I thought was representative

of the first draft in the former half of his statement and showed his handwritten edits as his first

approach toward what he would like readers to believe. While the idea of first edits clarifying an

author’s purposes seems subjective, the edits themselves demonstrated that Du Bois was a

meticulous wordsmith who paid close attention to the subtle meanings behind everything he

wrote. Upon further investigation, this matched descriptions of Du Bois as a detail-oriented

writer, described as interviewing “thousands of residents…and closely and meticulously

examined every aspect of the black man’s life” for his “exhaustive study, *The Philadelphia*

*Negro*.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Du Bois’ awareness of the impact of his words, only gleaned from his first draft edits,

is confirmed from a description of his choice to focus his talents into race relations because

doing otherwise would have meant “a consequent upsetting of the careful balance between

intellect and emotion.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Because of the extensive correlations between what I interpreted through

his first draft edits and further research into his motivations, associating edits on first drafts with

the truth of what an author initially wants to communicate appears to be accurate for Du Bois’

writing and a potentially world-changing idea if applied to other detail-oriented authors as well.

My research process was extremely difficult, as I needed access to Du Bois’s original

notes and draft for *A Soliloquy*, an autobiography that in its final form is over four hundred

pages, and I had difficulty deciphering his handwriting so that at times I couldn’t read small

notes or needed to layer papers in order to read what he had written over two sheets of paper.

Additionally, I couldn’t find any formal research analyzing his first draft edits, and so my

conclusions are all assumptions based on the information I found about *The Autobiography* and

its historical context. As a result, I decided to focus on a few major edits that stood out to me.

For example, when Du Bois was describing the African-American position in intellectual

society, he crossed out “We could truthfully say that between 1900 and 1925, no work on the

Negro and no study of the South was published which was not indebted to the studies at Atlanta

University. The United States Census Bureau and the Federal Labor Bureau asked our help and

co-operation.”[[7]](#footnote-7) While he began this statement with “Our reports were widely read and

commented upon,” he omits the details of this success in order to continue that “On the other

hand, so far as the American world of science and letters was concerned, we never “belonged”;

we remained unrecognized in learned societies and academic groups.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This edit stood out as an

indicator of Du Bois’s motivations behind *A Soliloquy* – it appears that Du Bois believed in

emphasizing the urgency of African-American betterment to the point where he chose to exclude

details of his intellectual group’s success, possibly to convince the reader that there is still urgent

work to be done. This also led me down an interesting thread of research into Du Bois’s

hypocrisy – while I concluded that while Du Bois minimized the appearance of black success in

order to motivate readers to initiate immediate change, I thought that he also appeared

contradictory given his own success as an African-American intellectual, but then reconsidered

when I recognized that by the time of this draft Du Bois’s social standing had already suffered

because of his communist sympathies.[[9]](#footnote-9) In this edit, Du Bois strikes a fine balance between

recognizing African-American accomplishments and not expanding on them so much as to create

complacency in readers about black struggles. Du Bois also appears to make this idea a priority

elsewhere, which I discovered when comparing the motivations of the first drafts to those of the

final drafts. For example, in a final draft, he talks about his time as a professor at Wilberforce

University, describing a desperate fight against a bishop from an African Methodist church

attempting to force a new literature professor without warning upon the department. He and his

students are victorious, but Du Bois emphasizes that the Bishop had “power for life and no one

stayed at Wilberforce long when he did not like him” and that “none of his dreams would be

realized at Wilberforce.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Unedited in the final draft and echoing the motivations of the first

draft edits, the victory is incredibly brief and deemphasizes their accomplishments in favor of

demonstrating the work that is still undeniably necessary.

While Du Bois dedicated himself to the three ideologies of truth, honor, and goodwill in

*The Autobiography* and other texts, his life and creation of these texts involved a certain level of

selective memory with accrediting known peers for concepts and terms to a point that may be

considered today as literary piracy.[[11]](#footnote-11) Additionally, he shows an inability to completely embrace

black culture when during his first stint teaching at Atlanta University he states that he must take

the family somewhere north once a year to civilization, even though as a highly-educated black

man he could not find a professorship in the north.[[12]](#footnote-12) This failure to embrace black culture is also

seen in his conservative European upbringing in Great Barrington, adaptation to German culture,

and an inability to embrace African-American music beyond spirituals, which the Sorrow Songs,

a prominent feature in *The Souls of Black Folk,* are.[[13]](#footnote-13) This research revealed the complexity

behind Du Bois’s thought process, which was something I took into consideration while

analyzing *A Soliloquy.*

I also paid attention to some minor edits in his draft, such as how Du Bois replaced “The

newer emigrants did not want Negro cheap competing labor and did not regard these dark

strangers as fellow workmen” with “The newer emigrants were warned against Negro cheap

competing labor…”[[14]](#footnote-14) which seemed to me like a subtle way to emphasize how it wasn’t inherent

nature to hate blacks but a concept instilled by American culture. I also noted how the sections

with his opinions on Booker T. Washington were more heavily edited. For example, he crossed

out “Negroes who sought high positions groveled for Booker’s favor,”[[15]](#footnote-15) possibly to avoid

describing African-Americans as helpless using language implying servitude. At another point,

Du Bois describes his black students, editing the phrase “boys and girls, with rare

talent in voice and action,” to simply “boys and girls, with talent in voice and action.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Again,

this appears to be careful editing in order to avoid portraying talent in African-Americans as a

rare occurrence, which would fall into another stereotype laid out by American culture. Later, Du

Bois edits “These children had a right to attend the white schools, but they seldom did about

college” to “These students…”,[[17]](#footnote-17) which indicates his avoidance of using condescending

language to describe blacks as childlike, a harmful trope with roots in slavery, and reveals a

glimmer of one of his major motivations – to represent blacks as having a natural place within

education.

Despite Du Bois’s personal opinions, he still decides to exclude his most incendiary

statements, showing he still has some concern for public acceptance of his ideas. Additionally,

Du Bois uses techniques that can even be applied to the modern day – when he describes

Washington’s speech in a colored church and how he was heckled by editors of the Guardian, he

states that the “result was a disturbance magnified by the newspapers into a ‘riot.’”[[18]](#footnote-18) His addition

of the quotation marks around “riot” demonstrate his attempt to elucidate how the news

criminalize African-Americans by their use of language. Later, Du Bois uses a different

technique to evoke sympathy from the reader, when he edits “The merging of the white and

colored school systems into one, had thrown colored folk into uproar lest their control of their

own schools be eliminated” to include “and colored children not admitted to white schools”[[19]](#footnote-19) at

the end. This demonstrates his desire to describe African-Americans as equals with a need for

education instead of simply wanting control of institutions, and to evoke the urgency of the

situation with children at risk.

Additionally, I gained insight into Du Bois’s ideas about Pan-Africanism and

Communism in his edits. He edited “I warned the colored world about borrowing capital from

the west” to “I warned Africa…”[[20]](#footnote-20) which to me indicated his shift to a global perspective. While

this is already a controversial condemnation of capitalism, Du Bois deleted even more

provocative statements, showing that he truly did consider the public’s reaction. Du Bois crossed

out “Deny yourselves and wait. See whether or not the Communist lands may not offer you

better bargains” which may simply demonstrate his limited options at the time he wrote the first

draft of *A Soliloquy* – a few years before he moved to Ghana and fully became a member of the

Communist Party in 1961.[[21]](#footnote-21) Later, he remarks that “to make fear of Socialism and Communism

so great that we have withdrawn our efforts toward the education of children…this is what I call

decadence. It could not have happened fifty years ago. In the day of our fiercest controversy we

have not dared this publicly to silence opinion.” However, he edits out the phrases, “This is what

I call decadence. It could not have happened fifty years ago.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Despite scholars’ disregard for *A*

*Soliloquy* as a controversial text, examining Du Bois’ thinking is essential for bringing the text

back into serious academic consideration, especially as this edit also reveals his self-control in

voicing controversial thoughts and his humility about claiming expertise in certain fields, such as

literature, that he states that he does not have as much experience with.[[23]](#footnote-23) Much of *A Soliloquy*

deals with Du Bois’ rampant support of Communism, and there are still several sections of other

drafts I did not have time to cover in my research, so I believe that further investigation into his

writing progression and comparing the more sections of his first draft with his later drafts will

result in more insight into Du Bois’s conflicts in choosing between his original convictions and

the extent to which he is willing to publicize endorsing Communism with the backdrop of the

Cold War.

One of my major concerns in my research was the accuracy of using this method of

analyzing edits to probe at authorial motivations, especially as a broad idea that, when applied to

many different works of writing, may be socially significant and world-changing. Accordingly,

one of my major focuses was determining Du Bois’ own writing habits and relationships with

small details in his writing. One significant piece of support for my investigation occurred in a

final draft, where Du Bois describes a new institution at Wilberforce. He remarked on how it was

called ““a combined Normal and Industrial Department at Wilberforce University.” The witchery

in this wording lay in “Industrial” which lured the support of the followers of the rising Booker

T. Washington; and also in that little word “at” which made this University a department not

“of” Wilberforce, but “at” Wilberforce.” In addition to emphasizing the setbacks blacks faced

with every success, Du Bois’ own sensitivity to language and complex processing of each word

is directly stated. I was aided by secondary sources that provided accounts of his exhaustive

detail-oriented writing and obsessive editing. In this way, I concluded that using his edits to

determine his priorities while writing *A soliloquy* would be relatively accurate, given the

correlation between what I was able to analyze from the primary sources and information I later

learned from secondary sources. If new conclusions about Du Bois from his edits are found that

aren’t described in documents analyzing Du Bois’ life and thinking, it would then be likely that

they would be accurate discoveries, granting us new insight into Du Bois as a person and as a

writer. And if other writers’ edits were analyzed in accordance with their demonstrated

attentiveness to words, so that the level of detail with which one analyzes their edits matched

other accounts and evidence of the writers’ level of attention to those details, countless new

insights could be found.

In my research, Du Bois’s editing choices especially illuminated his minimization of black

success in order to convey urgency but also highlighted his hypocrisy as in *A Soliloquy* he

recounts his successes in his own education. This led me to research where else Du Bois was

hypocritical in the creation of *The Autobiography, w*hich included his omission of crediting

known colleagues and his inability to fully embrace black culture even as he promoted the

concept of the “color line,” a term first attributed to Frederick Douglass, who Du Bois failed to

cite.[[24]](#footnote-24) This was valuable for me to recognize the additional complexity behind Du Bois’s ideas

and helped me conceive of reasons behind his edits elsewhere, and historical context allowed me

to discover the boundary between what Du Bois’s true opinions were and his consideration of

what he thought the public would tolerate. Using all of this, I identified other motivations behind

his edits such as a tendency toward evoking urgency and sympathy in the reader for his cause

even at the expense of omitting facts, and his careful language use in describing African-

Americans so as to not provoke further prejudice.

Overall, this was a challenging but enriching area of research that led to new information

about Du Bois’s goals behind *A Soliloquy* as well as to a potential new method of discovering

more information about other authors’ intentions. For me, analyzing the small details in Du

Bois’s handwritten edits on his first draft was enlightening and satisfying given the text’s

scholarly neglect, despite its enormous position in Du Bois’s life as his swan song, declaration of

communist sympathies, and most simply, as an autobiography spanning ninety years of a

heavily-influential life. However, I experienced the challenge of ignoring edits only made for

clarity, and was especially lucky in coming to a satisfying conclusion to my research as I began

analyzing the edits at a level of great detail without knowing whether Du Bois had invested as

much attention into the wording of his work, which he fortunately did. I was also fortunate in

assuming that at his last work, *A soliloquy* would have a great level of importance to Du Bois as

one of his life’s most important writings, which began my investigation in the first place.

As his final edit on the final draft of his last autobiography, Du Bois changes his ending phrase

“there is no Hope but Deed, there is no Dream but Memory” to “there is no Dream but Deed,

there is no Deed but Memory.” Du Bois is subtle but emphasizes the word “deed,” again pushing

his desire to spur action in race relations as one of his primary purposes in writing *A soliloquy.*

By analyzing an author’s edits at the same level of his own analysis of his words, the

misconception of many works in academia can be reduced by offering a direct pathway to

understanding what writers want to communicate at the very beginning, and how this may be

different from what people actually take away from it by only reading the final version.

Ultimately, this is a delicate but potentially world-changing process of understanding

authorial intent, especially for previously neglected texts – by thinking like the author from the

earliest stages of creation, one can communicate with the author behind the veil of time.

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