W. E. B. Du Bois

1868-1963

W. E. B. Du Bois was probably the most famous black intellectual and scholar in the history of the western world. He was a prolific author, publishing novels, poems, and studies such as Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880 *(1935),* The Philadelphia Negro *(1897),* John Brown *(1909), and* Black Folk: Then and Now *(1939). His most influential book, arguably the most seminal book written by an African American, was a collection of essays titled* The Souls of Black Folk *(1903), required reading in most colleges and universities today. Du Bois, who became famous in the arena of racial politics at the turn of the century as one of Booker T. Washington's most formidable critics, helped launch the Niagara Movement (1905) that led to the founding of the NAACP (1909), the oldest civil rights organization in the United States. Du Bois served as the editor of the organization's* Crisis *magazine from 1911 to 1934. Du Bois was also, at various times in his career, a college professor. He was one of the earliest black intellectuals to believe in the power of the social sciences to solve the race problem.*

The NAACP, since its inception, sent investigators to gather information on virtually all racial disturbances in the United States. Indeed, as in the case of Walter White, who became the executive director of the NAACP in the 1930s, it was not unusual for the organization to send light-skinned blacks undercover to gather information on lynchings and terrorist acts against blacks in the South. The East St. Louis riot of 1917 was one of many racial disturbances that occurred around the time of World War I (quite a number happened immediately after the war and many of them occurred in the North and the Middle West) and is still considered one of the worst. It must be understood that nearly all race riots that occurred in the United States before World War II were attacks by white mobs on black citizens and local black communities; usually some alleged criminal act by an individual black served as a pretext. They were in effect miniature race wars and were decidedly different in character and sociological meaning than the riots that were centered in post-1950s urban black communities that mostly took place in the summer and where the pretext was some alleged act of police brutality. Du Bois and a white woman colleague were sent to East St. Louis right after the riot to gather eye-witness information about the incident. Here are excerpts from their report.

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The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 70 Fifth Avenue, New York, sent Martha Gruening and W. E. Burghardt Du Bois to East St. Louis, as special investigators of the recent outrages. These two collected in person the facts and pictures from which this article is compiled.

On the 2nd of July, 1917, the city of East St. Louis in Illinois added a foul and revolting page to the history of all the massacres of the world. On that day a mob of white men, women and children burned and destroyed at least $400,000 worth of property belonging to both whites and Negroes; drove 6,000 Negroes out of their homes; and deliberately murdered, by shooting, burning and hanging, between one and two hundred human beings who were black.

Such an outbreak could not have been instantaneous. There must have been something further reaching even than an immediate cause to provoke such a disaster. The immediate cause usually given is as follows: On the evening of July 1, white "joy riders" rode down a block in Market Street, which was inhabited by Negroes, and began to fire into the houses. The Negroes aroused by this armed themselves against further trouble. Presently a police automobile drove up containing detectives and stopped. The Negroes thinking that these were the "joy riders" returning opened up fire before this misunderstanding was removed, and two of the detectives were killed. Some of the policemen were in plain clothes.

One naturally wonders why should the white "joy riders" fire in the first place. What was their quarrel with the Negroes? In answering that question we get down to the real story. It is here we meet with the facts that lay directly back of the massacre, a combination of the jealousy of white labor unions and prejudice.

East St. Louis is a great industrial center, possessing huge packing and manufacturing houses, and is, therefore, one of the biggest markets in the country for common unskilled labor. The war, by the deportation of white foreign workers, caused a scarcity of labor and this brought about the beginning of a noticeable influx of Negroes from the South. Last summer 4,500 white men went on strike in the packing plants of Armour & Co., and Negroes from the South were called into the plants as strike-breakers. When the strike ended the Negroes were still employed and that many white men failed to regain their positions. The leaders of various labor unions realized that the supply of Negroes was practically inexhaustible and that they were receiving the same wages as their white predecessors and so evidently doing the same grade of work. Since it was increasingly possible then to call on as many black strike-breakers as necessary, the effectiveness of any strike was accordingly decreased. It was this realization that caused the small but indicative May riots. Evidently, the leaders of the labor unions thought something must be done, some measure sufficiently drastic must be taken to drive these interlopers away and to restore to these white Americans their privileges. The fact that the Negroes were also Americans meant nothing at such a time as this.

The leader of a labor union must be an opportunist. The psychology of any unskilled laborer is comparatively simple. To the knowledge then that his job is being held by an outsider add his natural and fostered prejudice against an outsider who is black and you have something of the mental attitude of the rioters of East St. Louis. Doubtless it was with some such prophetic vision as this that Edward F. Mason, secretary of the Central Trades and Labor Union, issued a letter, the facsimile of which appears on the opposite page.

One point in particular is emphasized, that of color: "The Southern Negro," writes Mr. Mason, "has come into our community. No less than ten thousand of undesirable Negroes," he continues, "have poured in and are being used to the detriment of our white citizens." There is the appeal direct to prejudice. It is not that foreigners—Czechs, Slovaks, Lithuanians—or whatever ethnic division is least indigenous to East St. Louis—it is not that *they* are ousting Americans of any color or hue, but the "Southern Negro," the most American product there is, is being used "to the detriment of our white citizens."

Mr. Mason has no hesitancy in suggesting "that some action should be taken to retard this growing menace" and "to get rid of a certain portion of those who are already here." Was not Mr. Gompers' excuse in Carnegie Hall a faint echo of all this?

Mr. Mason wants to be fair. "This is not a protest against the Negro who has been a long resident"—so runs his superb English—"of East St. Louis, and is a law-abiding citizen of the state." In East St. Louis labor leaders are the arbiters of legal conduct and therefore 10,000 Negroes become undesirable citizens because they are strike-breakers and black.

That the July riot grew out of the meeting called by Mr. Mason (see facsimile), we are not prepared to say; but that it grew out of this attitude is only too apparent. By all accounts of eye-witnesses, both white and black, the East St. Louis outrage was deliberately planned and executed.

Says Richard L. Stokes, writing in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* for Sunday, July 8:

> On the night of May 28th a delegation of about 600 union men marched to the City Hall to appeal to the authorities to prevent the importation of any more Negroes. Among them were many of the Aluminum Ore Company strikers. They took possession of an auditorium, and some of the leaders made speeches advising that in case the authorities took no action, they should resort to mob law.

When genuine mob law did finally reign on July 2, the scenes were indescribable. Germany has nothing on East St. Louis when it comes to "frightfulness." Indeed in one respect Germany does not even approximate her ill-famed sister. In all the accounts given of German atrocities, no one, we believe, has accused the Germans of taking pleasure in the sufferings of their

victims. But these rioters combined business and pleasure. These Negroes were "butchered to make" an East St. Louis "holiday."

Carlos F. Hurd, an eye-witness, realizes this fact and speaks of it in the article which he publishes July 3 in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, of which he is a staff-reporter. Mr. Hurd writes:

> A mob is passionate, a mob follows one man or a few men blindly; a mob sometimes takes chances. The East St. Louis affair, as I saw it, was a man hunt, conducted on a sporting basis, though with anything but the fair play which is the principle of sport. The East St. Louis men took no chances, except the chance from stray shots, which every spectator of their acts took. They went in small groups, there was little leadership, and there was a horribly cool deliberateness and a spirit of fun about it.
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> 'Get a nigger,' was the slogan, and it was varied by the recurrent cry, 'Get another!' It was like nothing so much as the holiday crowd, with thumbs turned down, in the Roman Coliseum, except that here the shouters were their own gladiators, and their own wild beasts.

He goes on with another horrible account of which he was also an eye-witness:

> A Negro, his head laid open by a great stone-cut, had been dragged to the mouth of the alley on Fourth Street and a small rope was being put about his neck. There was joking comment on the weakness of the rope, and everyone was prepared for what happened when it was pulled over a projecting cable box, a short distance up the pole. It broke, letting the Negro tumble back to his knees, and causing one of the men who was pulling on it to sprawl on the pavement.
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> An old man, with a cap like those worn by street car conductors, but showing no badge of car service, came out of his house to protest. "Don't you hang that man on this street," he shouted. "I dare you to." He was pushed angrily away, and a rope, obviously strong enough for its purpose, was brought.
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> Right here I saw the most sickening incident of the evening. To put the rope around the Negro's neck, one of the lynchers stuck his fingers inside the gaping scalp and lifted the Negro's head by it, literally bathing his hand in the man's blood.
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> 'Get hold, and pull for East St. Louis!' called a man with a black coat and a new straw hat, as he seized the other end of the rope. The rope was long, but not too long for the number of hands that grasped it, and this time the Negro was lifted to a height of about seven feet from the ground. The body was left hanging there.

These accounts make gruesome reading, but they are all true. Hugh L. Wood

paints in the *St. Louis Republic* another horrible picture. He says:

> A Negro weighing 300 pounds came out of the burning line of dwellings just north and east of the Southern freight house. His hands were elevated and his yellow face was speckled with the awful fear of death.
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> "Get him!" they cried. Here was a chance to see suffering, something that bullets didn't always make.
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> So a man in the crowd clubbed his revolver and struck the Negro in the face with it. Another dashed an iron bolt between the Negro's eyes. Still another stood near and battered him with a rock.
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> Then the giant Negro toppled to the ground. "This is the way," cried one. He ran back a few paces, then ran at the prostrate black at full speed and made a flying leap.
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> His heels struck right in the middle of the battered face. A girl stepped up and struck the bleeding man with her foot. The blood spurted onto her stockings and men laughed and grunted.

And here is the testimony of Narcis Gurley, who had lived for seventy-one years to come at last to this. She says that she has lived in East St. Louis for thirty years and had earned her living by keeping roomers and as a laundress. She says:

> Between five and six o'clock we noticed a house nearby burning and heard the men outside. We were afraid to come outside and remained in the house, which caught fire from the other house. When the house began falling in we ran out, terribly burned, and one white man said, "Let those old women alone." We were allowed to escape. Lost everything, clothing and household goods.

Testimony of Samuel J. Green, age 34 years:

> I lived with my wife in East St. Louis; we have no children. I was born in Alabama and attended school through the fourth grade. I came to East St. Louis last October in search of better wages and better treatment from the white folks. I worked for the Loomin Owin Company; I received $3 for eight hours' work. I rented our home; I paid $10 a month rent. Before the riot things were fine, but on Sunday the rioting began. At night when I was going home from work I got off the car right into the thickest of the rioters. I ran and they chased me, firing at me all the time. I saw the state guards but they were helping the mob to club the Negroes. It is wonderful how I escaped unhurt. I hid in the weeds and was lost to the mob. It was about ten o'clock Monday when I saw the state guards clubbing the colored people. I shall stay here a while, then I shall go farther north.

Testimony of Robert Hersey, age 20 years:

> I have lived in East St. Louis since the 25th of March, 1917. I came here because of bad treatment and poor wages. I worked in a tobacco factory in St. Louis, Mo., and received two dollars a day.
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> Before the riot everyone seemed friendly toward me. I never got into the thickest of the men or riot, but they hit me with clubs, bricks, and stamped me on the head. They broke my arm. But for all of that I got away from them.
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> I shall never return to the South whatever may happen to me here, for in the South it is always killing and burning some of our people. No let up on bad treatment and no wages either. Men must work for eighty cents a day, women for fifty cents a week, and if the whites choose not to pay that, they won't do it. I shall stay in St. Louis, Mo.

The damning statements go on and on. Among the Negroes one finds a note sometimes of blank stark despair. John T. Stewart in the *St. Louis Star* draws a pathetic picture:

> One aged Negro woman passed the police station carrying in her arms all that mob spirit and fire had left of her belongings. They consisted of a worn pair of shoes—she was barefooted—an extra calico dress, an old shawl and two puppies. Tears were streaming down her face and she saw neither soldiers nor her enemies as she passed beneath the lights of the City Hall, going she knew not where.

Saddest of all is Miss Gruening's account of the old woman whom she saw poking about in the desolate ruins of what had once been her home. Her family had escaped to St. Louis, but not a fraction of their possessions remained intact. The woman was old—sixty-five—not an easy age at which to begin life anew.

"What are we to do?" she asked Miss Gruening. "We can't live South and they don't want us North. Where are we to go?"

From the statements gathered by the investigators, many of these driven people seem to feel that the example of the South in dealing with Negroes is responsible for the methods of East St. Louis. Many of them express firmly their resolve, in spite of all, never to go back South. They will stay in St. Louis, they say, or push further North.

How does East St. Louis feel? According to all accounts she is unrepentant, surly, a little afraid that her shame may hurt her business, but her head is not bowed.

In this connection Miss Gruening supplies the statement of East St. Louis Postman No. 23, who said: "The only trouble with the mob was it didn't get niggers enough. You wait and see what we do to the rest when the soldiers go. We'll get every last one of them."

Henry Dumas

1934-1968

Born on July 20, 1934, in Sweet Home, Arkansas, Henry Lee Dumas packed his brief life with potent poetry, fables, vignettes, literary and social activism, teaching, varied travels, enduring friendships, and illuminating experiences before he was killed suddenly—and mysteriously—by a New York City Transit policeman, in the subway, on May 23, 1968. Notable among his experiences and travels were his upbringing in Harlem, graduation from Commerce High School, study at City College of New York, a stint in the U.S. Air Force, more study at Rutgers, marriage and two sons—David and Michael, and work as a developer of little magazines: Umbra, Camel, American Weave, Untitled, Hiram Poetry Review, Negro Digest, *and* Collection. *These experiences also included civil rights activism, Hiram College Upward Bound, the Black Arts Circuit and Southern Illinois University's Experiment in Higher Education in East St. Louis, where he spent 1967–68 as a teacher-counselor and director of language workshops.*

*The "cult" of Henry Dumas has emerged and mushroomed since his death and with the publication of five volumes of his stories and poems—*Ark of Bones *(1970)*; Play Ebony Play Ivory *(1974)*; Jonoah and the Green Stone *(1976)*; Rope of Wind *(1979)*; *and* Goodbye, Sweetwater *(1988). In the summer of 1988 a special edition of* Black American Literature Forum *was published. It contained work on Henry Dumas by several dozen leading writers and critics, including Maya Angelou, Quincy Troupe, John A. Williams, Arnold Rampersad, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ishmael Reed, Imamu Amiri Baraka, Margaret Walker, and Clyde Taylor.*

Henry Dumas's widow, Loretta Dumas, and son Michael, live in Somerset, New Jersey, where Mrs. Dumas is a staff member of the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.

—Eugene B. Redmond

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Son of Msippi

Up
from Msippi I grew.
(Bare walk and cane stalk
make a hungry belly talk.)
Up
from the river of death.
(Walk bare and stalk cane
make a hungry belly talk.)

Up
from Msippi I grew.
Up
from the river of pain.

Out of the long red earth dipping, rising,
spreading out in deltas and plains,
out of the strong black earth turning
over under the iron plough,

out of the swamp green earth dripping
with moss and snakes,

out of the loins of the leveed lands
muscling its American vein:
the great Father of Waters,
I grew
up,
beside the prickly boll of white,
beside the bone-filled Mississippi
rolling on and on,
breaking over,
cutting off,
ignoring my bleeding fingers.

Bare stalk and sun walk
I hear a boll-weevil talk
cause I grew
up
beside the ox and the bow,
beside the rock church and the shack row,
beside the fox and the crow,
beside the melons and maize,
beside the hound dog,
beside the pink hog,
flea-hunting
mud-grunting,
cat-fishing
dog pissing
in the Mississippi
rolling on and on,
ignoring the colored coat I spun
of cotton fibers.

Cane-sweat river-boat
nigger-bone floating.

Up from Msippi
I grew,
wailing a song with every strain.

Woman gone woe man too
baby cry rent-pause daddy flew.

Eugene B. Redmond
1937-

Eugene Redmond is professor of English and former chair of creative writing at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville—his alma mater. An East St. Louis native, Redmond was appointed Poet Laureate of the city in 1976, the same year Doubleday published Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry, A Critical History. *He is editor of numerous books and author of six volumes of poetry, including* Eye in the Ceiling: Selected Poems *(1991), which was awarded an American Book Award (from the Before Columbus Foundation) for Excellence in Multicultural Literature in 1993. Currently, he is founder and editor of* Drumvoices Revue *and associate editor of* Literati Internazionali *and* The Original Chicago Blues Annual. *Since 1968, he has been literary executor of the Henry Dumas Estate, collaborating with Toni Morrison and others in bringing out seven collections of Dumas's poetry and prose. In 1986, a group of East St. Louis authors formed the Eugene B. Redmond Writers Club in his honor. The poems included are "Carryover" and the Prologue to "Milestone: The Birth of an Ancestor," which he read at the funeral of Miles Davis, both taken from* Drumvoices Revue, *and "A Tale of Two Toms (or Tom-Tom)" taken from a pamphlet from the late 1960s.*

■ ■ ■

Carryover

(Thinking about Jimmy Dixon, Clarence Nelson and Darnell Sullivan)

I have been tattooed for life:

A thought called EAST SAINT LOUIS

Is etched on each Island of my Brain.

EAST SAINT LOUIS will rise!

Will rise from the muddy gutty Mississippi.

Will rise disguised as AFRICA.

WILL RISE!

WILL RISE THROUGH MIND-EYES