We discovered W. E. B. Du Bois at very different points in our careers, and we want to share with you our academic journeys into Du Boisian sociology. Defined in its simplest terms, Du Boisian sociology is a sociological approach that draws from the theoretical and methodological tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois and puts racism and colonialism at the center of the understanding of modernity. In telling how each of us encountered Du Bois, we follow a key Du Boisian insight, which is that lived experience is a basis for reflection about society. In his 1940 book *Dusk of Dawn*, aptly subtitled *An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, Du Bois reflects on his own life to illuminate questions of race and racism. Du Bois, who lived from 1868 to 1963, a period of profound social change that begins with the post–Civil War Reconstruction era and ends with the peak of the American civil rights movement, argues that the value of his life lies not in its details, compelling as they may be, but in its reflection of the broader problem of race during his lifetime.

W. E. B. Du Bois was a seminal figure in American sociology, a major figure in American arts and letters, a prolific scholar, and one of the nation’s most influential Black political leaders and organizers for more than half a century. And yet, despite its critical importance, especially for the understanding of the making of the modern world, his work, almost from the start, has been largely ignored by sociologists. To be sure, sociologists knew about his work. After all, when the Department of Sociology of the University of Pennsylvania needed a scholar to conduct research on the city’s Black community, they hired Du Bois. Furthermore, the Bureau of Labor Statistics also contracted him to conduct research on African American communities. And some of his contemporaries cited his writings. Yet, he could only find jobs in historically Black institutions, and as the discipline institutionalized in Chicago, Du Bois’s work was marginalized. This historical erasure of Du Bois was
largely due to prejudice and racism. W. E. B. Du Bois entered a profession that had little to no interest in what a Black person had to say about society.

Like Du Bois, we want to share our own histories, not because they are particularly interesting but because they reflect a problem in the field of sociology—that a study of Du Bois’s works is not included in our discipline, despite the fact that he himself was a sociologist. Our experiences were very different, but both of us have this in common: Neither of us discovered Du Bois as part of our training as sociologists.

Karida Brown: Finding Du Bois in My Homes away from Home

I discovered Du Bois in my second year of graduate school, at Brown University, when I was twenty-eight years old. It was at that point that so many doctoral students confront the path that lies ahead of them—that watershed moment when many of us decide whether we will stay in academia or fight the good fight in some other space. During that time I constantly asked myself, What am I doing here? Does any of this even matter? Can I even belong here, in this institution, in this discipline? I, a Black, cis-gender woman, a low-income, first-generation college student, discovered the writings of Du Bois later than I should have, yet fortunately for me at the time in my life when I needed him most. I needed to know that there was room for me and the world in which I lived in the discipline of sociology.

My first encounter with Du Bois occurred when I read *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of essays on race published in 1903 that introduced his seminal concept of “double consciousness” and went on to become a classic work of American literature. That book awakened something in my brain that up until that point had lain dormant. In fourteen short essays and what he called a “forethought,” Du Bois eloquently gave words to all the intangible meanings of being a Black person in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. His prose was clear yet lyrical, his arguments subtle yet full of force, and embedded in every sentence was a plain old truth. W. E. B. Du Bois spoke to my own soul. Imagine my surprise when I learned that he too had been a sociologist, and that *The Souls of Black Folk* was one of the early works in the field.
I was surprised because I did not encounter Du Bois in my own department but rather in the Department of Africana Studies. I was surprised because I did not know that people could write so vividly and intimately and still be allowed to call themselves sociologists. I was surprised to realize that *The Souls of Black Folk* was not a mere one-hit wonder but that Du Bois had written, spoken, and curated art, theater, and performances prodigiously, and that there exists a vast body of secondary literature on his life and work. I was pleasantly surprised and even comforted to learn that there was such a thing as a Du Boisian sociology that I could study and incorporate into my scholarly work, and that it had been there all along, hidden in plain sight.

If I were to describe what kind of sociology graduate student I was, I would say that I was at best middling. I came to class, read most of the assigned readings, and wrote cogent enough papers. In my theory courses I read my fair share of the work of white guys we were all supposed to read and cite—Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Émile Durkheim—and to add some “contemporary” flair to the mix, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Bruno Latour. Because I was personally curious about research methods, I took as many courses in that area as I could, not just the required introductory statistics and field methods courses but also courses in event history analysis, legal history, demographic techniques, and geographic information systems. I also took almost every demography course my program had to offer; in fact, I spent two years as a fellow at Brown’s Population Studies and Training Center. Nothing that I ever did or said in class was remarkable. And yet, during my years of coursework, I struggled to find meaning in what I was learning. For me, the purpose of earning a PhD was to do something meaningful with it. I needed stakes.

I found those stakes in my “shadow” PhD program at Brown. That is, in the courses I took in Africana studies and comparative literature, in my weekly discussions as a fellow at Brown’s Cogut Center for the Humanities, in independent studies with insurgent intellectuals around campus, in conversations with members of my graduate student community, and in every single course, discussion, and program that Professor B. Anthony Bogues offered during my time at Brown, I was repeatedly exposed to the key works of critical theory that helped me develop an intellectual framework to make sense of the world. It was in
those spaces that I was introduced to Du Bois’s books *Souls of Black Folk*, *Black Reconstruction in America*, and *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, along with seminal texts written by such intellectuals as Sylvia Wynter, Audre Lorde, Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Cesairé, Hannah Arendt, and Sigmund Freud.

It was also in those spaces that I earned my informal PhD in both the Black Radical Tradition and critical theory. By my fourth year of graduate school, I was coming into my own as an intellectual. I had identified a dissertation project that offered the stakes I had been looking for, I had made friends and found colleagues within the academy, and I had become fluent in a language that gave meaning to the social issues that interested me most. However, I was still unsure about how to transform my newfound intellectual prowess into actual scholarship. Thank God for José. José Itzigsohn was my dissertation chair, and he too shared a deep interest in the sociology of Du Bois. A watershed moment for me occurred when he invited me to cowrite an article on Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness—the sensation of forming one’s identity by “seeing oneself through the eyes of the other.”

It was through a close reading of Du Bois and his contemporaries, including William James, George Herbert Mead, and Charles Horton Cooley, and then engaging in deep discussion about our ideas and putting pen to paper that I began to understand what it meant to publish a journal article as opposed to writing a term paper. We worked on the article for nearly a year, and the resulting piece, titled “Sociology and the Theory of Double Consciousness: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Theory of Racialized Subjectivity,” was published in the *Du Bois Review* in the fall of 2015. What I didn’t know while we were collaborating on the article was that José had been thinking for more than a decade about writing a book about Du Bois’s sociological program. From one generous invitation to collaborate on an article came another. This book is the result.

José Itzigsohn: Encountering Du Bois by Chance

I encountered Du Bois much later in my academic career than Karida did, and the incorporation of his work into my sociological practice was longer and more tortuous than hers. I acquired my PhD without reading Du Bois, in fact without even knowing who he was. My first job was
as a postdoctoral visiting professor teaching Latin American studies at both Brown and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. At U Mass Amherst I quickly learned that its main library was named the W. E. B. Du Bois Library. I also realized that several professors and students took pride in the fact that the university housed Du Bois’s archives.

All these piqued my curiosity about who Du Bois was. I started reading his works, learning about the man himself, and trying to fill a gap in my education. I was then in my mid-thirties. It is unsettling to know that had I not taught those two semesters at Amherst, I might have gone through my entire career without knowing of Du Bois’s relevance to the discipline of sociology, that is, until the publication in 2016 of Aldon D. Morris’s ground-breaking work, *The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*. However, not all the sociologists who pass through U Mass Amherst become Du Boisian sociologists. Perhaps it was the fact that growing up in Argentina I had already encountered the works of Frantz Fanon in my parents’ bookshelves, or that I had had the good fortune of reading C. L. R. James’s *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* in a Latin American history course as an undergraduate, or that what initially attracted me to sociology was the Latin American version of dependency theory that made me immediately realize the sociological importance of Du Bois. In any case, my desire to learn about Du Bois’s work was further stimulated when I got a tenure-track position at Brown’s Sociology Department as part of an effort to establish an ethnic studies program.

My colleague Paget Henry, who has been a source of inspiration during all these years, encouraged me to teach the introduction to ethnic studies course, and it was at that point that I started to teach Du Bois in undergraduate courses. But it took me much longer to incorporate Du Bois into sociology graduate seminars, and even longer to start writing about him. Although from the very beginning I realized that he was a major social theorist, it took me time to understand how to make that argument to sociologists. Eventually, I started to teach a classical sociological theory graduate seminar in our department, but the first years I taught it I did not teach Du Bois. It took me some more time until eventually I started to teach *The Souls of Black Folk* in relation to the work of George Herbert Mead and Alfred Schutz, two classical theorists of the self and subjectivity.
I did not teach the classical sociology seminar the year Karida entered our program, but rather a contemporary theory seminar. As I remember it, in that course we read Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, but we devoted only one week to the whole Black Radical Tradition whereas we devoted several weeks each to a discussion of the works of Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Bruno Latour. In short, for many years, I reproduced Du Bois’s exclusion from sociology. That was how I was trained, and that was how I was training others. These days, I am happy to teach an entire seminar dedicated to reading and discussing Du Bois’s work and Du Boisian sociology.

In the beginning, I taught Du Bois simply as a theorist of micro interactions and a theorist of race. It took me time to come to understand him as a global theorist and a critic of racialized modernity, the social system organized around racial differences. Reading his 1935 book *Black Reconstruction*, a history of the Reconstruction era and the role that Black people played in their own emancipation, led me onto that path. I always thought that that book talked not only about the Reconstruction era and the period when it was written but also about contemporary times. Moreover, I believe that if sociologists had read *Black Reconstruction* closely, we might have been spared much of the recent debate about the relationship between race and class. As soon as I read *Black Reconstruction*, I wanted to write an article comparing its sociological relevance to C. L. R James’s *Black Jacobins*. It took me years to actually write that article, and I eventually did so only because Paget Henry insisted that I write it for a special issue of the *C. L. R. James Journal*, which he edits.

Although I thought from the beginning that Du Bois should be brought back to sociology, I felt isolated in making that claim. Until recently most sociologists did not recognize him as one of our own, and as one whose work we should know. Except for Paget Henry, I had no one to discuss this issue with. To be sure, other sociologists believed that Du Bois’s work had a central place in the field, but I did not know them, and I imagine that they also felt quite isolated. For this reason, meeting Karida was crucial for me. In her I found not only a brilliant student but also someone who shared similar interests—someone with whom I could exchange ideas and from whom I could learn. Meeting Karida, and later on other students who created what might be called a
Du Boisian collective at Brown, broke my intellectual isolation. Now I could consider embarking on the project of thinking and writing about Du Boisian sociology because I had people I could discuss the undertaking with. I don’t remember exactly how I came to ask Karida to write our article on double consciousness and sociological theory, but writing that article was such a positive experience that I decided to ask her if she would be interested in writing this book. Coincidentally, the same week we talked about that idea, NYU Press contacted us to ask if we were interested in writing a book about Du Bois’s sociology. This is the result.

Towards a Du Boisian Sociology

Writing this book has been a journey of intellectual growth. Both of us share a deep appreciation and respect for Du Bois the scholar activist and a belief in the potential of a Du Boisian sociology to address the problems of the twenty-first century. We started this project believing that we knew his work fairly well. After all, we have read and taught him more than most sociologists have. Yet since we began working on this book, we have read all of Du Bois’s books and hundreds of his journal articles, essays, letters, and speeches. What we discovered is that his work is much richer, more complex, and more sophisticated than we initially thought. We have also traveled long distances—from Providence, Rhode Island, to Los Angeles, California, from Montreal, Canada, to Chicago, Illinois—to discuss what we read and to explore the questions that motivate this book: If W. E. B. Du Bois is in fact a founder of the discipline of sociology and one of the most important social theorists, what exactly was his sociology? And what is a contemporary Du Boisian sociology? This book is our answer to these questions.