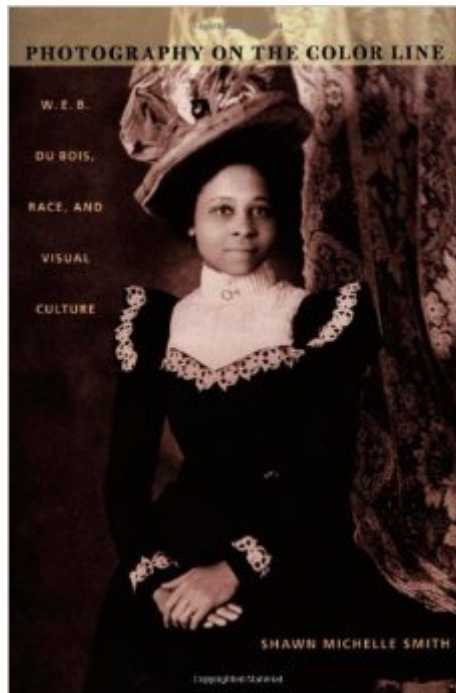


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Photography On The Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, And Visual Culture (a John Hope Franklin Center Book)



Synopsis

Through a rich interpretation of the remarkable photographs W. E. B. Du Bois compiled for the American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition, Shawn Michelle Smith reveals the visual dimension of the color line that Du Bois famously called "the problem of the twentieth century." • Du Bois's prize-winning exhibit consisted of three albums together containing 363 black-and-white photographs, mostly of middle-class African Americans from Atlanta and other parts of Georgia. Smith provides an extensive analysis of the images, the antiracist message Du Bois conveyed by collecting and displaying them, and their connection to his critical thought. She contends that Du Bois was an early visual theorist of race and racism and demonstrates how such an understanding makes the important concepts he developed—including double consciousness, the color line, the Veil, and second sight—available to visual culture and African American studies scholars in powerful new ways. Smith reads Du Bois's photographs in relation to other turn-of-the-century images such as scientific typologies, criminal mugshots, racist caricatures, and lynching photographs. By juxtaposing these images with reproductions from Du Bois's exhibition archive, Smith shows how Du Bois deliberately challenged racist representations of African Americans. Emphasizing the importance of comparing multiple visual archives, *Photography on the Color Line* reinvigorates understandings of the stakes of representation and the fundamental connections between race and visual culture in the United States.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The book has 2 very contrasting parts. The first is an analysis of Du Bois' collection of Georgia Negro photographs, that he exhibited at the 1900 Paris Exposition. Several hundred photos. Mostly of middle class American Negroes, well dressed and well posed for the photographer. (Who was not actually Du Bois himself.) The photos tended to show people born after the end of the Civil War and slavery. In that Paris Exposition, Du Bois' offering was a deliberate contrast to the other depictions of Africans, which came from the European empires in Africa. These invariably showed tribal Africans. Backward and ignorant. This was the ideological or racial justification for the White Man's Burden of imperialism. What Du Bois depicted were educated Americans, as an eloquent counterpoint. Here were people of African descent, but otherwise indistinguishable from white middle class Americans or Europeans. Another fillip was the inclusion of light skinned Negroes by Du Bois. As a rejoinder to a strict racial and racist separation promulgated by some whites. In one example, there is a photo of a girl who looked more southern European (think Spaniard or Italian perhaps) than African. Yet to the white mainstream, she would have been irrevocably classified as Negro. The second half of the book studies the lynching photos. Taken by whites at lynchings throughout the American South. Here, Smith takes particular care never to show the grotesqueries of the victims. (Other books adequately do this.) Instead, there is an incisive analysis of the white spectators and participants. We see them preening and guiltless. Many of the photos were in fact used as postcards, sent by the participants to others. While the white ideology of those times depicted Negroes as savages, the book asks, who were the actual savages?

This book is about the photographs taken of middle class black people. These photographs were shown at the 1900 Paris Exposition, at the American Negro Exhibit. They are still interesting today, because they show how black people looked and dressed in that era. Also of interest were photographs of blacks who looked more white than black, including a black albino person. I already knew about blacks being raped by whites during slavery, which would render their off-spring mulatto... or looking totally white. I haven't seen many photographs of them though. All of the photographs in this book are superb in quality. I found the text about these photographs to be very informative as well.

If you are interested in the history of photography and also in African American photographers impact in history this is the book for you. Highly recommend.

Great old-time, Victorian-age photos of Black people in their splendor. Why aren't these images more widely known?

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