



## **Fifty Years in Sociology**

**Rutledge M. Dennis<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*George Mason University*

### **Abstract**

*In two previous articles I reflected on how and why I became a sociologist. The first article discussed my role as a public, or engaged sociologist in the article, “The Scholar-Activist.” The second article discussed the evolution of my sociological education in the article, “Becoming a Sociologist.” As I recall the memories of my early years in sociology, what stands out as a major theme is the degree to which unplanned ideas and projects suggested by other researchers have helped to shape my sociological projects and research agenda. On the other hand, my research and sociological agenda, while in graduate school, had been to make my mark as a Du Bois scholar and to focus on urban and community culture and politics. The latter had been a research and sociological objective ever since I initially sought to conduct my Masters Thesis on the transformation of social and cultural politics of Black Charlestonians in their adaptation to life in Harlem.*

**Keywords:** Sociologist, Research, Methodological, Prejudice, Discrimination

---

In two previous articles I reflected on how and why I became a sociologist. The first article discussed my role as a public, or engaged sociologist in the article, “The Scholar-Activist.” The second article discussed the evolution of my sociological education in the article, “Becoming a Sociologist.” As I recall the memories of my early years in sociology, what stands out as a major theme is the degree to which unplanned ideas and projects suggested by other researchers have helped to shape my sociological projects and research agenda. On the other hand, my research and sociological agenda, while in graduate school, had been to make my mark as a Du Bois scholar and to focus on urban and community culture and politics. The latter had been a research and sociological objective ever since I initially sought to conduct my Masters Thesis on the transformation of social and cultural politics of Black Charlestonians in their adaptation to life in Harlem. Du Bois’s Philadelphia Negro, Thomas and Znaniecki’s Polish Peasant in Europe and America, Drake and Cayton’s Black Metropolis, and Carter Woodson’s A Century of Negro Migration would provide both methodological and theoretical models for the study. Thus, quite early in my sociological education urban and community issues were central to my sociology. This was reflected in the fact that in both my Masters and Doctoral Programs I had taken a total of three urban courses with Maris Van Blaaden, more courses than I had taken with any other sociology professor. Unfortunately, time and funding made such a project unfeasible, and I was fortunate in working with Lyle Warner who had recently completed his dissertation using Kurt Lewin’s field theory approach to an investigation of prejudice and discrimination. Lyle was the advisor for my MA Thesis, A Field Theory of Prejudice and Discrimination. After the completion of the Masters Thesis, I immediately began to seek out professors willing to serve on my doctoral committee to assist as I worked on my dissertation, The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois. Richard Ogles, a brilliant theorist and Parsons scholar, whose course in the Philosophy of Science had alerted me to the importance of both methodology and theory in the scientific process, and to the role of Karl Popper as a key figure in both the sciences and social sciences, agreed to serve as dissertation chair. To assist financially, I applied for, and received, a Ford Foundation Dissertation Grant. Now it was important to find a teaching position. I was married with one son, Tchaka, and another on the way, so it was important to find an institution and a locality that would fit my, and my family’s, wants and needs. I began sending out a few feelers to friends and academic cohorts. Automatically, I was torn in two directions. One direction led to a predominately Black University. This direction unconsciously led me towards St. Paul’s thesis: Those to whom much is given, much is expected. This translated into giving back to your community, especially a black community, where ever that community might be. The other direction led to a predominately white university where I might become a part of a growing number of black scholars engaged in initiating new and creative academic and intellectual insights into a growing number of racial and ethnic studies programs.

First, using Paul’s thesis in mind, I contacted Dr. Benjamin Payton, President of Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina. In the meantime, Melvin DeFleur, chair of Washington State’s Sociology Department, had attended a meeting in the east where Virginia Commonwealth University, a recently created state university resulting from the merger of two rather old academic and medical institutions: Richmond Polytechnical Institute

and The Medical College of Virginia. While I waited for a response from Dr. Payton, Dr. Edwin Whitesell, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, contacted me, explained VCU's push to create an Afro-American Studies Program, and asked whether I had an interest in becoming the first coordinator of the program. I stated my interest in the position and sent a copy of my Vita. After receiving a copy of my Vita, I received a call from Whitesell's secretary to arrange for a campus visit. The visit entailed a public presentation, a visit to several classes, a meeting with the students, and the meeting with the members of the student organization, Students for an African Philosophy, whose leaders Jim Elam, Preddy Ray, and Ray Cousins were in the forefront of the movement to create Afro-American Studies. Lastly, I met with members of the newly formed faculty organization, The Black Education Association, whose members, faculty and staff, were supportive of the program and wished to accelerate its creation. Ruby and Jimmie Walker picked me up at the airport, drove me around the city during my stay, and took me to the airport for my departure. Two days after returning to Pullman, Washington I received a letter offering me the position and the salary accompanying the offer, the details of which had already been discussed, and agreed upon, with Whitesell while I was in Richmond.

### **Navigating Dual Worlds: Building the Afro-American Studies Program and Teaching Sociology**

The first three years were hectic years. In addition to contacting, and maintaining contacts, with department chairs and faculty members to induce them to support AFAM by creating new courses, or cross-listing existing courses, a problem had emerged at WSU. Dick Ogles, the chair of my dissertation committee, would be leaving WSU, and I had to find a replacement. Monty would stay on as titular chair, but Louis Gray would replace Dick. Organizing and coordinating the program was given a major boost when Charles Jarmon was hired in 1972 as a joint AFAM-Sociology faculty. Charles would be immensely helpful in assisting with all aspects of the program. His critical insights and his task orientation were invaluable in the early success of the program. In many ways he was the co-coordinator of the program. Additional assistance was given when Virginius Thornton was hired as a joint AFAM-History appointee. Jarmon, Thornton and I constituted the core of the Advisory Council, along with the consistent presence, support, and participation of Daryl Dance, Black Literature; Richard Priebe, African Literature; Nap Peoples, Black Psychology; Regina Perry, Black Art; Amini JoHari, Black Theatre; E. Sagay and Bill Hellmuth, Black Economic Development; Daryl Rollins, The Black Church; Virginius Thornton, Black History, and Joseph Kennedy, Black Music.

In AFAM, I consistently taught Black Political Thought, The Sociology of the Black Family, The Sociology of Racism, Africanism, and Introduction to Afro-American Studies. I also taught two seminars in W.E.B. Du Bois. In undergraduate sociology, I taught Aging and the Black Community; The Community; Social Stratification; Social Thought; Sociological Theory; Work and Management in Modern Society; Organizations and Human Behavior, and Minority Groups in the U.S. In the graduate sociology program, I taught Complex Organizations, Social Stratification, Contemporary Sociological Theory, and Theory Construction. In the meantime, little progress was being made on my dissertation on Du Bois. I was making the personal and academic connections to chairs and faculty in departments which enabled the program to develop the courses which enabled those of us in the program to witness the fruits of our labor. But the dissertation was not yet a reality, though I did manage to publish an article, or two, and a book review, they were good exercises in keeping the writing on par, I needed to focus on completing the dissertation. The agreement upon accepting the position was that the dissertation would be completed in three years, four at the max. Francis Brooke, the provost, would send me gentle reminders asking the state of the dissertation and reminding me of our agreed upon time schedule for the dissertation's completion. As we were approaching the fourth year, I knew it was crunch time. In summer 1974 I moved into an on-campus dorm, with the permission of a friend in housing. I began to send chapters to Louis Gray. Louis and I communicated well when I was a student, but as I began to feel the pressure, I expressed some annoyance with a few of his comments on my chapters. In retrospect, his comments were correct, though occasionally, I thought, over the line. In any case, with the assistance of Tchaka and Imaro, who promised to give me a little time to wrap up the loose ends of the dissertation on the promise to give them a treat, and with the great help of my secretary Barbara Hopson, I finally finished The Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois and received the Ph. D. in 1975. With the Ph.D. in hand, I could again focus on increasing the number and variety of AfAM courses and move the program closer to offering a minor. This became a reality in 1976. Between 1971 and 1975 the program also instituted The Afro-American Studies Seminar Series and the Afro-American Studies Essay Contest.

### **The Community Outreach**

The Inreach academic program and its activities would be only one side of the AFAM Program. The other side consisted of activities focused in, or around, the larger Richmond community. That was how both students and faculty had defined the role of the coordinator of the program. I agreed with their assessment. The community outreach, though important, would add yet another stressor point for me, as I struggled to create and construct the AFAM Program and complete my dissertation. And yet, I was prepared for the challenge, for I began the process of

playing the role of public intellectual, or public sociologist, as a student at WSU, drifting into that role as an explicator of both the Civil Rights Movement and The Black Power Movement. The difference was location. At WSU, the audience was largely white. In Richmond, it would be largely black. Besides, there was the expectation that blacks who held high positions in predominately white institutions had an obligation to speak to the needs of the voiceless and assist in their rise and advancement. Back to Paul's Thesis.

During my first two to three years in Richmond, I gave a series of speeches and lectures to many social and religious groups. My involvement in the Richmond community would continue into the early 2000s, long after I had relocated to George Mason University in northern Virginia. A sample of these lectures and groups include the following: Jamie Porter Barrett School for Girls-"The New Afro-American Youth"; Crescent Club-"The Consequences of Inequality in American Society"; Center House(Roman Catholic youth center-"Achieving a Quality Education"; Tuckahoe Baptist Association-"The Church and the Problems of Youth"; South Hampton Youth Correctional Farm-" The Evolution of Black American Culture"; Muhammad University of Islam No.24-"The Educator: Today and Tomorrow"; Rubicon Drug Counseling and Training Program-"The Techniques of Leadership."

Before the completion of my dissertation I had been publishing articles on a variety of topics, many of which represented my interest in exploring a variety of topics central to Black Sociology, Black Culture, African themes, and Black Education. Quite a few of these articles were written, I must confess, during low periods when I was frustrated with my academic activities and when the dissertation direction seemed to be at a standstill. Luckily, I was able to construct quite a few sociological essays from my Du Bois readings that were published, either before, or after the completion of the dissertation. Some of these published sociological essays were the following: "The Dimensions of Black Studies," " W.E.B. Du Bois as Sociologist," " Nyerere and Ujamaa: Ideology and Societal Development," "The Sociology of Diplomatic Protest: The NAACP Years of James Weldon Johnson," and " Theories of the Black Family: The Weak-Family and Strong-Family as Competing Ideologies."From the completion of the dissertation to the end of the 1970s, the following articles were published: " The Emergence of Africa in African-American Social and Political Thought," "W.E.B. Du Bois's Analysis of the Role of Social Values and Social Research in the Study of Race," "Du Bois and the Role of the Educated Elite," "Science, Knowledge and Values," and "Citations of Black Social Scientists in Introductory Sociology Textbooks."

The late 1970s would be a very significant period for me, in that I would be engaged in two urban research projects that would be central to my future sociological research program: The Black Middletown Project(Muncie, Indiana) and the landmark Annexation Case in Richmond, Virginia. However, before these two projects, I was awarded an NEH Summer Grant in the summer of 1979 to join a Seminar on Alain Locke in Atlanta, Georgia. A book chapter, " Relativism and Pluralism in the Thought of Alain Locke," and an article, " Cultural Nationalism and Cultural Cosmopolitanism in Alain Locke's Sociology of Culture" were published as a result of this summer project. The notes collected during the seminar would assist me greatly almost four decades later when I co-taught a graduate sociology/philosophy " Du Bois-Locke Seminar" with philosophy professor, Rose Cherubin at George Mason University.

### **The Black Middletown Project**

In 1977, I received a call from Vivian Gordon, assistant professor of sociology and Director of African American Studies at the University of Virginia. She said she had been working on a draft for a proposal to conduct a study of Muncie, Indiana, the site of two landmark studies, and books about Middletown. Muncie(Middletown) which then currently being studied by sociologists Ted Caplow, Professor of Sociology at UVA, along with Howard Bahr and Bruce Chadwick, both of Brigham Young University, under the project, Middletown III, would be the most studied community in the country. Like the Lynd's Middletown studies, Middletown III would not include the black community. Thus, it made sociological sense to probe a neglected, and largely forgotten, Black Middletown. After I agreed to participate in the project, we met to work on the proposal drafts six times-three meetings times at VCU in Richmond, and three times at UVA in Charlottesville. The proposal was sent to NIH and rejected. Caplow and his team worked on another draft which was then sent to NIH, and approved. Vivian, Ted, and I would be co-principal investigators. According to the proposal, I would spend a year in Muncie, construct the community questionnaire, conduct the community survey, collect data for the baseline study, and engage in participant observation. Unfortunately, circumstances prevented us from following the schedule as we had initially planned it.

I did spend a year in Muncie, and we did complete the survey. Several VCU faculty were able to publish articles from the data collected, a student wrote his dissertation from the data collected, and I published the book, *Finding the African Americans That Middletown Left Out: The Field Notes of a Sociologist*. The book is a daily account of my activities, conversations, observations, and participation in a variety of community activities, whether in churches, social clubs, youth centers, or in-depth conversations with church members and leaders, community political and business leaders, plus just friendly and ordinary conversations and interactions with average citizens. It was an experience I shall never forget. Although participant observations studies have traditionally been the theoretical and methodological hallmark of anthropologists, it should not be forgotten that historically, many insightful and creative studies of black communities have used this methodology. Here one

thinks of W.E.B. Du Bois's Philadelphia Negro, Drake and Cayton's Black Metropolis, and Hylan Lewis's Blackways of Kent.

While in Muncie doing field work and engaging in participant observation, I was unaware of the disciplinary changes taking place in anthropology, one of which was the sharing of collected research with members of the community. I had no way of knowing of this disciplinary shift, but obviously some members of the community knew this. When a few community members approached me about reading the data I had collected, I refused the request, and expressed being shocked by the request. It was only upon returning to Richmond and in conversations with anthropologists that I was informed that the community request was currently being accepted as a shared process, and normal, in which community research has become a joint researcher-community enterprise which includes active participation by community members as both respondents and in some cases analysts of the data collected. Unfortunately, I did not return to the community to give an assessment of my experiences there, though I corresponded for many years with many individuals I met and became friends with during my year there.

The Middletown Experience was just another example of my many insider-outsider experiences. I felt and experienced this insider-ness/outsider-ness growing up in Charleston, South Carolina with the construction of rigid racial lines. We were a part of the society, but we were not, and whites made it clear, and very plain. Muncie was another insider-outsider scenario. I was a black researcher conducting research in black communities in Black Middletown, but some residents were quick to remind me that though I was black, I was still an outsider who really did not know the community. Radcliffe-Brown, Margaret Mead, Boas, and other anthropologists who studied communities outside of their countries knew they were foreigners and different. They knew they were the outsiders. Some learned the language and the local customs and sought to "go native," but even there they knew they were the outsiders, who, beyond the natural human physiological needs we all have in common, divergent habits and customs served as the dividing cultural lines between the researchers and those whom they studied. Black Middletown residents and I spoke the same language, even with the regional southern dialects that I knew and understood. And yet I was Simmel's The Stranger. The outsider was like the in-siders, and yet he was not a part of them.

Looking back at the Middletown experience, I remember a struggling small community with many of the problems facing small black communities throughout the country. Yet this small community had its uniqueness. Most of its current residents are descendants of those who migrated northward during the 1920s and 1930s to escape southern rural poverty, rigid racial segregation, and racial terrorism. Middletown was the site of a local major university, Ball State, which presented the community with town-gown issues which inevitably seeped into local class and racial politics. There was much criticism by the working and underclass directed towards those in the middle and upper middle classes. Some viewed members of these classes as racial traitors, while others viewed them, at best, as having good intentions, but unable to break through the racial barriers imposed by whites. A few members of the middle class directly accused me of acquiring a very negative view of the community due to my associations with members of the working class, as well as my attendance at many working class churches and social events. Thus, the class issue, and the class divide, was clearly evident, despite attempts by many to define Black Middletown as a community united against the larger dominant white racial, economic, and cultural power.

The established black and white leadership in Middletown was challenged by two forces: those blacks representing the working lower class and a small group of politically active Moslems. All members of the Moslem population had, until the early and late 1970s, been nominal Christians, with the vast majority adhering to the Baptist faith. During my conversations and interviews with many Christians quite a few were critical of the Moslem leadership in the city, with many viewing their presence as disruptive and, in a few cases, they were accused of setting back, and damaging racial relations and racial cooperation. I conducted a brief, but currently unpublished, study of Moslem men in Black Middletown.

Lastly, since I was a participant-observer, both participating and observing, I had an opportunity to be both an insider and an outsider. I joined the local chapter of the NAACP, though I was already a member of the Richmond, Virginia Chapter. I also worked with the senior citizen's group, and worked with the local YMCA chapter. Thus, I had a hectic schedule which entailed conducting interviews with respondents selected for community survey study, conducting interviews with political, business, educational, religious, and social leaders. With such a schedule I needed a quiet place to relax and unwind. That place was the community's largest barber shop. The owner, who had been interviewed for the study, allowed me to "hang out" there whenever I wanted. While "hanging out" I decided to conduct a study of the conversations of the customers. This became my study, "The Barber Shop: Dialogues of Black Men." One of the most intriguing issues posed by several Middle towners was the extent to which Black Middle towners values, ideals, and behavior ultimately were more Hoosier than Black. This observation forced me to return to the Du Boisian "Doubleness." How did Black Middle towners define "being Black?"; how did they define "being Hoosier? Could they be both? How? And under which circumstances was this possible? Unfortunately, I was unable to pursue these questions, though on several occasions I began a sociological essay entitled, "Being Black and Hoosier in Black Middletown."

### **The Richmond, Virginia Annexation Dispute**

John Moeser, Professor of Urban Studies at VCU, and I were neighbors in the Carillon community in Richmond. In the course of our many discussions about the city and its racial politics, the idea of collaborating on a study of the annexation dispute emerge. The dispute centered around a growing black population and increased black voter participation and the fear among the white ruling elite that blacks would soon be able to gain political control of the city. To offset this possible political reality, the Richmond white elite engaged in secretive maneuvers to annex portions of surrounding counties, Henrico and Chesterfield. The secret meetings of white city officials with county supervisors, without the knowledge and involvement of any of the seating black councilmen, which included Councilman Henry Marsh. The annexation was allowed to stand, with the stipulation by Judge Merhige that Richmond had to move from at-large municipal elections to single district, or nine ward elections-four predominately black wards, four predominately white wards, and one swing ward. The annexation dispute is a story of stealth, lies, and cover-ups to disguise the fact that the annexation effort had less to do with building the city's economy, but more to do with expanding the city's boundary to enable the city to acquire "50,000 affluent whites," as one white city official stated.

John had done some preliminary thoughts on the topic, and we settled on which events each of us would cover. John would cover Richmond's racial history and politics, the major city and suburban players in the dispute and the court documents. I would cover Richmond's recent racial history, the politics of politics and the politics of economics in the city, and the rise of individuals and groups, i.e., the Richmond Crusade for Voters, which emerged to challenge the white oligarchic power elite in Richmond, and the grass-roots community leader, Curtis Holt, whose challenge to Richmond's annexation would have political ramifications far beyond the expectations of those engaged in the struggle. John and I interviewed more than fifty past and present city and county political leaders, leaders of political, economic, and social organizations, and church leaders. The book, *The Politics of Annexation-Oligarchic Power in a Southern City*, was published in 1982. An Open Access Edition of the book was published by the VCU Libraries in 2020.

### **JAI PRESS-ELSEVIER EDITORSHIP**

In 1988 I was approached by a member of the Editorial Board of JAI Press regarding my interest in serving as the editor of the series *Research in Racial and Ethnic Relations*. My article, "The Use of Participant Observation in Race Relations Research" had just been published in vol.5 of the series, then edited by Cora Barrett and Cheryl Leggon. I agreed to accept the position on the condition that I could determine the direction and format of the series. After the editorial board agreed, I outlined what would be the direction of the series for the coming decade. I outlined a series of special themes and topics, each reflecting a unique major and important phase, or area, of black life. Though the series title, *Race and Ethnic*, I would focus on special, and unique, social, cultural, political, economic, and philosophical features of Black American life. This agenda would permit an exploration into the many divergent slices of black life, and in addition, highlight key individuals, and their ideas, thoughts, philosophies, and theories which have served as beacons and inspiration for blacks, both historically and contemporaneously. The first volume under my editorship, volume 6, published in 1991, highlighted community studies, political economy, and issues in academe. For volumes 6, Volume 7(Racial and Ethnic Politics), Volume 8(The Black Middle Class), Volume 9(W.E.B. Du Bois-The Scholar as Activist), Volume 10(The Black Intellectuals), Volume 12(Marginality, Power, and Social Structure), and Volume 15(Biculturalism, Self Identity, and Societal Transformation). Herbert Hunter edited Volume 11(The Sociology of Oliver C. Cox: New Perspectives); Myrtle Gonza Glascoe, Donald Cunnigen, and I edited Volume 13(The Racial Politics of Booker T. Washington), and Rodney Coates and I edited Volume 14(The New Black: Alternative Paradigms and Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century). This volume, published in 2007, would be the last volume published under my editorship. While reviewing my original 1988 notes and outlines for the series, there were two volumes I regret not publishing-volumes on Black Religion and on Black Conservative Thought.

Later I sought to continue to analyze the various pieces in the Black socio-cultural, political mosaic via brief sociological essays. These brief sociological essays were published in various encyclopedias. These sociological essays are different from sociological articles. They are shorter, less expansive, more concise, and may flow between the personal and the impersonal. I selected the topics for various encyclopedia, because each article addressed and explored a particular question, or position, I wanted to address its application and uniqueness to one, or more, features of Black Life nationally, or internationally. Listed below are the essays published in various encyclopedia.

The Social Science Encyclopedia:

"Racism"

Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology:

"W.E.B. Du Bois"

“Double Consciousness”  
 “The Talented Tenth”  
 “Marginality”  
 “Reparations”  
 “Separatism”  
 “Accommodations”

The Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society

“Black Intellectuals:  
 “African American Jewry”  
 “Black Conservatives”  
 Encyclopedia of Social Problems  
 “Gentrification”

Encyclopedia of Jim Crow

“A. Phillip Randolph”  
 “Harold Cruse”  
 “Martin Luther King, Jr.”

Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism \*with Kimya N. Dennis

“ The Veil”  
 “Benjamin Mays”  
 “Masking”  
 “Duke Ellington”  
 “Black Aesthetics”  
 “W.E.B. Du Bois”  
 “Double Consciousness”  
 “Ralph Ellison”

John Stone, chair of the Sociology/Anthropology Department at George Mason University, was instrumental in my joining the faculty there in 1988-1990, through what was then a special program, Commonwealth Scholars Program, later discontinued, created by the state of Virginia, to invite minority scholars to spend a year or two, at a university other than the one where they were currently employed. I chose George Mason University. John and I would collaborate on several co-editorship projects: *Race and Ethnicity: Comparative and Theoretical Approaches* (2003); *The Five Volumes, Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism* (2016), with co-editors Polly Rizova, and Xiaoshuo Hou, and later with the same co-editors joined by Anthony Smith for *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism* (2020). Over the years, I've benefited immensely from collaborative research and writing, whether as co-editor with Charles Jarmon when we were both newcomers at VCU with the edited book, *Afro-Americans: A Social Science Perspective* (1976), later with John Stanfield with *Race and Ethnicity in Research Methods* (1993), and later as Special Editors of the *Journal of Negro Education* (1995). Each collaborative experience forced me to stretch sociologically, politically, and philosophically and to delve more deeply into different layers of sociology; these collaborative experiences have both enriched my sociology and served as pointers for many ideas and themes for additional research and scholarship.

The early years of the twenty first century saw me returning to intellectual and sociological interests that got waylaid by other projects along the way. One waylaid project was my interest in Black Intellectuals, particularly, Black Academic Intellectuals. In 1975 I assembled a series of articles which were intended to become an edited book on intellectuals. After receiving comments from a couple of publishers I decided to shelve the idea. In 2006, I applied for, and was awarded a Fenwick Fellowship, an award presently yearly by the Fenwick Library at GMU. My topic was “The Making of Black Intellectuals,” later changed to “The Making of Black Academic Intellectuals.” The research required obtaining a sample of black professors, and phone, or, in-person interviews of individuals teaching at George Mason, Howard University, and Virginia Commonwealth University, and Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia. Data from the study was later published as a Research Report. Two years later, I received a Faculty Summer GMU Grant to study Black Entrepreneurs in Richmond, Virginia. Though the entrepreneur study was different from the study of Academic Intellectuals, I eventually wanted to compare and contrast the differing patterns of socialization and life histories of each group. That is, address the questions: Who becomes an intellectual? Who becomes an entrepreneur? How are academic intellectuals and entrepreneurs created? What are the historical patterns of cultural, religious, and educational development in black communities in the south, and elsewhere which makes it possible for one, or both types to exist, singularly, or together?

## Teaching

One of the greatest joys of my academic life has been teaching. The interactions with students, both graduates and undergraduates, have enriched me by challenging me to present lectures, areas for discussion, and more importantly, to present course material as “living” and “contemporary sociology,” even when the topics may not be specifically oriented to contemporary issues and personalities. George Mason University, like Virginia Commonwealth University, was a relatively new university when I began teaching there. This provided me with the opportunity to experiment with new courses and new ideas and topics to analyze and critique within these new courses.

Among the undergraduate courses I most enjoyed teaching, I must include the Honors course, *The World of W.E.B. Du Bois: The Study of Race, Class, and Gender Through the Autobiography*. The students in this class often surprised me with the breadth and depth of their critique and analysis of the works of Du Bois. In addition, I was often taken aback by their clarity and conciseness of their writing skills. Several students in the class indicated that their attachment to the class readings and discussions prompted them to consider selecting Du Bois and his writings and his sociology, as possible Masters choices. The readings, from *Souls of Black Folk* to *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois* gave students the opportunity to read both history of the eras in which Du Bois wrote, but to also witness the changes and transformation Du Bois himself went through as he adjusted to the national and world events and the ways these events altered the lives and circumstances of black communities within the U.S., and others throughout the Pan-African World. The other undergraduate course on Du Bois, *The Du Bois Undergraduate Seminar*, was similar to the Du Bois Seminar I had taught earlier at Virginia Commonwealth. The other undergraduate course, also listed as a part of the growing African American Studies Program at Mason, was *Black Social and Political Thought*, a course which began with the ideas of David Walker and ended with Malcolm X. The other popular undergraduate course I taught which generated a few hate emails, was called *Plessy to Trayvon Martin: Race and Politics in American Life*. The course was designed to highlight the intricate relations between America’s racial policies and America’s public politics and its culture.

The three graduate courses I most enjoyed teaching all entailed a focus on Du Bois. The first course was a course in African American Sociology. I used the texts of Du Bois’s, *The Philadelphia Negro* and *Black Reconstruction* to illustrate Du Bois’s importance as one of the early founders of American sociology and the theories and methodologies he used in an attempt to define black life and the parameters of its culture, politics, religion, and economics. In addition to texts by Du Bois, texts by Drake and Cayton, and Frazier were also included. More recently, I co-taught the Du Bois-Alain Locke Seminar with the philosopher Rose Cherubin. We not only taught the graduate seminar, but as a prelude to the seminar, given the semester prior to the course itself, we organized a Du Bois-Locke Workshop. The workshop was an intellectually stimulating event with a host of Du Bois-Locke scholars who provided an enriched prelude to the actual seminar. The Seminar itself, because it was fueled by both sociology and philosophy, was highly enlightening as it allowed sociology and philosophy graduate students to grapple with the ways different disciplines approach both the sociology of Du Bois and the philosophy of Locke. Spencer Crews, historian, and Bill Harvey, anthropologist, presented two insightful lectures on the contemporary significance of the sociology of Du Bois and the philosophy of Locke.

The course I taught this last spring semester, *Reading Du Bois’s Black Reconstruction*, offered students an opportunity to delve into and give a close reading of a once neglected classic of Du Bois. Given the topic, we had to probe the history of slavery in the U.S., and the world. We also probed, as did Du Bois, the relations between an emerging capitalism, an emerging European colonialism and imperialism, and the existing political economy of the U.S. from the nation’s inception to the growing regional differences between the north and the south, and why, with the southern desire to succeed from the union, war was almost inevitable. There was much class discussion regarding whether Du Bois’s use of Marxist ideas and concepts to describe ideas and actions during the Black Reconstruction was innovative, or merely his attachment of these ideas and concepts to situations and circumstances which may have added little to our understanding of the individuals, situations, and era with which he analyzed and studied. This has been the only course in the department in which one book was the sole focus of the course.

In closing, I wish to state that my fifty plus in sociology is not over. I continue to be challenged by new ideas, themes, and the divergent directions of the discipline. I continue to support sociological and disciplinary pluralism but there are important questions as to its limits and its effectiveness in permitting a clear understanding of the American social, cultural, and political mosaic. Although it is currently just an idea running around in my head, I’d like to teach a course on the U.S. Constitution. A sociology of the ideas, ideals, theories, and individuals that went into the Making of the Constitution. The idea for such a course has been in my thoughts for many years, as I’ve taught hundreds of American students and hundreds of foreign students. I don’t expect foreign students to have had a good grasp of American history, sociology, and politics. I know that by their reactions to one of the books I’ve been assigning to my introductory sociology class over the past few years: Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of a Slave*. Many of the current issues over which we grapple cannot be rationally and reasonably approached and understood, because students neither know, or understand, the origin of the issues and the

background factors which caused the issues to be of national importance. When all is said and done, I only hope my teaching has made a difference in the individual and collective lives of my students. I also hope, they have in turn, sought to make a difference in the lives of others whose lives they've touched.

### **Works Citation**

#### **BOOKS BY RUTLEDGE M. DENNIS**

- The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism, (eds.) with John Stone, Polly Rizova, Xiaoshuo Hou, and Anthony Smith. Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2020.
- The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism, Five Volumes, (eds.) with John Stone, Polly Rizova, and Xiaoshuo Hou. Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2016.
- Finding the African Americans That Middletown Left Out-The Field Notes of a Sociologist. Lewiston: Mellen Press, 2012.
- Biculturalism, Self-Identity and Societal Transformation, (ed.) Research in Race and Ethnic Relations, (vol.15), Oxford, GB: Elsevier, Inc., 2008.
- The New Black: Alternative Paradigms and Strategies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, (eds: with Rodney Coates) Research in Race and Ethnic Relations, Vol.14), Oxford:GB: Elsevier, Inc., 2007.
- The Racial Politics of Booker T. Washington, (eds.) with Donald Cunnigen, and Myrtle Glascoe) Research in Race and Ethnic Relations, Vol.13), Oxford: GB: Elsevier, Inc., 2006.
- Marginality, Power, and Social Structure: Issues in Race, Class, and Gender Analysis, (ed.) Research in Race and Ethnic Relations, (Vol. 12), Oxford, GB: Elsevier, Inc., 2005.
- Race and Ethnicity: Comparative and Theoretical Approaches, (eds.) with John Stone) Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003.
- Black Intellectuals, (ed.) Research in Race and Ethnic Relations, (Vol. 10), Greenwich, CT: JAI Press Inc., 1997.
- W.E.B. Du Bois: The Scholar as Activist, (ed.) Research in Race and Ethnic Relations, (Vol. 9) Greenwich, CT: JAI Press Inc., 1996.
- The Black Middle Class, (ed.) Research in Race and Ethnic Relations, (Vol. 8) Greenwich, CT: JAI Press Inc., 1995.
- Race and Ethnicity in Research Methods, (ed. With John Stanfield), Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993.
- The Politics of Annexation: Oligarchic Power in a Southern City, (with John Moeser) Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1982.
- Afro-Americans: A social Science Perspective, (eds: with Charles Jarmon), Washington, D.C., University Press of America, 1975.