1930s Multiculturalism

Rachel Davis DuBois and the Bureau for Intercultural Education

By Shafali Lal

Note: The late Shafali Lal, our colleague on the board of Radical Teacher, had planned to write an article for this issue of the magazine, based on her dissertation-in-progress, a study of how race was made and remade in the United States, through a variety of institutions and struggles. She would have drawn upon a chapter titled, "The Development of Education in Human Relations, 1934-1954." With advice from others working on this issue, I have lightly edited and somewhat condensed the first half of that chapter, here. Although Shafali would surely have told a fuller story and helped readers see how that story fit into a larger account of race, we think the present version includes much of what she would have wanted to say about one progressive educator in the 1930s, whose work foreshadowed a much broader effort in the 1960s and after, to build what eventually we came to call "multicultural" teaching and learning. Shafali wanted to contrast the multiculturalism "from above" (my term, not hers) that she describes here with the multiculturalism from below that rose out of 1960s political movements.

Rachel Davis DuBois (no relation to W. E. B.) is not much remembered today. Shafali's research is a welcome review of DuBois's educational work against prejudice, through appreciation of what various national and racial groups had contributed to American culture. This excerpt will also help us remember the intelligence and decency of our valued friend and colleague.

Shafali had not finished work on the chapter; her references were incomplete. We have not attempted to reconstruct them, but will note that she extensively used the Rachel Davis DuBois papers (1917-1974) at the Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota; and that she referred often to DuBois's autobiography, All This and Something More, *and two other books by DuBois:* Get Together Americans *and* Build Together Americans. *We hope others working in this field will be able to follow her leads.*

–Richard Ohmann

The Bureau for Intercultural Education was the brainchild of a young school teacher, Rachel Davis DuBois. Over its twenty-year history, from 1934 to 1954, the Bureau attempted to understand the "problem of the second generation"—i.e., children of immigrants—and offered a vision of an intercultural nation tolerant of diverse peoples. In so doing, the Bureau originated a cultural idea of psychic civil rights. While the intellectual meanings attached to race would change over the BIE's history, it never lost its investment in ascertaining taxonomy of the nation's native and foreign-born inhabitants and their troubled, immature, or prejudiced minds.

Rachel Davis DuBois's early life structured her later work. Born into a New Jersey farming family in 1892, Rachel Davis was schooled in the Quaker principles of seeing "God in every man." In her autobiography, *All This and Something More*, Davis describes her early farm life as rich in cross-cultural experiences. Watching work, learning songs, and playing games with the black and Italian hired hands was, for Davis, a critical part of coming-of-age. As she wrote:

> Perhaps such experiences were the beginning of my lifelong interest in race relations and intercultural education—my concern that people from different backgrounds be encouraged to share the best of their traditions and customs, thus building a richer culture and having fun doing it.

This idealistic vision of sharing traditions—those games and songs that were appealing to her as a young child—would structure Davis's life work. After attending a simple common school, she entered Bucknell University in 1910 and majored in the natural sciences. Seeing no professional prospects for a female scientist, she accepted a job teaching high school algebra, biology, and American history at Glassboro (New Jersey) High School in 1914.

The Great War quickly impinged upon her classroom and her consciousness; Davis became an ardent and active pacifist. Inspired by William James's "The Moral Equivalent of War" essay, she sought answers to the critical questions of Quaker theology: "'When differences arise, do you endeavor speedily to end them? Do you live in that life and power which takes away all occasion for war?'" In 1920, she attended the First International Conference of Friends in London and in 1922, at Jane Addams's invitation, she attended a meeting of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Upon her return to the U.S. Davis felt keenly her lack of knowledge about the social conditions of her own country. Her subsequent self-education

began with a trip sponsored by the Pennsylvania Committee on the Abolition of Slavery to visit the black schools in the South. Reading an article by W. E. B. DuBois on the problem of "Race and War" in *American Mercury,* Davis recalls realizing that "basic to the problem of peace and war is the problem of race." Witnessing first-hand the American system of racial segregation, Davis had found her "moral equivalent of war": the peacetime betterment of racial morality. In 1924, she joined the NAACP, and began teaching social studies at Woodbury (New Jersey) High School.

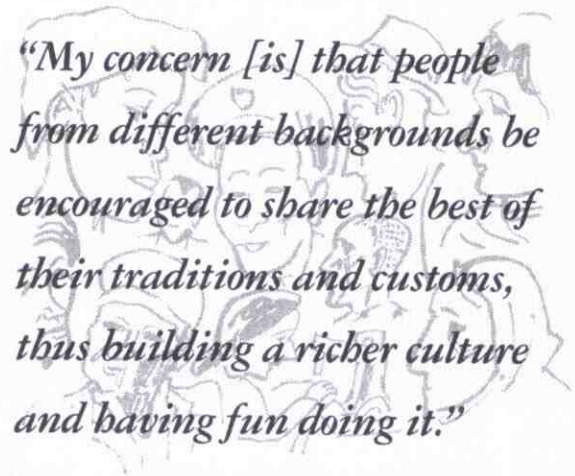
Along with her newfound political purpose, Davis's catholic experiences with interracial friendship continued. Indeed, Davis, now DuBois after her marriage to Nathan Steward DuBois, displayed what might be called a continual dis-investment in her whiteness. As she wrote, "Sometimes in a social group I would be the only white person present. I never purposely tried to 'pass,' [but] I would say nothing about my identity, preferring to 'pass' as just myself." With her dark skin and curly hair, "passing" just as herself often meant being mistaken for being black—a source of significant pleasure. In her autobiography, she gleefully recounted an episode at a friend's house when, "after all the guests had gone, Alta Douglas said 'Well, Rachel, now that the white folks have gone, let's have a good time!'"

Such experiences, however, were not mirrored during the school day. DuBois's forays in cross-racial sociality—even tinged with naïveté as they were—had no effect on her students. Troubled by the dramatic race riots of 1919 and the everyday racial tumults of her classroom, DuBois, the educator, developed a series of assembly programs designed to "foster understanding and appreciation among the various culture groups in the U.S." Each program highlighted the cultural contributions of the various races and nationalities present in America. While DuBois conceded that "when riots occur, the executive branch of the city, state, and nation must step in to preserve order," she believed that only locally based institutions could serve as preventative organizations. The proper educational program involving schools, churches, neighborhoods, and entire communities could start the long-term process of "planting and nurturing seeds of understanding which take time for growth." To determine the efficacy of her assemblies DuBois measured her students' attitudinal change with the increasingly popular Neumann Attitude Indicator and Bogardus Social Distance Scale. Finding measurable proof of such change, DuBois expanded her program to several schools in New York and New Jersey. In 1934, while receiving a master's degree in social psychology from Columbia University's Teachers College, DuBois founded the Service Bureau for Intercultural Education in New York City.

In her mind, the Service Bureau would serve as a resource for teachers wanting, as she had, to expand students' appreciation of diversity. Based on her belief in and experience with her initial intercultural assembly programs, DuBois sought to expand her ideas and methods—what she termed the Woodbury Plan—to a broader public. In addition to the assemblies, DuBois and the Service Bureau she founded offered pamphlets, bibliographies, and curriculum units all designed to help teachers integrate the study of race and nationality into their own classrooms. Under DuBois's direction, Service Bureau educators designed and distributed materials such as bibliographies on race and culture and curriculum units on "Italians" and "the Chinese" for teachers and pupils; gave assistance to teachers through individual conferences and collective classes; and helped equip teachers for guidance and counseling of students by calling attention to personality problems that might be caused by intercultural tensions. To further the reach of her educational methods DuBois taught in-service courses at New York University, Teachers College, and the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library. In the bureau's first year, DuBois and her co-workers prepared 100 curriculum units, fifteen playlets and skits, and two books. By 1939, the Bureau had worked with six elementary schools and four high schools in the New York metropolitan area. From 1939 to 1940, it distributed more than 3,000 pieces of published material to individuals and worked with about 150 teachers in in-service courses.

The Service Bureau began with a national committee of twenty-two members including James Weldon Johnson, Leonard Covello, Mabel Carney, and Crystal Bird Fausett, and an executive committee of five, headed by Heber Harper of Teachers College. In 1938, progressive educator William Heard Kilpatrick assumed the chairmanship. During the first five years of the Bureau's existence, the American Jewish Committee, the Works Progress Administration, and the Progressive Education Association provided funding. In 1938, with the U.S. Office of Education, DuBois developed the highly successful radio program, "Americans All, Immigrants All." This 26 episode radio series included some written by CBS cultural critic Gilbert Seldes, on such topics as "Negroes in America" and "Slavic Contributions to American Life."

With tremendous energy and optimism, Rachel DuBois offered a vision for tackling the social changes engendered by the waves of Irish, Italian, Jewish migration to the eastern coast of the U. S. and African-American migration to the north. Coining the term "cultural democracy," DuBois agitated against both Israel Zangwill's idea of an American "melting-pot" (the title of his popular 1908 play) and Horace



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DRAWING BY NICK THORKELSON

Kallen's and Randolph Bourne's conceptions of cultural pluralism. To her mind, only cultural democracy could heal the divisions between native born and immigrant Americans. As she asserted in her manifesto on intercultural education, *Get Together Americans*:

> [The] willingness—and ability—objectively to survey what all cultures may have to contribute to a growing world civilization is the essence of cultural democracy. It does not rest on the assumption that all culture traits are of equal value and have an equal right to survive; and it does not have for its aim a merging of them all in a uniform national or world culture. But, recognizing the advantage of the state of flux in which practically all cultures find themselves, and further recognizing the need for experimental adaptations, it is predisposed to treat with respect all those values that are cherished anywhere by any group.

For DuBois, cultural democracy preceded both civic democracy and economic democracy. Foreshadowing Gunner Myrdal's later celebration of the American creed, DuBois argued that democracy in American life or in any "dynamic society" was neither fully present nor wholly absent; rather a potentially explosive disjuncture reductively termed prejudice existed between theory and practice.

While DuBois feared social tensions and physical violence at home, other Bureau officials, like countless others in the 1930s, feared fascism abroad and its potential importation. Bureau board member Eduard Lindeman, for example, cautioned against following the example of Germany's ultimately illusory melting pot. DuBois quoted his claim that Jews there "were vulnerable precisely because they had become absorbed in a fictitious whole." To guard against home grown intolerance, Americans needed to appreciate the culturally enriching traits inherent in America's past and present immigrants. This tenet became the core of the Service Bureau's evolving orthodoxy.

Responsibility for creating a continually tolerant democratic nation rested in part with classroom teachers who, prepared by training with the Bureau, could propagate the theory and practice of intercultural education. In an example from a 1939 report, in one school, "a Jewish girl resented the swastika sign of the Indians—it represented Hitler to her—until its multiple origins were explained." Once enlightened, the young girl chose the symbol for the design on her wigwam. Setting aside the question of the educational import of children designing wigwams, the admiring statement was exemplary of the Service Bureau's educational mission and method; the vignette underscored DuBois's theory of "satisfying experiences" leading to social change and the reduction of prejudice.

She postulated three intertwined methods of teaching and learning: the emotional, the situational, and the intellectual. A teacher's realizable aims included changing students' attitudes through emotional and autobiographical appeals, increasing their intellectual knowledge about various minority groups, and increasing their sensitivity to the problems of race relations through cross-cultural interactions. By appealing to children's feelings through ethnic foods and cultural festivals, encouraging small scale interactions between students of different backgrounds, and providing factual information about the contributions of each race, the problem of intergroup prejudice might be solved.

Although concerned for all children, immigrant and native-born, first and second generation, the Service Bureau clearly worried most about the children of immigrants. As Frederic Thrasher wrote:

> American-born children of foreigners are much more likely to commit crimes than native-born persons of native parentage. And the reason for this, strange as it may sound to the 100 percent American, is *not* because they are children of immigrants, but because they are Americans and are no longer controlled by the traditions and customs which keep their parents in the paths of rectitude. In one important sense, it may be said that *Americanization* is one of the chief causes of crime in the

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— Frederic Thrasher, quoted by Rachel Davis DuBois

United States. (Quoted by DuBois in *Build Together Americans)*

Countering Progressive era Americanization efforts, the Service Bureau attempted to moderate the heavy-handed assimilation demanded by public schools during the 1910s and 1920s. For DuBois, preserving immigrants' heritage was necessary for the social, cultural, and psychological vitality of the nation. As she rhapsodized, "through such realization of the part which old culture traits might play in a period of adjustment to a new environment, much happiness might result and much energy might be saved; and the cultural luggage which newcomers in former times have been in too great a haste to cast away might henceforth be conserved for whatever heirlooms it may yet be found to contain."

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— Rachel Davis DuBois

A closer look at Bureau-sponsored curriculum units illuminates DuBois's heirloom conservation approach to racial equity. In June 1940, "A Unit of Work on Negro Culture," for instance, was prepared by Benjamin Zwerling, Florence Polakoff, and Harry Levine for distribution by the Service Bureau at P.S. 10. The unit was designed to "acquaint the children with the leaders of their own culture group" and to "show that Negroes have made contributions to American culture." Focusing on Paul Robeson, Henry Tanner, and Marian Anderson, among others, the unit stressed black achievements in various fields. A similar unit on Italians suggested, "Americans might with gain adopt those of the customs of Italy which fit into the American pattern." The unit contained numerous leading questions such as: "Do you think American life could become more interesting if more people would take part in musical activities (i.e. singing like the Italian Mazel family) instead of paying to watch others perform?" After presenting some real-life scenarios of individual achievement and even success at trouncing discriminatory barriers, the unit went on to stress both environmental and economic explanations for the presumably common belief that Italians were criminals. "Even granting that we find a large number of Italians in our criminal groups," the authors wondered, "are there factors operating in American life which might be considered contributory causes of this situation?" Citing crowded conditions, lack of opportunity, and American business practices, the unit concluded that it was "doubly important for us to be sure that Italians see the best of our life." The Bureau took insights from the increasingly popular culture and personality school of social scientific research, and, in its curriculum units, extended the impact of these academic theories. Relentlessly emphasizing the up side of American life, DuBoisian cultural democracy celebrated the opportunities afforded by the continual influx of immigrants.

Legitimated by academic theories or no, it is easy to dismiss such curricular platitudes as so much sugary frosting atop an ultimately bitter cake. Yet, such an assessment would miss the significance of the inclusive circle of civic identity the Service Bureau was attempting to draw. Forging a unity based upon the experience of discrimination, the Bureau's work left few child citizens outside the circle of damage. Within the framework of prejudice, inequities spanned the racial spectrum:

> A Jewish girl, trained to be a stenographer, finds that 'only Christians need apply.'
>
> A Negro is refused admittance to the theater where a Negro company is playing.
>
> A Nisei, born and raised in this country, who had always felt herself an American, suddenly finds herself in a relocation center behind a barbed-wire fence.
>
> A second-generation Italian boy hears Italians referred to as 'dirty wops.'
>
> A second-generation Greek boy is slighted at a school party because he is so 'foreign-looking.'
>
> A Japanese-American boy even before the war is expected to sit at a table set aside for students of his group in the college library.
>
> A German-American boy is bombarded by his school fellows with epithets about Hitlerism.

The Service Bureau's concern with "race, religion, and nationality" envisioned an American nation defined by difference. Race and other identity categories were determined not solely by surface perception or biological essence but rather by damage felt, discrimination inflicted, or cultural gifts appreciated. The hallmark of the Service Bureau's ideology was a fundamental belief in the possibility of a child's interior or affective life free of the internal conflict generated by external experiences of discrimination. The Bureau imagined this difference lodged in immigrant and minority children—their essential "two-ness," in W.E.B. DuBois's terms—to be necessary to the nation. The commitment to a minority child's inherent humanity, fitness for government, capability for American citizenship marked the contours of what I am calling psychic civil rights. Outsider status—a psychological state of being rather than a physical or biological reality—simultaneously inaugurated a new grammar of subjective citizenship and a language for a potentially renewing national identity. A rejuvenated democratic nation would spring from the precious social and psychic cargo of outsiders.

In the first five years of the Bureau's existence, DuBois attempted to tread a middle ground between social science expertise and "intuitive, integrative activity which characterizes the approach of the creative teacher as well as of the artist to a problem. Both methods of thinking are needed."

DuBois's science was also tempered by her religiosity:

> Our goal, like the Kingdom of God, may never be completely reached on earth, and yet it is always being reached. Complete harmony may never come among all our racial and cultural groups; and yet, whenever two or three representatives of these groups gather in a spirit of equality to discuss even an assembly program, as we always did, at that moment our common American culture is richer; for that moment the problem of race and culture conflict is solved.

Despite the romantic religiosity of DuBois's rhetoric, she insisted that this method could by all rights be classified as a science. Teachers could be led to see that their efforts were "an application of the science as well as of the art of human relations. The Bureau's conjoining of spiritual optimism and rational scientism reflected the dual philosophical origins of cultural democracy. Such contradictions are by no means rare in the annals of social science history; numerous scholars have written at length about similar tensions in the father of American psychology, William James. Indeed, if James was one of the first generation of American social scientists, Rachel DuBois could be his intellectual heir.

She was also very much a professional *woman* of her generation. Unaware though she was of the "female dominion in American reform," her professional life clearly rested on the shoulders of Progressive reformers such as Edith Abbott, Jane Addams, and Julia Lathrop. DuBois created a professional role in the domestic public spheres of education and child welfare and joined a larger set of reform efforts dedicated to scientifically managing the relations between parents, children, and schools. In those efforts, child guidance theory infiltrated the language of private child rearing. Through published advice literature, public lectures, and parent education programs, clinicians, educators, and philanthropists encouraged parents to think of their children as dually structured by both individual personality and family environment, rather than by biologically inherited traits. DuBois's educational theories fell within this larger cultural orbit.

Like other women of her generation, she often taught classes at various universities, and she eventually earned a doctorate in social psychology from Teachers College, fashioning a professional niche for herself at the nexus of social science, private philanthropy, and higher education. Thus, her path to the Service Bureau was neither strictly typical nor significantly exemplary but rather expanded upon the gendered religious and philanthropic milieu of early twentieth century reform work. Like her, numerous reformers and intellectuals, working with powerful philanthropic institutions and increasingly authoritative academic research institutions, focused their benevolent eyes on children and the problem of racial, national, and religious prejudice. And like her, these numerous reformers and intellectuals would increasingly couch their work in terms neither moral nor reformist but in language rather scientific and rational.

If William James and Jane Addams were Rachel Davis DuBois's intellectual progenitors, her sibling would, of course be John Dewey, the nation's patron saint of Progressive education. Indeed, the Service Bureau's chairman, William Heard Kilpatrick is best known as Dewey's disciple at Teachers College. Beyond intellectual genealogies, the work of DuBois's Service Bureau was made possible by the vast expansion of the American educational system. The course of schooling in the twentieth-century exemplified Americans' intense faith in educating the young rather than coercing the adult. The rise of compulsory schooling transformed childhood from the province of individual families into a responsibility of the state, and thus paved the way for an endless array of educational reform organizations like the BIE. By the late 1920s, for the first time, over half of Americans between 14 and 17 attended high school; by 1940, nearly three-quarters did.

If seventy-five percent of the nation's youth were attending school by 1940, their diversity was perhaps even more astonishing. In that year, immigrants and their children formed three-fourths of the population in New York City and Boston, two-thirds in Chicago, and more than half in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Youngstown, Detroit, Minneapolis, and San Francisco. Most of these cities had also developed "black metropolises" as African-Americans migrated north, a fact clearly registered in school enrollment figures. Black student enrollment in high schools increased from less than 20,000 in 1917 to a quarter of a million in 1939. These changes brought to the fore a central paradox of American education: in a nation dependent on the infusion of new immigrants for labor yet reluctant to extend legal or social citizenship rights to these new workers, precisely what responsibility rested with the educational system for democracy? This dilemma formed the terrain of battle for educators, intellectuals, and reformers—a field littered with victories and defeats, ideological twists and turns, and even a few individual casualties as the subsequent history of the Service Bureau demonstrates. RT

[In the second half of her chapter, Shafali Lal explored these twists and turns, beginning with a review of the Bureau's work by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, to which the Bureau's executive committee had applied for funding. The Fund's General Education Board—"in many ways the legitimating body of American educational reform"—wanted the BIE to ground its work more firmly in academic scholarship and, especially, to de-emphasize race, ethnicity, nationality, and so on as categories of group identity and separation. The GEB's critique was driven by various intellectual and political forces, including a push for national unity with the approach of war. The new direction it set for the BIE bypassed DuBois's version of cultural democracy based on appreciation of difference, and led to her resignation under pressure in 1941. There are obvious parallels, but also sharp contrasts, between this reversal of 1930s interculturalism and the "culture war" of the 1990s on a later multiculturalism and its supposed enforcement of political correctness."

—R. O.]