

Photography, visualizations, art and identity: “seeing” people in data

As all of you know February is Black History Month.

And as many of you know, I am an avid reader and lover of data visualizations and art, it has become my pandemic passion in addition to baking bread and meditation sessions. This is one of my latest book acquisitions and has intersections with Black History Month here in Canada and data collection & data visualization, what we do here in CDOB: [Black Lives 1900: W.E.B. Du Bois at the Paris Exposition.](#)

The pioneering American activist and sociologist hand-drew infographics showing and representing the progress of Americans of African descent since the abolition of slavery in that country, a scant 35 years before. As a sociologist, he conducted research employing various ways to assemble data including in-person interviews, community data collection using standardized forms, and research into State taxation and household records. The variables that Du Bois visualized include family income, occupations, taxable property and mobility. These data visualizations and accompanying photographs from across the United States formed an exhibition of 500 photographs as well as charts and other maps that were collected for the Paris Exposition in 1900.

This is one of the earliest examples of the use of colour and infographics for knowledge transmission. While mapping and other forms of visualization were the predominant way to “see” information for centuries, the rise of photography as a way to standardize and itemize information was a revolution for statistical data collection. This torrent of data collection led to the demand for new ways to present complex data, a similar problem faced by us today. This was over 120 years ago! Adding yet another reason to celebrate DuBois: as a pioneer in data visualization.

But what does this have to do with Black History Month in Canada? Du Bois wasn't Canadian but he did enter and stay in Canada as a visitor. Yes, its a stretch.

In 1905, Du Bois, then a professor at Atlanta University gathered 29 men from 14 states in Buffalo, New York to discuss the “accommodationist”

stance that they claimed that Booker T. Washington advocated. These men were public leaders and intellectuals who were interested in making a stronger community, a stronger country. They sought a place to retreat to in order to think, debate and plan.

From Buffalo, they then travelled to the Erie Beach Hotel in Ontario near Niagara Falls, spending a week in Canada.

According to Du Bois' own writings at the time, the group sought a "quiet place outside the city near the water where we can be to ourselves, hold conferences together" and have access to recreation; the Erie Beach Hotel in Ontario was their destination.

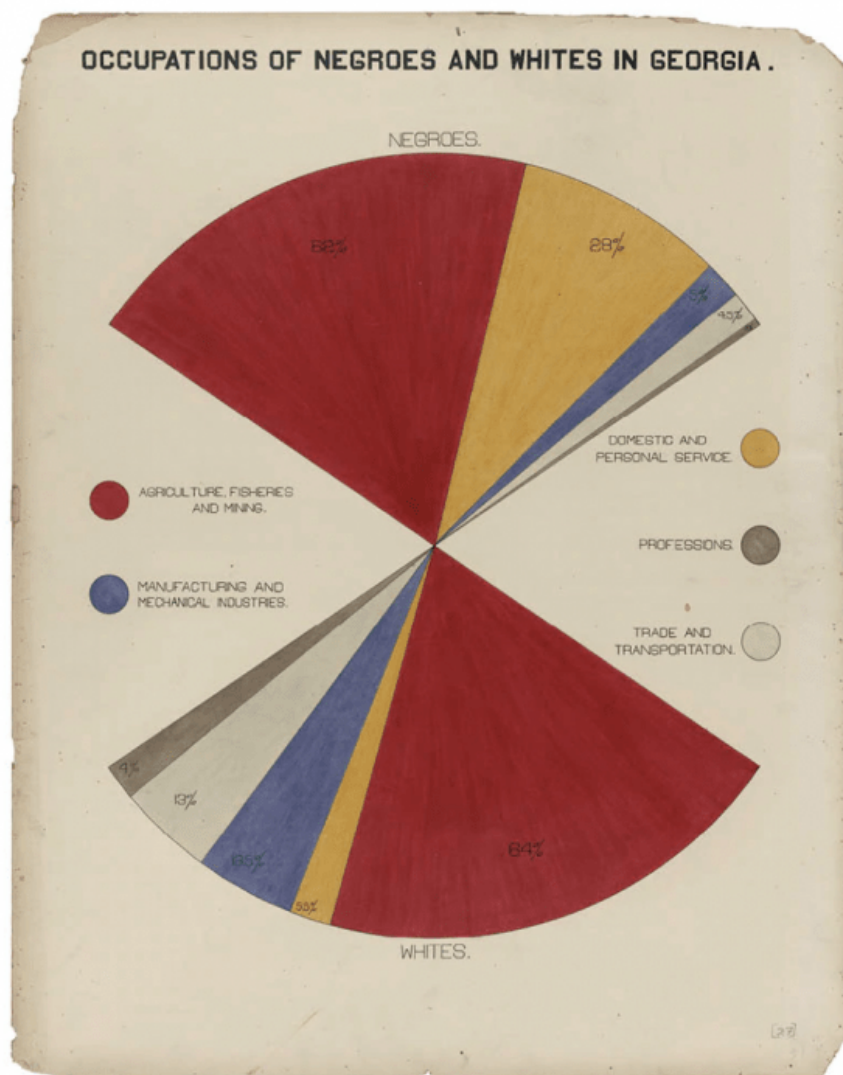
I agree that the Canadian side of Niagara Falls is much nicer than the American side.

Photographs of these infographics can be found in the Library of Congress link below. No known information is available on the photographers of these works that were taken at the 1900 Paris Exposition.

*Du Bois' hand-drawn charts, maps and graphs represented the achievements and economic conditions of African Americans in radically inventive forms, long before such data visualization was commonly used in social research.
From the publisher.*

From the Paris 1900 collection that can be found here: [Library of Congress](#)

The message from the Minister of Health that can be read [here](#) recognizes the significant and unique challenges faced by Black Canadians.



Source: <https://www.idonthaveacoolname.com/photography-visualizations-art-and-identity-seeing-people-in-data/>