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Author(s): Constance Holden
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The Black Educology Mixtape is an open access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. Our scope and sequence focuses on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. The main tenets of Black Educology’s educational vision are rooted in critical race theory, with a focus on counter-storytelling, Black critical theory, Afro-pessimism, and Black educational epistemology. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.
“What Would You Suggest that I Do Next?”: The Rival Geographies of Ellen Irene Diggs

Constance Holden

Abstract

This biographical essay tells the story of Dr. Ellen Irene Diggs (1906–1998), a Black woman anthropologist who specialized in African diasporic cultural and historical studies. Best known for her work with the heralded scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, Dr. Diggs was a writer, traveler, and educator who imagined an inclusive, expansive, and representative historical canon that captured the breadth and depth of Black politics and cultures. This essay argues that in so doing, Dr. Diggs charted a “rival geography” that challenged the dominant narratives of the academy. Building on the work of Stephanie Camp in her examination of rival geographies as a theoretical framing for understanding enslaved women’s mobility in the plantation south, this essay applies this concept to the ways in which Irene Diggs researched the African Diaspora across the world. In particular, I argue that her 1946 travels to Uruguay reflected a collision between Dr. Diggs’s visions for Black futures and the lived experiences of African-descended Uruguayans. In her analyses of Black political progress in Uruguay, Diggs revealed the tensions between class, race, and nationality that have informed perceptions and assessments of social realities. This essay invites us to examine the intellectual formations of Dr. Diggs and to question the intimate processes, emotional stakes, and pedagogical outcomes of Black knowledge production. Through the experiences, writings, and relationships of Dr. Diggs, we see the enduring complexities and challenges of researching Black histories that inform the opportunities and limits of academia for Black women educators.
professor, Dr. Diggs moved through and to places in which she used her name to signal her power, purpose, and profession. She was someone who made clear her degree of connection and relation to her personal and professional community, valuing her name as a sign—an announcement—of who she was, how she wanted to be understood, and how she wanted to be known.¹

Dr. Diggs’ strategic use of names was central to the development of her identity as a scholar in the mid-20th century. Naming was a method through which Dr. Diggs navigated how she perceived herself and how others viewed her, constructing a practice of self-presentation that mediated the class-based racial ideals of respectability and her own visions and desires of how she yearned to show up in the world (see Griffin, 2000; Hornsby-Hutting, 2009).² Naming signaled how Dr. Diggs wanted to be remembered, not unlike the ways in which her scholarship worked to stitch together the threads of Black histories past and present. Her research centered upon remembering Blackness in places where it had been erased, forgotten, or disappeared. This ethos motivated Dr. Diggs to graduate from the University of Havana with a doctoral degree in Anthropology in 1944, secure an international exchange fellowship from the United States Department of State in 1946 to research in Uruguay, and travel to “all continents, and many islands of the Atlantic and Pacific” throughout her career (Bolles, 1992; 1999; Diggs, 1978). Her research outside of the United States grounded her only published book, *Black Chronology: From 4000 B.C. to the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. A tome that offers a Black retelling of global history, *Black Chronology* opens with a statement on why the stories of Africans and their descendants matter. She predicted that “revolution in research and scholarship” will only come through a new chronological examination of the past (Diggs, 1983, p. xi). She posited that without a reckoning with how the African-descended past has been studied, chronicled, and analyzed, a changed and transformative future remained fleeting. She writes:

> A chronology of Afro-American history is important because there is so widespread a belief that Africa and Africans have no history, have not achieved, have made little or no contribution to culture; that Africa is a dark mysterious continent, isolated and insulated from the rest of the world; that what happened in Africa does not matter (Diggs, 1983, p. xi).

For Dr. Diggs, the inclusion of Africans and their descendants in the annals of history functioned as a starting point that remedied the myopic and monolithic narratives that cast Blackness as insignificant to the processes of capitalist, patriarchal, and white supremacist formations. In other words, the historical erasures and distorted visions of Black pasts and presents resulted from concerted processes and systems, of an ideological violence that understood the control of knowledge production as foundational to the operative power of

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² Particularly prior to the well-documented Black Freedom Struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, respectability endured as a politics of survival in the aftermath of emancipation. Dr. Diggs was born 41 years after the end of the Civil War, emerging into this world right at the nexus between the 1st and 2nd generations after slavery. By this time, respectability had formed an essential part of the moralistic discourses that guided the terms of Black inclusion and citizenship in the United States. Black middle-class and elite women especially espoused the “politics of respectability” that promoted the image of the nurturing, calm, and virtuous Black woman who cared for their families. The politics of respectability worked to counter stereotypes of Black violence, sexual lasciviousness, and immorality, all while advocating for Black self-improvement.
colonization. This violence produced silences in the archive. This violence detracted from the visibility of African-descended people in the world, not just as subordinate subjects, but as actors, agents, and authors of their lives. This violence subsumed Africans and their descendants into a simple story of the conquered and the conquerors, of resistance and assimilation, of labor and death. It is this project of reinserting Africanness and mapping out the meanings of Blackness that anchor Dr. Diggs’s intellectual pursuits, an endeavor that was attentive to historical contingencies and cultural continuities that brought Africa to the forefront of how African-descended people situated themselves in community with each other and within their host nations. She devoted her scholarship to understanding Black experiences across the diaspora, tracing linkages in Black cultural contributions and political mobilization. Simply put, Dr. Diggs was all about trying to figure out what the diaspora looked like in action—what values mattered, how African-descended communities formed, and what pieces of Africa remained as African-diasporic peoples got in formation across the Americas and the world (Beyoncé, 2015).

Dr. Diggs rejected the relegation of Blackness and Black identities to the margins of social formations and national histories. In this effort, centering Black perspectives was essential to the undoing of historical myth-making that marginalized, erased, and invisibilized African-descended people. To bring our stories to the center, to challenge the narratives that rendered us as non-actors, non-subjects, and non-persons, to understand us as we understood ourselves in particular cultural and historical moments meant charting a new path forward in education. To educate differently signified rupturing what we thought we knew and how we thought we knew it. Dr. Diggs’s approach was to write the story anew, in the hope that there would be a new model present for those who intended to learn beyond the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal narratives that resisted Blackness.

Despite Dr. Diggs’s efforts to center Black stories, her own was cast to the periphery. Her place in the intellectual lineage of 20th century Black scholars has been disregarded, mainly occupying the footnotes of texts like Blackness in the White Nation: A History of Afro-Uruguay by George Reid Andrews and Black Marxism by Cedric J. Robinson. She remains primarily known as the research assistant to renowned sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (Reed, 2020). While much of her scholarship reflects on the influence of Du Bois, much of it does not (i.e., Diggs, 1965, pp. 18–19; 1973, pp. 140–182). Dr. Diggs brought her own analyses of the Black political and cultural condition to the pages of Phylon, The Crisis, and The Journal of Negro History. Yet critics often dismissed her work as unoriginal. In 1986, three years after the publication of Black Chronology, one reviewer characterized the tome as “a truly unsatisfactory and misleading work” that provided “disconnected information” (Freeman-Grenville, 1983, pp. 506–507). They went on to say that Dr. Diggs refused to take into account the political specificities of African development and instead perpetuated notions of Africa’s backwardness by emphasizing the uniqueness of its cultural contributions (Freeman-Grenville, 1983, pp. 506–507). A potential editor of a different book project rejected the manuscript, claiming that Diggs solely regurgitated Du Bois (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1949). These dismissals reveal the ways in which racism and sexism intertwine to form the basis for assaults against Black women’s intellectual integrity. This intersectionality of race and gender informed the extent of Dr. Diggs’s alienation. The structural barriers of academic publishing didn’t help, between the gatekeeping and the time required to research and write while teaching. Dr. Diggs often lamented the teaching load that prevented her from devoting time to her research and scholarship.

Dr. Diggs theorized that her exclusion occurred because “it is generally known that I do not agree with many of the theories and findings in anthropology which have to do with
Dr. Diggs's models, frameworks, and theories, as they combined Black cultural and ideological contributions with historical, economic, and social analyses, challenged the then-boundaries of anthropological study (Bolles, 1999, p. 166). Arguably, Dr. Diggs’s scholarship encouraged an integration of class into analyses of structural inequalities. Yet processes of knowing and knowledge formation emerging from non-white men—particularly in the wake of the gains of the Black freedom struggles of the 1960s and 1970s—presented a fundamental challenge to who was in “control” of shaping ideas about culture and politics. Whose ideas were legitimate?

This biographical essay places Dr. Diggs at the center of her own story to understand why she faced exclusion within the academy and within the historical remembrance of “significant” Black scholars. I fully recognize the realities of misogynoir that Black women educators face. I look to the writings that Dr. Diggs produced to find those moments of divergence and to expand upon her thinking to see when her frameworks fell short of reckoning with the complexities and contingencies of Black identity and community formation. In so doing, I resist the temptation to reduce her marginalization as one of sole ideological “disagreement.” In this way, I engage in a liberation work that reaches back in time to think with Dr. Diggs, to hold us both accountable to self and community without assigning blame or condemnation (Love & Jiggetts, 2019, p. xviii). As Black women will continue to “question, explore, and interrogate ourselves about possibilities for supporting each other in the effort to come to grips with our conditioning into oppression,” I extend grace throughout my analysis when trying to understand Dr. Diggs’s research and intellectual positionings (Love & Jiggetts, 2019, p. xix).

In particular, I retrace her footsteps in Cuba and Uruguay with the interest in exploring what informed her way of thinking and moving through spaces that endorsed a liberal vision of racial progress that silenced slavery’s past and subsumed Blackness into their national identity in similar yet distinctive ways. Importantly, her writings suggest that her time in Uruguay marked a moment of professional transitions. Reflecting on her academic path in a speech to the Black Anthropological Association, Dr. Diggs identified 1947, the year that she returned from her research fellowship in Latin America, as the start of her troubles with publishing, teaching, and recognition (Diggs, 1978, p. 5). This essay explores Dr. Diggs’ personal and academic experiences through 1947 and into the early 1950s to understand the conditions that contributed to this major shift in Dr. Diggs’ perception and standing in the anthropological field.

I seek not to argue that Dr. Diggs is important because she studied with Du Bois; I seek not to argue that Dr. Diggs is significant because of her accomplishments, travels, or degrees. I seek not to argue that Dr. Diggs matters because she merits inclusion into the genealogy of Black scholars; I am not interested in foregrounding inclusion as the only antidote to marginalization; I seek not to argue that Dr. Diggs’ experiences and writings are worthy of knowing because I, too, am an aspiring scholar of Afro-Latin America; I do not tell this story just because Dr. Diggs and I share a commitment to the scholarly undertaking of exploring Blackness as a cultural and political identity, of investigating the transnational social transformations that produced similar

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yet distinctive meanings of “Black” as a racial category, of examining “freedom” as an embodied possibility and lived reality before and after slavery’s abolition.

In remaining true to Dr. Diggs’s desire to carve “an independent career of her own,” I prioritize imagining how Dr. Diggs grappled with both the gendered and the racialized violence of the academy while also piecing together her own intellectual formation (Diggs, 1978, p. 2). For this, Dr. Diggs’s story matters because it provides a blueprint for how Black women scholars think through and heal from rejection, exclusion, and marginalization. Her story reveals guidelines for how to follow threads for research; how to engage in intellectual acts of wandering that lead you to unanticipated ways of knowing, learning, and education. In mapping out her story, we become students of the process of African diasporic study and the intimacies of intellectual growth that shape us as educators. As scholars Stephanie Evans, Andrea D. Domingue, and Tania D. Mitchell outline, in learning the histories of Black women educators we can “appreciate their insights into the ‘processes and goals’ of how to solve social problems” (Evans et al., 2019, p. 9). Detailing Dr. Diggs’s story offers a window into the continuing global systems of oppression and the ways in which Black women undermine and upend them to find their own paths toward collective liberation and inner peace (Evans et al., 2019, 4–5).

Dr. Diggs paved her own “rival geographies” that resisted the constraints of disciplinary parameters, gender prescriptions, and expectations of racial respectability and uplift. “Rival geographies,” as theorized by historian Stephanie Camp (2004), identifies the ideas that enslaved women used to challenge the oppressive confinement and containment of the plantation space in the antebellum south. Camp borrows from decolonial scholar Edward Said (1993), who used “rival geography” to describe the reclamations and repossessions of land that characterized “resistance to colonial occupation” (Camp, 2004). For Camp, enslaved women of African descent confronted the challenge of knowledge dispossession—a spatial and somatic experience that heralded the ideas and demands of white enslavers over those of the enslaved. This form of alienation and constraint required “alternative ways of knowing and using” space that made the ways in which African-descended women harnessed information all the more urgent, necessary, and creative (Camp, 2004, p. 7). The mobility of “bodies, objects, and information within and around plantation space” contributed to the shaping of these alternative and often hidden pathways, allowing enslaved women to access and assert knowledge that challenged the authority of enslavers (Camp, 2004, p. 7). In this way, enslaved women created their own geographies and networks of knowledge based on their modes of seeing, perceiving, and moving that were informed but not determined by dominating hierarchies and ideologies.

Dr. Diggs, through her work in the United States and South America in the mid-20th century and beyond, charted her own rival geography that served her vision for African diasporic scholarship that moved away from the path that had been established, one that had excluded African-descended histories and her own work on people of African descent. Dr. Diggs organized and collected information about how people of African descent in Cuba, Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina emerged from slavery, preserved and recreated African-based practices, and articulated their political claims. She used the spaces of the academy in ways that conflicted with the ideals and demands of its elite; creating alternative ways of thinking about Blackness that even challenged the thought of Black activists within and beyond the United States. Her movements in these “elsewheres” were embodied acts of resistance that made visible the various strategies that Black scholars used to recover Black lives and stories. Ellen Irene Diggs was a transformative educator who affirmed and expanded conventions of liberatory pedagogy and Black intellectual thought.
Bringing her story to the fore creates a rival geography that moves the ideas of Black women scholars to the center of Black histories. Moving Black women educators like Dr. Diggs to the center disrupts the traditions of Black intellectual histories that revere Black men and the Black masculine imagination as the sole authors of and pathways to political ideas (e.g., Stephens, 2005). This radical movement allows us not only to see institutional oppression as a totalizing system of domination that influences perceptions, possibilities, promotions, and publications, but encourages us to examine the ways in which Black women scholars grappled with how to take up space, how to self-fashion, and how to advocate for themselves and their community.

As an essay that thinks broadly about the meanings of decolonization, and with a humble interest in trying to understand Dr. Diggs as she understood herself, from this point forward I will refer to Dr. Diggs as Irene. Irene is the name that she used most frequently in published documents, books, and letters, and it is how she signed most documents. I use Irene to disrupt hierarchical notions of relation and to approximate as close of a connection as possible, as a writer, to a scholar whose story has been told in fragments. This choice is decolonial in its aim to cultivate a narrative space where Black women are free to name themselves, to develop a deeper awareness of self and environment, and to have their ways of knowing, observing, and being occupy the center of the story (Love & Jiggetts, p. xiv).

Continuing

Monmouth, a small college town in Warren County, Illinois, is where this story begins. Monmouth had a beginning similar to most towns and cities in mid-19th century United States—one mired in the toils of slavery, warfare, and Indigenous dispossession. The migrations caused by the War of 1812 led to a community of veterans who, as legend has it, established the town in 1831 after a poker dispute. An 1815 treaty had displaced the Sac and Fox Nations, who had lived there for centuries prior to the arrival of any European descendants, so naturally, the veterans perceived the land as empty, available, and worthy of being gambled. John Talbot, a Kentucky slaveholder who allegedly posed as a war veteran to put forth his claim to what would become Monmouth, won the poker game. Talbot planted roots in Monmouth, joined by the families migrating from within and beyond the then-borders of the United States. Perhaps Monmouth was a place of roots and routes, displacement and grounding, birth and rebirth—an epicenter for new chapters.

Ellen Irene Diggs was born in this industrial and agricultural center on April 13, 1906. Monmouth was majority-white in the early 20th century with a small Black population of about 300 (Bolles, 1992, p. 277). Monmouth was a grid-based city divided by the railroad. The Black community lived on the south side of the tracks (Gamer, 2020). There were two Black churches and two books written by Black authors on Irene’s high school reading list—Up From Slavery by Booker T. Washington and The Quest of the Silver Fleece by W.E.B. Du Bois. Her parents, Alice and Charles Henry Diggs, who were committed to education as a means and an end to racial uplift and social mobility, exposed Irene to perspectives and practices beyond those she engaged

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4 For instance, she signed her name as “Irene Diggs” on a Cuban customs form. See Cuba, Ministerio de Hacienda. 1944.

5 Interdisciplinary scholar Imani Perry makes a similar argument defending her choice to refer to playwright Lorraine Hansberry as Lorraine throughout her award-winning biography, Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry. See Perry, 2018, p. 2.
with in Monmouth. Books were her outlet. Charles Henry Diggs worked as a repairman and often brought books back from the local Wirtz Bookstore, along with Chicago-based newspapers (Bolles, 1999; Diggs, 1978). In an interview with anthropologist A. Lynne Bolles, Irene revealed a passion and determination to “visit and see these far distant places and people with my own eyes and for my own self” (Bolles, 1999). Books were her portal to other worlds and her ticket out of household chores; she would often barter with her siblings to relieve herself of her responsibilities so that she would have more time to read. “My world perhaps has always been a world of books and reading,” Irene recalled in a 1978 speech, convinced of the infallibility of books, from which, rightly or wrongly, she could “obtain more satisfying answers from them than from people” (Diggs, 1978, p. 1). Learning was reading, reading was traveling, and traveling was what sustained Irene through her childhood years. In an era that historians consider to be the most uncertain period for Black freedom and citizenship in the wake of the violent overthrow of Reconstruction, and in which, in time, “progressive” politics prioritized reform, social documentation, and economic betterment, Black childhood existed at a nexus of surveillance and possibility. The generations of Black folk emerging from slavery and stepping into citizenship at the turn of the 20th century carved spaces of respectability and in doing so, reinvented pathways for self-expression and self-discovery. For Irene, reading was that avenue that inspired her to access her inner dreamer, her inner wanderer, her inner scholar.

**Learnings**

Ellen Irene Diggs featured in a 1923 issue of *The Crisis* magazine as a part of a brief profile on graduating high school students. (The Horizon, 1923)

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6 On the downfall of Reconstruction and the legal, cultural, and political attacks against civil rights, immigration, and reproduction, see Mitchell, 2004. See chapters 5-6 for the meanings of Black childhood in the early twentieth century.
Irene set out on a path toward academic success. Upon graduating from Monmouth High School in 1923, she earned a scholarship to attend Monmouth College that covered her tuition. However, the college in the heart of the town that she had known her entire life mismatched her intellectual interests. She yearned for a different kind of challenge in a new environment—hopefully one that offered a broader array of course offerings. Irene found the academic rigor that she craved at the University of Minnesota. She enrolled in the College of Science, Literature, and Arts, majoring in sociology with a minor in psychology. Yet the defiance of white administrators to counsel Irene—she did not meet with an academic advisor and selected her own courses—presented her with a coded politics of racial exclusion that motivated her to find deeper community with Black people in Black(er) spaces (Diggs, 1978, p. 2). While it was in cold Minnesota that she first found the warmth of Black magazines and newspapers, the university remained a hostile environment that fueled her intellectual thirst to deepen her knowledge about African diasporic cultures, experiences, and histories. In 1928, she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Sociology. And she might have rested in the temporary discomfort of not knowing what to do next in her academic career.

And then she wandered. A car ride to Georgia introduced Irene to the intellectual, political, and social energy of early 20th century Black Atlanta. Joining her sister and new brother-in-law on a journey down to Atlanta, Irene visited Black colleges and institutions. Energized, Irene decided to relocate to Atlanta and pursue graduate coursework in sociology at Atlanta University. It was here that she encountered W.E.B. Du Bois, who by 1934 had returned to the professorship after leaving Atlanta University in 1910. By then, Du Bois had resigned from The Crisis magazine, the periodical published by the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), due to tensions among the leadership. Du Bois, who Irene had first discovered through her high school coursework, also understood Atlanta as a new beginning. Irene enrolled in one of Du Bois’s courses during her second semester. Du Bois became her mentor and advisor, offering Irene a summer research assistantship. This was the beginning of Du Bois and Irene’s relationship as scholars devoted to the study of the African diaspora throughout the world, which would lead to an intellectually enriching collegial friendship. “He appreciated my class work and reports,” Irene remembered in an interview with Bolles (1999). This appreciation created a mutual trust, leading to Du Bois relying on Irene for notes, proofreading, and fact-checking. In 1933, Irene graduated from Atlanta University with the institution’s first master’s degree in sociology. Irene worked as Du Bois’s research assistant and secretary for 11 years. She remained at Atlanta University between 1933 and 1942, working with Du Bois on foundational texts such as Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880, Black Folk, Then and Now, Dusk of Dawn, and The Encyclopedia of the Negro. In 1940, they co-founded Phylon, an academic journal that examined race and culture from interdisciplinary perspectives.

Traveling

A year after Phylon’s publication, Irene vacationed in Havana, Cuba. She visited the University of Havana and met scholars who nurtured her interest in studying the African presence and legacies in Cuba. Funded by a Roosevelt Fellowship sponsored by the Institute of International Education, Irene returned to Havana the following year, beginning her studies in Cuba with intensive Spanish language study. At the University of Havana, Irene worked with the renowned ethnologist and anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. Ortiz studied the cultural legacies, influences, and
contributions of Africans and their descendants across the Americas, providing a framework for Irene to situate and emphasize the endurance of African cultures within the daily and national constructions of Cuban lives. Irene traveled across Cuba, studying the music, festivals, rituals, and dances of this realm of the Black Atlantic (Bolles, 1999). She surmised that Cuban racial hierarchies stemmed from the cultural currency ascribed to skin color. She points out that skin color coalesced with notions in class, resulting in the codification of racial disparities through the language of social status. In Irene’s gaze, the visible cultural presence of Africa supported the notion that Cuba had achieved “racelessness”—a perceptibly equal Cuban society without racial hierarchies—which bred the idea that social inequalities stemmed from class differences (Bolles, 1992; see also see Brunson, 2021; Ferrer, 1999). The expansive definitions of whiteness in Cuban society engendered illusions of mobility and a healthier racial climate, especially when compared to the United States, who, by the throes of World War II in the 1940s, had accrued a transnational reputation marred by its Jim Crow regime and violence against people of African descent in the United States. The entrance into World War II and claims of fighting for the cause of democracy placed the U.S. culture of segregation and exclusion into sharper hemispheric and global relief. Irene, as a scholar from the United States enrolled at the only institution of higher education in Cuba, disrupted the racial and class boundaries of Cuban society. She was an educated, darker-skinned woman from the United States, allowing Cuban perceptions of her social place to situate her as privileged and near-elite.

While Irene’s work in Cuba interrogated the structures and systems that influenced Cuba’s class-based racial order, Irene remained committed to the cultural recovery of Blackness. At a time when historical and anthropological schools of thought focused on integrationist methods that studied top-down patterns of assimilation, racial relations, and cultural retention, Irene’s research understood people of African descent as theorists and intellectuals within their own right. Irene traced the values, perspectives, and practices that sustained the ways in which African-descended people navigated and negotiated their lives. After graduating from the University of Havana in 1944 with a doctorate in anthropology, Irene secured a three-month fellowship from the State Department to conduct research in Uruguay. The Department of State, under their Division of International Exchange, selected Irene out of 49 candidates, becoming one of a nine-person cohort of scholars studying abroad (Du Bois, 1946, July 15). She was one of two women. In a summer 1946 report written by W.E.B. Du Bois to the NAACP, Du Bois characterized Irene’s fellowship as “the first time that a Negro scholar has received such recognition or that the federal government has recognized the right of American Negroes to make direct cultural contact with the millions of persons of Negro descent in South America” (Du Bois, 1946, September 7). Du Bois understood Irene’s work as an ethnographic triumph, an endeavor necessary for the “regeneration of the race” across the hemisphere. Du Bois highlighted the significance of cross-cultural encounter and engagement in research and, in so doing, implied the centrality of federally supported academic work to that process. In this 1946 report detailing the significance of Irene’s fellowship, he affirmed his famous declaration at the turn of the 20th century, first stated at the end of the 1st Pan-African Convention in July 1900 in his To The Nations of the World speech (Du Bois, 1946, September 7). Forty-six years later, he reinforced that the problem of the 20th century was indeed the color line, and that the “race conflict and color line problems are becoming increasingly international, and are demanding investigation, publicity, and action” (Du Bois, 1946, September 7, p. 1). Irene’s research in Uruguay would

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7 Du Bois described Irene’s early research in Uruguay as the “study of race relations and the transculturation of Negroes and whites in South America, especially in Uruguay.” See Du Bois, 1946, July 15, p. 2.
contribute to “the freedom and progress of the black folk of the world,” which Du Bois registered as the “last great barrier to the realization of the unity of humanity” (Du Bois, 1946, September 7, p. 1). In alluding to the geographic, cultural, and social connectedness of people of African descent in the Americas, Du Bois troubled notions of North American Black exceptionalism (see Seigel, 2009; Karush, 2012). Du Bois valued international community-building as a tenet of scholarly production. His passion for Irene’s studies affirmed his intellectual and political convictions that liberation was a transnational project.

Irene departed for Montevideo, Uruguay in the late summer of 1946. She arrived by August 31 and by early October had achieved what Du Bois categorized as “unusual success.” (Du Bois, 1946, November 26). The September 1946 issue of Nuestra Raza, considered to be the preeminent Black Uruguayan newspaper of the time, dedicated its cover image to a photograph of Irene, who meets the camera directly with a penetrative gaze and cautious smile (Andrews, 2010). Their byline identifies Irene as “Ellene Irene Diggs” a “delegada del Departamento de Estado de E.E.U.U. para estudiar los problemas sociales en el Uruguay.” During a September 12, 1946 press conference with other Uruguayan journalists—which excluded editors and writers from Nuestra Raza—Irene emphasized that there were tides of change occurring in the United States, that public opinion was shifting: “En favor de la raza negra, lo que se ha exteriorizado en el abatimiento de muchas de las reservas que sobre ellos existían, principalmente en los Estados del Sur.” (Nuestra Rasa, 1946) According to the U.S. Embassy, this press conference was a huge success, paralleled only by the frenzies that surrounded the visits of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Admiral Halsey, a World War II naval commander (Du Bois, 1946, September 23). By November, Irene had gone on something of a speaking tour throughout Montevideo. She addressed audiences at the Artigas-Washington Library and the Women’s University of Montevideo. She spoke at the U.S. ambassador’s residence and to the American Woman’s Club during the tenure of Joseph F. McGurk. By November 7, 1946, a Catholic association honored Irene with a banquet. Montevideo embraced Irene. African-descended Uruguayans were excited about Irene’s research and welcomed her into their communities and organizations.

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8 Nuestra Raza published regular monthly issues between 1933-1948. Uruguay, although it had a smaller Black demographic presence, produced the most active Black press in early 20th century Latin America, publishing at least 25 newspapers for Black audiences between 1870–1950.

9 English translation: “Ellene Irene Diggs, delegate of the United States State Department” who would study “Uruguayan social problems.” In Nuestra Raza, September 1946, 1.

10 English translation: “Actually, in the United States, public opinion is largely shifting to be in favor of the Black race, which has quelled much of the reservations that Americans had about them, especially those from the South.” “Miss Ellene Diggs, intelectual Negra estadounidense, visita el Uruguay en gira de estudio,” Nuestra Raza, September 1946, p. 2; Du Bois, 1946, September 23.

Caption: Ellen Irene Diggs on the cover of Nuestra Raza (Our Race). Biblioteca Nacional de Uruguay. Online.

Misreadings
Irene, from a vantage point influenced by the “progress” she witnessed and experienced in the United States, tried to compare the perceived lack of political advancement in Montevideo to Black organizing and mobilizing traditions in the United States. The supposed absence of overt, coherent, and consistent movements toward racial equality led Irene to conclude that Uruguay was void of racial discrimination and oppression. Historian George Reid Andrews (2010) has dismissed Irene’s claims, arguing that Black political activism in Uruguay looked differently because of its more subtle forms of exclusion. In 1936, Black Uruguayans had formed a Black political party, the Partido Autóctono Negro (PAN) that infused the struggle for social equality with the struggle against racial oppression. PAN was one of only three Black political parties formed in Latin America in the early 20th century. If journalistic production is a measure of political culture, then it is noteworthy that Uruguay had the most Black newspapers published in Latin America in 1870–1950, despite having one of the smaller populations in the region. For some reason, the cohesion that Irene experienced in Cuba eluded her in Uruguay. Irene could not see that Black political power and progress looked different in Montevideo, and that the U.S. could not be a reliable comparative framework if it’s understood as the model for both racial exclusion and Black mobilization. Irene, as an anthropologist engaging in comparative historical work in Uruguay, grappled with the problems posed by comparative methodologies. She was not the first scholar to do so, and she was certainly not the last. Many scholars working on comparative questions of race and racism struggle against the ease of fitting cultures and nations into neat boxes. Generalizations lead to misjudgments, and misjudgments lead to disappointment. Perhaps Irene was disappointed. Perhaps she decided to extend her stay in Uruguay to challenge her misconceptions, to deepen her understanding of a place whose history and culture she could not know fully without an openness to intellectual growth and flexibility.

By January 1947, Irene’s research had resulted in conclusions that were unsatisfactory at best for the African-descended Uruguayan community. Irene, in various interviews to Uruguayan and Argentine newspapers, emphasized the absence of political motivation and mobilization among the Black community in Montevideo. She described African-descended Uruguayans as a people with a “visible cultural poverty” (Andrews, 2010). She viewed Uruguay as a place with ideal conditions for social mobility, and therefore it was untenable to her that the Black community had eschewed the creation of a widespread, cohesive, and therefore perceptible political culture (Andrews, 2010). Irene’s misreadings did not map onto the lived realities of African-descended Uruguayans, who faced disenfranchisement across society—in education, politics, and even transportation. Nuestra Raza refuted Irene’s damaging and myopic comments.

In a January 1947 article entitled “Al margen de una apreciacion” (Unappreciated), Nuestra Raza writers, who were closely aligned with PAN, denounced Irene as a scholar who relied on her elitism to sustain her arguments. They rejected her statements to a December 1946 Argentine newspaper article Qué! (What!), where Irene lamented that there was only a professional Black medical class in Uruguay—nothing else. The Nuestra Raza writers asked, “¿Conoce el proceso y la sanción de prejuicio racial aplicada al mencionado titulado en ocasión de su último exámen? ¿Sabe que este profesional y artista que tanto podría aportar el la contribución de la elevación cultural de la colectividad, es los atacados en aislamiento?” (Nastra Raza, January 1047, p. 4)12 The writers went on to say that Irene seemed to belong to an elite category of African descendants, one that had produced a blindness and obliviousness to the realities of race

12 English translation: “Do you know about the racial prejudice that Black doctors face in their studies and their profession? Do you know that this artist and professional who supports the cultural uplift of the community, faces exclusion and alienation?”.
and class. They opined that it was fitting that she remain in the United States, in her own bubble, much like that of the Black professional class in Uruguay that she had overlooked (Nuestra Raza, 1947, January, p. 4). Two months later in March 1947, Irene prepared to return to the United States. Black journalist Cleanto Noir bid her adieu, pronouncing:

Nuestra raza que es buena, tiene el derecho de esperar se le ayude a superarse. Y es eso lo que la Dra. Diggs, con todo su bagaje de cultura y todo su gran saber no ha comprendido y le ha negado públicamente la permanente inquietud espiritual y el continuo anhelo de superación. (Nuestra Raza, 1947, March, p. 4)

They were big mad, and understandably so.

Teachings

How did Irene receive this criticism? How did Irene respond? How did Irene engage in metacognitive reflection? Did she journal? Did she dance? Did she pray? Did she ignore their critiques? Did she connect with the Nuestra Raza writers to explain her position and learn from their wisdom? The answers to these questions remain to be explored in the archive. Yet Irene returned to the United States by April 1947 and resumed working for W.E.B. Du Bois. She and Du Bois remained in frequent communication during her time abroad. Irene sent Du Bois a postcard from her travels to São Paulo, Brazil, that included mentions of her visit with a colleague from the Smithsonian and details of her nights dancing samba. She identified Brazil as a land of the future (with three exclamation marks; Diggs, 1947). Her disappointment with Uruguay intensified her enthusiasm for Brazil. In Irene’s eyes, these two nations represented opposing ends of the spectrum of racial progress in the Americas—one frozen in the past, another poised for the future. Du Bois sent Irene letters with requests for her to bring back books written by and about African descendants in South America (Du Bois, 1947, January 17). Du Bois frequently communicated with NAACP officials and Schomburg librarians about Irene’s research in Uruguay, giving updates on talks and providing newspaper clippings when available. While most scholarship identifies Du Bois and Irene as colleagues and research associates, their letters reveal a friendship.

Upon her re-entry into the United States, Irene continued to discuss her research in Latin America. She orchestrated intercultural workshops and gave talks at Brooklyn College and the New School. In 1947, she accepted a teaching position at the historically Black institution Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. Entering the world of teaching provided a new set of challenges, namely the need to find time to publish. In a 1949 letter to W.E.B. Du Bois—who she addressed as “my dear WEBD”—she described the difficulty of balancing teaching with research. She expressed disdain over the strenuous teaching load and demands of faculty meetings and workshops (Diggs, 1949, October 4). In a March 1950 letter, she expressed anxieties around the possibilities of the publication of a book titled The Negro in the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata: Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile with Macmillan Press. She wrote that she was “prepared for a no but will be glad to get a criticism from Macmillan” (Diggs, 1950, March 20, p. 2). A year prior, she had received a “no” for her manuscript on The Sociology of the American Negro. Prentice-Hall educators critiqued the text, saying it was a “restatement of Dr. Du Bois’s earlier works [which] therefore makes no particular contribution to a field for which there is, in any case, a decidedly limited market” (Prentice-Hall, 1949, September 27). The realities of rejection certainly weighed on Irene. Around this same time, the Morgan State University deemed her salary of $5,100 ineligible for future raises (Diggs, 1950, March 20).
Writing again to W.E.B. Du Bois, Irene questioned why a new salary scale would not affect her salary. She screamed through the page: “All those who should get a raise will except me!!!!!!” (Diggs, 1950, February 14). She added that the “comptroller has already asked why” and the frustration remains palpable throughout the page. Irene was angry, disappointed, and annoyed, and, most importantly, she gave herself permission to feel these emotions in correspondence with her friend Du Bois. She felt all the feelings all while reminding herself and Du Bois not “to overwork – even if the pay is good!” at the end of a March letter (Diggs, 1950, March 20).

The summer of 1950 provided an answer to the salary dispute. After writing to the American Association of University Professors, Irene learned that she could not receive a salary increase unless she earned a Ph.D. from a university in the United States. Irene forwarded this letter to Du Bois with a simple question written atop the page: “What would you suggest that I do next?” Signed Nell (American Association of University Professors, 1950).

Grace(full) Sojourning

Irene continued to teach at Morgan State University until 1976. It is unclear whether she received a raise during her tenure. If the institution remained resistant to a salary increase, then Irene challenged their stubbornness by charting a dynamic teaching career characterized by mentorship and dynamic coursework. Students remembered her as a transformative educator who enriched their transnational understandings of Black liberation (Reed, 2020). Irene’s interdisciplinary background enabled her to teach coursework across disciplines, offering courses in sociology and anthropology. Her teaching combined questions of class inequality and the persistence of racial oppression, with an analytic that prioritized the cultural continuities across the African diaspora. She published Black Chronology: From 4000 B.C. to The Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1983. Committed to building local and transnational communities, Irene contributed to public radio and televisions, published widely in The Crisis, and returned to Cuba as a special visitor to the United Nations International Seminar on the Eradication of Apartheid and in Support of the Struggle for Liberation in Southern Africa (Bolles, 1992). The Association of Black Anthropologists honored Irene in 1978 with the Distinguished Scholar Award. In her acceptance speech, she was open about her exclusion in the academy, tracing the origins of her alienation to 1947. She explained that:

I have found it difficult to get articles published in anthropological magazines, and when published elsewhere to have them mentioned in bibliographies and footnotes. I have not been invited to give papers at anthropological meetings which I have attended, with four or five exceptions, since 1947, to give papers, write reviews or appear on panels except on rare occasions (Diggs, 1978, pp. 4–5).

Reflecting on her journey, she advised emerging Black anthropologists of their duty:

Continue with us, and after us to create our own institutional structures wherein we study, work, write and educate students and have our work evaluated... this means we will have our own center and not be on the periphery of others... this means that we have no intention of isolating ourselves and in turn being isolated (Diggs, 1978, p. 5).
As a praxis and pedagogy, Irene affirmed Black autonomy as an ideologically potent strategy for education and liberation. Irene charted multiple rival geographies throughout her career, investing in the creation of her own intellectual identity, as etched by a transgressive and fugitive mobility across global lines (Camp, 2004). In her scholarship, Irene upheld what scholar-activist Angela Davis (1994) encouraged Black women in the academy to do—“to think about linkages between research and activism, about cross-racial and transnational coalitional strategies, about the importance of linking our work to radical social agendas” (Davis, 1994). While Irene’s early research embraced conservative outlooks that dismissed the diasporic complexities and dissimilarities of Black political activism, Irene committed her life to locating threads of connection and unity. Perhaps Irene’s path shows that an overreliance on cultural continuities detracts from the specificities of Black experiences, identity formation, and social structures that informed the parameters of Black mobility and liberation. But Irene’s intellectual and public life shows that the classroom continued to be the most “radical place of possibility in the academy,” to borrow from theorist bell hooks (1994). Irene’s classrooms were transnational and transgressive, fearless and faithful to a vision of a future where Black women educators were free: Free to teach beyond disciplinary parameters, free to be paid what they deserved, free to travel beyond the borders of the university, and free to engage in public-facing academic scholarship. Yes, Irene’s work is missing from the footnotes of the pages of many texts on race in Latin America, but that is not the only reason to recover and restore her work. Nor is she important only for the purpose of looking to the past to identify “blueprints” for human and civil rights work (Morgan State U, 2020). In looking to Irene’s intellectual trajectory as a scholar-traveler, an anthropologist-sociologist, a mentor-teacher, we discover strategies for self-advocacy and innovation.

We see courage and confidence as crucial for the emotional and intellectual well-being of scholars. We affirm the centrality of community and friendship to sustaining scholarly work. We engage with the necessity of international travel and research to deepen diasporic sensibilities and pedagogy. We visualize the ways in which Irene moved across and with geographical and epistemological “elsewheres” to locate what Black autonomy looked like in spaces beyond Monmouth and Atlanta. We see the need to self-reflect and pivot as educators, to ask new questions, to reframe old ones, and to resist assumptions that paint Black condition(s) and experience(s) as monolithic because of shared legacies of enslavement and exclusion. We understand “misreadings” as a recurring intellectual theme in diasporic “gazes” (see Nurse, 2020). As communities of African descent often measured their progress against the gains of others, Black political cultures formed in part through misinterpretations, missteps, and misreadings of the meanings of freedom (Nurse, 2020). Irene’s misreading of Blackness in Uruguay was in some ways a part of this historical Black activist tradition to reach uncommon ground as they strove to put forth their own visions of freedom and belonging. Irene’s life showed that education is a process of reconstruction and deconstruction, pivoting, and opening. Irene’s studies abroad make visible how Black scholars understood international travel to be central to their projects of study and visions of liberation.

And Irene’s life also demonstrates just how important it is to use grace as an optic for understanding past scholarship—that there are alternative ways of reading, interpreting, and beginning. This is one lesson of the work of Ellen Irene Diggs—that grace is a radical act and practice of education. Misreading and re-reading are transformative elements of the pedagogy of grace. How do scholars apply a grace-based analytic when evaluating misreadings of past literature? What lessons do we derive when we lean into misreadings—in our own work and in
the evaluation of scholarship? How can misreadings be new beginnings in thinking through ways of knowing and educating? These are the questions prompted when looking at the life and times of Ellen Irene Diggs. Ellen means light. Irene signifies peace. What shall we do next to work toward light, peace, and justice within ourselves and our fields? What geographies of grace shall we chart?
References


Miss Ellene Diggs, intelectual Negra estadounidense, visita el Uruguay en gira de estudio. (1946, September). Nuestra Raza, 2.

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Nuestra Raza, January 1947.

Nuestra Raza, March 1947.

Nuestra Raza, September 1946.


