

AJ

HI-211

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### Open Book Midterm

A common response to a misconception of a people, especially in the case of a disenfranchised community actively fighting for their rights, is to publish an essay that not only discusses common transgressions, but also actively disproves them. W.E.B DuBois famously contests the role of the average Black American in the successes and failures of the reconstruction era in “The Propaganda of History” from *Black Reconstruction*. In the Essay, DuBois begins by addressing the three most widespread beliefs; the first being that “All Negroes were ignorant”, the second being “all Negroes were lazy, dishonest and extravagant, and the third being “Negroes were responsible for bad government during reconstruction”. The larger problem for DuBois was that these beliefs were not passed down orally, but were written in textbooks painting a picture that DuBois suggests is “limited to the south” for all students nationwide. Not only were the textbooks a public smear campaign of recently freed black individuals, but the unabashed untruths could lead to problems in securing the freedoms and rights DuBois and other Black activists were actively seeking.

While addressing these unfounded claims was obviously in the best interest of DuBois, the central focus of his essay is to highlight the dangers of retelling history inaccurately. This is precisely why DuBois actually begins his essay quoting the untruths of several different textbooks ranging from S.E Forman’s “Advanced American History” to Hubert Cornish and Thomas Hughes, “History of the United States for Schools.” DuBois even goes as far as to use

direct quotes from President Lincoln because the Emancipation Proclamation, and the decision to free the enslaved would highlight how influential the black masses were, during the civil war, and especially during abolition efforts. By citing several different sources, most of which his audience was familiar with, DuBois could effectively provide counter arguments to widespread misconceptions, establish himself and thus his critique as both trustworthy and credible, all before connecting it to his larger thesis; that telling the history of America without the contributions of the Black populace would disqualify American History from being considered a science and align it more with the concept of propaganda.

DuBois believes it important to recognize that the previously traveled path of unfounded and untrue claims is one that heavily contrasts with the supposed American value of truth for principles sake and also because he believes recognizing that contradiction could aid the fight for equal rights amongst Black Americans. DuBois' problem with American History being used to teach an agenda is well established, but it's the agenda being pushed that DuBois really wants to contest. The previous portrayal of the south as innocents irresponsible for the inevitability and propagation of American slavery—while simultaneously portraying the enslaved as inhuman brutes who would go on to ruin reconstruction with their stupidity is extremely insulting and far from the truth.

To write a response or even a continuation of DuBois' essay would be extremely hard without reiterating any of his points or the way he went about them. His articulation of the idea that history without the darker truths is more akin to propaganda than record keeping makes sense. The omission of truths in order to elicit a specific response, in this case national pride and respect, seems like an agenda based crime and less of a science. Unfortunately if he weren't so eloquent, his points would not have been considered regardless of how true they were, which is a

bit ironic in this context so most cosign his choice of frequently presenting a critic's counterargument before refuting it. The difference between DuBois and other writers comes in the form of verbosity. While most would find it hard not to lose the central message, DuBois keeps circling back to either his original three points he chose to refute or his central thesis around preserving history.