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The Vagrancy of Race Suicide Through the Early Twentieth Century: Reimagining Fear

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ABSTRACT

The American Eugenics Archive defines race suicide as an alarmist term that describes, “when the birth rate within a so-called race dropped below the death rate...with the ultimate consequence that the “race” would die out.”¹ This article traces the ways in which fears and the concept of race suicide, a term coined by a sociologist committed to racial hierarchies, was reimagined by emerging black sociologist, W.E.B. DuBois who actively sought liberation from systematic racism in the Postbellum Era. This historical research seeks to analyze the ways in which fear among communities of color made claims of genocide inseparable from the histories of reproduction, birth control, sociology, race science, the Antebellum, and Jim Crow Era in the early twentieth-century. This is an attempt to provide a speculative history that allows fears of those most vulnerable within systematic oppression to be historicized, without the reigns of rigid, objectivity that act as a gatekeeper within the field of history. I argue that tracing fears of race suicide allows for a complicated and necessary reimagining of race science. The reimagining of race science allows us to see historical actors of color actively engaging in liberation struggle through what Britt Rusert calls oppositional science. Similarly, analysis of race suicide allows us to bridge what Judith Butler calls, the theory-practice divide.



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Dana Simmons is Associate Professor of History, with a research specialization in the history of science. She received her PhD from the University of Chicago. Her book, *Vital Minimum: Needs, Science and Politics in Modern France* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2015. She is grateful for the opportunity to mentor undergraduate researchers as wonderful as Debbie Arce.



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Debbie Arce is a fourth year History major. Her academic interests include science and technology studies, as well as critical feminist and race theory. Her research investigates the relationships between reproductive autonomy, medicine, activism and science in the U.S. Debbie is a 2017-2018 recipient of the Chancellor's Research Fellowship, and is currently a member of the Student Editorial Board for the University of California, Riverside Undergraduate Research Journal. In the future, she plans to pursue a PhD in History/Feminist Studies.

¹ “Race Suicide,” Eugenics Archive, April 29, 2014, <http://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/connections/535eedb87095aa0000000250>.

INTRODUCTION

Historicizing an Emotion

The historicizing of emotions is a heavily debated subject within history as a discipline. Young historians are often taught to detach from their work. To remain as “objective” as possible is the quintessential goal. Only that which can be deemed “fact” is heavily emphasized. As their careers progress, however, young historians are exposed to the debates surrounding objectivity within the discipline. Despite this, many young (and professional) historians remain under the impression that detachment is the only ways to produce valid claims of knowledge. In this case, the promise of objectivity is as Donna Haraway asserts, a god-trick.² Moving past the false promises of complete objectivity allows for a new realm of historical analysis to emerge, the history of emotions, or rather, the history of ideas and concepts that point us toward specific experiences of emotion. This research will trace the understandings of twentieth-century fears surrounding the notion of race suicide.

In recent years many different psychological phenomena that can only be categorized as central to human emotions have been given room to be critically analyzed within history. Under this framework, emotions have come to be recognized as having specific, and identifiable histories. In this work, I attempt to trace fears surrounding race suicide. The American Eugenics Archive defines race suicide as an alarmist term that describes, “when the birth rate within a so-called race dropped below the death rate... with the ultimate consequence that the “race” would die out.”³ In understanding how fears of race suicide emerged and were reconfigured, the intertwining of multiple histories becomes clear and elucidates the ways in which oppositional science rooted in emotion created pathways to liberation from systematic oppression, specifically in the case of W.E.B. DuBois.

My research on ideas and fears surrounding race and reproductive autonomy began with blackgenocide.org. This particular website vehemently argued against the support of Planned Parenthood on the grounds that family planning

services sped up the process of genocide, a practice said to have been occurring in America in regards to African-Americans.⁴ The fear of genocide lies at the very core of this website. Nazi eugenics and the final solution are both mentioned in the site, the idea being that a similar plan is currently being pushed with regards to African-Americans, contraception and abortions provided by family planning services.⁵ As a result, the active support of family planning services changes genocide into active participation in race suicide. Fears of race suicide are not unique to one particular community, nor can the fear be generalized as encompassing the thought of a single community, this was merely my own [first] encounter with the phrase.

An emotion conceptualized—race suicide—allows for a complicated journey through fears in American history. It is important to acknowledge that many scholars have rejected the use of the term race suicide as an analytical concept, the reason being the term is rooted in racism, anti-feminism, connection to the eugenics movement, and its use of the category of “race” as a biological category. Despite this consensus by academics, race suicide has had and continues to have deep rooted psychological impacts on the relationship varying communities have with reproductive justice.⁶

Methodology

Academic discourse surrounding race suicide began in the 1970s. However, in the 70s, race suicide was only analyzed using race theory. Two works that best exemplify scholars’ oversimplification of race suicide are, Laura Umansky’s, *Motherhood Reconceived* and Robert G. Weisbord’s, “Birth Control and the Black American: A Matter of Genocide?” The aforementioned works both came to fruition in the 1970s and are of the select few that heavily engage with race suicide as it pertains to the 60s and 70s. However, due to these scholars’ use of a single framework of analysis, race suicide was oversimplified and ultimately, dismissed. In the contemporary period, there has been shift towards major emphasis on intersectional approaches to research, particularly in feminist studies. The ways in which I

² Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, 3 (Autumn, 1988), 575-599. p. 584.

³ “Race Suicide,” Eugenics Archive.

⁴ “Blackgenocide,” accessed November 13, 2017, www.blackgenocide.org.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “Race Suicide,” Eugenics Archive.

analyze race suicide provides an intersectional analysis rooted in race and feminist theories as well as a framework centered in historiography. In providing an analysis that steps beyond race theory, I seek to change and reopen the dialogue surrounding race suicide.

In dismissing race suicide, scholars have consequently dismissed a massive topic, the fear of genocide present among communities of color. Indigenous, feminist scholar, Dian Million comments on Western historians tendency to dismiss claims of genocide, arguing that western notions of genocide remain solely with the experience of the Jewish community in the Holocaust.⁷ This ultimately causes most western historians to delegitimize other claims of genocide, both before and after the Holocaust. Genocide is solidified as something of the past, as a result, claims of genocide are not seen as worthy of historical analysis. I do not aim to prove race suicide is plausible, I do not aim to argue people of color can be complicit in race suicide by supporting contraception or family planning services. Rather, I seek to reopen the discussions of race suicide as a fear of genocide. A fear that has been present in many communities as a result of settler colonialism. This fear, this dismissed topic, has opened the door to different paths of liberation which makes it worthy of critical analysis. As a result, outright dismissal is irresponsible and a continued silencing on behalf of historians and other scholars.

Based heavily on archival research, this article will engage heavily with the concept of race suicide. I use the University of Massachusetts digital archive of W.E.B. DuBois' published papers, letters and writings alongside the works of controversial sociologist Edward A. Ross in order to understand race suicide in its conception and elucidate the ways in which it was reimagined in spaces of color that allowed it to change the face of eugenics in a way that opened the path to liberation from systematic racism. Embedded within DuBois' digital archive is also the work of the Birth Control Federation of America, which will also factor heavily in explaining DuBois' role in this work. This historical research article will also draw on secondary monographs of prominent historians such as: Aldon Morris and Britt Rusert in order to provide critical context and

the backdrop needed to understand the different voices engaging with race suicide at the turn of the century. Finally, I draw inspiration from Dian Million's indigenous, feminist concept of "felt theory." Felt theory will give the tracing of race suicide a framework that will allow me to trace race suicide through the fears of those who felt it. Historical reigns of objectivity will be loosened and I will allow fears of communities of colors, as well as their anger and frustration surrounding inner community conflict to be heard. I will not delegitimize fears of genocide, rather I will seek their origins in order to understand why a term coined in the twentieth century continues to be pervasive in the modern day. In seeking the roots of fear, I will elucidate how different historical actors have reacted to and addressed race suicide and how these reactions shaped the fight against racist, masculinist thought, as well as the fight for reproductive autonomy.

I propose a speculative history, one that does not offer definitive answers as to why race suicide became such a prevalent topic for W.E.B. DuBois in the twentieth century, though I will attempt to tackle this question as best I can. I offer a history that seeks to acknowledge fears of genocide within a settler state built on systematic racism. I offer a history that seeks to understand how these fears were regarded, used and reimagined in order to provide a pathway towards liberation. To begin this long journey, I will turn my attention to W.E.B. DuBois and his sociological interaction with notions of race suicide.

From Fear to Fallacy:

At the end of the nineteenth century, the field of sociology began emerging in America, its emergence began less than a century after emancipation.⁸ The emancipation of former slaves did not address the status of black Americans in society, and at the turn of the century, circulating rhetoric seemed to continue the subjugation and systematic oppression that had encompassed African-American life in America. Slavery had shaped the ideas of the white populace and popular scholarly discourse further pushed a notion of black inferiority, this push was especially present in the emerging world of sociology.⁹ Historian Aldon Morris comments on the role of sociology in its emergence,

⁷ Dian Million, "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Approach to Affect and History." *Wicazo Sa Review*, Volume 24, Number 2, Fall 2009, pp. 69

⁸ Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. DuBois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (California: University of California Press, 2015), 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

stating that the field struggled to get a foothold within academia and was tasked with providing explanations for race relations along with addressing challenges of immigration and reproduction.¹⁰ Thus, it is not surprising that it was within this climate that race suicide was first coined in an America shaped by years of one of the most profitable slave regimes ever enacted.

In 1901, sociologist Edward A. Ross followed the lead of many white sociologists and published perhaps his most well known work, *The Causes of Race Superiority*, in this work Ross coined the term “race suicide.”¹¹ Ross’ work centered on notions of racial hierarchies, and it was within these hierarchies of “superior” and “inferior” races, that competition of race survival emerges.¹² Race suicide occurred when “superior” races, in this case white Americans, no longer felt the need to reproduce due to a standard of comfort, which could lead to the extinction of the race.¹³ In the early 1900s, America was a country coming to terms with mass social and economic change. Ross’ work directly reflects what the field of sociology encompassed at this time, white hegemonic ideas of racial superiority and the fervent need to protect white hegemony from immigrants and “inferior” races, in this case the recently emancipated black population. Fear is at the center of Ross’ work. Fear is meant to push towards pronatalist attitudes which were meant to ease the minds of anxious white Americans whose lives and views had been shaped by the slave era. Ross’ notion of race suicide was an attempt to grapple with rapid changes in American society that ultimately followed the guidelines of the new emerging field of sociology, which at the time sought to perpetuate ideas of racial hierarchies.

From 1892 to 1894, DuBois, like many scholars interested

in the social sciences at the time, traveled to Berlin to train under German masters of the social sciences.¹⁴ It was during this training that DuBois was taught to reject studies that validated themselves through the claims of “natural laws.”¹⁵ At the time of DuBois’ studies in Europe, the eugenics movement was rising at the same time that Jim Crow America was beginning to unfurl.¹⁶ The two systems helped reinforce the other, eugenic ideas were reflective of the new ideals of Jim Crow America, as a result, eugenic thoughts seeped into the new field of sociology.¹⁷ The nature of American sociology now stood at odds with the ways in which DuBois had been trained in Germany. DuBois had been trained to resist research that sought to prove itself through things like “natural” laws, something the sociology movement in America was notorious for doing, especially after internalizing eugenic ideologies.¹⁸

DuBois engaged heavily with disproving eugenic ideals at the turn of the century, but he also involved himself greatly with the emerging birth control movement. At a glance, DuBois’ connection to the birth control movement may seem separate from his ties to sociology and eugenics, but the birth control movement was the way in which DuBois actively challenged the ideas of Ross that had seeped into the veins of Americans across racial lines. Sociology began merging with eugenics in this period. As a result, eugenicists’ obsession with reproduction rates made the link between contraception, sociology and eugenics inseparable. As a result, in June of 1932, DuBois gave the Birth Control Federation of America (BCFA) permission to publish a previous article he had provided them in their eighth edition of their journal, entitled, “The Negro Number.”¹⁹ The Negro Number was part of the Birth Control movement’s effort to introduce contraception to black southerners.²⁰ The eighth edition of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Edward A. Ross, “American Sociological Association, accessed November 20, 2017, <http://www.asanet.org/about-asa/asa-story/asa-history/past-asa-officers/past-asa-presidents/edward-ross>, paragraph 1.

¹² Edward A. Ross, “The Cause of Race Superiority,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 18 (Jul., 1901),: 67-89.

¹³ Ibid, 88.

¹⁴ Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. DuBois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*, 17.

¹⁵ Ibid, 21.

¹⁶ Ibid, 19.

¹⁷ Many sociological journals reprinted the work of Francis Galton, an English scientist who proclaimed he had developed the science of eugenics.

¹⁸ Ibid, 22.

¹⁹ W.E.B Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, George S. Schulyer, “Birth Control Review Vol. Xxii, No. 6, June 1932,” accessed January 24, 2018,

<https://lifedynamics.com/app/uploads/2015/09/1932-06-June.pdf>

²⁰ Ibid, 163.

the journal included prominent African-American leaders' positive thoughts on the possible impact of contraception. It is in this article, which had been written prior to 1932, that DuBois sought to disprove fears surrounding race extinction through race suicide. The journal specifically mentions the "Negro Problem" which not only referred to the disenfranchisement of black communities, but also the bigger notion of incorporating African-Americans into American society, the notion that had loomed over the twentieth-century since emancipation in the nineteenth-century.²¹ This journal and broader movement's addressing of the "Negro Problem" was perfectly in step with what DuBois had been attempting with sociology since the early 1900s. It also allowed DuBois the perfect arena to challenge eugenic ideologies, the birth control movement was, by default, at odds with eugenicists of the time who condemned the use of contraception. By allowing the journal to publish his article, DuBois would be directly in relationships with groups actively opposing ideas pushed by eugenics, thus it makes perfect sense that this is where DuBois actively sought to disprove race suicide.

In his article, "Black Folk and Birth Control," DuBois addresses the high reproductive rates among African-Americans, arguing that this high birth rate is rooted in false fears of race extinction.²² DuBois refers to fears of race extinction as the fallacy of numbers. DuBois believed African-Americans were buying into a fear of race extinction which would only be furthered by low reproductive rates. On the subject, DuBois comments, "they [African-Americans] are quite led away by the fallacy of numbers. They want the black race to survive. They are cheered by a census return of increasing numbers and a high rate of increase. They must learn that among human races and groups, as among vegetables, quality and not mere quantity that counts."²³ This fear among black communities presented by DuBois parallels the fears among whites presented by Ross. In both instances, there is a fear of low birth rates leading to race extinction. Ross directly states that not actively reproducing is race suicide, DuBois did not, nor did he have to, this already seemed to be a solidified belief among disenfranchised

communities of African-Americans seeking to survive through reproduction. In DuBois' writing, however, there is not a fear of displacement or an acknowledgement of racial hierarchies. As mentioned before, DuBois actively challenged notions of racial hierarchies, so this would not have been present in his discussion of race survival. For African-Americans, fears of survival were understandably rooted in familial structures of the Antebellum era. DuBois specifically commented on the roots of genocidal fears, stating, "Tradition of early marriage and large families has put grave strain on a budget...not merely to maintain, but to improve...standard of living. As slaves, every incentive was furnished to raise the largest number of children possible."²⁴ The slave era was wrought with violence and terror, family structures were constantly restructured, ripped apart and restructured again. The production of more slaves was the production of commodities, a production actively encouraged by slave masters to reap the most economic benefits out of the bodies they owned. Similarly, slaves actively resisted through the nurturing and maintaining of what familial structures they could achieve. DuBois acknowledges this and understands that constant turmoil and violence within familial structures of the slave era initially introduced the fear of race extinction into African-American communities which in turn, emphasized the family unit as means of resistance and survival. It is significant to note DuBois' emphasis on the Antebellum era, it is an instance in which DuBois actively sought to contextualize social issues that were presenting themselves at the time. The acknowledgment of the fears of genocide and race extinction do not emerge from a hierarchical competition among races, for DuBois, fears emerge out of the lasting effects of a slave regime which terrorized, threatened and murdered countless black bodies. Acknowledging the lasting effects of the slave era disproves Ross' belief in hierarchies and centers fear of extinction on legitimate claims that reference past atrocities against African-Americans. In contextualizing, DuBois delegitimizes Ross, while assuring African-Americans that while he understood their fears, contraception was still key to liberation.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Similarly, the mere act of conveying this message through the Birth Control Review, ensured that DuBois would not only reach the black community, but that he would also reach any readers of the journal which very well could have included sociologists as well as eugenicists seeking to oppose the material.

The factors that lead to fears of race suicide and extinction are different in white and black spaces, highlighting the fluidity of the idea, but the solutions and fears mirror one another across different historical settings. Ross argued that race suicide was a legitimate fear that could be solved through pronatalism. Similarly, African-Americans also saw their survival wrapped up in high birth rates. DuBois, however, sought to altogether disprove fears of race suicide and extinction in his discussion of high reproductive rates among African-Americans. Addressing fears of race survival as fallacy signals DuBois' silent, but strong dismissal of a fear so vehemently pushed in white, sociologist circles. The solutions presented to combat race suicide and extinction presented by Ross are also actively challenged by DuBois.

Unlike Ross, DuBois did not believe high rates of reproduction, would ensure race survival. DuBois vehemently argued against the use of high reproductive rates to combat the new form of violent and racist society. DuBois allowed the publication of his article in the edition of the Birth Control Review actively seeking to remedy high death rates of black mothers as well as outbreaks of disease in rural black communities through contraception.²⁵ DuBois comments, "The mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among whites, is part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to refer their children properly."²⁶ DuBois' statement, though elitist in nature, continues to be wrapped up in his idea of race elevation. For DuBois, contraception was an active way to allow African-American women time to physically heal after childbirth while simultaneously allowing families ample opportunity to raise children in a manner that would ultimately promote healthier ways of navigating

life in an oppressive state. Thus, the fear of extinction was unsubstantiated. Race suicide was not possible because fears of race extinction were mere fallacy and in opposition to liberation.

Conclusion: Counter Sciences and Reimagining the History of Science.

At the dawn of the century, W.E.B. DuBois was determined to reimagine the social sciences in a way that would open pathways of liberation to African-Americans. DuBois' training in sociology allowed him to return to America ready to challenge Jim Crow America. In allowing his works to be circulated by the birth control movement, DuBois ensured his message reached those he cared most for and those he was determined to undermine. DuBois' opposition came at a time in American history where African-Americans were mitigating the terms of their identity. Emancipation was said and done, but this did not guarantee incorporation into a society shaped by oppression, subjugation and white hegemony. African-Americans were grappling with this at the turn of the century and thus, fears that understandably stemmed from the slave era translated into Postbellum America. Fears of race extinction and stagnation that resulted in active participation in what Ross deemed race suicide emerged among African-Americans, but it was not without its challengers. DuBois exemplified what Britt Rusert referred to as oppositional sciences.²⁷ These oppositional sciences are characterized as seeking to make an intervention in scientific discourse, DuBois was an active participant in these oppositional forms of science, particularly, speculative science which sought to mediate on the contingencies of black subjectivity and existence.²⁸

Seldom is opposition at the forefront of discourse surrounding the history of race science. Perhaps like claims of genocide, ideas of race science are also wrapped up in a particular time frame of world history. As a result, it is imperative to trace the histories of fear surrounding race suicide. Race suicide allows for a new narrative in the histories of race science to emerge, oppositional narratives. Black participation in racial science allowed for the reclaiming and revising of beliefs meant to oppress.

²⁵ Margaret Sanger, "Planned Parenthood Leaflet, Ca. 1941," accessed December 15, 2017, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b094-i139>.

²⁶ W.E.B Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, George S. Schulyer, "Birth Control Review Vol. Xxii, No. 6, June 1932."

²⁷ Britt Rusert, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism, and Freedom in Early African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), pg. 18

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Oppositional counter sciences did not disappear after the 1930s and neither did fears of race suicide, DuBois' challenging of racial sciences in the 1930s would be done again in the 1970s by black feminists seeking to oppose race suicide within their activist circles and within the mainstream feminist movement.

To address black feminism and race suicide is the task of another long and exciting project. Further research is needed on the subject and I intend to devote myself to the aforementioned relationship in further studies. However, I urge readers and scholars to now turn their attention to all that could be lost if race suicide is dismissed as a concept of analysis. Race suicide tells a story of fear. In tracing race suicide, we can see how claims of genocide became attached to fears rooted in violence and survival. Ultimately, race suicide intertwined multiple histories and made them emotional, which ultimately led to erasure. Perhaps race suicide was too tied to emotion to be relevant for the rigid notions of detachment that often serves as a gatekeeper to history. If history is to move forward as a discipline, it must learn to come to terms with its relationship to

emotions. History is no less valid when centering on lived experiences, and emotions. Lived experience is after all, the goal of liberatory feminism and what should be the goal of a liberated field of history.

The silencing of race suicide has silenced invaluable instances of opposition and mass changes in liberation struggles. Understanding the contentious past of race suicide allows us to understand its re-emergence in the contemporary moment. Bodies are still under subjugation in the twenty-first century and elucidating the contentious relationship of America as a settler state with the history of reproduction allows for new pathways towards liberation to be made visible as they were in the 30s, and again in the 70s. Race suicide shows the work still needed within both academia and activism, within theory and practice. Feminist scholar Judith Butler proposed the idea of theory-practice divide, in which work in the realm of academia and activism remain separate. The analysis of race suicide allows for one instance of bridging this divide in a way that seeks a feminist abolition of institutional violence and oppression.

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ENDNOTES

1. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, 3 (Autumn, 1988), 575-599, p. 584.
2. The examples listed here specifically reference, Dr. Dana Simmons’ article entitled “Impostor Syndrome, A Reparative History.” As well as Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas’ book entitled, “Love in Africa,” which traces the history of love, sex and intimacy in Africa.

3. Dana Simmons, “Impostor Syndrome, a Reparative History,” *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 2 (2016), 106-127.
4. “Blackgenocide,” accessed November 13, 2017, www.blackgenocide.org.
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6. “Race Suicide,” *Eugenics Archive*, April 29, 2014, <http://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/connections/535edb87095aa0000000250>.
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12. Edward A. Ross, “The Cause of Race Superiority,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 18 (Jul., 1901),: 67-89.
13. *Ibid.*, 88.
14. Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. DuBois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*, 17.
15. *Ibid.*, 21.
16. *Ibid.*, 19.
17. Many sociological journals reprinted the work of Francis Galton, an English scientist who proclaimed he had developed the science of eugenics
18. *Ibid.*, 22.
19. W.E.B Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, George S. Schulyer, “Birth Control Review Vol. Xxii, No. 6, June 1932,” accessed January 24, 2018, <https://lifedynamics.com/app/uploads/2015/09/1932-06-June.pdf>
20. *Ibid.*, 63.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. Margaret Sanger, “Planned Parenthood Leaflet, Ca. 1941,” accessed December 15, 2017, <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b094-i139>.
26. W.E.B Du Bois, Charles S. Johnson, George S. Schulyer, “Birth Control Review Vol. Xxii, No. 6, June 1932.”
27. Britt Rusert, *Fugitive Science: Empiricism, and Freedom in Early African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), pg. 18.
28. *Ibid.*