Du Bois as Existential Philosopher
“We will never run out of things for which turning to Du Bois will be useful,” Dr. Thomas Meagher said in his keynote lecture for this year’s annual Du Bois Research Day, held on October 12 at the Commonwealth Honors College Events Hall.

Dr. Thomas Meagher, a visiting assistant professor from the Department of Philosophy and Political Science at Quinnipiac University, is at UMass Amherst as a Du Bois Fellow. Along with nine other fellows studying under a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Meagher uses the Du Bois archives to further his own research.
Du Bois Research Day is a day when students from UMass and surrounding community colleges engage with the W.E.B. Du Bois Center and the Special Collections. It is designed to introduce students to Du Bois and his work, and the legacy UMass inherited along with his archives.

Dr. Meagher discussed how Du Bois can be viewed as an existential philosopher in his views of race in the world. Du Bois tried to place himself and the problems he encountered outside of the context of society — in other words, outside of racial categories — and in doing so, undertook an incredible existential feat.

Dr. Meagher explained how a lot of students at a university see themselves as producing an identity for who they will be after college, and learning how to become a profession that already exists such as an accountant or a nurse. Du Bois instead focused on what areas were lacking and what new fields he could create, and in this brought an existential view to his work which had a powerful influence on many different fields. This decision Du Bois made, that was very different from what students are often encouraged to do in school, is an important one for students to take note of in their own lives.

“It’s really easy to distinguish between what you’d like to be and what you wouldn’t like to be,” Meagher said about this difference. “But it’s a lot more difficult to ask the question, What can I become?”

The W.E.B. Du Bois Library, as Du Bois Center director Professor Whitney Battle-Baptiste observed, is a radical and empowering space. Professor Battle-Baptiste said that it is important to have a historical context to the Du Bois Center, and reminded students that in 1968, the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of African American Studies opened, and the library was named after Du Bois only after students staged a takeover of the campus administration building, Whitmore. She said this is particularly important to know because “this campus is going through some racial problems right now.” The collection of Du Bois’s work is an amazing campus resource for self-reflection and self-discovery.
Citing Du Bois’s timeless relevance, Professor Battle-Baptiste feels his work has something to say about nearly every topic discussed in
today’s public sphere. “You can look up quotes from Du Bois and only look at five of them, and four out of those five will be relevant today,” said Battle-Baptiste. The Du Bois archives are therefore a great resource for students in almost any field, and this is one reason a trip to see these archives is a large part of the required honors course “Ideas that Change the World.” In this course, students get a tour of the archives and a chance to read and reflect on all of Du Bois’s thoughts.

“Du Bois is an excellent model,” Dr. Meagher concluded. “Anytime that you enter a relationship with knowledge, anytime you become responsible for learning, you have to address the problems that are actually there in the world. Du Bois is someone that really took seriously the commitments that make knowledge matter.”