The Wounded World is a book over a century in the making. In 1916, the African American intellectual giant and political activist W.E.B. Du Bois, best known for his work with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its journal The Crisis, began his mission to pen what he called a definitive history of the Black military experience in World War One. He informed The Crisis readers that his work would be a timely “scientific and exhaustive history of the black man in the Great War” (83). A series of professional, political, and personal obstacles stretching over many decades impeded Du Bois from ever bringing his passion project to completion. The historian Chad Williams, who as a graduate student first stumbled upon Du Bois’s unfinished work, picked up the baton that Du Bois left behind and carried The Wounded World across the finish line with an aplomb well worth the wait.

Skillfully written and beautifully edited, the latter too often overlooked, The Wounded World shows once more why Chad Williams is the preeminent scholar of African Americans during the Great War. The painstaking research that earned Williams his first accolades with Torchbearers of Democracy is on full display in this book too. Years spent meticulously combing Du Bois’s private papers, his public writings, and personal records have produced one of the richest accounts of Du Bois’s life and work during the mid-twentieth century. The Du Bois revealed in the pages of the Wounded World is a man whose ambitions often collided against those of other prominent African Americans. Williams successfully demonstrates how Du Bois’s competitiveness, ego, pettiness, and irascible nature repeatedly cut short potentially transformative partnerships. The reader learns just how much Du Bois craved recognition of his genius and self-appointed leadership, though he did not always know how to share the stage with other African Americans also jockeying for power and public standing. When crossed, Du Bois showed neither patience nor grace for those he singled out as opponents, with many foes falling into that category, including principal of Tuskegee Robert Moton, US President Woodrow Wilson, Universal Negro Improvement Association president Marcus Garvey, and journalist-activist William Trotter, to name only a few. Ultimately, Du Bois’s inability to share the limelight contributed to some of his failed endeavors—like his famous Great War study—and left in ruins friendships and alliances that could have changed the course of African American history and likely Du Bois’s own life.

Chad Williams’s The Wounded World is far more than a book about African American experiences during the Great War era. It is, in fact, an intricate Gordian knot that brings together muscular intellectual, military,
African American, political, international, corporate (of the NAACP, The Crisis, etc.), and American social histories. It is also an intimate, at times vexing, biography of Du Bois that does not shy away from the great thinker’s fragilities and fallibilities. This is a book with many layers and many vulnerabilities, both for Du Bois and for Chad Williams writing about a man that he clearly admires deeply. Like Du Bois, Williams sets out to tell his own history of the Black military experience in World War One; in the process the author hit some of the same potholes that had frustrated Du Bois’s pace at the start of the twentieth century. This two-tiered aspect of the book enriches The Wounded World still more.

With Williams’s scope and ambitions for The Wounded World so great, his book could easily have become unwieldy, but this it is not. Rather, it advances with calm and calculated sure footing that readers will both enjoy and appreciate, particularly given the many complexities that the author addresses. The Wounded World is organized in three parts (Hope, Disillusion, Failure), each containing four chapters. Williams solves the hazard of so large an enterprise by oscillating seamlessly between the war itself half a world away in Europe, and violent outbreaks taking place at the same time in the United States. For Williams, as it had been for Du Bois, instances of racialized violence happening in the US were indivisible from the European war because nationalist and racialist chauvinisms had been the catalysts for the global conflict. And, as Du Bois’s and Williams’s logic hold, if outright war could happen in Europe’s purported great empires, it could just as easily happen in the United States. Seen in this way, the urgency of Du Bois’s dash to France in 1918, and his quest to get his assessment of the war’s racial dimensions published quickly, take on even greater clarity.

Among the topics at the center of Williams’s book is Du Bois’s place as an international figure and his importance in international affairs. International threads course throughout The Wounded World, with Williams very much invested in making a global argument about the war’s racial roots and Du Bois’s campaign to expose those entanglements. Williams stakes Du Bois’s encounters with African American soldiers in Europe after the armistice as a new turning point in the activist-journalist’s international awakening. Learning about the repeated indignities that Black war workers and soldiers endured while “safeguarding the world for democracy” threw Du Bois’s eyes wide open to a new realm of international racial abuses. Williams frames Du Bois’s investigations, interviews with Black American veterans, and his visits to key Western Front sites as concrete measures of his commitment to capturing the Black war experience in the European theater. The more Du Bois saw and heard in France, the more disillusioned he became about the extent to which military service could truly reverse the United States’ investment in white supremacy. Accordingly, working with others gathered in Paris during the peace negotiations and coordinating the Pan-African Congress became all the more pressing for Du Bois. For Williams, Du Bois’s work during the Pan-African Congress and his dealings with European politicians affirm his significance as an international political figure and his suitability as the man who would then write about the Black experience during the war.

The Wounded World’s blind spot, however, is that it takes as an article of faith that Du Bois was, in point of fact, the man who should have been speaking for the Black Diaspora, and that he should be its conscience and its mouthpiece in the aftermath of the Great War. Having alienated so many leading political and educational figures in Black American life, yet being determined to see himself as the self-appointed perfect person to pen an account of the experience of Black Americans in the Great War, by the time Du Bois reached France, he was a man in search of a movement and new allies. Williams writes that Du Bois landed in Paris determined to be both the spokesman for the world’s Black people—though no one in Europe or in other parts of the Black Diaspora had actually invited him to speak on their behalf—and to lead a Pan-African Congress that Afro Europeans and Africans had not asked for. That Du Bois parachuted into France, then began giving orders, slips by mostly unchallenged in The Wounded World, as do Du Bois’s elitist proclivities when pontificating about what should become of former German Africa (7-99).¹ Du Bois’s assumption that African Americans—and he in particular—should be the rightful torchbearers for the Black Diaspora—unmasks an arrogant Americocentrism. Worse, it exposes the same elitism that Africans rebuked

from Europeans who dictated what colonized people’s freedoms should entail. Despite being a newcomer both to wartime France and to the Western Front, Du Bois simply expected that he would be the one to prescribe postwar solutions, including what should become of Germany’s former African colonies, which he proposed entrusting to African American supervision as protectorates. President Woodrow Wilson too shared this kind of hubris about Europe and colonial affairs, though he would have envisioned only white people as the rightful overseers of Africans.²

In truth, neither Du Bois nor Wilson had any meaningful expertise about colonialism, or assured solutions for its dismantling. For one thing, neither Du Bois nor his writings held any particular pride of place among Black Europeans or Africans. The Senegalese-born French politician Blaise Diagne, who Williams acknowledges as having been instrumental in helping Du Bois understand what had been happening in France during the war and who brokered permission for the Pan African Congress from the French government, was the most powerful Black man in France. Diagne held a seat in the French National Assembly, and spent the war fighting for the citizenship rights of African and other colonial soldiers.³ How could Du Bois think that he could land in Diagne’s country, then be entitled to dictate orders? Had Diagne done the same in Du Bois’s Harlem, the prickly The Crisis editor would have seen this as a clear affront and usurpation of his position. Had Williams interrogated Du Bois’s puzzling sense of entitlement and his elitist prescription for African colonies, The Wounded World would have been an even more powerful intervention in international Black history. Du Bois may have recognized the value of addressing colonialism—after all he had published a handful of good essays on the matter,—but he showcased no real consistent fire in the belly about the exploitation of African troops during the war, most horrendously by France. Instead, he fawned over the French and their alleged racial utopia, even though by 1918 accounts of French atrocities against its Black soldiers—including accusations that the Quai D’Orsay’s strategy had been to use Black soldiers as cannon fodder—were well established.⁴

While Du Bois declared to any who would indulge him that his would be an unprecedented international study of Black people in the Great War, in reality, much of Du Bois’s gaze—and outrage—was fixed narrowly on Black Americans, not on a variety of Black veterans and war workers. His was a book about African Americans in the war with other Black combatants relegated largely to marginal roles. To say that writing about African American soldiers and noncombatant workers amounts to a history of the Black military experience raises the eyebrows, given that African Americans spent only six months of the war doing battle in France. By contrast, Black Frenchmen, Black Canadians, Antilleans, Belgians, Britons, and Germans had been in the trenches since August 1914, and together accounted for over half a million soldiers.⁵ France alone fielded over 80 percent of the Black soldiers on the Western Front, making Black Frenchmen the real face of the “Black experience” during the Great War. Yet the Americans and their emissary Du Bois somehow came to France and saw mostly themselves. Williams takes at face value Du Bois’s claim that his work was a diasporic or global one, when in truth it was not and may never have been intended as such. African Americans—their suffering, their experiences, their grievances, and their battles—are not universal stand-ins for a global Black experience. It is because Chad Williams is so rigorous and smart a scholar that those coming to The Wounded World with diplomatic, international, and colonial history sensibilities may scratch their heads and wonder why Du Bois gets such wide berth when it comes to his troubling stances on colonialism, France, Africa, and the Great War.

---

The absence of a more robust critique of W.E.B. Du Bois’s elitist penchants, especially when it came to Europe and German Africa, is an unfortunate lacuna, but not one that diminishes Chad Williams’s other important contributions in this book. Du Bois, like the African American soldiers beat down by the war that he so wanted to write about, was himself wounded from his experiences during and after the war. Cantankerous by nature, Du Bois struggled to maintain many of his personal and professional relationships first during the Great War era, then during the Cold War when the US government trained its ire on Black folks who spoke truth to power. In the end, W.E.B. Du Bois proved a man, an intellectual-activist, haunted by and hunted for his indefatigable work on behalf of African Americans, Great War veterans in particular. Chad Williams’s ability—both as a scholar and a writer—to humanize Du Bois and to make the reader empathize with a man that they may even dislike at times make this book so hard to put down. No one in recent years has done so good a job of bringing to life W. E. B. Du Bois’s own great war. Because of this, Chad Williams’s Wounded World has earned its place on the shelf of great works about Du Bois, right next to David Levering Lewis’s Pulitzer Prize winning masterpiece W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography.6

Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu is Associate Professor of History at the University of Minnesota. She earned a joint PhD in History and African American Studies at Yale University and specializes in twentieth century American, African Canadian, and African American history with an emphasis on immigration, war, race, globalization, social movements, and political resistance. Her forthcoming book The Glory of Their Deeds: A Global History of Black Soldiers and the Great War Era examines the experiences of Black soldiers and civilians during World War One, both in Allies and Central Powers nations.