



**RECOVERING ELLEN IRENE DIGGS:
RACE, GENDER, AND VISIBILITY
CONSTANCE HOLDEN**

ABSTRACT

THIS BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY TELLS A 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.

NOTES FROM ARTIST

THIS IMAGE IS OF A COLLECTIVE, STORIES WHICH ARE ALL COMPLETELY SEPARATE, ARE CARRIED TOGETHER INTO COMMON SPACES. BIRDS ARE CHOSEN AS CARRIERS FOR THEIR ABILITY TO REACH FARTHER THAN ANY ONE PERSON. THESE STORIES FIND HOMES IN FAMILIAR NEIGHBORHOODS, AND ARE COLLECTED AT A BUS STOP, A PLACE OF MOVEMENT, OF COMMUNITY, OF DEPARTURE AND NEW ARRIVALS.