

# MacArthur fellow joins SOC faculty



AU professor and documentary filmmaker Louis Massiah has explored the lives of many social activists, including W.E.B. DuBois, shown here.

BY SALLY ACHARYA

For Louis Massiah, documentary filmmaking is a visual art form, a means of analysis and a tool for social change. And it's a tool he not only wields himself with a skill that has been described as "brilliant" and "legendary," it's one he has long worked to put into the hands of communities.

The independent documentary filmmaker, who joined the SOC faculty this year, brings an impressive reputation that includes a MacArthur Fellowship - one of the famed "genius grants" for extreme originality and dedication.

"He's one of the premier documentary filmmakers in the country," says SOC colleague Charlene Gilbert, also an independent film and documentary maker. "He is not only a talented storyteller, but also, in his own way, a brilliant

historian. He doesn't just make films that are entertaining. He makes films that explore complex ideas, and translates those into a visual medium."

## A Challenge to the Status Quo

Massiah's PBS documentaries have included two episodes of the Civil Rights classic *Eyes on the Prize II* and the innovative *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography in Four Voices*. Drawn to the stories of social activists, he has profiled not only the famed DuBois, but a less-known African American political activist from the early twentieth century, Louise Thompson Patterson, and local Philadelphia activist Bill Crawford.

"As a filmmaker, I am very interested in men and women who have made a conscious decision to dedicate their lives to work toward a higher, more

civilized humanity," he says. "In many ways, our society rewards us for accepting the status quo, so it takes great courage, and often times great personal costs, to dare to challenge the society to change; to progress to something better; to be more humane; to work for a society free from oppression."

Even before he'd made the pieces that drew the attention of the documentary film world, Massiah worked to help communities express their own voices and histories in film. In the early 1980s, he founded the Scribe Video Center in Philadelphia to provide low-cost workshops and equipment to emerging filmmakers and community groups.

It's a "superb example of community media," says SOC professor Pat Aufderheide.

Through Massiah's work, members of diverse communities in Philadelphia, includ-

ing many traditionally excluded from access to the tools of media production, having acquired the skills and tools, he says, to tell stories that reach not only their neighbors, but millions through cable television and film festivals.

The model has had an impact around the world, with UNICEF replicating Scribe internationally to train community groups in documentary production.

## AU - A Growing Reputation for Docs

Massiah's arrival at AU this year has been heralded as a sign of SOC's growing strength in documentary film. "By bringing someone of [Massiah's] stature on board, we're raising the profile of our division and our work in the documentary program," Gilbert says. He is joining a group of well-regarded documentary filmmakers that now include Gilbert, Aufderheide, Larry Engel, Garry Griffin, Brigid Maher, Chris Palmer and Maggie Stogner.

It was the work and reputation of people at SOC that attracted Massiah, he says, including Dean Larry Kirkman, who, Massiah notes, has had "a major impact in shaping and nurturing a burgeoning community media movement throughout the U.S."

SOC's film division "is pervaded by a strong sense of social mission, and this is evident in everything that Louis does," Aufderheide says.

"Louis Massiah is legendary in circles of documentary film.