Echo and Narcissus: The Afrocentric Pragmatism of W. E. B. Du Bois

Richard Cullen Rath

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> Oppressors talking about oppressors
> Oppressing their oppressors.
> Where are the oppressed?
>
> —Mutabaruka, "Revolutionary Words," 1986

In a unique assignment for the *Independent* in 1904, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois reviewed his own book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. He characterized the style as "African." Du Bois made no apology, contending that "the blood of my fathers spoke through me and cast off the English restraint of my training and surroundings." "The resulting accomplishment," he concluded, "is a matter of taste." It "lost in authority but gained in vividness" because of its African perspective: It might tempt certain readers to contest every statement impatiently, but "some revelation of how the world looks to me cannot easily escape" even those readers. "One who is born with a cause"—for so he assessed himself—"is predestined to a certain narrowness of view, and at the same time to some clearness of vision within his limits with which the world often finds it well to reckon."[1]

The world has found it "well to reckon" with *The Souls of Black Folk* ever since. Du Bois's ideas about the "color line" and "double consciousness" have guided discussion of race relations from the moment the book appeared. It received immediate attention not only from African Americans but on a national and international scale as well. Booker T. Washington, whom Du Bois criticized severely in the most controversial essay in the book, saw to it that it received little notice in the African American newspapers he influenced. Nonetheless, it was read widely. For many, including Langston Hughes and John Hope Franklin, it served as "a cultural initiation rite." Several classic African American novels are based on its ideas. The response of the mainstream white press ranged from neglect to guarded praise to fanatical

Richard Cullen Rath is a doctoral candidate in the American History Program at Brandeis University. This essay received the Louis Pelzer Award for 1997.

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[1] W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, review of *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Independent*, Nov. 17, 1904, p. 1152.

claims that it would incite rape. The leading West African intellectual and political leader of the day, J. E. Casely Hayford, wrote Du Bois that more books like *The Souls of Black Folk* could bring an end to the race problem. Max Weber expressed interest in having the book translated and commissioned Du Bois to write a piece in German on North American race relations.[2]

Although Du Bois claimed his voice was African, his biographers have tended to discuss solely the European and Anglo-American influences on him. Eric J. Sundquist is perhaps the only exception, calling him a moderate Afrocentrist. Others have labeled Du Bois a mystic, a romantic, a panpsychic, a pragmatist, an integrationist, a segregationist, Hegelian, Boasian, Spencerian, Roycean, Victorian, a historian, a social scientist, an activist, an elitist, a Marxist, a tool of corporate hegemony, even a wildly anarchic thinker. Practically the only consistency among most of the assessments has been the conclusion that Du Bois's thought is somehow inconsistent and thus flawed.[3]

My argument is that at the turn of the century, Du Bois created an Afrocentric philosophy of history. Recognition of his Afrocentric vision ties disparate strands of his thought together into a cogent and compelling whole. I use the definition of "Afrocentric" proposed by Molefi Kete Asante, who coined the term. To adopt an Afrocentric outlook "is to place Africans and the interest of Africa at the center of our approach to problem solving" and to give "agency, subject position, to Africans." But Asante explicitly denies that Du Bois was Afrocentric. Du Bois, he maintains, simply added African references to his essentially Eurocentric scholarship. He dismisses the possibility of multiple perspectives—what Du Bois famously called "double consciousness"—as inauthentic. Even so, Asante's definition fits Du Bois's approach to American history in *The Souls of Black Folk*.[4]

[2] Henry Louis Gates Jr. lists James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) among the novels for which *The Souls of Black Folk* provides the subtext. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Introduction," in W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York, 1989), xiv. On responses to the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, see *ibid.*, xii–xxv; and David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York, 1993), 290–94.

[3] Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 457–625; Dickson D. Bruce Jr., "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness," *American Literature*, 64 (June 1992), 301–4; Immanuel Geiss, *The Pan-African Movement: A History of Pan-Africanism in America, Europe, and Africa*, trans. Ann Keep (New York, 1974); Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois;* Nancy Muller Milligan, "W. E. B. Du Bois's American Pragmatism," *Journal of American Culture*, 8 (Summer 1985), 31–37; Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, 1989), 138–50; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York, 1984), 403; Shamoon Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888–1903* (Chicago, 1995), 113–68, esp. 117; Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago, 1986), 21–37; Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 57–58, 65; Alun Munslow, *Discourse and Culture: The Creation of America, 1870–1920* (London, 1992); Joseph P. De Marco, *The Social Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Lanham, 1983); James B. Stewart, "Psychic Duality of Afro-Americans in the Novels of W. E. B. Du Bois," *Phylon*, 45 (Spring 1983), 95; Dan S. Green and Earl Smith, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Concepts of Race and Class," *Phylon*, 44 (Fall 1983), 262–72, esp. 269; Stanley Crouch, "Who Are We? Where Did We Come From? Where Are We Going?," in *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*, ed. Gerald Early (New York, 1993), 80–94, esp. 83.

[4] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia, 1987), 198; Molefi Kete Asante, "Where Is the White Professor Located?," *Perspectives*, 31 (Sept. 1993), 19; Ibrahim Sundiata, "Afrocentrism: The Argument We're Really Having," *Dissonance*, Sept. 30, 1996 [http: // way.net / dissonance / sundiata.html]. See also Molefi K.

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Du Bois never relinquished his Euro-American training and heritage. Drawing from African, European, and American ideas and beliefs, he forged a philosophy that accounted for the multiplicity of his experience as an African American. Here his encounter with William James was important. It was through the lens of pragmatism that Du Bois first viewed Hegelian and materialist thought. His study with James reinforced his conviction that history did not unfold along a predestined track; it reflected both the pressure of necessity and the force of striving wills. He also stunningly employed James's conviction that relations, although invisible, were powerfully real. Both convictions emerge in the philosophical history of African Americans in *The Souls of Black Folk.*

There Du Bois expressed himself in two cultural languages at once. His two perspectives throw the problems on which he focused into relief, much as an old-fashioned stereoscope employs two differing viewpoints to give depth to its subject.

Moreover, what is perceived in his book varies from one reader to another. Two examples devised by linguists illustrate how a reader's situation, knowledge, and ignorance can determine an interpretation: First, a jet pilot would derive a different meaning from the sentence "Flying planes can be dangerous" than would a balloonist floating near an airport. Flying imperils the one, planes, the other. Second, most perceivers judge the sentence "The horse raced past the barn fell" ungrammatical. But an owner of two thoroughbreds, one of which had been raced past the house and the other past the barn, would understand it, especially in reply to the question "Which horse fell?"[5] As the linguists did in formulating exemplary sentences, Du Bois deliberately gave his essays a surface form that represented more than one underlying meaning.

For Du Bois, multiplicity was not only inescapable, but valuable. "The American Negro," he wrote, wished

> neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world.[6]

He claimed that the hard-won skill of constantly negotiating multiple meanings was a distinctive, historically forged asset of African American consciousness that the rest of the world would do well to acquire. *The Souls of Black Folk* was his effort to show the way.

How did Du Bois construct the African style that "spoke through" him at the turn of the twentieth century? He would not set foot on the African continent until

Asante, "Racism, Consciousness, and Afrocentricity," in *Lure and Loathing,* ed. Early, 127–43; and Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Buffalo, 1980). I use the adjective "Afrocentric," rather than the nouns "Afrocentrism" and "Afrocentricity," to underscore the nonexclusiveness of Du Bois's perspective.

[5] Merrill F. Garrett, "Sentence Processing," in *An Invitation to Cognitive Science,* vol. I: *Language,* ed. Daniel N. Osherson and Howard Lasnik (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 133–76; Joanne L. Miller, "Speech Perception," *ibid.*, 69–94; Kenneth I. Forster, "Lexical Processing," in *ibid.*, 95–132.

[6] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 3.

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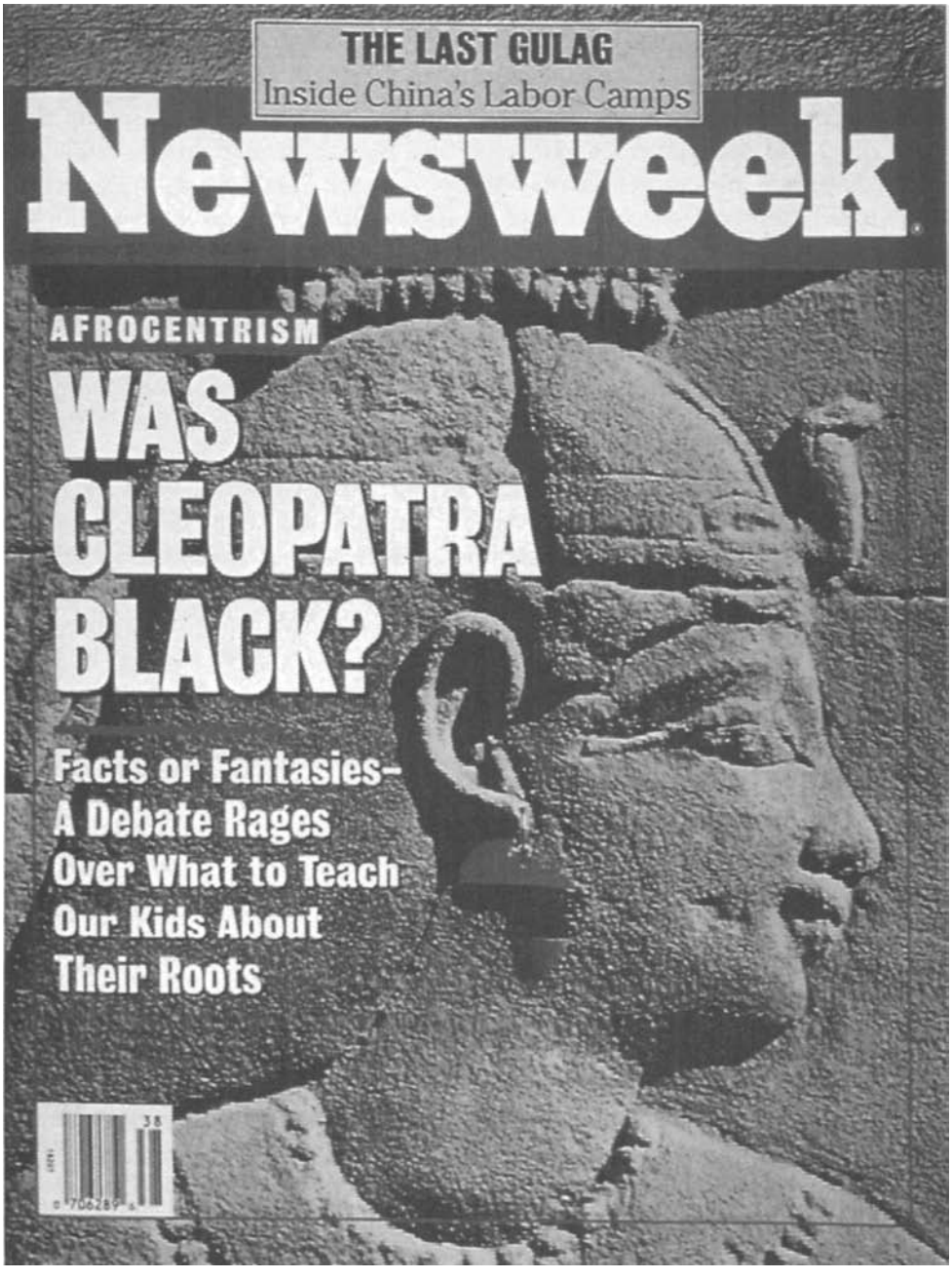

A *Newsweek* cover from September 23, 1991, depicts a second century B.C. relief of Cleopatra II (not the famous queen associated with Julius Caesar and Marc Antony) to raise questions about African contributions to Western civilization.

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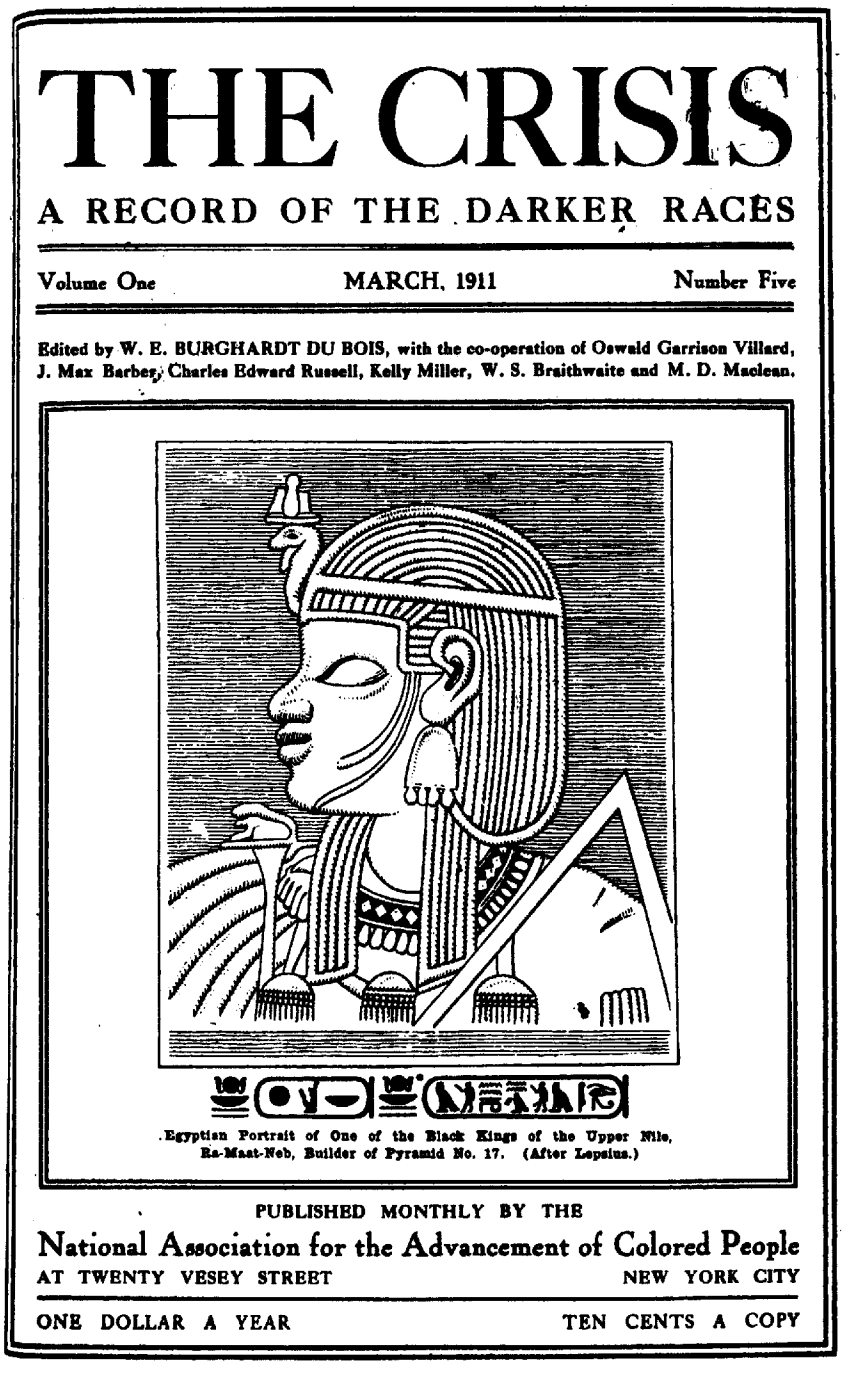

THE CRISIS

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PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY THE

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The March 1911 cover of the *Crisis* used a similar relief to underscore black African contributions to world history.

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1923, and scholarship on the subject was woefully inadequate. His Africa was made of the ideas and feelings he claimed to share with 10 million Americans whose ancestors slavery had brought. His Africa was a way of life more than a place, so it makes sense to discuss "what was African" rather than to ask what Africa was.[7] First, historical events, not biological race, determined what was African about him and about America. Second, Du Bois adopted a "severely logical" African philosophy, misleadingly called animism, in which not just individual humans, but all forces, had wills. The world was thus alive with intent. He developed his notions of *race, soul, consciousness,* and the *veil* from this African metaphysics. Third, he cobbled together fragments of rhythm, melody, and lyric that he could trace to West African sources to argue that much of what was most distinctive and beautiful about America derived from Africans. He based this claim on evidence from African American spirituals, the *sorrow songs.*

Du Bois used his notions of what was African to redefine race, soul, consciousness, the veil, and the sorrow songs. He posited these key ideas as Africans' contribution to North American civilization, born of their struggles with slavery and Jim Crow America. Citing that contribution, he laid claim to Africans' share in America: "Your country?," he asked white Americans, "How came it yours?" "Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation," he reminds us still.[8]

Race

Du Bois considered the distinctiveness of Africans' American experience a product of history, not biology. He considered "the Negro Problem" to be not one, "but rather a plexus of social problems . . . [that] have their one bond of unity in the fact that they group themselves about those Africans whom two centuries of slave trading brought into the land." He advocated fostering the best qualities that historical events had forged in the "Negro Race" rather than aiming at a European-derived standard.[9]

By 1900, Du Bois had developed a viable African identity from what he had available as a particularly brilliant and privileged African American. Throughout his life, he maintained that his curiosity always led to the African rather than the European side of his ancestry. "What is it between us," he asked of the continent, "that constitutes a tie which I can feel better than I can explain?" His family heritage gave him a single tangible connection with West Africa, a song passed through his family that was to anchor the "Sorrow Songs." He recalled his New England youth

[7] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro* (New York, 1915), 244. For a nonessentialist approach to questions of race and ethnicity that informs my use of "African" and "Afrocentric" here, see Monisha Das Gupta, "What Is Indian about You: A Gendered, Transnational Approach to Ethnicity," *Gender and Society* (forthcoming).

[8] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 186–87.

[9] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro,* quoted in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York, 1968), 200; W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *Pamphlets and Leaflets by W. E. B. Du Bois,* ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, N.Y., 1986), 1–8.

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as a time of near obliviousness to race. With his teenage years came a dawning realization of the values the white community attached to his skin color. It was at Fisk University, a historically black college in the South where he studied from 1885 to 1888, that his racial identity—and his growing consciousness of racism—began to take shape.[10]

Du Bois's education was not always conducive to building a usable African racial identity, but he persisted. During his years at Harvard University (1888–1892), and later at the University of Berlin (1892–1894), he engaged with the European-derived racial theories of his day. William James, his mentor and "guide to clear thinking," uncritically adopted James G. Frazer's developmental model of race as going through stages from "primitive" or "savage" to "civilized." In it, "Negroes" represented the most unsophisticated stages, with "Hindoos" and "Mongoloids" occupying mediating positions along the way to that apogee of civilization, western Europe and its crown, late Victorian England. The jewel of this crown was philosophy, which James considered a civilization's "race-heritage." At least once, Du Bois called Africans—perhaps facetiously, but without comment — "savages" in Frazer's sense of "uncivilized."[11]

Du Bois emerged from his undergraduate years with the goal of applying "philosophy to an historical interpretation of race relations." James had given—and Du Bois, in his own words, followed—"pragmatic" counsel to exchange a concentration in philosophy for the more practical realm of historical studies. In history, Du Bois found tools to use in contesting social Darwinist models of physically determined, hierarchically ranked cultural traits and to design his own conception of race. Under the tutelage of the historian Albert Bushnell Hart, Du Bois wrote in an austere, relentlessly documented style. Hart, though holding an opinion of African American race traits at odds with Du Bois's, not only encouraged his student but advised him to pursue a doctorate at the University of Berlin.[12]

In Berlin, more perhaps than at any other time, Du Bois's ideas of race were exposed to varied influences. Free from American versions of racism, he forgivingly

[10] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York, 1940), 116; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 2, 180; W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York, 1920), 13; Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 56–149.

[11] Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn,* 38; Du Bois, *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois,* 133, 143. See Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 79–161; Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn,* 97–102; Du Bois, *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois,* 132–36; Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (2 vols., Boston, 1935); Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930* (New Haven, 1977); and James G. Frazer, *The New Golden Bough,* ed. Theodore H. Gaster (New York, 1959), xxv–xxvii. For William James's use of James G. Frazer, see William James, "Philosophy and Its Critics" (1911), in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition,* ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago, 1977), 473, 478–79, 489–90; and William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (1899), *ibid.*, 630. For Du Bois's use of "savage," see Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 135. For James and Du Bois on Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer, see W. E. B. Du Bois, "Philosophy Notes," c. 1888, *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois* (microfilm, 89 reels, Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980), reel 87, frames 200–228; Milligan, "W. E. B. Du Bois's American Pragmatism," 35; and Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 142, 202–3.

[12] Du Bois, *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois,* 148; Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn,* 39. For Du Bois's relations with Albert Bushnell Hart, see *Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois,* ed. Herbert Aptheker (3 vols., Boston, 1973), I, 9–14. For Hart's opinion of African Americans, see Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 99, 102, 111–13. Du Bois was unable to complete his doctorate in Berlin because of funding problems, and he completed his Ph.D. at Harvard instead. Lewis, *ibid.*, 144–46.

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took in Heinrich von Treitschke's German nationalist rhetoric, including a statement that startled him: "Mulattoes are inferior; they feel themselves inferior." From Gustav Schmoller and others came lectures on Georg Hegel's understanding of history as belonging to *races* rather than *nations* or *great men.* Cultural, historical, and linguistic affinities bound people together, not just physical characteristics. This romantic construct of race culminated in ideas about *Volk* associated with Johann Gottfried von Herder, Johann von Goethe, Friedrich von Schiller, and the brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm.[13] Du Bois drew on this vocabulary and style in *The Souls of Black Folk,* but beneath the surface his notion of race differed from that of the German romantics.

Du Bois took the Hegelian idea of history as a determinant of a race's cultural traits, disengaged it from racist typologies, and used it to form his African racial identity. In effect, he replaced *historicism*—the Hegelian belief in a world unfolding according to some perhaps-decipherable plan—with *historicity,* attention to what has happened as the basis for explanation of how things are. Instead of Victorian biology, Du Bois consistently invoked the "historical facts" of "modern Negro slavery and the slave trade" as the best explanation of the "race traits" of African Americans. This people, he contended, had been "swept on by the current of the nineteenth while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century." He reminded readers and would-be "students of the problem of the races" that "the history of the slave did not begin with his landing in America."[14]

The history of Africa was difficult to study at the turn of the century. The ideology of slavery had produced "astounding prejudice." In Du Bois's 1915 summary of his own efforts to correct the situation, he noted that "that which may be assumed true of white men must be proven beyond peradventure if it relates to Negroes." In the United States, pseudoscientific definitions of race took two contradictory forms, one applied to Europeans and their descendants and the other to Africans and theirs. Presaging George Orwell, Du Bois wrote of the consequent word games.

> In North America, a Negro may be seven-eighths white, since the term refers to any person of Negro descent. If we use the term in the same sense regarding the rest of the inhabitants of the world, we may say truthfully that Negroes have been among the leaders of civilization in every age of the world's history from ancient Babylon to modern America. . . . In sharp contrast to this usage, the term "Negro" in Africa has been more and more restricted.

The upshot of the contradictory standards was that "in this restricted sense, the Negro has no history, culture, or ability, for the simple fact that such human beings as have history and evidence culture and ability are not Negroes!" Using the racial definitions that he was critiquing, Du Bois reclaimed African history by applying the "one-drop" law of descent used in North America to the world as a whole. The

[13] Du Bois, *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois,* 165; Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 130–47. For the concept of *Volk,* see Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), 3–22.

[14] Du Bois, *Negro,* 142; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 142; W. E. B. Du Bois, review of *The Negro in Africa and America* by Joseph A. Tillinghast, *Political Science Quarterly,* 18 (Dec. 1903), 695–97.

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dominant culture could claim the validity of "one-drop" racial definitions only at the expense of its pure-white history. It could maintain "Negro" inferiority and African ahistoricism only at the expense of "one-drop" racial definitions. A third course, that of oblivious narcissistic wordplay, is the one that Du Bois criticized.[15]

A biological concept of race, Du Bois believed, could not usefully characterize black folk in North America. "The blood of all nations flows in their veins," he wrote, "but the predominant strain is black African." As an undergraduate student, he noted that eighteenth-century North American colonies "artificially" imposed laws to end the intermarriage of Africans and Europeans. This fact, Du Bois argued, refuted any idea of a "natural repulsion" between the races. Foreshadowing the cultural relativism of Franz Boas, in 1897 Du Bois wrote that "no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences" between races.[16]

Du Bois dismissed biological race as an open, but irrelevant, question. He dealt with the problem of publishing his views on race in a hostile environment by granting biological racialism a place, but no positive function. At the turn of the century, he mentioned physical race in his writings, but he silently uncoupled it from the causes of racial characteristics. The forces of history, he noted, sometimes respected and sometimes ignored ties of "blood, descent, and physical peculiarities." But those forces have always "divided human beings into races, which while they perhaps transcend scientific definition, nevertheless, are clearly defined to the eye of the historian and sociologist." A race was thus "a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life."[17]

Anthony Appiah argues that Du Bois's invocation of history inevitably implied some race essence on which history acted. Du Bois was thus begging the question of defining race. Adopting the dialectic, Appiah claims scientific racism as the thesis, Du Bois's revaluation of its contents as the antithesis, and Appiah's rejection of biological race (while retaining its revalued contents) as his own synthesis, the completion of Du Bois's "uncompleted" argument.[18]

[15] Du Bois, *Negro,* 12, 138, 139. See also *ibid.*, 12–13, 16–17; and Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941; Boston, 1958), 1–6, 54–61. In regard to "the term 'Negro' in Africa," Du Bois meant the imposed, not indigenous, label.

[16] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Introduction to Folk Songs," n.d., *Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois,* reel 83, frame 887; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Contributions to the Negro Problem," c. 1891, *ibid.*, reel 87, frame 241; Du Bois, "Conservation of Races," 2–3. Franz Boas is often regarded as influencing Du Bois, but the opposite is as likely. See Milligan, "W. E. B. Du Bois's American Pragmatism," 34–35; and Franz Boas, *Race, Language, and Culture* (New York, 1940), 157–59, 623, 629–30. Boas's classic formulation of cultural relativism was contained in the second edition of *Primitive Man* (1938); the first edition was published in 1911 with a significantly more biological perspective on physical race. The seeds of his later relativism are contained in the 1894 essay "Human Faculty as Determined by Race," but "one is struck by the limits of Boas' critique in 1894." George W. Stocking Jr., "Racial Capacity and Cultural Determinism," in *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911: A Franz Boas Reader,* ed. George W. Stocking Jr. (New York, 1974), 220; Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911; New York, 1938); Franz Boas, "Human Faculty as Determined by Race," in *Shaping of American Anthropology,* ed. Stocking, 221–42.

[17] Du Bois, "Conservation of Races," 2; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* xxxii.

[18] Appiah, "Uncompleted Argument," 26–27. See also Lucius Outlaw, "'Conserve' Races? In Defense of W. E. B. Du Bois," in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture: Philosophy, Politics, and Poetics,* ed. Bernard W. Bell, Emily Grosholz, and James B. Stewart (New York, 1996), 15–37; and Robert Gooding-Williams, "Outlaw, Appiah, and Du Bois's 'The Conservation of Races,'" *ibid.*, 39–56.

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Du Bois's own words belie Appiah's attribution of a failed Hegelian historicism. "Not in our little day may you and I lift it" he wrote of the veil of race that occluded the way to the "better, truer self" that both he and Appiah wanted. The "striving" was the point, and it was necessary for historical reasons. Du Bois transcended the dialectic by substituting for Hegelian synthesis a continual, unresolved tension between the abilities of a "race" to redefine itself dynamically through the free agency of its members and the ever-shifting historical contingencies that bound those members together as a "race." That tension echoed Du Bois's own notion of "double consciousness." It was also a version of Jamesean pragmatism, a middle way between "tender-minded" idealism and "tough-minded" empiricism. As formulated by James and as revised by Du Bois, pragmatism overcame the determinist fatalism implicit in Hegel's logic, leaving room for free-willed agents to affect the world—it left "live options."[19]

Du Bois's pragmatism was a nonindividualist empiricism that culminated in his analysis of a distinctive gift of African civilization to the world, the African notion of "soul." For Du Bois, the characteristics of a race hinged on the history and "soul" of its people, not on their physical traits, cultural essences, or the doings of their great men. Thus, when he embarked on a lifelong search for the historical reasons for his felt Africanness, he looked not to material conditions alone, but also to the intangible constituents of what "soul"—or "souls"—he felt.

Soul

In *The Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois presented not just the history of the souls in the title, but a distinctive African-derived category of soul that engaged with the tensions between free will and rationality that his mentor James had mapped out at Harvard. Du Bois had no firsthand knowledge of Africa on which to base his notion of soul. He knew only the descendants of Africans, but here he spoke with the authority of experience, reminding his readers "that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil." As an undergraduate at Harvard, he began to develop his notion of soul by inference from gaps in Western philosophy's treatment of *agency*—the ability to act intentionally. Toward the end of the century, he began sorting through the paltry and mostly racist anthropological literature on Africa and Africans in search of evidence that was congruent with his developing philosophy of agency.[20] If we track the devel-

[19] Du Bois, "Philosophy Notes," frame 220; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 3; Du Bois, *Darkwater,* 246; William James, "Pragmatism and Religion" (1907), in *Writings of William James,* ed. McDermott, 472; William James, "Monistic Idealism" (1909), *ibid.*, 511; William James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy" (1907), *ibid.*, 365; William James, "The Will to Believe" (1897), *ibid.*, 717–18. On Du Bois's relation to the Hegelian dialectic, see Thomas C. Holt, "The Political Uses of Alienation: W. E. B. Du Bois on Politics, Race, and Culture, 1903–1940," *American Quarterly,* 42 (June 1990), 301–23; and Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 281. Shamoon Zamir contends that James rejected dialectical logic; however, James thought that something like the dialectic operated, but in a pluralistic rather than monistic universe. Zamir, *Dark Voices,* 152. See also William James, "Hegel and His Method" (1909), in *Writings of William James,* ed. McDermott, 512–20.

[20] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* xxxii; George W. Stocking Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York, 1968).

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opment of his ideas on the soul through his apprenticeship under James and through the anthropological literature that he afterward read, the African ideas he presented as American in *The Souls of Black Folk* and elsewhere cease to appear only a mystical, romantic hodgepodge of folk beliefs. They emerge as a powerfully coherent theory of agency.

A theory of agency is a theory of how *will* is attached to effects in the world. Although today the word *soul* has fallen from grace in some Western circles, its secularized referent, *agent,* is still important to several scholarly discourses. An agent, or soul, is that which is capable of acting with both volition and intent. It is a cause in itself, not simply a determined reaction predictable from inputs. Although James had ostensibly set aside metaphysical questions in order to develop his psychology during the latter half of the 1880s, his metaphysical concerns are foregrounded in Du Bois's 1888 notes. At Harvard Du Bois learned that *souls* mediate will and effect. The soul was the bridge that allowed ideas to affect the material world, solving the Cartesian mind/body problem. By the 1890s, it had grown rickety as a philosophical concept. It either failed to bridge the gap at all, as in the solipsism of George Berkeley, or it simply begged the problem by making the soul a little man—a homunculus—which in turn needed its own soul in order to explain how *it* worked.[21]

The late-nineteenth-century alternatives to the idea of soul associated with dualism fell out along two axes. The first axis was whether agency was *individuated* or *distributed.* Individuated will belonged to a being, most often an individual person. In contrast, distributed will (which Du Bois called *pantheism* in his notes) need not be attached to any being. The second axis was whether the universe was *closed* (what James called *monism*) or *open* (what James called a *plural universe*—and what Du Bois's notes call *polytheism).* The two axes provided four possible configurations for a theory of agency: *materialism* (individuated, closed), *pluralist individualism* (individuated, open), *absolute idealism* (distributed, closed), and by inference from the other three, *polytheistic pantheism* (distributed, open). The last was to pique Du Bois's interest.

James's critique of the first configuration, materialism, resonated with Du Bois. Materialists, such as the social Darwinists Herbert Spencer and Thomas Huxley, predicated individuated agency in a closed universe. They dispensed with the notion of the soul; the physical world provided sufficient explanation for all philosophical questions. Whatever freedom there appeared to be was reducible to physical causes. James found this approach to agency unacceptable because it was deterministic and left no reason to strive. When attached to a view of individuals as

[21] Du Bois, "Philosophy Notes," frames 204–5. For current notions of agency in semantic and grammatical theory, see Ray S. Jackendoff, *Semantic Structures* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 47, 55, 125, 128–29, 258; and Alan M. Leslie, "A Theory of Agency," *Technical Reports of the Rutgers University Center for Cognitive Science* (no. 12, 1993). On functionalism and homunculi, see Jerry A. Fodor, "The Mind-Body Problem," *Scientific American,* 244 (Jan. 1981), 114–23; Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston, 1991), 14, 15, 31, 85–89, 176, 228, 259–63, 459–60; William G. Lycan, "Homunculus Functionalism Meets PDP," in *Philosophy and Connectionist Theory,* ed. William Ramsey, Steven P. Stich, and Daniel E. Rumelhart (Hillsdale, N.J., 1991), 259–86; and Ned Block, ed., *Readings in Philosophy of Psychology* (2 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1980), I, 171–305.

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the only agents, it seemed a justification for selfish actions and for preoccupation with material gain. Du Bois agreed, repeatedly pointing out the base ugliness of the combination of individualism and materialism that manifested itself in the United States racial system. In his 1890 Harvard commencement address, he considered Jefferson Davis as the idealized representative of "Teutonic civilization." At the foundation of that society lay "the idea of the strong man—Individualism coupled with the rule of might." When adopted as a philosophy of the state, as it had been in Victorian American society, this idea resulted in an ethics ruled by "triumphant commercialism" and "material prosperity" that led inevitably to "the advance of a part of the world at the expence of the whole."[22]

James predicated the second configuration, individuated agency in a pluralistic universe. To James, mind and matter were but different aspects of the "pure experience" of individual human beings. If agency was firmly rooted in individuals and nowhere else, the dualist's problem of how thoughts could have material effects no longer signified anything. No soul had to be invoked to solve it. James conceded that a soul could exist as a matter of faith, but he rejected it in favor of the "individual." The open pluralistic universe granted James's individuals a reason to exert their free wills that materialists did not have: being (as Du Bois recorded it) "polytheistic," a plural universe was not all good, all bad, or all neutral. It had parts of each, so real choices ("live options") could be made.[23]

In his published work between 1885 and 1890, James ostensibly insulated his individualistic psychology from metaphysics. But in 1892, he allowed that the two were at bottom not separable. By 1895, he claimed that his psychology was robust enough to support a metaphysical system. The direction of James's thought is clear in Du Bois's notebooks from 1888, when James was publicly segregating his psychology from his metaphysics. The only alternative to individualism—whether materialist or pluralist—that James then envisioned was the third configuration, the absolute idealist's pantheism.[24]

In Hegel's absolute idealism, agency was freely distributed in a closed, monistic system. Building on Immanuel Kant's notion of an all-encompassing transcendental soul, Hegel dispatched mind/body dualism by positing a unified world that was

[22] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Jefferson Davis as a Representative of Civilization" (1890), in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader,* ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York, 1996), 243–45; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 3, 31, 55–56, 66, 141–42; Du Bois, "Philosophy Notes," frames 204, 206, 211, 213–14, 219–22.

[23] Du Bois, "Philosophy Notes," frame 226. For the profound individualism of James's psychology, see William James, "The Experience of Activity" (1905), in *Writings of William James,* ed. McDermott, 283–84n180, 289; William James, "The Function of Cognition" (1885), *ibid.*, 150; William James, "The Knowing of Things Together" (1895), *ibid.*, 161; William James, "A Plea for Psychology as a 'Natural Science,'" *Philosophical Review,* 1 (Jan. 1892), 146–53; William James, "The Thing and Its Relations" (1905), in *Writings of William James,* ed. McDermott, 216; William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891), *ibid.*, 616–17; Deborah J. Coon, "'One Moment in the World's Salvation': Anarchism and the Radicalization of William James," *Journal of American History,* 83 (June 1996), 79–80; and Kuklick, *Rise of American Philosophy,* 138. For his views on souls, see James, "Knowing of Things Together," 161–67; William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (2 vols., New York, 1890), I, 180–82, 299–305; and James, "Experience of Activity," 283–84n180, 289–90.

[24] James, "Function of Cognition," 136–51; James, *Principles of Psychology,* I, 136–37, 401, II, 671; William James, *Psychology (Briefer Course)* (New York, 1892), 395–400; James, "Knowing of Things Together," 152–68. Kuklick charts the evolution of James's metaphysics but not James's transfer of his psychology's individualist assumptions to it. Kuklick, *Rise of American Philosophy,* 179–86, 266–67.

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the all-inclusive will of the oversoul. James wrote that Hegel's absolute idealism served to

> explain things by an over-soul of which all separate souls, sensations, thoughts, and data generally are parts. . . . The problem for the over-soul is that of insulation. The removal of insulating obstructions would sufficiently account for things reverting to their natural place in the oversoul and being known together.

James's opinion that "the problem for the over-soul is that of insulation" closely resembles Du Bois's famous prophecy that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." The real problem was not the black folk, but the insulator, the imposed color line that had grown into the "veil" enveloping his race.[25]

Du Bois was captivated by the idea of a distributed or pantheistic will, but he rejected Hegel's monism for three reasons. First, James taught him that absolute idealism was a closed, deterministic system. The all-inclusiveness of the oversoul's will eliminated the possibility of individual free will, which would have "the lulling effect of making us indifferent to the moral strife in the world." Second, any absolute construct of the world soul could be no more than an artificial unity imposed on a plural universe, an imposition Du Bois disparaged for its resemblance to the workings of race relations in the United States. For Du Bois in Jim Crow America, the arbitrary imposition of an identity not his own was an all-too-real probability, one that he devoted his life to fighting. Third, Hegel and his intellectual heirs excluded Africans from their list of "world historical peoples." "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian," Du Bois sought to include "the Negro" as "a sort of seventh son." Du Bois found the absolutist strains of Hegelian philosophy wanting, and it plays a less direct role in his thought than is often assumed. During the 1890s, he was formulating an alternative to the problems he saw in both individualism and absolutism.[26]

In his notes, Du Bois showed an affinity for the fourth configuration of agency, distributed free will in an open, pluralistic universe ("pantheistic polytheism" by inference from his notes). He paid keen attention to James's pluralistic (that is, open) universe but mostly ignored his individualistic metaphysics. Likewise, he took copious notes on James's disparagement of Hegel's monism, but he carefully noted the details of Hegel's pantheism (that is, causation by distributed agency).

Du Bois's notes record James's saying that "force" provides the most rational ground on which to base a theory of cause. Force was "nothing more or less than will." Du Bois concluded that if forces and wills were the same, then the mind / matter distinction collapsed. "Idealism Realism Materialism the same" he breathlessly scribbled on a stray leaf of paper, "If thought *is* force what's the difference."

[25] James, "Knowing of Things Together," 166; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* xxxi, 1–6, 10, 67–68, 186–87.

[26] Du Bois, "Philosophy Notes," frame 220; Williamson, *Crucible of Race,* 402; G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History,* trans. J. Sibree (New York, 1956), 1–98; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Contributions to the Negro Problem," reel 87, frame 241; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 3. Lewis marks Du Bois as Hegelian based partly on Du Bois's philosophy notes, which deem Josiah Royce's proof of the absolute a "new and original argument which I cannot shake." The "I," however, as Lewis notes elsewhere, is most likely James, not Du Bois, and may indicate doubt rather than acceptance. Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 601n29.

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He was attracted to the pantheistic idea of agency pervading everything, unmediated and unobstructed. A decade later, he fashioned a notion of soul from this pantheistic metaphysics and substituted it for James's individualism while keeping his mentor's polytheistic universe intact.[27]

Because he favored a pluralist, or "polytheistic," universe, Du Bois faced a choice that absolute idealists were spared in their pantheism. He would need to sort out whether forces always had wills commensurable with human perceptions. His notes waver between the argument that distributed agency anthropomorphized nature and the counterargument that it was hubris to place human faculties above nature rather than within it. Drawing on African spiritual beliefs a decade later, he would claim the latter and build a theory of soul from the position that force and will were different aspects of the same thing operating in a plural universe. Human wills were just one force among many. But in his philosophy class, he never completed the connections. His soul theory, implicit in his Harvard notes, remained unarticulated until he became acquainted with African philosophies of agency.[28]

Two considerations "broke in upon" Du Bois's work around the turn of the century "and eventually disrupted it: first, one could not be a calm cool and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched; and secondly, there was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort that I was doing." Lynching was at its peak, and one in particular, the 1899 hanging and barbecuing of the Georgia farmer Sam Hose, changed Du Bois's life. In its aftermath, he wrote a restrained letter against lynching to Joel Chandler Harris, the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution,* and set off from his university offices to deliver it. En route, he heard that Hose's blackened knuckles were on display in the shopwindow of a white store owner. He turned back without delivering the letter. Commissioned by the University of Pennsylvania to study African American urban life in Philadelphia, Du Bois produced a landmark sociological study, *The Philadelphia Negro.* Yet the university omitted his name from the catalog and ignored his contribution. His pathbreaking Atlanta University studies went largely unnoticed and underfunded. The federal government hired him to do research on Georgia farming communities between 1898 and 1904, but it destroyed a major research project because it "touched on political matters." The conquest of Europe's and America's best universities had not given Du Bois what he needed to get his message across.[29]

In response, Du Bois began to explore a model of agency that drew on African as well as European precedents. In it, souls were forces, and *all* forces had wills. The West African belief systems he read about invested every force with intent and

[27] Du Bois, "Philosophy Notes," frames 204–5; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Notes—c. 1888–1890," *Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois,* reel 87, frame 265. Charles Sanders Peirce's formulation of pragmatism shares with Du Bois's pragmatism a willingness to let go of the notion "individual" as the foundational metaphysical object. James Hoopes, "Objectivity *and* Relativity Affirmed: Historical Knowledge and the Philosophy of Charles S. Peirce," *American Historical Review,* 98 (Oct. 1993), 1545–55. Milligan says Du Bois's pragmatism was Peircian as well as Jamesean. Milligan, "W. E. B. Du Bois's American Pragmatism." Du Bois, however, credits African traditions, not Peirce, for his philosophy.

[28] Du Bois, "Philosophy Notes," frames 200–201, 205, 209, 213.

[29] Du Bois, *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois,* 222, 227; Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn,* 97–102; Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 179–81, 226, 354–56.

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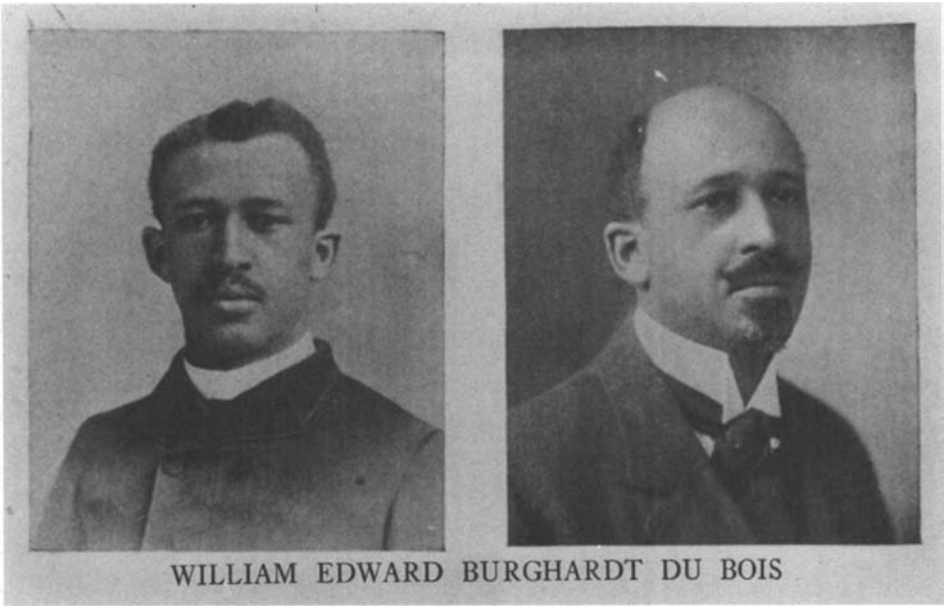

W. E. B. Du Bois's twenty-fifth anniversary Harvard University reunion portraits, one taken at the time of his graduation from Harvard in 1890, the other at the time of his 1915 reunion.
Courtesy Harvard University Archives.

volition, then explained the world by the actions of those forces. In James's psychology, agency had to be attributed to "individualized personalities."[30] "Animism" as Du Bois employed it was under no such stricture.

Making the African connections proved a frustrating task. Five or six years into his inquiry, Du Bois wrote that "those who have written on the subject [of African and African American belief systems] have not been serious students of a curious human phenomenon, but rather persons apparently unable to understand why a transplanted slave should cling to heathen rites." In a 1915 bibliography summarizing his first two decades of African research, he lamented that "none of these authors write from the point of view of the Negro as a man, or with anything but incidental acknowledgment of the existence or value of his history." But Du Bois was wearily accustomed to viewing his world "through the eyes of others." He pointed out places from which he had managed to cull useful material, filtering out what nonsense he could. Much of the scholarship on which he was forced to rely came out of missionary efforts and Victorian anthropology. Sorting colonialist constructs of "savagery" and "civilization" from observation induced doubt. As a result, Du Bois presented his notions of African philosophy in "half-articulated" terms in the 1890s. But by 1898 he had discovered an institutional bearer of that

[30] James, "Knowing of Things Together," 161, 163–64.

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philosophy. "The Negro Church," he wrote, "is the only social institution of the Negroes which started in the African forest and survived slavery." It was "the center of Negro social life" after emancipation because slavery had destroyed African family and state structures in the Americas, and it remained "the most characteristic expression of African character."[31]

Du Bois's descriptions of the "Negro Church" always began with an overview of the African notions of agency that undergirded it. In West African societies, agency was an all-pervasive, distributed force; as in James's concept of pure experience, no distinction was made between matter and spirit. He reported that Tshi-speaking people, located in what is now Ghana, believed that "man and all nature have indwelling *kra,*" or soul force. A person's *kra* came and went at will during life. Upon death it departed to seek an abode in a new person—or not. It was not necessarily attached to a person. Tshi-speaking people also posited another soul that lived on after death, a shadow version of the deceased. A. B. Ellis (whom Du Bois cites), found variations on this theme among Ga, Ewe, and Yoruba speakers as well. Du Bois noted similar tendencies throughout the continent.[32]

In *The Souls of Black Folk* and elsewhere, Du Bois maintained that this widespread African philosophy of souls "was nature-worship, with profound belief in invisible surrounding influences, good and bad." "Negro Religion" in North America could be understood only "if we remember that the social history of the Negro did not start in America." The key feature of African animism was the attribution of intent and volition—agency—to forces rather than to individuals. Du Bois observed that the first African churches in the Americas were "an adaptation and mingling of heathen rites among the members of each plantation." Much like his ancestors, "the transplanted African lived in a world animate with gods and devils, elves and witches; full of strange influences."[33] The implications of such distributed agency require amplification: A person could have more than one soul. Souls could come and go from the person at will, occasionally even fighting each other, usually to the detriment of their host's health. Trees, rivers, histories, species of animals, iron, lightning, ancestors, enemies, drums, influences, gods, valleys, nations, individuals, sexes, thoughts, races: all were willful forces, souls, mixing up freely in the world, acting and acted on. Such souls could be as grand as the spirit of the age or as homely as a hand-me-down tune in *The Souls of Black Folk.*

In the first of his three histories of Africa and Africans, *The Negro,* published in 1915, Du Bois returned to the African conception of the soul, calling it "animism or fetishism." He sought to correct serious and widespread misapprehension of the subject by mainstream scholars. Animism was not "mere senseless degradation," Du Bois contended;

[31] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Negro Religion* (Atlanta, 1903), 6; Du Bois, *Negro,* 244; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 3; Du Bois, *Some Efforts of Negroes for Social Betterment,* cited in Du Bois, *Negro Religion,* frontispiece; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 136.

[32] Du Bois, *Negro Religion,* 1–6; A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi-Speaking Peoples. Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, etc.* (1877; Oosterhout, Netherlands, 1966); A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples. Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, etc.* (1894; Oosterhout, Netherlands, 1966); A. B. Ellis, *The Ewe-Speaking Peoples. Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, etc.* (1890; Oosterhout, Netherlands, 1966).

[33] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 137–39.

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> *It is a philosophy of life.* Among primitive Negroes there can be . . . no such divorce of religion from practical life as is common in civilized lands. Religion is life, and fetish an expression of the practical recognition of dominant forces in which the Negro lives. To him *all* the world is spirit. . . . Fetish is a severely logical way of accounting for the world in terms of good and malignant spirits.

Although he interleaved these descriptions with standard Victorian references to "primitive peoples" and invoked Goethe's *Prometheus* to illustrate the consequences of animist ways of viewing the world, Du Bois's idea of the soul was largely African-derived.[34] Such universals as appeared were always situated in an African context, and he ridiculed them as often as he adopted them.

Although Du Bois's notion of soul was Afrocentric, he remained a pragmatist—with a Germanic twist—throughout. By employing the West African idea of soul as willful force in the place of James's individuals (while retaining James's pluralistic universe), Du Bois's theory of agency fit into what his mentor called the "smoother" solution to the problem of the one and the many. (James admitted that "formal settlement" of the nature of agency "could run far more smoothly" if he allowed souls to exist, but as a committed individualist, he claimed to be held back by "an ancient hardness of heart of which I can frame no fully satisfactory account.") Du Bois's pantheistic Afrocentric frame allowed him to recombine and redefine elements of Euro-American philosophy.[35]

According to Du Bois, his idea of soul offered the world, through the notion of distributed agency, affirmation of the ability of individuals or aggregates constantly and freely to strive. Souls, fully capable of intent, caused rocks to fall or events to pass. Souls could also cause one to feel African. Thus Du Bois's African soul was not only his, in the Western individualist spirit, it was perhaps more a world-historical force that could act purposefully on him and even make him. The voluntary and involuntary strivings of souls were the defining characteristics of a race.[36]

Consciousness

By the turn of the century Du Bois had developed a model of consciousness that could account for the African American experience of living in two "worlds" at once. In perhaps the best-known passage in *The Souls of Black Folk,* he wrote:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of

[34] Du Bois, *Negro,* 124–25 (emphasis added). On animism, see Safro Kwame, ed., *Readings in African Philosophy: An Akan Collection* (New York, 1995), 95–168; John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1990); and Joseph E. Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington, 1990). On fetish, see *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2nd ed., s.v. "Fetish"; Havelock Ellis, *The Psychology of Sex: A Manual for Students* (London, 1933); and Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* trans. Ben Fowkes (1867; New York, 1977), 163–77. For a Victorian anthropological account (which Du Bois had read) of the misunderstanding of "fetish," see Ellis, *Tshi-Speaking People,* 176–95. See also Du Bois, *Negro Religion,* 1; and Du Bois, *Negro,* 247.

[35] James, "Knowing of Things Together," 164. James's emphasis on "formal" was an oblique eschewal of his colleague Royce's formal-logical proof of the absolute.

[36] Du Bois, review of *Souls of Black Folk* by Du Bois, 1152.

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> a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[37]

Du Bois framed this problem of "twoness" during his college years. He did not, however, offer double consciousness as its solution until after he had developed his African-derived notion of soul.

Even before arriving at Harvard, Du Bois had outlined the two polarized worlds in which black and white folk lived. He observed that the "extreme Negro" wanted a free intermingling of the races with full civil and political rights and social equality; the "extreme White" wanted "Absolute Caste," the "concubinage" of African American women, no African American political rights, and only limited civil rights. In 1887, Du Bois regarded these as differences in desires and societies, leaving open but untouched the possibility of a difference in consciousness.[38]

At Harvard, he familiarized himself with the leading theories of consciousness of the day. James published his widely read *The Principles of Psychology* during Du Bois's tenure at Harvard, and Du Bois no doubt became acquainted with its ideas. He claimed in his *Autobiography* that psychology as it was taught at Harvard was something he "could understand from the beginning." James summarized his beliefs on consciousness in an article for *Scribner's Magazine,* a popular periodical that Du Bois often recommended in his own bibliographies.[39]

The individualism of James's theory of consciousness aroused Du Bois's distrust. James characterized consciousness as the "unifying function" that comprised the ever-shifting stream of relations among percepts and concepts that define an "individual." Du Bois considered such individualistic consciousness the ideological bulwark of materialism and of a caste system that yielded African Americans "no true *self*-consciousness." Having dispensed with the soul, European-derived varieties of individualistic consciousness unmoored spiritual accountability and could justify exploitation. James himself recognized the loss of a basis for ethics in his philosophy and sought to redress it with the "will to believe" and his adoption of a philosophy of "as if."[40] But the "will to believe" was not enough for those on the bottom of a caste system in which white folk defined the outside limits of the materially possible, partly by individualist notions of consciousness.

If Du Bois drew little from the individualism of psychological theories of consciousness, another aspect of them no doubt caught his attention. During the

[37] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 3.

[38] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Outline for 'An Open Letter to the Southern People,'" c. 1887, *Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois,* reel 82, frame 1225.

[39] Du Bois, *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois,* 149–50; William James, "The Hidden Self," *Scribner's Magazine,* 7 (March 1890), 361–73.

[40] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 3. On consciousness as a unifying function, see James, *Principles of Psychology,* I, 299–305; William James, "Does Consciousness Exist?" (1904), in *Writings of William James,* ed. McDermott, 169–83; and James, "Experience of Activity," 283–84n180. For stream of thought, see James, *Principles of Psychology,* I, 224–90. For ethics, see Du Bois, "Philosophy Notes"; James, "Will to Believe," 717–35; and William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" (1907), in *Writings of William James,* ed. McDermott, 429–43.

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1890s, James and some European psychologists became interested in "split" or "divided" consciousness. They thought—quite reasonably, it seems—that more than one consciousness per person destroyed the continuity of an individual's identity. Proposed remedies for divided consciousness involved recognition of one manifestation as the true and proper one. This essential consciousness had to gain dominance of the individual's personality to prevent its dissolution. Any competing manifestation had to be removed, subsumed, or reduced to a serving function, with no agency of its own.[41]

Some scholars connect divided consciousness and Du Bois's double consciousness. He was probably familiar with not only the psychological, but also the literary uses of split consciousness—particularly its use by Goethe. But Du Bois (as David Levering Lewis notes) left no direct evidence that he based his idea of double consciousness on nineteenth-century divided consciousness theories. Two reasons might account for Du Bois's lack of avowed interest in such theories. First, split consciousness could not solve the problem of negotiating two incompatible worlds: African Americans needed a multiplied, not a divided, consciousness. Second, a split within the individual replicated North America's caste division too closely to act as a solution—it only described the problem. Du Bois needed more than individualist consciousness had to offer.[42]

According to Du Bois, for James the absolute idealist alternative suggested that "our consciousness is but an island in a vast sea-floor of consciousness" imposed on the world by the oversoul. Could plural consciousness perhaps exist here? No, because if a single consciousness pervaded all and individual consciousness was merely an isolated patch of the infinite, then plural consciousness would be oxymoronic, an illusion at best. Du Bois, like the Hegelians, later adopted a pantheistic idea of consciousness (although he rejected their absolutism), but during the years immediately preceding his inquiry into African philosophies, he never mentioned the possibility of a nonindividuated, plural consciousness. He wrote of plural "worlds."[43]

In the mid-1890s, Du Bois contended that white folk were each born into "one of several superimposed worlds," correlating with socioeconomic class. Among white people, the world of one's birth determined the limits and possibilities of

[41] James, "Hidden Self"; James, *Principles of Psychology,* I, 399; Rampersad, *Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois,* 74. For the idea of plural consciousness, symbolized by Echo and Narcissus, in the work of an early Freudian scholar, see Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study,* trans. and ed. Harry Tucker Jr. (1914; Chapel Hill, 1971), 67–86, esp. 77–78.

[42] Bruce, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness"; Rampersad, *Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois,* 74–76; Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 139–40, 280–83, 642n36; Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations,* 570–71; Stewart, "Psychic Duality in the Novels of W. E. B. Du Bois," 97–99. Scholars sometimes substitute "split" or "divided" for Du Bois's preferred "double" consciousness or "twoness," a practice that inverts Du Bois's meaning. See Munslow, *Discourse and Culture,* 9, 129, 133–34, 137, 147, 155, 217, 218; and Rampersad, *Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois,* 89, 123, 105.

[43] Du Bois, "Philosophy Notes," frame 226; Hegel, *Philosophy of History,* trans. Sibree, 1–98; Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (9 vols., New York, 1963), VII, 200–202, 223–25. James emphasized the weakness of Hegelian thought in his philosophy lectures during Du Bois's tenure at Harvard. For an excellent analysis of Du Bois transcending Hegelian models of consciousness as constructed by Victorian scholars, see Zamir, *Dark Voices,* 113–68, esp. 117.

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one's perspective, and it could be transcended only with great difficulty. In general, such perspectives went largely unnoticed, much less transcended.[44]

Du Bois's description of the "worlds" of white folk bears comparison with Antonio Gramsci's influential model of a subordinate or subaltern group consciousness nested uncritically and completely within an all-encompassing "hegemonic" consciousness. Gramsci wrote that members of subordinate groups have "two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness)," one concerned with everyday life and another superimposed upon the first. The hegemonic consciousness is one that the subaltern "has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed." It consisted primarily of "language." "If it is true," he wrote,

> that every language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture, it could also be true that from anyone's language one can access the greater or lesser complexity of his conception of the world. Someone who speaks only dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilized and anachronistic in relation to the major currents of thought which dominate world history.

Limited and unconscious knowledge of the hegemonic language "makes it difficult for the dispossessed to locate the source of their unease, let alone remedy it." Gramsci's model would seem to describe anyone in a "subaltern" position. His nested pair of "contradictory" consciousnesses was not, however, the same phenomenon that interested Du Bois. Even in the mid-1890s, Du Bois's appraisal of the African American situation diverged sharply from Gramsci's social analysis.[45]

While it accounts for the isolated worlds of white folk that Du Bois described, Gramsci's notion of language and dialect is inadequate and parochial. It is akin to the idea that "dialect" speakers suffer from a cognitive deficit because they lack the elaborated code of the standard speech. That assumption (a variation of which Du Bois attributed to white folk) has a long and mischievous history in relation to African Americans.[46]

[44] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Afro-American," c. 1894–1896, *Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois,* reel 82, frame 1233.

[45] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci,* ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, 1971), 325–27, 348–50, 450–52; T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review,* 90 (June 1985), 569. On Gramsci's work as part of subaltern studies, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, 1988), 271–313, esp. 283, 287; and Lata Mani, "Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts: Reading Eyewitness Accounts of Widow Burning," in *Cultural Studies,* ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York, 1992), 392–408. Munslow subsumes Du Bois's notion of double consciousness under Gramsci's idea of divided consciousness, treating them as interchangeable versions of the latter. Munslow, *Discourse and Culture,* 9, 129, 155, 162, 217, 218. Gramsci's retrograde thoughts on "American negroes" offer a preemptive caution to those wishing to add him to their theoretical arsenal. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* 21.

[46] Ronald Wardaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (New York, 1992), 211–19, 326–45, esp. 334–38; Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson, "Discriminatory Discourse in Afro-American Speech," in *Discourse and Discrimination,* ed. Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson and Teun A. van Dijk (Detroit, 1988), 144–75; Geneva Smitherman, "What Go Round Come Round," *Harvard Educational Review,* 51 (Feb. 1981), 40–56, esp. 41, 48, 51–52; John W. Chambers Jr., ed., *Black English: Educational Equity and the Law* (Ann Arbor, 1983); Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), esp. 212–14; Laura Martin, "Eskimo Words for Snow: A Case Study in the Genesis and Decay of an Anthropological Example," *American Anthropologist,* 88 (June 1986), 418–23; Geoffrey K. Pullum, *The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax and Other Irreverent*

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The presumption that language, code, or dialect determines the scope of consciousness enables the fabrication of an all-encompassing mainstream consciousness. Du Bois repeatedly pointed out that with enough societal force behind it, a fabricated consciousness could be imposed and could maintain the illusion of all-inclusiveness. That illusion is what has veiled the Afrocentric aspects of Du Bois's thought.

In a model such as Gramsci's, nothing African could exist in any effectual form because, being outside the language of the hegemonic discourse, nothing African could be expressed. For example, Eugene Genovese, using a Gramscian framework, claims that slave culture existed only in terms of the master's culture: slaves subverted and adapted its contents to their own ends, but the materials and boundaries were set by the master's possession of the institutional structure of slavery. Even *autonomy,* for the slave, could only be *autonomy from.*[47] Outside the hegemonic consciousness there can be no history—only a disengaged folklore. The only task for one who believes such a closed system exists is to pass judgment: Either the domination of subalterns is for the good and deserves consent ("whiggism"), or it is bad and ought be resisted ("Gramscianism"). Consensus and conflict are the only two items ever on the menu, regardless of what is in the kitchen.

Du Bois maintained that although black folk had to know the hegemonic language to survive, it was not the only—nor even the primary—one they knew. It was merely the only one that the dominant could, or would, understand. White folk had no need to learn the language of their perceived subordinates. Du Bois observed that black folk's contribution to American culture "has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood" by white North Americans. In contrast to Gramsci's analysis, that of Du Bois points to a shortfall in the consciousness of the dominant, rather than the subordinate, group—one that was common knowledge to him and to those within the veil.[48]

Du Bois did not deny the existence of the nested consciousness Gramsci described, but he considered it as much a dilemma and an arbitrary imposition as was caste. In 1897, he rhetorically wondered whether "his only possible practical aim" would be "the *subduction* of all that is Negro in me to the American." Note the location of agency: in choosing subduction, Du Bois would have been placing himself within the hegemonic discourse, not passively and dim-wittedly consenting to be placed there like some object. Striving to maintain an identity in the face of the white world's attempts to define the consciousness of black folk was a life-and-death matter. In an unfinished novel from 1892, "A Fellow of Harvard," Du

Essays on the Study of Language (Chicago, 1991). On the debate over the Whorfian principle of linguistic relativity, see "The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis," *Linguist List,* 1992–1996 [http: // engserve.tamu.edu / linguist / topics / sapir-whorf]. Gramsci's version of the cognitive deficit hypothesis is cruder and less defensible than those critiqued in the above references.

[47] Du Bois, "Afro-American"; Lears, "Concept of Cultural Hegemony"; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1972).

[48] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 178.

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Bois's doubly named protagonist, John Johnson, loses his sanity because he is unable to negotiate living in two worlds at once. In "Of the Coming of John," a story in *The Souls of Black Folk,* the black protagonist loses his life because of a similar inability to develop a usable doubled consciousness, this time in the face of nearly impossible circumstances, the rape of his sister. The white protagonist, also named John, dies as well, because of his ignorance of the humanity of African Americans, whom he apprehends only as objects to fulfill his wants.[49]

Between 1890 and 1896, Du Bois honed his analysis of North American race relations, but he still struggled to define the consciousness required of a people born into two worlds rather than one. The individualist and absolutist modes of consciousness offered him by James and Hegel were only partial solutions. Perhaps it was this lack of answers that led him to set aside unpublished so many drafts during these years. He did not propose double consciousness as a way out until he had begun to inquire into African philosophies. In the confluence of animism and pragmatism, however, Du Bois would develop the notion of a self capable of more than one consciousness. Understanding double consciousness in terms of *only* its European and American precedents impoverishes his position. Double consciousness meant claiming both the Afrocentric and the Eurocentric as American.

Du Bois first applied his theory of agency to consciousness in the 1897 essay that was to open *The Souls of Black Folk* six years later.[50] Consciousness meant something qualitatively different when situated, not in individuals, but in West African–derived souls. *Volition, intent, purpose,* and *will* distinguish agency from mere action. They also entail consciousness. Accordingly, the location of agency (whether in the individual or in forces) governed any construct of consciousness. Forces were the only seat of consciousness as Du Bois envisioned it. Individuals could be conscious, but individuality was a property of the particular consciousness, not a prerequisite. Thus an individual could have—or be had by—more than one consciousness at a time, and a consciousness could operate on more than one individual at a time. The free distribution of forces across plural entities made Du Bois's version of consciousness much more complicated than the notions of collective, group, or corporate consciousness that ensue from monism, whether Hegelian idealism or Marx's materialist inversion of it.

Although "this American world" would let an African American "see him*self* [only] through the revelation of the other [white] world," only the "self," the individual, was so constrained. There remained a conscious force who kept a powerful vision, even "second sight." Its locus was the "soul" of West African beliefs, an agent that need not be coterminous with any individual, a purposeful force. White folk could split off and insulate black folk, denying culture, history, and occasionally humanity itself to individual African Americans, but only by becoming unconscious of who and what "black folk" were and losing consciousness of a part of their

[49] Du Bois, "Conservation of Races," 5 (emphasis added); Du Bois, "Afro-American," frame 1233; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 142–44, 161–76; W. E. B. Du Bois, "A Fellow of Harvard," c. 1892, in *Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois,* reel 82.

[50] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic Monthly,* 80 (Aug. 1897), 194–98.

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own America.[51] African Americans could, and often had to, split away from mainstream notions of American identity, but they could do so without necessarily losing sight of what those imposed notions were.

Without the benefit of double consciousness, direct contact with white culture could annihilate one's personality, through insanity or internalization of subaltern status. At the turn of the century, resistance killed the body but had no effect on the problem. Accommodation killed the spirit and reinforced subalternity.[52] For these reasons, Du Bois rejected resistance and accommodation as worse than useless. His solution to the quandary of living in contradictory worlds is inconceivable from both Gramscian and individualistic perspectives: Du Bois proposed that black folk, fully conscious in and of both "irreconciled worlds," maintain awareness of both simultaneously. He thought that as a fully conscious agent, one could decide whether it was a good idea to subduct oneself to the dominant culture, to resist it, or, perhaps, to struggle to balance all the forces at play. Denying that all the options available to black folk were defined by the hegemonic discourse, he pointed beyond accommodation or resistance.

Double consciousness itself was doubled. One configuration of double consciousness was as an "either / or" dichotomy between inclusion in and exclusion from the mainstream culture. The other was the "both / and" union of two consciousnesses, one African and the other American, with each being a part—but not the whole—of the other, like the shared area in two overlapping circles. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness held both configurations at once, giving his thought an ambiguity often mistaken for sloppy thinking. But the ambiguity gave a reason to strive, demanded it in fact. Double consciousness, like James's idea of consciousness as a function, was a process, not a state.

Two works have brilliantly explicated the "either / or" configuration of Du Bois's double consciousness by situating him outside the Western mainstream. Paul Gilroy argues that Du Bois's double consciousness was a scathing critique of modernist individualist nationalism. In Gilroy's interpretation, double consciousness arises from the contradictions of being excluded from a world to which one is integral, and Africa served Du Bois as a rhetorical "outside place" from which to launch his attack. Thomas Holt contends persuasively that Du Bois parlayed the alienation and disorientation arising from exclusion into a radical social and political stance based on the positive value of the constant "striving" needed to live with two consciousnesses in tension.[53] Neither Holt nor Gilroy, however, places Du Bois's thought *in* a context other than opposition. Du Bois came from outside, but from where? He explicitly situated double consciousness in his own historical circumstance as a descendant of Africans living in North America. As patchy and subjective as that African perspective was, it needs to be taken into account.

This article extends Holt's and Gilroy's analyses by restoring the other double

[51] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 3 (emphasis added). See also Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 29–52.

[52] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 142–45.

[53] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); Holt, "Political Uses of Alienation."

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consciousness, the "*both* African *and* American" one. In this configuration Du Bois appears more hopeful. True self-consciousness was not just for African Americans. Once black and white folk had come to understand each other fully, all Americans would possess it, having risen above the veil separating the races. By understanding what was African about Du Bois's double consciousness, we can grasp why he strove to explain black folk to a North American audience that seemingly did not want to hear. As Du Bois constructed it, double consciousness was not his own personal gift to scholarship, it was African America's contribution to the world. It provided a way of positively negotiating the stress, flux, and uncertainty of what we now call the postmodern world, if only that world would have it.

Double consciousness was not a biological feature. The hardship and striving in African America's history forged and then tempered a nonindividualistic consciousness that could transcend the worst contradictions and pressures of the Western world. It was only from a common history that it emerged. Du Bois claimed "the history of the American Negro" was "the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self." The terrible pressures of twoness were too much for many, but those who strove could do much more than simply survive.[54]

Reading *The Souls of Black Folk* only from its Eurocentric frame imposes a singular, unified consciousness on Du Bois. The art of the book was to foreclose readers' opportunities to do so, while giving voice to experiences outside the consciousness of "white folk" but familiar to "black folk." Double consciousness and its reagent, *the veil,* gave the author space to do both.

The Veil

Seventeen years after the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois wrote "And then—the Veil. It drops as drops the night on southern seas—vast, sudden, unanswering. There is Hate behind it, and Cruelty and Tears." The veil held many meanings. It was a thought-thing, made of nothing more than relations, yet it was a powerful force, the problem of the twentieth century. It could insulate, cut off, protect, or grant mystical vision. It recurs from Du Bois's earliest to his latest works in an amazing variety of contexts, separating positions in time, as in "the thickening veil of wish and afterthought"; separating continents, as was "Africa veiled from Europe by Asia and Mohammedism"; and in *The Souls of Black Folk,* separating a people from their history and their true selves. Mostly, it separated "Black Folk" and "White Folk": "And yet it hangs there, this Veil, between Then and Now, between Pale and Colored and Black and White—between You and Me."[55]

The forces of tears, cruelty, and hate converged to form the veil, the embodiment of the color line. In putting a name to the problem, Du Bois did more than employ a romantic metaphor. He combined pragmatist ideas about *relations* with his Afro-

[54] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 3.
[55] Du Bois, *Darkwater,* 246, 13; Du Bois, *Negro,* 17–19.

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centric explanation of agency to cast light on North American race relations. For Du Bois the color line was not a problem of *persons,* but of the warped *relations*—power relations—that stood between white and black.

A "vast hanging darkness," the all-too-tangible terror of racism, ensued from the "thought-thing" of the veil. Du Bois wrote of how its shadows obscured the true nature of power relations in the United States, saying that "the Doer never sees the Deed and the Victim knows not the Victor and Each hates All in wild and bitter ignorance." The source of racial oppression lay in the historical fact of slavery. Transplanted Africans knew it to be "the dark triumph of Evil"—an anagram of the veil—over them. It was to be found in the rationalization of hate and greed that Du Bois knew in both the North and the South, and it did not lift with emancipation. From within the "half awakened consciousness" of the veil, Du Bois and other black folk clearly saw these forces to which much of reason and individualist materialism were bound at the turn of the century.[56] They saw them in petty insults and abuses, peonage, and lynchings. They saw them as the dominant culture would not—from within. From the thought-thing of the veil itself—not from them—came the myth of African racial inferiority, which allowed the history of "the Negro problem" to remain unknown and unnoticed.

The veil had many functions. Like a stage curtain, it both connected and divided white folk and black. It fixed conventions about who was thought to see what, regardless of the action taking place on either side of the line. Black folk's position in relation to the veil occasionally allowed them to articulate messages that would otherwise have been unacceptable. For example, Du Bois could say things knowing that their import would be only half perceived by the white world, for he was tokenized as a "black" scholar and denied the seriousness granted to "real" ones. This tendency only increased. By 1940 what was formerly veil had become "some thick piece of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass" behind which he could be seen but not heard, no matter how clearly or loudly he articulated his message. But the veil could also protect. While still at Fisk, Du Bois looked forward to his teaching internship in rural Tennessee as a move "beyond the Veil" of the segregated but nurturing environment of the college. It also separated. Upon obtaining a position and being invited for dinner at the home of his white employer, he wrote of his luck, quickly dashed, "but even then fell the awful shadow of the Veil, for they ate first and then I—alone."[57]

The veil also gave those within it a certain clairvoyance into the workings of society and "white folk" in particular. "The Negro is a sort of seventh son," wrote Du Bois, "born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world." Recent findings in the study of vision and language confirm Du Bois's metaphor. The gift of "second sight" bestowed by double consciousness and the veil seems much like the ability to perceive second-order patterns that were invisible from any singular perspective. Seven decades after Du Bois wrote, cognitive scientists study-

[56] Du Bois, *Darkwater,* 246; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 139. See also *ibid.*, 1; and Du Bois, "Afro-American."
[57] Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn,* 130–32; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 43, 45.

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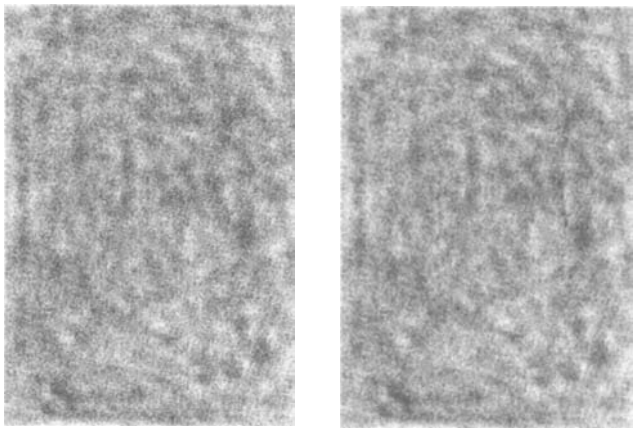

Each of the two images consists of random dots. The left is identical to the right except that a rectangular portion of the latter has been offset slightly. When viewed stereoscopically, a striking illusion of depth appears. To see the effect, cross your eyes until a third box, the same size as the other two, is visible between them. Within about a minute, the pattern should become visible. While the perception of depth is an illusion, the ability to perceive an intentional, nonrandom pattern, the rectangle, is not.

ing stereoscopic vision discovered that a doubled perspective makes it possible to perceive intentional patterns that cannot be seen monocularly. (See figure, above.)[58]

Second sight had African and African American precedents. In African American folklore, "born with a veil" refers to being born with a caul—or as Du Bois punned about himself, "born with a cause" (he considered *cause, force, wills,* and *souls* aspects of each other). A *caul* is the remains of the amnion that covers the heads of some newborns. That meaning is a narrowing of an earlier definition, perhaps as a result of English speakers' expanded contact with West African cultures beginning in the fifteenth century. *Caul* first took the meaning of "a thin film of an internal organ" in 1327. It was first used in reference to the amnion in 1530, thirty-nine years after the reopening of direct European-African contact. The first reference to a child "born with a caul" was in 1616. Another postcontact definition of *caul* or *kell* is as spider webbing, which was associated with West African birthing practices. Melville Herskovits observed that Dahomeans and many other West Africans regarded children born with the caul intact as "special types of personalities whose spiritual potency calls for special treatment." In African American lore,

[58] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 3; Bela Julesz, *Foundations of Cyclopean Perception* (Chicago, 1971); David Marr, *Vision: A Computational Investigation into the Human Representation and Processing of Visual Information* (San Francisco, 1982); A. L. Yuille and S. Ullman, "Computational Theories of Low Level Vision," in *An Invitation to Cognitive Science,* vol. II: *Visual Cognition and Action,* ed. Daniel N. Osherson, Stephen M. Kosslyn, and John M. Hollerbach (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 18–25. The "seventh son" is a frequent allusion in African American folkways, particularly in blues lyrics, such as Willie Dixon's "Seventh Son." The lyric may derive from Du Bois's statement, rather than Du Bois deriving his statement from an extant African American song.

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those born with a caul had multiple consciousnesses and second sight—the ability to see what remained invisible to others. Herskovits drew his conclusions from his own fieldwork in Dahomey and a 1900 *Journal of American Folklore* article about Braziel Robinson, an elderly African American root doctor from Georgia who said, "I can see spirits, I have two spirits, one that prowls around and one that stays in my body. The reason I have two spirits is because I was born with a double caul." In his 1901 *Select Bibliography of the American Negro for General Readers,* Du Bois recommended that journal, so he was no doubt familiar with anecdotes like Robinson's.[59]

Du Bois's own second sight grew most limpid regarding the white mainstream of American society. What he wrote in 1920 was hardly in the words of a Gramscian subaltern, only dimly aware because of a lack of fluency in the language of the hegemonic discourse.

> I know of many souls that toss and whirl and pass, but none there are that intrigue me more than the Souls of White Folk. Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. . . . I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious![60]

With so many vague and disparate manifestations, how could Du Bois justify the veil as anything other than a literary construct, quaint folklore as grand metaphor? Du Bois left two points unstated when he called the veil a thought-thing. First, the veil comprised the permutations of relations between white and black North Americans rather than any one assemblage. By itself, it was "tenuous, intangible" yet "just as surely is it true and terrible." In other words it was power, all-pervasive, latent, and ever shifting. Second—borrowing again from James—Du Bois considered *all* relations to be thought-things. This view derived from his mentor's pragmatism. James contended that the relations signified by such immaterial things as prepositions were real. These words created a web of patterns or habitual pathways in the brain. As such, relations (now physically instantiated as patterns in the brain) and the words that signified them were as real as desks and trees. They were thought-things. James taught that the close study of such relational words would yield much.[61] These two intermediate levels—the veil as relational and relations as thought-things—allowed Du Bois to proceed from "veil" to "thought-thing" in a way that drew equally from animist philosophy and

[59] Du Bois, review of *Souls of Black Folk* by Du Bois, 1152; *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "Caul"; *ibid.*, "Kell"; Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past,* 188–90, 316nn84–91; Roland Steiner, "Braziel Robinson Possessed of Two Spirits," *Journal of American Folklore,* 13 (July 1900), 226–28; W. E. B. Du Bois, *A Select Bibliography of the American Negro for General Readers* (Atlanta, 1901), 11. Braziel Robinson's story could not have been the basis of Du Bois's notion of double consciousness because the latter had already been published. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," 194–98.

[60] Du Bois, *Darkwater,* 29.

[61] *Ibid.,* 246. For James on prepositions, see William James, "A World of Pure Experience" (1904), in *Writings of William James,* ed. McDermott, 197–98; James, "Thing and Its Relations," 215–16, 222; and James, "Monistic Idealism," 498.

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Jamesean pragmatism. He nested both these levels within a shell of German neo-romantic allusions, arguably the least important element of his style.

Du Bois paid close attention to relational words, especially concerning the veil. He nearly always wrote of folk's location with respect to the veil, rather than what the veil did or what folk did to it. As consciousness, in James's account, unified a stream of experience, the veil unified infinite permutations. The function words that modified it specified relations between white and black folk at any time. For example, Du Bois usually portrayed African Americans as "within" the veil, wryly leaving white folk "without." The veil might fall "between" folk, but never were black folk in the seemingly obvious position of "behind" the veil. At least since emancipation, it no longer hung "over" African Americans as it had during slavery. This gave Du Bois fleeting moments of hope that in the future folk might rise "above" the veil, by that becoming their "better and truer" selves.[62]

A unique difficulty haunts analyses that hinge on relational words. These function words are apparently often invisible: readers frame the relational parts of sentences to meet their expectations rather than perceiving exactly what has been written. This same "fill-in-the-expected" phenomenon has appeared in the clinical interpretation of Broca's aphasics, people who have suffered traumatic damage to the portion of the brain that processes functional aspects of language. For many years, aphasiologists perceived the sentences used by Broca's aphasics as linguistically unimpaired but haltingly articulated. The nonaphasics unconsciously supplied the expected functional parts of the aphasics' speech, conflating their interpretations with their subjects' mental states. In other words, accommodation to dominant expectations took place in the hearer, not the speaker, even though the object of study was the speaker.[63]

Readers of *The Souls of Black Folk* have often unconsciously reinterpreted Du Bois's carefully employed relational words to fit their own expectations, thus altering and even inverting his meaning. For example, although Du Bois wrote "within" and "without" the veil and of maybe "rising above" it, one author substitutes "draw back," "draw over," "lift" and "tear" it, all of which Du Bois rejected as futile actions that ignored real relations of power. The substitutions allow the author to use Hegel and Gramsci to interpret Du Bois as representing "the race's failure to grasp its own spirituality and *tear down* the veil by not understanding its own religion, music and life forces."[64] Much of Du Bois's construction of "the problem of the twentieth century" resided in an analysis of race that hinged on relational terms. Black folk were—and so often are—misperceived by those "without the veil" because of inattention to real relations between the races. Perhaps for that reason, the core of Du Bois's message in *The Souls of Black Folk* was carried by music rather than words.

[62] For Du Bois's ambivalence toward integrationism and separatism, see Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 198–99; and Williamson, *Crucible of Race,* 411.

[63] Edgar B. Zurif, "Language and the Brain," in *Invitation to Cognitive Science,* ed. Osherson and Lasnik, I, 178–98, esp. 189; Garrett, "Sentence Processing," 165.

[64] Munslow, *Discourse and Culture,* 9, 10, 124, 135, 138, 140.

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The Sorrow Songs

"Ever since I was a child," recounted Du Bois, "these songs have stirred me strangely." Those songs, the spirituals, were a major source of his felt Africanness. An explanation of their origins, history, and importance concluded his discussion of the souls of black folk. Within the veil, the spiritual strivings of African America were embodied in the "sorrow" of the spirituals and their historical antecedents. "The Music of Negro religion," Du Bois claimed, was

> that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences. . . . Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it was adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and the whip, it became the one true expression of a people's sorrow, despair, and hope.[65]

Du Bois argued that the songs were African, that they were at the core of African American racial identity, and that that identity was a critical constituent of the nation's identity. The songs represented an African history of North America as the songs of a West African *jali* (griot) songs might represent the history of the *jali*'s community. Like a *jali,* Du Bois strung the words of his story along the melodies that connect each chapter.[66]

Critics of Du Bois often question the authenticity of his invocation of Africa. The most common judgment is that Du Bois's Africa was a romanticized Europe in disguise. Immanuel Geiss maintains that Du Bois's invocation of a "sentimental and superstitious link back to Africa" hindered a more rational notion of the continent that "reflected the dominant White elements in [all] society" and that Du Bois's conception of Africa was no more than a recycled and incoherent German nationalism. (Geiss notes that Du Bois was unlike "most Afro-Americans [who] assumed the White stereotype of a barbaric, savage Africa devoid of history" and thereby developed "a deeply rooted inferiority complex of which traces remain to this day.") The more generous allowance of Alun Munslow is that Du Bois stumblingly employed an "at best unclear African heritage" in a failed attempt to "*create* a viable alternative black culture."[67]

[65] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 177, 180, 134. See also *ibid.*, 134–36, 177–82.

[66] For the sorrow songs, see Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations,* 457–590. For Du Bois as *jali,* see *ibid.*, 488–90. For North America's misperceptions of, and debt to, black folk, see Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 178. A one-page leaflet written by Du Bois is still a good introduction to nineteenth-century spirituals. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Bibliography of the Negro Folk Song in America* (Atlanta, [1902–1903]). See also Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Chicago, 1977); Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York, 1997); and Portia K. Maultsby, "Africanisms in African-American Music," in *Africanisms in American Culture,* ed. Holloway, 185–210.

[67] Geiss, *Pan-African Movement,* trans. Keep, 27–29; Munslow, *Discourse and Culture,* 147 (emphasis added). Geiss's evidence is thin. He employs a transcript of one church meeting in Philadelphia in the 1830s to assess the innermost beliefs of "most Afro-Americans . . . to this day." He bases his claim that Du Bois did not know enough of Africa to lead a Pan-African movement on an assertion made in a London newspaper (*West Africa*) that a mispronounced West African town name could alienate a native of that town. Geiss, *Pan-African Movement,* 113, 253, 258–62, 85, 440n39, 449nn50–53, 483n103.

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In perhaps the most telling appraisal, J. E. Casely Hayford, called Du Bois's work "provincial." Hayford, although a leading turn-of-the-century Pan-Africanist, was more concerned with anticolonialist nationalism centering on efforts to establish an independent Fante nation in the Gold Coast, where he lived. He claimed that Du Bois, along with "the average Afro-American citizen of the United States," had "lost absolute touch with the past of his race and is helplessly and hopelessly groping in the dark for affinities that are not natural, and for effects for which there are neither national nor natural causes. . . . The African in America . . . has committed national suicide." For him, national languages, dress, and other cultural ways marked what was African. National languages, however, separated Africans as much as they unified them. The languages capable of unifying across national and ethnic boundaries, creole languages, were in fact extended, rather than lost, in the diaspora.[68]

Du Bois's African-centered perspective allowed a basis for a Pan-African conception of the continent founded on something more complex than opposition to Europe. All his life, Du Bois struggled with the meaning of the continent, concluding in 1947 that, beyond geography,

> The idea of one Africa to unite the thought and ideals of all native peoples of the dark continent belongs to the twentieth century and stems naturally from the West Indies and the United States. Here various groups of Africans, quite separate in origin, became so united in experience and so exposed to the impact of new cultures that they began to think of Africa as one idea and one land.[69]

For Du Bois, the sorrow songs, though they were the one "true American music," were African, "the voice of exile." In *The Souls of Black Folk,* Africans interested Du Bois much more than Africa—and Africans were to be found all over the world. Africa was significant chiefly as the source of those who had been enslaved during the development of the Americas.[70] In North America, Africans and their descendants were at the root of what civilization the United States had, their labors at the base of the material world, and their music, folklore, religion, and love for freedom the most distinctive and valuable aspects of its cultural life. The nation owed much of its bountiful wealth and meager beauty to the work of Africans and their descendants.

Du Bois laid claim to both Europe and Africa, each from the frontier of the other. He wrote from what ninety years later is called the liminal, the hybridized,

[68] J. E. Casely Hayford, *Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation* (1911; London, 1969), 172–73. For details on Hayford, see F. Nnabuenyi Ugonna, "Introduction," *ibid.*, v–xxxvi. For Du Bois's formative role in the Pan-African movement, see Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 245–51; and Geiss, *Pan-African Movement,* trans. Keep, 176, 181, 190–93, 197–98, 215–17, 229–82. Hayford's nationalism was based on Edward Blyden's late-nineteenth-century philosophy of Ethiopianism. For an African perspective on the Pan-Africanist movement that corroborates nationalist intent and opposition to colonialism rather than race as its defining characteristics, see A. Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore, 1987), 20–23, 74–76.

[69] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa* (New York, 1947), 6.

[70] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* xxxi, 8, 178, 133–45, 180–82, 186–87. For the importance of Africans over Africa, see Du Bois, *Negro,* 9–11.

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This picture of W. E. B. Du Bois was taken at Wilberforce College in 1914, the year before the publication of *The Negro*.
Courtesy Photographs and Prints Division, Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

the in-between, the middle ground, the creolized, the borderlands—that which must create a legitimacy the world without has tried to deny it. Authenticity is a problematic notion in such a mixed-up place, set both in and between "two great and hardly reconcilable worlds." Within this borderland the frontiers were always "changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilder-

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ment." The sorrow songs, with their polyrhythms, shifting lyrics, and haunting melodies, were the one true expression of this American world.[71]

Little evidence of African origin presented itself on the surface of the sorrow songs. Only a few fragments of words had survived the centuries of American life since the beginning of the diaspora. One such phrase, "*Do bana coba gene me,*" served as an anchor to the concluding chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk.* The lyric's literal meaning had been lost to Du Bois but not its felt meaning. It had been passed down to him from his mother's West African great-grandmother. Eric Sundquist argues that the untranslatable phrase was part of a language beyond words, representing the destructive effects of slavery and the shortcomings of Western transcriptions. Occasionally, noted Du Bois, there appeared in the sorrow songs other words in unknown tongues, as in the phrase "cross the mighty Myo," which signified death. Perhaps those words expressed the idea of crossing a body of water and returning to the forest as a spirit, which had been recognized for centuries as a Central Africanism.[72]

"Before each chapter, as now printed," Du Bois wrote, "stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs,—some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past." Melody and rhythm "sprung from the African forests" characterized black folk's song even after the old words had been lost in a New World. As the fragment of melody preceded the text of each chapter, so the music of the sorrow songs was "far more ancient than the words." The songs, with their differently aged components, were what Du Bois called "the siftings of centuries," a systematically ambiguous phrase—the centuries sifted the songs, or the songs were what was left after some force had sifted the centuries.[73] Either way, they were like nuggets. Parts might erode under the continual sifting, perhaps leaving an irreducible kernel that could withstand the pressures of time and change.

In a new environment, the kernel could act as an irritant, precipitating accretion. Like a grain of sand caught in an oyster, the melodies of ten or so "master songs" formed the core of African American racial identity, historically formed by culture, stress, and strife—not biology. Du Bois thought that in the master melodies "we can trace here and there signs of development" by examining and interpreting the strata that had worn and accreted upon the melodic and rhythmic base of the sorrow songs. He proposed three stages: "The first is African music, the second, Afro-

[71] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 142, 134. On "in-betweenness," see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, 1987); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991); Edward Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford, 1971); and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994). For Du Bois's approach, see Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 3–9, 142–43.

[72] For Du Bois's direct ties to Africa, see Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 180; and Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn,* 114–15. For Du Bois's genealogy, see Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois,* 11–22; Du Bois, *Darkwater,* 166–69; Du Bois, *Negro,* 123–24; and Stewart, "Psychic Duality in the Novels of W. E. B. Du Bois," 100–102. For songs as "secret," see Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations,* 528–31. For "Myo," see Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 182–85. For twentieth-century Central African beliefs, see Wyatt MacGaffey, *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago, 1986), 62.

[73] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* xxxii, 177, 180.

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American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian." This model of cultural transit and transformation accommodates the contradictions and tensions between "persistence" and "loss" approaches to African American identity, addressing issues that have occupied students of the African diaspora in the nine decades since the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk.*[74]

In *The Souls of Black Folk,* the rhythms and melodies of the sorrow songs appeared as fragments on a page. Print had reduced them to "echoes," but of what? Du Bois answered with deliberate, systematic ambiguity, offering different clues to different readers. How readers make sense of his book depends on the bodies of knowledge that they draw on. While a quotation in German might mean little to a sharecropper, a bar of the spirituals' melody was equally incomprehensible to those who did not already know the songs. As Du Bois more acerbically phrased it, white America had "caught the jingle but not the music."[75]

The message of the sorrow songs could be fully articulate, as in the spirituals of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, where music and word welled up powerful enough to raise buildings, conquer hearts around the world, and found universities. The message could be "naturally veiled and half articulate" in other black American folk songs. In these, the African-derived melody remained "singularly sweet" but "words and music . . . lost each other." "New and cant phrases of a dimly understood theology" were substituted for the African lyrics. Even nonsense words could be sung; the important thing was the "haunting melody."[76] The new lyrics veiled the Afrocentric meaning of the songs. Wordless tunes carried the indestructible kernel of the African message to the world.

Du Bois implored his audience to consider the "eloquent omissions and silences" in the slaves' message. He, too, deliberately used omission and silence. To those familiar with the spirituals, the bar of music anchoring each chapter evoked much from both the elusive nuances of the timing and the tune and the missing words. While the music evoked certain feelings, it also (as Sundquist suggests) invoked the words to those who knew them. The unprinted lyrics provide a sharp counterpoint to the European epigraphs that Du Bois chose to articulate.[77] The subversive

[74] *Ibid.*, 181–82. Du Bois's synthetic model of cultural transit and transition has been lost as a starting point for the debate begun by E. Franklin Frazier and Melville J. Herskovits over loss and persistence of African cultures in the Americas. E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939; Chicago, 1948); Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past.* For two recent summaries of this debate, see Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, 1992), vi–xiv; and Joseph E. Holloway, "Introduction," in *Africanisms in American Culture,* ed. Holloway, ix–xxi. It is often posited that Herskovits argued for persistence of African culture in the Un ed States and Frazier argued for the destruction and loss, with the synthetic position of Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price emerging more recently. Du Bois, who reviewed both Herskovits's and Frazier's books favorably, constructed a more nuanced synthesis that has been overlooked. Herbert Aptheker, ed., *Book Reviews by W. E. B. Du Bois* (Millwood, 1977), 182–83, 207–8.

[75] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 135–36.

[76] *Ibid.*, 178, 182, 179.

[77] *Ibid.*, 183–84. On the omitted lyrics, see Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations,* 457–539. He also reviews scholarship on loss due to transcription that is corroborated in technical detail by ethnomusicologists. See *ibid.*, 470–77, 485; Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts* (Urbana, 1983); and Mantle Hood, *The Ethnomusicologist* (New York, 1971).

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power of the songs thus lay in the African time and melody, whose muteness could be more eloquent than words.

Without Du Bois's guidance, those "without the veil" heard only the echo, however haunting, of their own preconceptions. One purpose of Du Bois's systematic ambiguity was to confront this narcissism, the phenomenon of recognizing only one's own knowledge in the articulations of others. The theme of Echo in *The Souls of Black Folk,* with Narcissus mute, provided Du Bois an ironic point of reference. He used it to give those who would hear it a glimpse of life within the veil.[78] This is why he called the wordless tune printed before each chapter an "echo" belonging to a "haunting melody." The melodies welled up from the souls of black folk. The agency was not in the individual singers. It dwelled elsewhere, though where is not at first glance obvious.

The only location of agency that he left unspecified is whatever does the "haunting" of the melodies. It might have been the melody or it might have been something else, which haunted by means of the melody. The tunes to the sorrow songs were Du Bois's tangible connection with his felt Africanness, the only connection of which he could capture at least an echo on a printed page. The history of Africans, from home and the diaspora, haunted the melodies. But Du Bois also used the melody to haunt America, to point out that the printed page held only a part of his knowledge. His double entendre simultaneously revealed and veiled the identity of what haunts.

The Souls of Black Folk was rooted in the voice of the dominant American culture, which Du Bois claimed as one of his own. He claimed it even though that culture would deny black folk both education in, and access to, the world of the printed word. Partly because of this obstruction, enslaved Africans in America had articulated their message to the world in a medium incomprehensible to their enslavers, the sorrow songs. The continued viability of this medium was unfortunately ensured by the terrorism of Jim Crow's America at the turn of the century. It made cautionary sense to speak from within the veil.

In the discourse of the sorrow songs it was not the subordinates who suffered a lack. The limiting boundaries were not theirs, but the center's. The terms and vocabulary of the hegemonic sociolect (or *hegelect*) were insufficient to articulate more than an echo of the sorrow songs' message.[79] To Du Bois, and those within the veil, African American discourse was clear, even "eloquent." Du Bois did not think that white folk's blindness was necessary. Nor did he mistake it for the self-interest of an inherently evil race of people. It was, he showed—using the veil and the sorrow songs—the result of a powerful fear grown out of the history of a wealthy, free nation springing from a source fouled by greed and coercion.

[78] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* xxxi.

[79] I use *sociolect* to include Gramsci's definition of language as "a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content." Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* 323. Perhaps *hegelect* would be more appropriate. Most socio-, psycho-, and ethnolinguists agree that the hegemony wielded by any such language would be limited to a particular setting, class situation, region, age bracket, ethnicity, or other domain. Many would argue against the existence of any such object, however, its boundaries being too fluid to yield anything resembling a coherent definition.

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If Africa is acknowledged in the Americas without its own analytical categories, it becomes an addition or a remarkable survival, worthy of celebration but not capable of engaging with "real" issues. Power is fixed in one location, and the other is declared powerless and victimized. In such a model to disagree or to grant agency to Africans leaves one a defender of the whip and worse. Resistance and accommodation, the only tools offered the oppressed, can be framed only in the terms of the hegemonic culture and its history. This replicates the system to which Du Bois objected. He rejected power being located and fixed in white folk. Although recent scholarship has begun to recognize this perspective, Du Bois's work has been lost as a starting point. It still has much to offer to those who would think about what is African about America.

Power unused is no power. It exists only in relation. For Du Bois, it existed in the veil pending between black folk and white. To discuss power relations *in the terms* of a dominant culture—whether the traditional "mainstream" or a Gramscian hegemony—was in fact to operate from *within* that culture, reinforcing whatever advantage it had. Such discussions of the oppression of subordinates or subalterns are thus unveiled as acts of oppression themselves. For this reason, Du Bois consciously chose to write from "within the veil" rather than "without." He knew he could resist, rebel against, consent to, or accommodate the dominant white culture. But *The Souls of Black Folk* was not about coping with white folk on their terms. It was about the agenda and terms of another. Its author thought subduction and rebellion to be foolish choices made by the weak, recipes for disaster. Instead he advocated a world in which there was a "loftier respect for the sovereign human soul." And in that long-sought world, he concluded, the longings of black folk "must have respect":

> The rich and bitter depth of their experience, the unknown treasures of their inner life, the strange rendings of nature they have seen, may give the world new points of view and make their loving, living, and doing precious to all human hearts.[80]

His was Echo's own voice, not Narcissus's heard echo.

[80] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk,* 76. For power as relational, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* trans. Robert Hurley (3 vols., New York, 1978), I, 90–98; and Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault* (New York, 1987). Richard Cullen Rath, "Relations of Power: A Formal Model," *Dissonance,* May 1, 1997 [http: // way.net / dissonance / power.html].

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