

# Legitimacy from Modernity's Underside: Potentiated Double Consciousness<sup>1</sup>

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Analyses of political legitimation tend to take two polarized forms: they offer descriptions of circumstances in which the ruled accept the power or concede to the force of those who rule over them or they essay to develop a guideline of ethical standards or moral rules the following of which would itself constitute legitimate authority. The question of legitimation from the standpoint of those who are in tension with the system, of those who offer themselves as friends but are treated in turn as the antithesis of the presented legitimate order have yet to be fully explored. Such individuals encounter their situation as a contradiction not only of what the social and political system may claim is right and just, but also of reason itself. What is more, when what is embodied in the social order that is hostile to them is ascribed the status of universality, such people encounter living in a world that is literally without room for them. They become perpetual “outsiders” evaluated by “insider” norms. An insight into this problem was raised more than a century ago in the thought of W.E.B. Du Bois. He called it *double consciousness*, and it is to an examination of that concept that I shall now turn. I hope it will be of some use to the formulation and understanding of the post-continental project.

## Double Consciousness

Du Bois, affectionately called “the old man” by the U.S. black intelligentsia, lived ninety-five years that spanned the official end of U.S. chattel slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the political radicalism and Depression of the 1930s, World War II, McCarthyism, and the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, years so pivotal to U.S. black history that his own biography has been called “a biography of a race.”<sup>2</sup> In truth, Du Bois’s life is not only the story of one, U.S. black, race. Modernity, as seen through the eyes of Max Weber, was a period characterized by the consequences of the development of early capitalism, colonial exploration and expansion, and the development of dissenting Protestantisms. These emerged together with the ascendance of a rationalism and commitment to rationalization that undergirded the valorizing embrace of technical development and its cultural counterpart, technicism. Weber argued that these could not but have the effect of disenchanting the world. Carl Schmitt described the early twentieth century in similar terms, as dominated by the rise of mass culture and by positivistic method, by the reification of the private dimensions of men and their lives. These developments endangered the very possibility of the political beyond politics, of reasons and causes that were experienced collectively as sufficiently serious and real to require the ultimate sacrifice, the willingness to lose one’s life.<sup>3</sup> Du Bois turned his attention to the question of racialization, insisting that racialized and racializing identities and the institutional orders that buttress and are buttressed by them were not remnants of earlier social and political forms. He argued that they were instead an integral part of the modern world order of European capitalism, as pivotal to it, we might add, as the social transformations captured by the concepts of commodification, rationalization, and secularization, the core of the central theses of modern sociology.<sup>4</sup>

Paget Henry observes that although the roots of African self-reflection are in Africa, the first to outline a “comprehensive phenomenology of African self-consciousness was Du Bois.”<sup>5</sup> Entering Harvard University to study philosophy with William James and Josiah Royce, Du Bois was introduced to their American pragmatism and to their engagements with Hegel’s philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

Henry suggests that Hegel's phenomenology is a clear example of what Jürgen Habermas has called a "general interpretation," or a generalized narrative of self-development addressed and directed to a particular subject, the reader. To engage such a general narrative, in Habermas's account, requires that one literally apply it to the self, trying it on, and "respon[ding] to the experienced sense of fit."<sup>7</sup> Habermas contrasts such general narratives with general theories which pertain to objects. Henry explains that their "application takes the form of an externally imposed subsumption that requires experimental evaluation rather than confirmation from an addressee."<sup>8</sup> Du Bois's engagement with Hegel and what came of it, suggests Henry, came from the experience of a mismatch, or of an ill-fit. "Du Bois," writes Henry, took from Hegel "how to view the racialized African subject and its possibilities for recovery from the standpoint of the self- and world-constituting activities of its consciousness."<sup>9</sup> Borrowing a general phenomenological approach, Du Bois, unlike Hegel, did not "make an absolute onto-epistemic commitment to this perspective."<sup>10</sup> For Du Bois, what emerged, double consciousness, does not appear at first as an asset. It is initially, for him, a source of agony.<sup>11</sup> Du Bois reflects in *The Souls of Black Folk* (hereafter referred to as *Souls*):

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question . . . To [this] real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. And yet, being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe . . .<sup>12</sup>

To *be a problem*, rather than a person with or faced by problems, is strange, even for those for whom it is a familiar and only "normal" condition. What it is like to be such is the question between the experience of being a problem and the other, white world. And yet it is a question that is never articulated. It is omnipresent precisely because it is never actually asked. The answer is also spoken in silence. And yet the experience is genuine. Du Bois continues:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.<sup>13</sup>

Born as the Negro, as opposed to the African or black person, in America, this son is born veiled or gifted. To be born and born Negro in a world that will yield one no true self-consciousness is to see oneself through the eyes of those of another world.

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 a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this 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.<sup>14</sup>

Double consciousness is at first to look at oneself only through antagonistic eyes, to measure oneself according to standards and values articulated through one's negation. It is the experience of irreconcilable twoness with no horizon of integration.

Du Bois describes the longings of the American black as a yearning for adulthood, for a merging of separate selves into a self-conscious whole without the bastardization of either.<sup>15</sup> There is irony here in relation to our earlier mention of Max Weber. He too strongly endorsed the effort to

bring meaning to one's life through integrating its various domains and dimensions and lamented that this was a challenge that so many of his contemporaries used all of their resources to escape or shun.<sup>16</sup> In Du Bois's 1903 portrayal the absence of such reconciliation, the achievement of a synthesis in a model alternative to one of hegemonic assimilationism, what emerges is waste, from the waste of the powers of body and mind—"the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness"—to the waste of conflicting double aims and of a black message to the world stating that meaningful history, and within it the potential of modernity and rationality, are far from complete.<sup>17</sup>

Henry explains that double consciousness is not the result of the Africana subject having to exist for another consciousness, as is so in Hegel's account of the struggle between master and slave. In this account, the self-development of the European subject is bumpy, "marked by splits, doublings, and self/other binaries that resulted in premature exclusions and negations that would have to be overcome in subsequent stages."<sup>18</sup> This would have been the challenge to the consciousness of an African prior to colonization. Du Boisian double consciousness instead "results from the Africana subject having to exist for a self-consciousness that racialized itself as white," writes Henry.<sup>19</sup> What emerges, Henry then concludes, is a dialectic of racial recognition in which "it is not the humanity but the blackness of the Africana subject that confirms the whiteness of the Teutonic 'Strong Man.'"<sup>20</sup> Henry also rejects Shamoan Zamir's interpretation of double consciousness as the Hegelian "unhappy consciousness," for, he emphasizes, the Africana subject does not move between a changeable "I" and fixed "Other," but between two "We's," those produced by the colonization and subordination of one life-world by another. The irreconcilable twoness to which we earlier referred, is the clashing of these two life-worlds and the racialized collective identities at their core.<sup>21</sup>

The divisions brought on by the impact of racialization took at least two forms, according to Henry. The divided Africana psyche, he suggests, was the effect of the caricature "Negro" as the "polar opposite of white," where whiteness was linked to a set of prescriptive normative ideals. This disparaged any sense of meaningful collective black identity, of any coherent sense of a pre-colonial African self.<sup>22</sup> Henry argues, "Du Boisian double consciousness is a phenomenological account of the self-consciousness of these African subjects whose 'We' had been shattered and challenged by this process of negritude."<sup>23</sup> Anthony Monteiro, echoing revolutionary psychiatrist and writer Frantz Fanon, describes European or white civilization as a psychological, existential complex the existence of which "assumes the African or African civilization, as objects of white history."<sup>24</sup> Removing the African as a subject of history, or, as with Hegel, from world consciousness, designated African consciousness as false or pathological and the African as "lacking human identity."<sup>25</sup> It also had the effect of placing blacks beneath the self-other dialectic of the master slave narrative, below the possibility of a future of reciprocal recognition.<sup>26</sup>

Henry notes that in addition to the splitting of the Africana psyche, double consciousness also describes the splitting of transcendental consciousness by the experience of racialization. The "second sight," or seeing of the black man or woman through the "the eyes of the white other," is an ability that a pre-colonial African would not have possessed and that indicates that first sight must involve an ability to see oneself through eyes that are not other, that are, presumably, one's own.<sup>27</sup> Henry explains that the "categoric changes in the organization of the transcendental domain that are associated with double consciousness derive from the complex and changing dynamics that developed between first and second sight."<sup>28</sup> Where second sight, which is rooted in a European and Euro-American life-world that is premised, in its very constitution, on the subordination and caricaturing of a black life-world, has displaced first sight, all that is available as "a categoric form of self-blindness, a deformation, [is] a detour rather than a positive phase in the development of

Africana self-consciousness.”<sup>29</sup> This “classic case of false consciousness,” Henry emphasizes, “will only take this subject away from its self.”<sup>30</sup> The struggle through this dim and obscuring second sight, Henry reflects, “is the categoric dilemma of Africana self-consciousness as disclosed by Du Bois’s phenomenology.”<sup>31</sup>

### Potentiated Double Consciousness

In *Souls*, Du Bois argues that “the children of Emancipation,” the generation of U.S. blacks born outside of slavery and adults born of the promise of new conditions, had sensed their own powers and mission. They had grasped palpably that to affirm their place in the world they would need to be themselves. They soon felt helpless before the ideals of white civilization that they were ready to revere, however. They constantly faced the humiliation that came of a white readiness to ignore the best of everything black while embracing the worst. They inculcated this disdain that led quickly to a self-disparaging lowering of expectations and aspirations. Du Bois’s own response was to call for the development of race organizations, designed at every step to wed the projects of study, education, and political and economic progress together with the demand that U.S. institutions begin to hire and reward on the basis of merit. When engaged in this work and arguing for its indispensability, the double consciousness that seemed a liability emerges, however tentatively, as a strength, as what Henry calls “potentiated second sight.”<sup>32</sup> In both *Darkwater* and “The Study of Negro Problems,” where he does not refer explicitly to double consciousness, Du Bois exemplifies what a twoness reveals when it looks back. Take, for example, his *Darkwater* essay “The Souls of White Folk.” He writes:

High in the tower, where I sit above the loud complaining of the human sea, I know 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.<sup>33</sup>

White folks appear transparent to the onlooker with double consciousness. For those who are most likely to exemplify it, blacks, are born as black people, *as Negroes*, of the thought and language, of the project of the white modern life-world and its beginnings in the moment of colonial exploration and expansion.<sup>34</sup> Du Bois never claims that individual white people could never see themselves critically. He did emphasize how difficult it is actually to do this with anything short of a commitment to the demolition of the project of whiteness.<sup>35</sup> Even then, this would have to be something other than the initial portrayal of double consciousness we have described. For the basis of whiteness is a subordinated black life-world, the denial of its reality as a legitimate alternative point of view for consciousness. In other words, the recreation of Africans and Africana people as black Negroes does not appear as a problem for white first sight, which would appear to be intact and to suggest no need to look at the self through eyes of a black other. The effects of racialization are to deny the status of other to the black. Du Bois continues:

Mine is not the knowledge of the traveler or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder. Nor yet is my knowledge that which servants have of masters, or mass of class, or capitalist of artisan. Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails.<sup>36</sup>

Du Bois suggests that the grasp of white reality available to the black is not based on the observations of one who simply visits nor those of someone who stays and then compiles a collage of nostalgia, conversation, and admiration. It is not the knowledge a servant has of the minutiae of his superior's mundane life, or even the kind a capitalist has of the skills and aspirations of the artisan whom he aims successfully to displace. What is more, Du Bois appears to suggest that this knowledge is not the simple fact of physical proximity or intimacy. He writes:

I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious. They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth. My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism. And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped—ugly, human.<sup>37</sup>

Black eyes are felt by whites. And although black being is degraded and denied, its ongoing reality as human, as an alternative view based in a living if subordinated life-world, angers many whites. Many attempt to put off this penetrating and solid gaze through denial, framing it only as the eyes of resentment and resignation, the hungry looks of those who wish to change places. The sober and unaffected look is not that. Double consciousness is not simply false and immobilized self-consciousness when caught in resentment and resignation, in an envy that desperately affirms a desire for whiteness. Double vision becomes what Henry calls “potentiated second sight” when it is capable of seeing through the narcissism of whiteness without resentment, when it sees beneath words of “fact” and fancy that what is at work are the grand and self-deceiving aspirations of human beings.

Henry explains that at the core of Du Bois's phenomenological inquiry is a concern for “the denigging of Africana identities, the full recognition of the humanity of Africana peoples, and also of their cultural contributions to the shared problems of human ontogenesis.”<sup>38</sup> It is with these aims, suggests Henry, that double consciousness and second sight can become double-edged swords, both obstacles to genuine self-consciousness *and* also a potential link to “very special access and insight into the dehumanizing ‘will to power’ of the European imperial subject.”<sup>39</sup> Henry writes, “The potentiating of second sight is always a latent possibility in the racialized and divided self-consciousness of the Africana subject.”<sup>40</sup> It can be activated, explains Henry, either through “the recovery of a significant measure of first sight,” the possibility of seeing oneself as an African rather than as “the negro” or through the development of an independent standard of self-evaluation and self-elevation.<sup>41</sup> The former requires a reconstruction of the self and one's world “within the creative codes of African discourses and symbols.”<sup>42</sup> The extent of one or one's group's ability to do this is the measure of the alternative space through which one can see through the imposition of all of what “the negro” implies for one. Similarly, the development instead of a genuinely alternative independent point of view must be capable of understanding the formation of the caricature “the negro,” “its white psychosocial significance, and also its dissolution.”<sup>43</sup> Henry suggests that the “cultivation of such an ‘I’” would either constitute a new form of first, or a third sight.<sup>44</sup> Henry argues that the ability to combine both of these alternatives provides “great insight into the psyche of the creators and perpetrators of this tragic farce.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, he writes, “It is from the reflective immediacy of the decaying caricature of ‘the negro’ that the critiques of potentiated second sight derive their ethical/moral power, pinpoint accuracy and razor sharp quality.”<sup>46</sup>

One is reminded here of Søren Kierkegaard's account in *Repetition* of the exception that reveals the universal. Kierkegaard writes, “The exception also thinks the universal in that he thinks himself through; he works for the universal in that he explains himself.”<sup>47</sup> The exception to the

universal is actually bound up in its constitution as an erected outside. The black person, as such, cannot think himself as the black outside without thinking of and through the project of whiteness. Kierkegaard continues, “Consequently, the exception explains the universal and himself, and if one really wants to study the universal, one only needs to look around for a legitimate exception; he discloses everything far more clearly than the universal itself.”<sup>48</sup> To give an accurate account of himself, rather than just what the white would say of him as the caricature, “the negro,” he is able to give a depiction of whiteness that moves beyond its own self-rationalization. In turn, writes Kierkegaard, “The legitimate exception is reconciled in the universal; basically, the universal is polemical toward the exception, and it will not betray its partiality before the exception forces it, as it were, to acknowledge it.”<sup>49</sup> This could be read as an account of second sight unpotentiated to which Kierkegaard adds by way of explanation, “If heaven loves one sinner more than ninety-nine who are righteous, the sinner, of course, does not know this from the beginning; on the contrary, he is aware only of heaven’s wrath until he finally, as it were, forces heaven to speak out.”<sup>50</sup> Potentiated second sight emerges dialectically from its immobilizing version. The ability to grasp intimately the illegitimacy of the claims to universality of the white life-world to see beyond its narrow, over-defined scope emerge out of the experience of oneself first as the problems, then as the contradictions of such a faulty universalism. The razor sharp accuracy of potentiated second sight is what can emerge if one does not collapse under the weight of the subordination of the black life-world.

Du Bois’s discussion turns to an account of the uniqueness of the modern obsession with skin color. He remarks that “personal whiteness” is a “nineteenth and twentieth century matter,” one that the ancient world would have mocked.<sup>51</sup> But suddenly, whiteness was wonderful and of “all the hues of God,” it alone was obviously better. “[E]ven the sweeter souls of the dominant world as they discourse with me on weather, weal, and woe are,” he observes, “continually playing above their actual words an obligato of tune and tone.”<sup>52</sup> Expressed in it is the assumption that one must wish to be born white, that in anything else “the curse of God lies heavy on you,” and yet there is reassurance: “Do your work in your lowly sphere, praying the good Lord that into heaven above, where all is love, you may, one day, be born—white.”<sup>53</sup> In this racialized formulation, redemption from blackness, which is equated with sin, is in whiteness. When, or if ever, asked why whiteness is so desirable, it is, explains Du Bois, because “whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!”<sup>54</sup> For Du Bois, however, his own suffering is outweighed by a pity for people so enthralled and imprisoned by their own fantasies.

He mocks the idea of a nation like the U.S. trying to make the world safe for democracy, suggesting an idiocy in its government decrying atrocities committed elsewhere that it commits against domestic blacks, and, we should add, Indigenous Americans. And while a worthy ideal can uplift a people, he suggests, a false one imprisons them. He writes, “[S]ay to a people: ‘The one virtue is to be white,’ and the people rush to the inevitable conclusion, ‘Kill the “nigger.”’”<sup>55</sup> Progress is cast in this theodician mold. Du Bois asks:

Are we not coming more and more, day by day, to making the statement “I am white,” the one fundamental tenet of our practical morality? Only when this basic, iron rule is involved is our defense of right nation-wide and prompt. Murder may swagger, theft may rule and prostitution may flourish and the nation gives but spasmodic, intermittent and lukewarm attention. But let the murderer be black or the thief brown or the violator of womanhood have a drop of Negro blood, and the righteousness of the indignation sweeps the world. Nor would this fact make the indignation less justifiable did not we all know that it was blackness that was condemned and not crime.<sup>56</sup>

There is a will in general, suggests Du Bois, that being white is a tenet of shared morality. It is a tenet that when believed to be endangered produces prompt action, suggesting that actions labeled “crime” are not cause for indignation so much as is the race of their perpetrators. It is blackness itself which is the crime to be condemned. Its very existence, an encroachment on the morality of whiteness. This raises the question of the status of white crime, whether there can in fact be white criminals, as opposed to individual white men or women who, anomalous and misled, do criminal things.

Du Bois explains that the project of civilization preceded this contemporary form, but that in its earlier Egyptian, Persian, Greek, Roman, Mongol, and Arab forms it was never characterized by the “disconcerting seriousness [with his own perfection] as the modern white man.”<sup>57</sup> Monteiro adds: “The racialization of civilizations (not just peoples) is the decisive outcome of the socio-historical processes associated with modernity. Therefore, white civilization, and the civilizational commitment to and predisposition among the majority of the world’s white people to white supremacy, overdetermines the modern epoch. Civilization in practical methodological terms is the totality of those things that are the historical *a priori*.”<sup>58</sup>

Not everyone is taken in by this seriousness, however. Some see with eyes able to be made old by experience of the world. Du Bois continues:

We whose shame, humiliation, and deep insult his aggrandizement so often involved were never deceived. We looked at him clearly, with world-old eyes, and saw simply a human thing, weak and pitiable and cruel, even as we are and were. These super-men and world-mastering demi-gods listened, however, to no low tongues of ours, even when we pointed silently to their feet of clay.<sup>59</sup>

It is not that there are black Americans who are not weak, pitiable, and cruel. They are fully aware that they are human and certainly do not frame their failings as the height to which humanity might soar in emulation. But then there is nothing that makes people cling more to their claims to being human than their experience of this being actively and consistently denied. The honest mirror offered in the reflection of black eyes was, and continues to be, ignored. As we have seen, for this to be rendered visible would require an acknowledgment of a black life-world and black people with interiority and a point of view, indispensable to the story of modernity, when potentiated, offering perhaps its most honest and clear reflection. But what is the actual content of these low tones? Du Bois queries:

But may not the world cry back at us and ask: “What better thing have you to show? What have you done or would do better than this if you had today the world rule? Paint with all riot of hateful colors the thin skin of European culture,—is it not better than any culture that arose in Africa or Asia?”<sup>60</sup>

Du Bois gives a resounding “no,” insisting that the greatness of Europe, which he acknowledges, has “lain in the width of the stage on which she has played her part, the strength of the foundations” on which she built with ability no greater than those of races of earlier days.<sup>61</sup> Du Bois explains that the reasons for Europe’s triumph lie outside of it, in earlier struggles of humankind, in crucial earlier accomplishments in the iron trade of ancient “black Africa,” in the religious empire-building of “yellow Asia,” the art and science of the “‘dago’ Mediterranean shore, east, south, and west, as well as north.”<sup>62</sup> Where Europe ignored or sneered at such lessons, “she has played, like other empires gone, the world fool.”<sup>63</sup> Existential historian Hans Blumenberg’s identification of the desire to create

modernity *ex nihilo* reads with a different ring here. Rather than a renouncing of human agency through theocentricity, what is being erased is a history of human achievement upon which Europe was able to build. Hidden from view is how recent are the accomplishments of whiteness, that its heights are only singular because in being the newest, Du Bois argues, they have the most on which to stand.

The degrading of men by men, or the use of some by others who call themselves masters, is not an independent creation of Europe and Euro-America. What is unique to the project of white Europe and America is the scale and elaborateness, the culminating “width of the thing,—the heaven-defying audacity—makes its modern newness.”<sup>64</sup> This theory of human culture will pay inordinate profits, notes Du Bois, in “dark lands” at home and abroad in which “industrial development may repeat in exaggerated form every horror of the industrial history of Europe.”<sup>65</sup> It will also fuel a want, in the United States on the part of whites, to believe in the failure of democracy “so far as darker peoples were concerned.”<sup>66</sup> Du Bois notes that this is so in spite of the absence of any actual failures. Neither the Japanese nor Chinese have “menaced the land,” he writes, and “the experiment of Negro suffrage has resulted in the uplift of twelve million people at a rate probably unparalleled in history.”<sup>67</sup>

### Potentiated Double Consciousness and Social Scientific Method

Du Bois later considered his own certainty “that the world wanted to learn the truth and if the truth were sought with even approximate accuracy and painstaking devotion, the world would gladly support the effort” to be the naive idealism of a young man.<sup>68</sup> Still, his early “The Study of Negro Problems” reveals how his potentiated double vision pushes up against his hopes for the inevitable impact of the truth that science can bring to society and its members. His own guiding concerns for racial liberation ironically raise fruitful questions about the nature of rigor in the social sciences, indicating the epistemological significance of potentiated second sight to grasping social and political phenomena. He writes:

A social problem is the failure of an organized social group to realize its group ideals, through the inability to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life . . . . Thus a social problem is ever a relation between conditions and action, and as conditions and actions vary and change from group to group from time to time and from place to place, so social problems change, develop and grow.<sup>69</sup>

This could suggest, as writers like Gunnar Myrdal would later conclude, that problems of social and racial injustice are instrumental and technical ones, requiring only that we finally align our behavior with our higher aims.<sup>70</sup> It might also be read more broadly to suggest that the difficulty is one of collective purpose and aims following from political obstacles borne of a public morality grounded in a belief in the superiority of white being. For even here Du Bois emphasizes the social dimension of social problems, that, rooted in the lived life of groups, they are prone to shift and change. He writes, “[W]e ordinarily speak of the Negro problem as though it were one unchanged question” when the “obvious facts” show its long historical development with the growth and evolution of the nation. What binds together this “plexus of social problems, some new, some old, some simple, some complex” is that “they group themselves about those Africans whom two centuries of slave trading brought to this land.”<sup>71</sup> Moving beyond Myrdal a half century earlier, he, with subtlety, raises questions about the status of collective ideals as ideal. He writes:



As things are, our opinions upon the Negro are more matters of faith than of knowledge. Every schoolboy is ready to discuss the matter, and there are few men that have not settled convictions. Such a situation is dangerous.<sup>72</sup>

This suggests a continued failure at the level of practice or behavior, of undisciplined opinion holding sway over careful reflection, of dogmatic faith obscuring rational consideration. Du Bois does go on to argue that societies must settle problems according to ideals and that this can only be rationally carried out through studying problems through the best of scientific research. Yet he emphasizes that nations can discourage and encourage intelligent action, indulging conjecture over conscious thought. In his own day, ideas about black people were matters of faith, believed already settled, even in the minds of children, who felt able to articulate these in public with confidence. Here, the line between practice and ideals is blurry. Surely a goal of a supposed self-governing polity aimed at more than majoritarianism would need to make an effort at intelligent public life.<sup>73</sup>

Du Bois stops short of explicitly framing the aversion to studying black people as a function of one of the many “high ideals” that should guide the settling of societal problems, or as being foundational to a kind of racial rationality the legitimacy of which is tied fundamentally to the project of whiteness. Here the kind of positivistic science that so concerned Weber and Schmitt takes on an interesting twist. One response to the absence of a commitment to truth or science in the treatment of blacks is to argue for its irrelevance in racial liberation. Du Bois concluded that this would be a mistake, and he argued for a more robust conception of scientific and systematic inquiry of the social world. He reminded readers that Thomas Jefferson had complained that the nation had never studied the conditions of its slaves and therefore made hazardous over-generalized conclusions concerning them. The difficulty of the task, or sorting out the different relevant questions, should not have been a deterrence. It was true that when asked, the Negro would frame the problem as one of racial prejudice, while the Southern white would say write simply of ignorance, crime, and social degradation.<sup>74</sup> His response was that vastly more could be known than what was available, particularly if the scholar began intelligently, realizing that “not only is [the Negro] affected by all the varying social forces that act on any nation at his stage of development, but that in addition to these there is reacting upon him the mighty power of a peculiar and unusual social environment which affects to some extent every other social force.”<sup>75</sup> Du Bois, in other words, offered here an early formulation of a humanistic social science, if not a clear anti-positivism, in an age dominated by a narrow scientism and by the disenchantment of Europe.

“The Study of the Negro Problems,” published in 1898 in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, was a presentation Du Bois made to the Academy a year earlier at the conclusion of his monumental thousand-page ethnography, *The Philadelphia Negro*, a work that established the field of urban ethnography. We have already touched on some of the insights of this historic article. Let us explore it further. In the opening, Du Bois acknowledged the limitations of early social scientific efforts: much empirical research was conducted, “work always wearisome, often aimless, without well-settled principles and guiding lines.”<sup>76</sup> Little had been accomplished or proven, save that phenomena of society were worthy of ongoing study. This was particularly true of the society of the United States that drew European writers and scholars like Alexis de Tocqueville and Max Weber. “The rapid rise of a young country, the vast social changes, the wonderful economic development, the bold political experiments, and the contact of varying moral standards—all these make for American students crucial tests of social action, microcosmic reproductions of long centuries of world history and rapid—even violent—repetitions of great social problems.”<sup>77</sup> This was a rich and potentially fertile field for the sociologist of which many astute observers were aware. What few had yet realized was the unique opportunity raised by “the group of social phenomena arising from the presence in this land of eight million persons of African

descent.”<sup>78</sup> Du Bois continued, in what may have alarmed his readers, *both* black and white, that African Americans were uniquely worthy of study, suggesting that progress in the emerging field of sociology would be linked to undertaking social scientific work on this quintessential “problem people.” Falling short of the challenges posed by this opportunity to trace the development of a race, an opportunity that Du Bois considered the only one of its kind presented to a modern nation, would not only hurt the name of the American people, it would forestall the international cause of science, degrading the sanctity of the very project of truth-seeking just as it needed confirming. And for what, asked Du Bois? So that whims of the day might be lazily and shortsightedly indulged.<sup>79</sup>

This task would not be easy, however. Du Bois cautioned that when it came to studying black people, avowed commitments to standards of rigorous scientific work, however new and awkwardly tried out, were quickly abandoned. Gone were efforts critically to select evidence; to choose the best approach to study; to assess biases of sources; to assess critically degrees of typicality or representativeness; to determine the sources of figures, the method of their collection, and their margin of error; or to question the competence of informants. He illustrates the ways in which race prejudice colored the possibility of basic insight—that the “crime or carelessness of a few of his race is easily imputed to all, and the reputation of the good, industrious and reliable suffer thereby.”<sup>80</sup> Another danger ensuring a lack of rigor was in the very framing of the questions to be studied. These questions lacked diversity and range, interrogating only the perceived influence of black people on the lives of whites. With neither training nor a commitment to the sanctity of science and scientific method, the fiercely racist convictions held by many writers on these themes made it impossible to call their work scientific in Du Bois’s view, though he admitted, somewhat ironically, that they might be interesting as opinion. Still, he made clear, using scientific criteria to make distinctions between more and less legitimate accounts of race did not receive much of a public hearing.<sup>81</sup>

Du Bois went so far as to argue that some social problems could not be studied in their own time, that public feeling surrounding them was characterized by so resilient an opposition to uncovering their truths that reasoned analysis was unattainable. He contended that it would have been impossible to uncover the necessary facts to give a truthful explanation of black crime and lynching in his day. The response to these limitations, however, was not to collapse into nihilism, but to inaugurate and buttress, as we saw earlier, a robust faith in the merit and consequences of searching for truth, with the mediate goal of social reform aimed at identifying the way in which a society could fulfill its avowed humanistic commitments. The results were to be available to all, but, he reiterated, “the aim of science itself is simple truth.”<sup>82</sup>

Such an approach required what Lawrence Bobo later called a holistic method,<sup>83</sup> one that drew on all of the resources available in the social sciences and importantly, for a seemingly positivistic scholar, emphasized the need for an interpretive sociology that could explore “those finer manifestations of social life which history can but mention and which statistics cannot count.”<sup>84</sup> Lewis Gordon argues that this explicit affirmation of black interiority was an explicit challenge to the epistemic closure with which the study of black people had been and continues to be undertaken. It challenged the notion that blacks were only exterior beings and that to see the blackness of an individual was to know all there was to know about all blacks.<sup>85</sup> This emphasis emerged in Du Bois’s distinction between people and the environments in which they lived, the historical nature of social problems, and the need for a social psychology. Du Bois concluded his classic essay instructively:

Finally, the necessity must again be emphasized of keeping clearly before students the object of all science, amid the turmoil and intense feeling that clouds the discussion of a burning social question. We live in a day when in

spite of the brilliant accomplishments of a remarkable century, there is current much flippant criticism of scientific work; when the truth-seeker is too often pictured as devoid of human sympathy, and careless of human ideals.<sup>86</sup>

A commitment to rigorous science in the face of heated social conflict was mistaken for an absence of human feeling, commitment, and authenticity. The truth, could not have been more different. Du Bois continued:

We are still prone in spite of all our culture to sneer at the heroism of the laboratory while we cheer the swagger of the street broil. At such a time true lovers of humanity can only hold higher the pure ideals of science, and continue to insist that if we would solve a problem we must study it, and that there is but one coward on earth, and that is the coward that dare not know.<sup>87</sup>

Social scientists, in Du Bois's view, needed to wage a loving and courageous fight against societal impulses to collapse into presentist reassurances in the face of complicated political challenges. They needed to affirm that the realization of human projects required the affirming of human dignity through intellectual work that documented, as it sought to understand, the full range of human being. There was much more interest in and patience for having it out physically, immediately, and publicly in a street brawl, something that Du Bois hoped time and courage would change. This guiding principle, of people with a collective character capable of steady improvement through scientific research accompanied the commitment that shaped Du Bois life's work: to suspend, the "natural attitude" through which black people were viewed.

Anthony Monteiro has argued that affirming black people as worthy of social scientific study, as subjects rather than objects of social life, was nothing short of revolutionary. Social scientific questions had emerged out of a European historical experience that in turn provided its central tropes.<sup>88</sup> Du Bois challenged these assumptions that assumed the centrality of Europe, arguing that with the post-slavery improvements of which they were capable, black people were not most appropriately studied through biology but were "entitled to have [their] interests considered according to [their] numbers in all conclusions as to the commonweal."<sup>89</sup> They were, Du Bois suggested, a fundamental part of, rather than superfluous to the constitution of a general

will of the United States. Such a transformation would require rethinking the language, methods, and civilizational assumptions of the social sciences, challenging the poverty in concepts and methods of the social sciences that undergirded the consensus around prevailing social and political issues of his day. Seeking to “use science against scientific racism in the interest of reform and uplift. . . with scientific accuracy,” Du Bois framed the incorporation of black people into American life as requiring and assisting in the intellectual and political task of breaking down the edifice of white supremacy.<sup>90</sup> Wrote Du Bois, “Either he dies or he wins. Either extermination root and branch, or absolute equality. There can be no compromise. This is the last great battle of the West.”<sup>91</sup>

Lewis Gordon underscores Du Bois’s unique understanding of human study as linked, at its most rigorous, to larger questions of, or a guiding *telos* of human liberation. Gordon notes the ways in which method and principles inspiring research are mutually constituting: “the search reveals the normative and the normative reveals the search.”<sup>92</sup> Du Bois thereby stressed the fundamental incompleteness of human beings and the challenge that this posed to attempts at complete social scientific explanation, at ever closing a social or political question for good. The necessary consequence of this position for Du Bois, according to Gordon, was also to suggest both concrete and metaphorical meanings of a blackness that would change over time, here foreshadowing what Frantz Fanon would later advance as the sociogenic theory of blackness.<sup>93</sup> A sociogenic theory frames “the color line” that Du Bois made so famous as, like potentiated double consciousness, paradigmatic, argues Gordon, a way of delineating all kinds of normal and abnormal identities.<sup>94</sup> Commissioned to undertake this study to affirm that the explanation for a spasm of reform in Philadelphia, “then and still one of the worst governed of America’s badly governed cities” that “was evident to most white Philadelphians: the corrupt, semi-criminal vote of the Negro Seventh Ward,” Du Bois offered not the “scientific sanction” to what everyone agreed was “the cancer.”<sup>95</sup> He instead recentered political questions and answers, exemplifying how one studies “a human population whose humanity is a structurally denied feature of the society in which they are studied.”<sup>96</sup>

Paget Henry observes, “Given some of the exclusive claims on reason that the West has made, it has been difficult to see clearly the rationality of non-Western peoples,”<sup>97</sup> and the same applies to the theoretical significance of the insights of a writer like Du Bois. The association of reason with whiteness, and of the capability of producing theory with the universalism ascribed to whites against the supposed particularity and particularism of blacks, is an ongoing feature of the white life-world that Du Bois’s phenomenology attempted to capture. What Du Bois’s potentiated second sight reveals is of great epistemological value: It points toward the cultural dimensions of phenomenology (“of the discursive practices through which self-reflective descriptions of the constituting activities of consciousness are produced after the ‘natural attitude’ of everyday life has been bracketed by some ego-displacing technique”),<sup>98</sup> that have been “concealed by the ways in which reason and culture have been brought together in the identity of European phenomenology.”<sup>99</sup> From this view, the classic formulations of Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Husserl, which framed European phenomenology “as the self-reflective practice that disclosed the latent movements of a universal reason, which was also the prime constituting force operating within the core of the European subject,”<sup>100</sup> appear as a “universal reason” limited to the cultural particularity of Europe. It illuminates a project through which the particularization of universal reason required universalizing the European subject whose science and phenomenology would, they claimed, “give reason a fully realized vision of itself.”<sup>101</sup> Henry emphasizes, “In this peculiar configuration, Europe acquired a monopoly that made it co-extensive with the geography of reason.”<sup>102</sup> This is the geography of Hegel and of Kant and Weber, that for Husserl was tied to the very question of whether “European humanity bears within itself an absolute idea, rather than being merely an empirical anthropological type like ‘China’ or ‘India.’” An irony emerges: Hegel’s objection to

Rousseau's formulation of the general will had been that it was still linked to the actual act of willing of individuals. Hegel feared that individuals as such were prone to frame their own particular consciousness as universal, presumably raising problems for their ability to fathom and grasp what was general and their willingness to be corrected when in error.<sup>103</sup>

Henry insists that to de-link reason from an exclusive relationship with European culture so that other phenomenological possibilities might appear, it is necessary to consider the occasion of self-reflection, the path into the practice of self-reflection and the role played by knowledge produced in the natural attitude in our constructions and reconstructions of the transcendental domain.<sup>104</sup> In the history of Western philosophy, he explains, the problem of rationality and rational/scientific knowledge production has been the occasion for phenomenological reflection. Henry notes that Hegel attempted to keep the "creative and explanatory agency of Spirit as an integral part of the changing discursive spaces produced by the natural sciences"; for Husserl the crisis that made such reflection urgent was brought on by "positivistically reduced notions of rationality and humanity that accompanied the rise of mathematics and the natural sciences."<sup>105</sup> Habermas attempts to respond to the colonization of the Western life-world by instrumental rationality. Henry writes, "These variations within the overall *telos* of rationality that has governed the self-image of European phenomenology are important for raising the question of other occasions for self-reflection that are outside of this rational horizon."<sup>106</sup>

This is especially true for an Africana phenomenology, like Du Bois's, the governing *telos* of which has been liberation from problems of racial domination. Henry remarks, "In the tradition of Africana phenomenology, the occasion for self-reflection has not been the positivistic reduction of rationality and the mechanized caricature of the European subject that it threatens to produce. Rather, the occasion for reflection has been the racist negating of the humanity of Africans."<sup>107</sup> This has, as we have seen, led Africana thinkers to a concern for "clarifying the systematic error producing foundations of the European humanities and social sciences that have had to legitimate and make appear as correct this racist reduction of African humanity."<sup>108</sup> Henry explains that the hyper-mechanical positivistic reduction of European humanity is the "upper and rational side of itself that Western capitalism likes to affirm," whereas the racist reduction of African humanity is "a creation of the 'underside' of this mechanized capitalism, a part of its irrational shadow that it cannot affirm but must project onto others that it perceives as its opposite."<sup>109</sup> Henry underscores that the production of "the negro" was not part of the Habermasian notion of the internal colonization of the life world by its own technocratic reason; this was part of "the external colonization of one life-world by another."<sup>110</sup> Henry emphasizes that the literature that give an account of experiences of racialization suggest that "the terrain of self-reflection in the Africana world has been a rather burnt out, exploded and blackened one, very different from the technological dystopia of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or George Orwell's *1984*."<sup>111</sup> Occupations with racial liberation then, notes Henry, displace, though not fully, the problem of rationality as the source of occasions for self-reflection.<sup>112</sup> One could ask whether in fact this is the case, given our previous discussion of "The Study," which suggested, if it did not clearly state, that one of the obstacles to rigorous social scientific investigation was an elaborate and institutionally buttressed racist rationality. Henry, in other words, demotes the problem of rationality to one of many, rather than *the* fundamental problem of the modern age.

Similarly, adds Henry, the path to reflection—in Descartes the method of radical doubt; in Hegel of spiritual and theological meditation; or more recently in Derrida reflecting on the creativity of systems of writing in which the subject is embedded—is varying and its relation to the universal claims of reason only further problematized by a method of particular centrality to Africana phenomenology, exemplified in Du Bois, that of poetics. Finally, Henry insists that the everyday ethical/practical projects of phenomenologies and phenomenologists, whether these be clarifying

the foundations of the natural sciences or of spiritual and theological discourses or the foundations of writing, fundamentally shape the “ongoing reconstructions of the transcendental domain.”<sup>113</sup> Henry reflects,

These examples point to a circle of mutual influencing between the world-oriented projects of phenomenologies and their corresponding views of what is foundational or transcendental for knowledge production. But such a pattern of influence points to a historicizing of the transcendental domain that would limit any absolute claims for Spirit, logic, presuppositionless idealization, or arche-writing.<sup>114</sup>

There has been a clear tendency in the transcendental accounts to reach beyond what “this circle of mutual influence would suggest.”<sup>115</sup> This tendency has been distinctly weaker in Africana phenomenology, suggests Henry. He concludes that these comparisons make clear that differences between Western and Africana phenomenologies, as exemplified by Du Bois in instances of his own potentiated second sight at the core of his Africana phenomenology, are qualitative. The ways in which they diverge limit the universal claims of both sides, “creating epistemic breaks that can only be engaged/resolved through conversation and comparative analysis.”<sup>116</sup> He adds that from a philosophical standpoint these differences are metaphysical, the result of differences in presupposed foundations. This is so in spite of the claims of European philosophy to be post-metaphysical, which Henry suggests, are profoundly metaphysical. He turns to Habermas’s “post-metaphysical arguments” as an example, insisting that any effort to give discourse-constitutive priority to one explanatory factor or method of inquiry over another requires moving beyond “physics.”<sup>117</sup> By contrast, the metaphysical underpinnings of Africana phenomenology have never “included the absolute claims for reason that have been at the center of the transcendental foundations of Western philosophy. In the Africana tradition, reason has always had to share the metaphysical stage with poetics and historical action.”<sup>118</sup> This suggests that the European post-metaphysical stage, which involves a “scaling down its claims for reason,” brings it closer to the metaphysical positions of Africana philosophy.<sup>119</sup>

Du Bois was one example of the “discursive synthesis” at the metaphysical foundation of Africana thought, argues Henry, combining many fundamental principles of priority, rather than a singular one, and combining the methods of poetics with those of sociology and history, refusing to make an absolute onto-epistemic commitments to any one. Henry compares Du Bois’s attitude toward his “discourse-constitutive fundamentals” as one of “a jazz musician to his/her improvisations. They are all real epistemic offerings, they possess creative potential, but they are partial and limited formations that could not only be done differently, but also need to be checked and complemented.”<sup>120</sup> Although fundamental, Du Bois’s pre-theoretical groundings are “provisional, variable, in need of complements, and therefore change significantly in his different texts.”<sup>121</sup> Originating in the midst of conditions of colonization and racialization, Henry writes that he would call this specific Africana metaphysics, “creative realism,” as what it assumes to be ultimately real is the creative act in its spontaneous movements rather than any of its specific creations.<sup>122</sup> Here metaphysical questions are considered and engaged, but they are not mystified. Indeed they are framed as fundamentally bound up with political questions that are still very much open. Henry concludes with a consideration of a question raised by Shamoan Zamir, who asks how Du Bois could read Hegel in ways that went so against the grain of readings common in nineteenth century America, with no knowledge of Marx, Kierkegaard, Kojève, or Sartre? Henry replies that in addition to the small matter of Du Bois’s genius, “the answer is to be found in the uniqueness of this period of black racialization that Du Bois’s phenomenology had to theorize.”<sup>123</sup>

## Conclusion

If Carl Schmitt suggested that genuine political and public life requires a readiness to identify collective enemies, Du Bois writes as the black, enemy of modernity showing up the limitations of depictions of whiteness as universally legitimate. Moving from immobilizing to potentiated second sight, double consciousness embodies the contradictions of such claims, offering epistemological insight into the nature of social and political life, the context for political legitimacy. Du Bois has been criticized from every side—for his naivete, for his positivism, elitism, bourgeois democratic commitments, for his focus on the character of people, and his use of a problematic concept of race.<sup>124</sup> Yet what Du Bois's own life and work illustrate is that such charges—not because they are critical, but because they substitute purpose for criticism and suggest that such is all that one can do—belong to a world committed to expanding the scope of specifically European processes of disenchantment. For Du Bois's own part, the task of a viable black political identity and political practice and the possibility of a genuine general will, rather than simply the will of some of the citizenry of the U.S., remained a challenge of the future.<sup>125</sup> It turned not on affirming the logic of white modernity, in which whiteness was logical, technical, and rational, if to a fault. It was to befriend rather than antagonize those very parts of the self associated with a rationality broader than this technocratic kind that put the minds of men in the service of their instincts. For to disdain, in however a set of sophisticated terms as were available, the forging of collective politics was to abandon the very meaning of the actual project of popular sovereignty or collective self-rule. Double consciousness is a model of what comes of the project of mature reconciliation in the face of limitations, what comes of seeking legitimacy from the direct experience of its opposite. White efforts to be limitless sources of legitimacy like God are profane. Efforts to forge political identities out of contexts of illegitimacy may be mythic.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this essay have previously appeared in “Double Consciousness and the Problem of Legitimacy in Political Thought” in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), pp. 205-225 and in “Challenges Posed to Social-Scientific Method by the Study of Race” in *A Companion to African American Studies*, edited with an introduction by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), pp. 279-304.

<sup>2</sup> David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993). Both of the volumes Lewis wrote on Du Bois's life, each of which received the Pulitzer Prize, are considered the authoritative source, besides Du Bois's own three autobiographies, on Du Bois's life. Hereafter cited as *Biography of a Race*.

<sup>3</sup> Recall that Schmitt distinguished politics in its colloquial reference to the battling out of self-interests embodied in or amplified by modern political parties, from the political which he attempted both to illuminate and to revivify.

<sup>4</sup> Paget Henry, “Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications,” *CLR James Journal* 11, no. 1, (Summer 2005): 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Shamoan Zamir, *Dark Voices: W.E.B. Du Bois and American Thought 1888-1903* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 113–133. The impact of Hegel's phenomenology on Africana thought was immense, particularly, notes Henry, when one considers its substantial influence on Trinidadian writer, scholar, and activist, C.L.R. James and Martinican writer and revolutionary psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon.

<sup>7</sup> Henry, “Africana Phenomenology,” p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* In addition to linking Du Boisian double consciousness to the thought of Hegel, Tom Meyer has suggested a fruitful comparison with the quality of double consciousness described by Ralph Waldo Emerson. For Emerson, he noted, double consciousness described the “division between a stifling culture of conformity engulfing vast segments of the population and bursts of genius to which this culture makes itself averse.” It was part of an “individualistic breed of moral perfectionism that responds to what appeared to be the stifling universalism and conformity of the age.” By comparison, argues Meyer, Du Bois offered an account of vital black cultural life alongside an American culture “weighted with materialism and prejudice whose participation issues in a world of shaded hatred and decline.” See Tom Meyer, “Du Bois, Deleuze, and Double Consciousness,” *Shifting the Geography of Reason II: Gender, Religion, and Science*, edited by Marina Banchetti-Robino and Clevis Headley (London: Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming). This connection is also made by Doris Sommer, “A Vindication of Double Consciousness” in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 165–179. Sommer argues that to live with double consciousness is to embrace a hyphenated or mixed identity, transcultural or bicultural incoherence rather than the challenge of reconciling multiple identifications into a single whole. She urges that this alternative is fully compatible with the project of democracy which rather than “defining difference away, as more of the same ‘universal’ human character,” embraces “the particularities of citizens who must be tolerated in their difference from others” (p. 176). I will suggest that the usefulness of double consciousness is in the way it directs our attention away from the universal/particular dialectic, that it involves more than a simple multiplication of particularities. If this were what double consciousness involved, the objections that it should be more than double—triple, quadruple, etc.—consciousness would be justified.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson Moses is critical of centering double consciousness in interpreting the work of Du Bois. He insists that this was not the central nor the most important conflict in or for Du Bois. He writes, “*Du Bois was not two souled, because he was not two dimensional*” (The italics are his.) See Wilson Moses, *Creative Conflict in African American Thought: Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 196. Although a more astute depiction of double consciousness, Charles Mills also links double consciousness with questions of perspective and standpoint, suggesting that the designation “double,” would seem to come up numerically short. In an otherwise useful explanation he writes, “What is involved here, then, is a ‘racial’ version of standpoint theory, a perspectival cognitive advantage that is grounded in the phenomenological experience of the disjuncture between official (white) reality and actual (nonwhite) experience, the ‘double-consciousness’ of which W.E.B. Du Bois spoke. This differential racial experience generates an alternative moral and political perception of social reality which is encapsulated in the insight from the black American folk tradition . . . that ‘when white people say, ‘Justice,’ they mean ‘Just Us.’” See Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 109–110. Although there are many varieties of feminist standpoint theory, it tends to center the physical bodies of women as the locus of unique, individuated experience. Du Bois’s double consciousness, in contrast, centers the social and political experience of blackness as one that is shared. He is therefore able to emphasize the subjective quality of perception without suggesting that what is seen is completely random or radically individualized. There may be black people with neither double consciousness nor potentiated double consciousness. Although a more astute depiction of double consciousness, Charles Mills also links double consciousness with questions of perspective and standpoint, suggesting that the designation “double,” would seem to come up numerically short. In an otherwise useful explanation he writes, “What is involved here, then, is a ‘racial’ version of standpoint theory, a perspectival cognitive advantage that is grounded in the phenomenological experience of the disjuncture between official (white) reality and actual (nonwhite) experience, the ‘double-consciousness’ of which W.E.B. Du Bois spoke. This differential racial experience generates an alternative moral and political perception of social reality which is encapsulated in the insight from the black American folk tradition . . . that ‘when white people say, ‘Justice,’ they mean ‘Just Us.’” See Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 109–110. Although there are many varieties of feminist standpoint theory, it tends to center the physical bodies of women as the locus of unique, individuated experience. Du Bois’s double consciousness, in contrast, centers the social and political experience of blackness as one that is shared. He is therefore able to emphasize the subjective quality of perception without suggesting that what is seen is completely random or radically individualized. There may be black people with neither double consciousness nor potentiated double consciousness.

<sup>12</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1982) p. 45. Hereafter cited as *Souls*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> If the significance of Du Bois's insights were not entirely grasped then or now, they were not lost on Max Weber, who, when *Souls* was published in 1903, set about arranging for a German translation, writing to Du Bois "that he would be pleased to do the introduction to his 'splendid book.'" Weber did not remember Du Bois as a student at Berlin when he attended a conference on crime organized by Du Bois at the historically black Atlanta University in 1904. Weber and Du Bois's time had coincided when Weber received a temporary lectureship in what was Du Bois's second year of study in Berlin. Du Bois, upon receiving his doctorate in Philosophy from Harvard, went to Berlin to study for the doctorate in Economics. He completed his thesis after three semesters, hoping then to defend it. A faculty member objected that he had not spent the four semesters required to receive the degree. Du Bois was determined to stay the necessary time, to earn for himself and his race this incredibly difficult and distinguished degree, and to add, if necessary a comparative dimension to his study which focused on the United States. He failed to receive an additional semester's funding and returned to the United States without officially finishing. Impressed by Du Bois's research, Weber proposed and did publish a "short review of [Du Bois's] recent publications about the race problem in America" in the *Archiv fur Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. Weber never did oversee the German translation of *Souls*. See Lewis, *Biography of a Race*, pp. 131 and 225.

<sup>17</sup> Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 46. By contrast, for all of Du Bois's criticisms of Booker T. Washington, he writes of him: "... this very singleness of vision and thorough oneness with his age is a mark of the successful man" (*Souls*, p. 81). Alvin Poussaint and Amy Alexander explore this ongoing problem of the readiness to waste black lives in a study of the rising rates of African-American suicide. They insist that to do so requires exploring the connection between racial oppression, hopelessness, self-hatred, economics, and patterns of self-destructive behavior. They argue that rather than a single act of violence against the self, most acts of suicide among black people take a more protracted course. In particular, black men, often those with a sense of promise and possibility that is abruptly curbed, turn to alcohol and drugs and refuse to seek out medical care (often for historically informed reasons) in processes that can only lead in one direction. They suggest that an adequate response must be a political, economic, and social one, and must focus on developing better mental health care for black people. They cite for instance, how rarely Black people, who often play downplay their depression, are rarely diagnosed with it, while they are regularly over-diagnosed for schizophrenia. See Poussaint and Alexander, *Lay My Burden Down: Suicide and the Mental Health Crisis among African-Americans* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000). For an account of the wasting of lives that is a part of the trajectory of modernity itself, see Zygmunt Bauman. *Wasted Lives* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004). Finally Kevin Bales, a scholar of contemporary slavery has argued that unlike the chattel slavery of the Americas, in which to buy a slave was to invest in at least one lifetime, but usually several potential generations of labor, it is considered more economical to simply dispose of contemporary slaves as they age or become sick or weak. See Bales. *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley, University of California, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Henry, "Africana Phenomenology," p. 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>22</sup> An example of the embracing of a black identity as the polar opposite of whiteness can be found in some aspects of the Nègritude movement. Frantz Fanon, for example, argued that such a move required being "lost in the night." He meant that accepting oneself as the polar opposite of any group required a fundamental form of self-deception, particularly if the group in question was seen to exemplify the very qualities of reason. Even more, this meant being consigned to a form of dependency in which the dominant and dominating group freely asserts their identity, while the dominated must simply react. See Frantz Fanon's discussion of Nègritude in *Black Skins, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), chapter 5.

<sup>23</sup> Henry, "Africana Phenomenology," p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Monteiro, "Science, History and Phenomenology: Understanding the Multiple Determinations of Polymorphous African Being," Presented at the Caribbean Philosophical Association Meetings, Puerto Rico, June 2005, p. 8. Forthcoming in *Shifting the Geography of Reason II: Gender, Religion, Science*, edited by Marina Banchetti-Robino and Clevis Headley (London: Cambridge Scholars Press).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Hegel's account of the struggle between master and slave was an account of the movement of Spirit toward absolute freedom which therefore involved a future in which the slave was no longer a slave. By contrast, in his "Introduction" to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel made it clear that the destiny of black people was outside of this movement of world history. Black slavery, in other words, is incoherent as slavery in such a portrayal

because the status of blacks as human beings is definitively answered in the negative. For more discussion, see chapter 6 of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*.

<sup>27</sup> Henry, "Africana Phenomenology," p. 89.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater*. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999), p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> There has been much interpretive work devoted to understanding the meaning and viability of the concept of "race" in Du Bois's work. Richard H. King endorses Tommy Lott's depiction of Du Bois as having acknowledged the difficulties at the core of the race concept, made use of it at every level of analysis, from the personal to the world historical. See Tommy Lott, "Du Bois and Locke on the Scientific Study of the Negro," *boundary 2*, 27, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 138–140. King contends that Du Bois's early definition from the "Conservation of the Races," which Du Bois largely abandoned, incorporated the variety of meanings he attributed to it across his lifetime. King quotes, "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." To common blood, language, history, tradition, and purpose, Du Bois later added, in emphasizing a Pan-African and colonized identity, a shared disaster that stressed unity against strained direct historical links. For this discussion, see Richard H. King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals 1940–1970* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), pp. 38–45. The Du Bois essay, "Conservation of the Races," was published in Washington, D.C., by the American Negro Academy in 1897.

<sup>35</sup> For related discussions by white scholars on the question of whiteness, see *White on White/Black on Black*, edited by George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater*. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999), p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Henry, p. 90.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, edited and translated with Introduction and Notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 227.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Du Bois, *Darkwater*, p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Monteiro, "Science, History, and Phenomenology," p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> Du Bois, *Darkwater*, p. 20.

<sup>60</sup> Du Bois, *Darkwater*, p. 22.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>68</sup> Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1980), p. 222. (Hereafter *The Autobiography*.)

<sup>69</sup> Du Bois, "The Study of the Negro Problems," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (March 2000): 14. Hereafter "Negro Problems." This article was originally published in the same journal in 1898.

<sup>70</sup> Richard H. King writes that "the decision by the Carnegie Corporation to engage Myrdal to direct a study of U.S. race relations was complexly linked to Du Bois's failure to obtain funding for an *Encyclopaedia of the Negro* [it was Kwame Nkrumah's promise to help Du Bois carry out this project that convinced him to move to Ghana at the age of ninety-one, where he died two years later] . . . Although there is no ironclad evidence that the Carnegie Corporation saw matters in either/or terms, Carnegie wanted its study conducted in an 'objective and dispassionate way,' and some feared that a project under Du Bois's direction would not meet this standard. An absolutely final rejection of his project had not come yet in November 1938 when the two men met for the first time. 'Scrupulously gracious,' to Myrdal, Du Bois, David Levering Lewis adds, was 'impressed in equal parts by Myrdal's energetic brilliance and his unprejudiced ignorance of the Negro.'" See King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals*, p. 39.

<sup>71</sup> Du Bois, "The Negro Problems," p. 14.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>73</sup> Du Bois reflects, "Lions have no historians, and therefore lion hunts are thrilling and satisfactory human reading," *Darkwater*, p. 79.

<sup>74</sup> Du Bois, "The Negro Problems," p. 18.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>80</sup> Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 323.

<sup>81</sup> Because of the pioneering nature of Du Bois's early work, he does not cite scholars who exemplify the limitations he is describing. Du Bois argued in this essay that a bibliography of research on the American Negro was needed. He did, in the same note briefly summarize the existing literature with which he was familiar. He included general historical studies of the Negro, special histories of the institution of slavery in different U.S. states, investigations into the economic aspects of slavery, the formation of anti-slavery opinion, government census and bureau reports, the work of "foreign students" De Tocqueville and Martineau, Halle and Bryce. At the end of the brief list, he added that "there [was] a mass of periodical literature, of all degrees of value, teeming with opinions, observations, personal experiences and discussions." See Du Bois, "The Negro Problems," p. 20.

<sup>82</sup> Du Bois, "The Negro Problems," p. 23.

<sup>83</sup> See Lawrence Bobo, "Reclaiming a Du Boisian Perspective on Racial Attitudes," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 568 (March 2000): 186–202.

<sup>84</sup> Du Bois, "The Negro Problems," p. 25.

<sup>85</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, "Du Bois's Humanistic Philosophy of Human Sciences," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (March 2000): 275.

<sup>86</sup> Du Bois, "The Negro Problems," p. 27.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>88</sup> Anthony Monteiro, "Being an African in the World: The Du Boisian Epistemology," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (March 2000): 223.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 224.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, p. 225.

<sup>91</sup> Monteiro quotes this passage on p. 230 of "Being an African." It comes from Du Bois's classic *Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), p. 703.

<sup>92</sup> Gordon, "Du Bois's Humanistic Philosophy of Human Sciences," p.268.

<sup>93</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*. What is at stake in sociogenic analysis is to understand human beings, having rejected categories of human nature and also overly simplified accounts of relevant history. Lewis Gordon writes, "The struggle must be waged, Fanon concludes on two levels: the ontogenic level of individual struggle and the phylogenic level of structural and biological imposition. The mediating factor here bridges the gap

between the two as sociogeny.” See Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 54.

<sup>94</sup> Gordon, “Du Bois’s Humanistic Philosophy of Human Sciences,” p. 266.

<sup>95</sup> Du Bois, *Autobiography*, p. 194.

<sup>96</sup> Gordon, “Du Bois’s Humanistic Philosophy of Human Sciences,” p. 274.

<sup>97</sup> Paget Henry, “Africana Phenomenology,” pp. 79–112.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79. Henry notes that the “self-reflective core of phenomenology . . . is not peculiar to philosophy as a discipline.” It can be initiated from within any human discipline, all of which, notes Henry, “including the logical and empirical practices of philosophy, produce knowledge in the natural attitude.” Although the distance to travel varies according to “qualitative differences in creative and knowledge-producing codes,” practitioners of all disciplines can interrupt the natural attitude in order to engage “the transcendental or knowledge-constitutive ground that supports their routine practices” (p. 80). One is reminded here of the account of the metaphysical in Schmitt, that which is beneath social constructions of meaning and that which is supposedly, though not clearly, and certainly not convincingly, constituted through sovereign decision. In spite of differences between disciplines, the existence of a shared transcendental ground explains why phenomenology has been able to reach into these spaces of other discourses, emphasizes Henry, why a figure like Edmund Husserl, reflecting on the foundations of mathematics, was able to contribute so much to a portrayal of the “crisis of European man.”

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> This is quoted by Henry. It is from Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, translated with an introduction by David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 16.

<sup>104</sup> Henry, “Africana Phenomenology,” p. 81.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Although Du Bois’s response to the racial hierarchies, class inequalities, and caricaturing of identities produced by Western capitalism varied throughout his long life, his commitment to the ethical crisis these produced was constant. Richard H. King writes, “[I]f any single African-American thinker can be said to have been an ‘organic intellectual,’ whose every waking thought and action was devoted to the improvement of his people’s welfare, it was Du Bois.” See Richard King, *Race, Culture, Intellectuals*, p.38.

<sup>113</sup> Henry, “Africana Phenomenology,” p. 82.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94. For the posing of this question, see Zamir, *Dark Voices*, p. 117. U.S. scholars of Hegel in this period included the likes of Josiah Royce and the early John Dewey. For a discussion of these figures, see Louis Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001). Unlike these scholars, who worked with the expectation of the universality of their concepts, Du Bois actively pointed out the contradictions of those concepts through turning the dialectical gaze of potentiated double consciousness to questions of race struggle in history.

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<sup>124</sup> For a feminist critique of Du Bois's elitism see Joy Ann James's *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals*. (New York: Routledge, 1997). Many such criticisms have a strange status, however, given that Du Bois in his later age said as much of himself (in his younger years.)

<sup>125</sup> In the larger work from which this short piece is extracted, I argue for the ongoing usefulness of the idea of the general will to understanding the nature of political legitimacy. I suggest that there are problems with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's classic formulation which an engagement with Du Boisian double consciousness can help to correct.