

Of Horizon: An Introduction to “The Afro-American” by W. E. B. Du Bois—circa 1894

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The Question of Historicity—in the Practice of Thought

The general question of historicity in the thinking and political practice of W. E. B. Du Bois was situated at the level of existence that might be understood as ontological in the terms of the inheritance of Greek thought as conceptuality as it has issued forth in the modern epoch. Thus it can be said that it concerned for him the sense of being or the way in which something is announced in or as existence. Further, the question of historicity for him was not only, or first of all, as a problem for thought, one concerned with the gathering and establishment of references that would confirm a claim about the material aspects of a form, or forms, of existence—even though it was *also* such a project. In the epistemic sense of *practice as thought* it was simultaneously a question of the possibility of rendering an account of the *status*, the ground, as genesis or revelation, of a form, or forms, of existence. As an inquiry the question might be summarized by three interlaced interrogatives and a coda: (1) What kind or form of entity is or can be understood as a bearer of historical devolution? (2) Whence such a form of existence; that is, from what does it emerge or arise? (3) What is its end or *telos*; or is such a formulation even the proper one to ask about the character of its becoming, its past, its present, its future? And then the coda, whose motif actually runs through each previous question: What are the means by which such questions can be considered, engaged, perhaps answered?

1. The Historial as a Problem.¹ If we characterize his thought in general on this question, that of historicity, Du Bois’s own approach or practice takes the form of a history of the *problems* of existence. It is neither the chronicle of the greatness of the sovereign (whether as person or people) as conqueror, nor simply the narrative of the realization of a given truth in the form of the idea or the absolute. Historicity for

him is announced in the promulgation of an engagement with problems, with the dynamic constitution of a difficulty in the forms of existence. Historicity emerges in the forms by which a group of humans engages the difficulties posed for it in existence, including both its possibility, its survival, or its becoming something else altogether. Historicity then, beyond the question of the status of any particular group, is about possibility in general: the relation of chance and necessity, or, that is to say, the configured character of opportunity as relation.

Thus, the question of the subject of historicity takes on a profound status in the work of Du Bois. By way of the relation of the question of ontological ground to the question of who can be a subject of history, this ontological level of the question of historicity is for Du Bois profoundly political—concerned with the organization and bearing of the force of power. The determination of the question of ground is decisive in the practical theoretical judgment of who or what is the bearer of historicity, *whether or not* such is understood as a proper, the proprietary, or a property. It is thus the crux on which all of Du Bois's major judgments about the political is situated; it is the question about who is *responsible* and for *what* in the making of the future world(s).

In this sense, Du Bois's ideas about the historical might be construed along two dimensions: one, a concern with the possibility of the originary emergence (not only as past, but also, and especially, as future) and profile of social groups of one kind or another; the other, a concern to characterize the structure of limit in a historical domain. This latter dimension as part of a project of science in the broad philosophical sense would pose the question of elucidating the general process of historicity, certainly of a domain of history in general, such as the modern epoch, if not of the absolute of history as a system. Yet the paradox of Du Bois's approach to the general or the whole is that it is only and always by way of the nodal irruption of historicity as example or problematization. That is to say, it accedes to the general form of limit by way of the tractable example.

The first of these two dimensions, the question of originary possibility—that is, the question of the possibility, in all senses, of the realization of forms of existence according to judgment, perhaps as value, perhaps as ideals—is the guiding order of problematic. The second dimension of Du Bois's critical engagement of the historical, the form of historical limit, is a constitutive form of the organization of the first dimension within his thought. Thus, as the former dimension will appear as the titular motive in the discussion at hand, it should be said, in a word as it were, that the production and operation of the concept-metaphor of “the problem of the color line” in Du Bois's thought across more than sixty years offers an account in this domain—of historical forms of limit—that cannot be set aside even in the most contemporary of discussions. For his thought here, in its elaboration, is one that attends to systems of material forms of hierarchy and subordination as domination, exploitation, and oppression, just as much as it names so-called ideational systems. And for Du Bois, the mode of historical appearance of the “problem of the color line”

would always be material even if the forces in play cannot always be represented. In the epistemic sense, these two dimensions—possibility and limit—are aspects of one general problematic. They are simply respective ways of conceptualizing the same objectivity: the character and implication of collective forms of historical existence. They are conjoined and tractable only in the irruptive emergence and devolution of the example.

2. *The Forms of Example.* The example then becomes the site of epistemological conjuncture in Du Bois's thought. It articulates the given as situation to existence as a committed practice. On the one side it is the situation of a group as revelatory of historical circumstance. On the other side it is the activity of a group as an exemplification of both limit and possibility. Du Bois, it must be emphasized, was committed ultimately, we might say, to the question of historical possibility: to the movement of that which is illimitable within the possible as existing limit.

It hardly need be recalled here that the inaugural and abiding example in Du Bois's thought was the situation of the African American in the United States. The fundamental problem was to elucidate the terms on which this ostensible group could be understood to enter historicity: as part of the project of America, as part of the making of the modern world. What must be underlined at this juncture in the context of a horizon beyond the nation-state is that the African American is the example by which Du Bois places at stake the question of the project of America as itself a world-historical example. It is in fact from the base of this abiding critical example as a crucible that all of Du Bois's reflections on historicity unfolded. It would put one on the wrong track to declare this privilege as a simple chauvinism, for this was the historically produced form of Du Bois's problematic. Even his vanguardism—whether of the Talented Tenth or of the Negro in America—is rooted less in an arrogance or a judgment of a supposedly proper (or preternaturally given) hierarchy, than in a sense of historically given duty, an imperative beyond choice, of those who might arise in and by way of the conjunction of chance and necessity as *opportunity*.

The question of the future of this group entailed a rethinking of the sources of their emergence. In the first moment, of that incipit of thought that it can only precomprehend, even if critically, this was posed in concrete terms. In this case it required an engagement with the history of modern Atlantic slavery and then, by way of the history of that process, their reciprocal relation to a project called "America" and then to both a historical "Diaspora" throughout the Americas and to the situation of the continent of Africa. (And on this point it is instructive to read closely the sense of "Diaspora" in the later chapters of *The Negro* from 1915. There one finds the configured sense of a "black horizon" long before and otherwise than our contemporary discourses of a "black Atlantic" or a certain "Africana.")² Certainly, a question of their relation to Europe was also posed throughout for him, although it has a different rhythm and internal organization of question. Herein can be located a key example for Du Bois that articulates with all of the scenes of modern historicity that is at stake—the Americas, Europe, Africa—and that is the historial profile of

Haiti.³ In the second moment, and in a sense ultimately, it posed the speculative question of their status as a kind of historial being (does it actually exist in a theological or philosophical sense; and if so, on what terms?).

How might we approach the thought of an illimitable sense of possibility if we must yet always proceed by way of the given? Are we not always and already foreclosed in our passage to the general? Yes, and no. Yes, if we already understand the terms of the question—of the character of the particular and likewise the sense of the general. No, if we can take the example as a non-simple form, the supposed unity of which cannot be submitted to the idea or to the concept, but must rather be understood to acquire such organization only as a problematization of existence.

The Example—of the Given: A Peculiar Sense of World

If we translate this thought in the direction of the effervescent terms of the young Du Bois's discourse at the fin de siècle—of the mid-1890s—we might propose that the question is the possibility of a certain order of theoretical imagination in which the ideal would always take form as a movement of immanence.

While elsewhere I have attempted to render this thought by way of a passage through a whole sheaf of the early texts of Du Bois (the essay at hand being an excerpt from that study), here I wish to remark on an inscription that according to the archive appears as the incipit of its enunciation in his discourse.⁴ And this remarking may have the additional value of allowing us to notice the form of the turning within Du Bois's practical-theoretical reflection, one that in all truth never stops, but remains as a recurrent and renewed oscillating gesture and movement, from an existential preoccupation on the order of the autobiographical to one that extends itself to the limits of the historial understood on a planetary scale and on an epochal horizon of temporality.

The statement in question is given in the form of an essay that is provocatively titled "The Afro-American," the composition of which most likely dates from sometime over the course of the late autumn of 1894 to the end of the late spring of 1895—during the half a dozen months or so after his return to the United States by steerage from Germany (where he had studied from mid-summer 1892 to the early spring of 1894), via France and England. This remarkably interesting essay for our purposes—for its rendering into relief traces of the form of a certain historical passage in thought of an African American intelligentsia—has remained unpublished until now. It exists as a twenty-page typescript among the papers of Du Bois housed in the special collections of the library named after him at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.⁵

This essay can rightly be taken as a decisive step in Du Bois's attempt to formulate for himself the theoretical and political terms and project of a putative vocation that could become his own. The title of the essay then should in all propriety be taken as Du Bois's first attempt at announcing his own reflexively chosen

nominalization of a sense of self in terms of a supposed group or horizon of historical situation. It stands at the inception of a crucial phase in Du Bois's development, at the beginning of a period of three years in which he struggled to clarify for himself his sense of intellectual problem and a way of engaging it—the sense of a vocation. In the chapter titled “Science and Empire” in the remarkable text *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* of 1940, which might be understood in relation to “The Afro-American” as simply a late extended reprise of the original composition with the addition of an up-to-date coda, Du Bois gives us the pivotal formulation in the form of a recollection: “I tried to isolate myself in the ivory tower of race. I wanted to explain the difficulties of race and the ways in which these difficulties caused political and economic troubles. It was this concentration of thought and action and effort that really, in the end, saved my scientific accuracy and search for truth. But first came a period of three years when I was casting about to find a way of applying science to the race problem.”⁶ We can reasonably understand the denouement of this period of vocational and theoretical searching as given a nodal articulation in the pivotal programmatic statement calling for a “scientific” study of the situation of the Negro in the United States that Du Bois presented to the American Academy of Political and Social Science in November of 1897, which was subsequently published in early 1898 in the *Annals* of the Academy and as a free-standing pamphlet in its special publication series, both under the title “The Study of the Negro Problems.”⁷ I consider this the founding programmatic statement calling for the systematic practice of an African American Studies. If this is so, following Du Bois's own periodization as a thumbnail guide, we can propose then that the essay at hand, “The Afro-American,” stands at the inception of Du Bois's effort to announce to himself the terms of his possible intellectual projection. It thus offers a legible passage of reflexive discourse that can be remarked as outlining the conjunctive terms by which the so-called Negro problem acquired its incipient organization within his practice as thought. And in this organization, the autobiographical and the historiographical are explicitly conjoined, and the local and the global appear as figures always announced in relation to the other. This so-called Negro problem—in America—is anything but parochial in the terms of Du Bois's discourse, as we may be able to recognize already in this very early essay of his first maturation as a thinker. Yet it must be noted for the scholastic record that the epistemic and theoretical sense that we are adducing here for Du Bois's late autobiographical recollection of the passage of time that we hereby demarcate, from late 1894 to late 1897, has remained essentially unremarked in the critical discussion of his thought, biographical or otherwise.

This essay is the theoretical form of Du Bois's return from Europe to the United States of America.⁸ Comprised of an ambulatory discourse of four paragraphs and a main discourse of four sections, the essay is oriented toward one concern: to articulate a sense of the situation of the “Afro-American” from the point of view of this putative historical and social subject itself.

The turning that we have begun to remark is made across the crucible of the problem of representation. That is to say that the stage-setting problem of the essay as a whole is that of the question of understanding or knowledge and the concomitant question of the representation of the situation of the Negro in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. The question can be further unfolded as the problem of the representation of the so-called Negro problem both by others and by the putative “Negro himself.” And, in an apparently small but ultimately decisive formulation, Du Bois will come to proclaim that in America, “Americans” in general (other than the Negro) “veil” the situation of the American Negro from themselves. In the thought of the young Du Bois of the middle of the 1890s, the problem at its root is one of “understanding.” The project then is to engage the prevailing discourse on “the Negro question” and to intervene in its terms by way of announcing the Negro’s own representation of its sense of itself as a form of problem—and, this sense will mean in part, in its eventuality, as a form of solution.

The essay opens and closes with an autobiographical reference, the first situated on the level of the individual and the latter on the level of a collective. In its middle stages it formulates a sense of problem, the so-called Negro problem, and outlines a series of approaches to it, three different ones proposed by others and a nascent perspective that would be proffered by a putatively new “Afro-American” intelligentsia at the end of the nineteenth century. Across the discourse of this incipient essay, all of the most poignant and famous themes and concept-metaphors of Du Bois’s thought of the turn of the century are already announced—in thoughtful gesture and reflexive distinction if not in the fullness of their lexical and theoretical nominalization. In a sense that could be sustained at all levels of its discourse—lexical, rhetorical (conceptual and metaphorical), and theoretical—it could be demonstrated that the pivotal essay “Strivings of the Negro People” from mid-1897, which was subsequently positioned as the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, is in every sense a performative and transformative reinscription of the essay “The Afro-American.” The fullness of Du Bois’s attempt to think the whole of the historically given present situation of the Negro in the United States at the time of this inscription gives the latter essay its most distinctive character. It is thus the political-theoretical form in which Du Bois first attempts to announce himself as an independent intellectual persona within the American scene.

1. A Passage in Dialogue. The discourse of the essay opens with the flush of a searching gesture of self-reflexivity, which, paradoxically perhaps, is formulated by reference to his sense of the apperception of his persona by others. Across the cusp of this perambulatory statement and fictional dialogue in its conjunction with the opening of the first section of the essay proper, the first formulation of a certain structure of critical self-reflexivity begins to take shape. It is a movement of self-reflexivity that would justly become the definitive epistemic passage in opening the most radical order of Du Bois’s own gestures in thought. In these opening

paragraphs of “The Afro-American,” we see the first discursive appearance of a practical theoretical problematization on the order of *thought*, a certain critical reflexivity, of the sense of inhabitation of the historically rendered forms of identification that would define one W. E. B. Du Bois or the putative forms of collectivity to which he might be understood and understand himself to belong. In this specific sense, we can say only retrospectively that it is the first rhetorical form within Du Bois’s discourse of the problem that he will in its eventuality construe under the heading of “double-consciousness.” As this essay has remained essentially unremarked or unknown in the critical literature, I will quote its ambulatory paragraphs and embedded dialogue in full here.

In a third class continental railway carriage, my neighbors at first stare at me—sometimes a bit impudently, sometimes with an inquisitive smile. I have grown so used to this that I can sit quietly for an hour or so with from three to six pairs of eyes focused on my brown face, my closely curled hair, my hat, my clothes, my hands and the visible part of my soul, without betraying any considerable impatience. After satisfying their eyes and becoming more or less assured that I am neither wild nor a member of a passing circus, one of the bolder ones usually seeks to open a conversation, through the weather, the speed of the train, the window, or some such railway topic. It depends of course on my mood as to whether the conversation is particularly successful. Sometimes when there are [not many] with us, and my neighbor is pleasant and gentlemanly, I let the talk run on, well knowing whither it will eventually drift. I agree that the weather is pleasant, that the open window is to my taste, *et cetera*.

My friend then generally sees fit to compliment my accent and says:

“Your native tongue is—?”

“English.”

Here comes always the first look of surprise. Oh! he thought I spoke French, or Spanish, or Arabian.

“You are then from English India?”

“No, I am an American.”

“Ah, yes—South American of course; I’ve a cousin—”

“No, I’m from the United States, North America.”

“Indeed, but I thought—were you born there, may I ask?”

“Yes, and my father, my grand father and my great grand father.”

“Is that so! Excuse me, I had thought from your color that—”

“I am of Negro descent.”

In this manner it gradually dawns upon my inquisitive friend that he is face to face with a modern “problem.” He recollects the emancipation of several millions of slaves in the United States some years ago, and he has since heard more or less of the trouble which naturally followed with this horde of partially civilized freedmen. In common, however, with the rest of the European world he had always thought of these people in the third person, and had no more imagined himself discussing this race problem with one of them, than he had planned talking Egyptology with a pyramid. The curiosity of my neighbor, therefore increases. He hesitates at openly prying into my private affairs or into such public ones as may be painful to me. Yet he is interested, for here, says he is a young man whose very existence is a kind of social paradox: removed but a couple of generations from barbarism, he is yet no barbarian; and again though to all appearances the civilized member of a civilized state, he represents the 19th century problem of barbarism.

I am not always unwilling to satisfy my friend’s curiosity. Yes, I tell him, I am one of those nine million human beings in the United States, who constitute the so-called “Negro Problem.” The majority of us are not of pure Negro blood, and therefore, as a people, cannot be described as Negroes; neither we nor our ancestors for generations were born in Africa and thus we are not African. We describe ourselves by the perhaps awkward, but certainly more accurate term of Afro-American. If, now, the interest of my neighbor still continues, I proceed to enlarge on a subject which naturally lies near my heart.⁹

In these opening paragraphs of “The Afro-American,” Du Bois begins by hypothesizing a description of himself through “the eyes of others.” And this formulation of narratological or epistemological point-of-view will certainly come to stand as exemplary across his entire itinerary of discourse. It is related to all of his subsequent major statements of the problematization that defined his thought. Its richness is such that it can and must sustain multiple approaches to its discourse. Here we will mark out only a certain track of reflection in the context of our discussion at hand—the question of example.

The scene, as it opens, is of the Negro abroad, beyond the borders of his natal habitation in a local, regional, or national sense. Perhaps it should occasion no surprise that the very incipit of the discourse of the young Du Bois in maturation is a discourse of transnational “travel.”¹⁰ The autobiographical narrator is on a completely different “continent” than his natal one and the world is named, if at all, from a different shore or heading than one that might presumptively be considered

his own. And it is precisely the question of heading, under the question of nominalization, that is at issue. He is in Europe in the general sense and on the continent itself. Yet he is in transit. The question remains, from where to where? In all senses, this is a conversation “of between,” that is, both from and about a movement that is otherwise than a coordination of a punctual present of a determinate space and a given time.¹¹

The theme is his sense of the perception of him by others around him. This is self-reflexivity of the second degree, at least and never only. On the implicit level, the entire background of the discourse is that they perceive him as “different from the others,” from themselves and the others, those other than him. He formulates their implicit questions as to whether in some sense he is monstrous—whether he renders the space unsafe for them, as in “wild,” or whether he is abnormal in some definitive manner, as in a member of a “passing circus.” Here, before the incipit of a stated dialogue proper according to Du Bois’s text, he represents their perception of him as a certain order of phenomenal problem. His appearance for them is outside of the norm: thus the question of “what is . . . ?” But their eventual judgment is that he is within the compass of their anticipation of the possible forms of human. He is comprehensible by way of their notions of civility. In a moment, this form of precomprehension will be shattered, at least for one hypothetical member of this circumstantial and fictional group.

Du Bois, the “Afro-American” narrator, then outlines a typical course of conversation. It proceeds by way of indirection. It is in all senses a discourse of “between.” Expressions of curiosity mount, of the weather, of the speed of the train, of the aperture of the window, etc. His response is to meet such indirection with the same: “I agree that the weather is pleasant, that the open window is to my taste, et cetera.” And, so far, he describes his supposed interlocutor as “gentlemanly” or, with a gesture of politesse, as “my friend.” In its eventuality the course of the conversation picks up an orientation toward a question of his origins or his identification. It unfolds as a series of questions and responses that are punctuated by statements of repeated surprise, which acquire their rhetorical implication by their appearance against the foil of an indirectly spoken but nonetheless relentlessly declared statement of always already achieved knowledge on the part of the autobiographical narrator. This narrator is a worldly one.

The explicit register of the first question is of the narrator’s language. Perhaps the language of the conversation is German, for it takes place on “continental” Europe, and French, Spanish, and English, along with Arabic (Du Bois writes “Arabian”), are queried in the dialogue. Here we simply note the biographical facts as we have them at present, that after some initial study of German as well as Latin some years earlier at Fisk, Du Bois really began to speak the language during his first summer months in Germany during the summer of 1892.¹² He makes no mention anywhere in his autobiographical recollections of learning Italian, perhaps the only other language that would likely function in a synonymic manner in this example. Yet

the specific and presumptively literal truth of reference is not decisive. At issue is the narrator's relation to the language of the interlocution. Is it natal or not? Or better, does its availability *belong to him*. His accent in that language, although perhaps worthy of compliment, is perceived as otherwise than native: "Your native tongue is—" (emphasis mine). And what goes unasked is the real question, perhaps given as two implicit interrogatives: initially, "where are you from?" which in all truth means "who or *what* are you?" When the narrator answers "English," it only causes greater confusion. It occasions the first "*look*" of surprise (emphasis mine). But this is really the second (or even a third) form of surprise after a hidden or implicit one that stands before and behind the entire opening of spoken interlocution. A first one was the surprise of his appearance in general. But another unspoken surprise has perhaps also already occurred, the one that yielded a perhaps overly polite judgment that he has already been better spoken than they would have anticipated: "My friend then generally sees fit to compliment my accent." They both bespeak the character of a hidden—unspoken, perhaps unspeakable—order of presumption in this context.

Yet another turn of question can be noted here in that this open register of the stated form of interlocution, as just noted, carries an implicit one. It is a query about his natal place, the place of his natal origination. Here the stress is on the first term of this nominalization: "Your *native* tongue is—" (emphasis mine). And here, it can be recognized, the whole implicit order of presumption moves ever so obliquely onto the threshold of the realm of the speakable. The question here is "to what do you belong?" In a general sense, place, as in place of origination, is here presumed by the interlocutor almost as a form of given ontological determination. Language then would be its sign. Thus, "English India," in the interlocutor's aggressively inquisitive reply, carries the paradoxical mark of civility at this juncture of the discourse, of which the implication here—without any paradox according to the horizons of colonial discourse and its offshoots—is that it issues from a form of colonial philanthropy. The term "English," the one shared term of these two respective locutions, in all of the instability and polysemic capacity of its putative reference is the modifier that bespeaks the presumption. Otherwise, the figure and term of "India" might be enough. Yet even the statement of this latter figure would leave intact the idea that language and place, as in origination, bear a fixed relation. The narrator's answer disturbs all of the layers of such presumption within the terms of this interlocution: "No, I am American." The force of this statement comes from its deepest paradox. While it appears in the form of a statement of essence, an answer to the question "what is . . . ?" or "who are . . . ?" in all truth it resolutely announces a heterogeneous genealogy all the way down, so to speak, and in all of the orders of reference at issue in the interlocution. The sense of possible reference of the term "English" is simultaneously distended from any fixed origin—the term is "American" and not "English American"—and multiplied in the implication of the horizons of world that it might assist in naming.

Yet the figure of “American” that has been named is also not simple. This is the third turn of question. It appears, however, not in the explicit form of the interrogative, but as a reassertion in even stronger terms of the implicit presumption. It is almost a declarative statement. The interlocutor raises the profile of a certain “South America” in which he would recognize “a cousin.” It is given as the “of course” of a statement of precomprehension in which this “other America” would be apprehended as an extension of the “gentlemanly” interlocutor’s supposed world, not to say family, that is to say, of a certain “Europe.” The “South American” would be the derivative cousin of the European in the latter’s imaginal horizon. We note, however, that at least the question of another “America” appears on the edge of this dialogic scene. The strongest disruption of any thought of a simple essence attached to an appearance—that of the practice of language, here as speech—comes in the flat insistence by the narrator that his natal origin is “the United States, North America.” In so doing he proposes against his interlocutor’s repeated presumption of a predetermined recognizability a different truth: that this America, of the north, has anything but a simple form of identity or identifiable sense of essence. Just what is “American” is being problematized for his interlocutor, or at least any precomprehension of what might be such.

It is at this juncture that the interlocution reaches a decisive turning point, in the sense of the dynamic play of perlocutionary force that would determine for this interlocution the order of name attached by both parties to the narrator. It is the most complicated moment of the discourse. The interlocutor’s presumption appears in an implicitly self-reflexive statement as an explicit admission: “Indeed, but *I* thought—” (emphasis mine). And then, finally, interrupting the ever-so-briefly exposed hint of self-reflection, the question about natality appears explicitly and is posed in starkly direct terms: “were you born there, may I ask?” This is the presumptive and precomprehended query of the whole dialogue for the interlocutor. It arises from a complication at the root: phenomenal appearance has not yielded the base for a determinate judgment of essence, supposed here as a certain necessary conjunction of natality and language. Likewise, we can remark then that the narrator has continually exacerbated that indetermination rather than relieved it.

Let us turn then and follow this exacerbation to its conclusion. The narrator proposes that this complication of the American scene goes, so to speak, all the way down. “Yes,” he was born in “the United States, North America.” But, more importantly, much more importantly in the terms of this interlocution, he continues in a manner that has the status of an emphatic gesture, almost an aggressive one, “and my father, my grand father and my great grand father.” With this statement, the questions cease. The next locution, which could well have been expected to take the form of the interrogative is not such at all. And Du Bois’s punctuation here guides us. It takes the form of a mark of exclamation and not of interrogation: “Is that so!” This locution is simply the beginning of a two-part statement from the interlocutor. In all truth, it is a statement of agreement. Yet, in the rhetorical sense, it is one that is

given under the force of a certain perlocutionary force that might be said to arise by way of the narrator's complicated ironic operation, as we have followed it, of the very premises by which the interlocutor had instituted the conversation. It yields also an apology and the admission, again in the ever-so-brief flash of an explicit register of self-reflexivity, of a mistake and a form of prejudice on the part of the interlocutor: "Excuse me, *I* had thought *from your color* that—" (emphasis mine). Having already fundamentally questioned the premise and the whole logic of this presumptive admission, the narrator can then give a final statement in a manner that is peremptory and appears in the context of this interlocution almost as a triumph: "I *am* of Negro descent" (again, emphasis mine). And, yet, all of the ambiguities of this statement of apparent being (given in the unavoidable use of the copula) and descent that has been set afoot over the course of this interlocution remain.

We can say then that a certain presumption is adduced both rhetorically and thematically as subtending the whole conversation of the narrator and his interlocutor. A certain engagement with that presumption is the concern of this opening stage of the essay, "The Afro-American."

We have so far been able to track the rhetorical level of this problematic within the dialogic rhythm of this interlocution. The matter pertains to the syntax of the respective locutions: a contrapuntal movement in which, respectively, a presumption, unstated or not, is given in the discourse of the interlocutor, which is then met by a certain counter, in the form of a confounding contradiction of that presumption and the eventual revelation of a different truth, so to speak, on the part of the narrator.

2. The Conception—of the World of the "Afro-American." The thematic level of this problematic is given in the two closing paragraphs of this ambulatory discourse. We can sketch it as the relation of two forms of question or two forms of representation of question. The first is that of the Negro American in the United States as perceived in "the European world" as a "modern 'problem,'" that is a form of being "whose very existence is a kind of social paradox." As the narrator describes it, he is perceived in the eyes of his interlocutor in this railway carriage as of apparently "barbaric" origins but is yet "to all appearances the civilized member of a civilized state." Du Bois here calls it "the 19th century problem of barbarism," which might well be understood as a nascent formulation of the problem that he would later call "the problem of the color line." If above, in the opening scene of the interlocution, just before its incipit in the form of actual statement, the problem was understood by the narrator's putative interlocutors as one of a certain comprehensible monstrosity, a borderline "wild" man or a "member of a passing circus," now we can recognize that for the "gentlemanly" interlocutor proper, a far more profound sense of problem is also operating within his discourse, on its lower registers or among the resonances of its cavernous subterrain. The figure of the narrator, under the heading of the Negro, appears as the name of a great modern social problem. And it takes the reverse form of the one we noticed at the outset. It

can now be said that, according to the view of his interlocutor, the Negro has seemed on the terms of his initial appearance—decisively marked here by his linguistic capacity, perhaps his ability to speak in German, a so-called European “tongue”—within the norm of civility, but according to the eventuality of the conversation it has been revealed that he *is*, in actuality, according to this view, descended from “barbaric” and uncivilized origins. Yet interlaced within the whole of this apparently given form of social problem is a specifically discursive one. In this view of the question, the so-called Negro is an object of discourse but not at all a possible, let alone probable, subject of such discourse or of a critical reflection. As the narrator poignantly puts it, “In common, however, with the rest of the European world he had always thought of these people in the third person, and had no more imagined himself discussing this race problem with one of them, than he had planned talking Egyptology with a pyramid.” In a sense, the whole discourse of this essay is an intervention and interruption of this form of objectification and its underlying premise of the absence of a critical and reflexive form—in this form—for the announcement of a putative subject. Not only has the table begun to walk, but the walls have also begun to talk. Thus, the second form of question is the one given by the putative object/subject of the conversation—the “Afro-American” himself. And the key is given in that he proposes to self-reflexively name himself in a certain manner: “I am one of those” whom you think “constitute the so-called ‘Negro Problem.’” That is to say, in the initial breath, he names himself to his interlocutor in the terms that would be given by others. However, almost immediately, in the decisive gesture of the interlocution, he proceeds to rename, to reinscribe the name, of the so-called Negro in America according to premises that would define such a figure otherwise than those already given. In logically negative terms, he specifies in two terms or two forms of reference what the Negro in America is not: not of “pure . . . blood,” not of “pure Negro blood, and therefore, as a people, cannot be described as Negroes” (thus, in part, the complication posed for his interlocutor by the narrator’s “color” or appearance); and not of a simple or single natal origin in a genealogical sense, that is, “neither we nor our ancestors for generations were born in Africa and thus we are not African” (even as the question of “what is American?” is opened and held in abeyance, as any closure that would exclude the figure in question is forestalled or put at issue). Thus, the narrator concludes, “We describe ourselves by the perhaps awkward, but certainly more accurate term of Afro-American.” This figure, in the voice of the narrator, proposes to intervene here directly and in its own name on the terms by which it would be represented—to the whole of the possible world, we might say.

And then we must recall that this ambulatory discourse is just an overture to a discourse that would attempt to name and rename the terms by which this figure of the “Afro-American” might be announced within the lineaments of Du Bois’s historical present of the end of the nineteenth century. Over the course of the next decade, he will definitively elaborate this thought problem at the level of a self-

reflexive discourse as the historical terms of a specific organization of subjectivity—of subjectivation and the pronouncement of a putative subject-hood—here called “Afro-American.” Yet the gradual or eventual character of the processes of this emergent theorization must be adduced. All does not appear in one moment or gesture. Nor does it eventuate in a fully accomplished statement on the level of a generalized theoretical proposition. We will maintain here in our own reinscription this sense of a thought in movement, in process, yet to be finished, or better, yet to come. The implication of its epistemic irruptiveness remains, even in the form of this emergent enunciation, nonetheless.¹³

In the first step into the main discourse of the essay, across the conjunction of the ambulatory discourse and a first statement of problem, Du Bois maintains the self-reflexive register of his discourse even if the specific autobiographical motif has moved somewhat into the recesses or interstices of the explicit statement.¹⁴

The European child is born into one of several superimposed worlds; he sees in the various social grades and walks of life, so many different and more or less completely separated spheres to only one of which he belongs, and from which he views the others as so many strange and unknown planets. With the white America child, the case is not so different as many democrats would have men believe. With the Afro-American the case is quite different; he is born into a universe which in addition to all horizontal boundaries is separated by a straight perpendicular fissure into a white and black hemisphere. These two halves both have their horizontal differences of educated and ignorant, rich and poor, law abiding and criminal. On the black side these grades are not, to be sure, so highly differentiated, and the average of culture is far below that of the white side, still they are adjacent and not superimposed spheres.

This fissure between white and black is not everywhere of the same width. Naturally it is the widest in the former slave states and narrowest in the older and more cultivated East. It seldom, however, wholly closes up in New England, while its threatening width in the south is the “Negro Problem.” (paras. 5–6)

The question that Du Bois adduces here—following the figure of the child—is that of a peculiar sense of world. Du Bois, it can be proposed, is on the track of outlining a complicated sense of world. The world in question is always one of worlds. It is a world that is itself, as such, an infrastructural organization of discontinuities. In this sense, the world has, perhaps always, already been “broken.” It will always have been a “wounded world.”¹⁵ At its limit, it may be that, paradoxically, it will always have been this break or “wound” that will also always have already made possible a

complicated epistemic passage of standpoint from which the sense of world in question might be remarked.

Du Bois outlines two different and contrasting experiences of the sense of world. The “European child” and the “white American child” exist within a world of separate worlds marked by a series of horizontal distinctions, layers, or gradations, configured as distinct “social grades and walks of life.” It is a stratified social order. But, in the telling as given here, however, “world” is yet more or less experienced as if a whole, indeed as a “sphere” (even as we can note that at its root, in its genealogy, the distinction of supposed social class could purport from a certain position of hegemony to function as a categorical mark). The existence of the “Afro-American” child also takes place within separate horizontal worlds but, according to the text at hand, with a radical difference. A vertical or “perpendicular” line of distinction, which Du Bois describes as “a fissure,” divides the horizontal layers into two different “hemispheres,” one “white” and the other “black.” Thus world here, while experienced in a certain way as if a whole, is yet also always already re-marked within that form of experience, that is to say, explicitly marked, as a categorically or oppositionally divided whole. The sense of whole here is always already that of the originally non-simple. And even if only in the form of the remark as an infrastructural organization of its possibility, the non-simple would always remain precisely *as the sense of “world”*—in the apparent here and now of this situation. The sense of world will always have been already phenomenological.

In describing the situation of the Negro in America from a putative third-person point of view, which would yet simultaneously be a partial one, that is one announced on the bias of a concern to adduce the terms of an “Afro-American” situation, Du Bois accedes to an account of the general structure organizing the social and historical field in question. Just how such accession unfolds at the epistemological level we will not try to completely address or determine here. The eventuality of its announcement must retain its theoretical opacity for us. Yet the moment of this essay “The Afro-American” is a pivotal stage of theoretical projection and it is one from which Du Bois in all propriety will never retreat. According to this statement, the problematization that sets afoot the conditions in which something like a Negro or “Afro-American” is announced takes shape as a peculiar organization of relation, one that is yet distributed across the entire social field in general. This is a specific historically produced organization of social field and horizon.

Across four subsequent paragraphs that comprise the remainder of this opening section of the main body of the essay, Du Bois produces the perhaps apocryphal, yet truthful, figure of a young “black boy” as a coded mark to guide his representation of this heterogeneous sense of historicity.¹⁶ Making reference to John Greenleaf Whittier’s figuration of the same in the sixth stanza of his poem “Howard at Atlanta,” which was composed in the aftermath of the Civil War and in the advent of Reconstruction, in a gesture that he would reprise in one of the two epigraphs that stand at the head of the fifth chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and*

Sketches, titled “Of the Wings of Atalanta,” Du Bois proposes to describe the “peculiar world in which he [the young black boy of the poem] had to ‘rise.’”¹⁷ The leitmotif carried therein, in Du Bois’s telling, in which the matter of “education” is the most decisive passage of the life-course, is that of “Afro-American” capacity—to “secure a common school education,” to struggle to rise above “the old menial positions” that he had been perennially encouraged to accept, and to move beyond the segregation and prejudgment that had both historically and in the present of the fin de siècle “strictly hedged in” his mature social and political life (in home ownership and in the participation in civic life, such as the use of “public libraries, theatres . . . , lecture courses, white churches, etc., and from hotels, cafés, restaurants, and the like,” but also in the negotiation of the relative absence or limitation of protection by public law for the freedom of movement, e.g., railway transport, freedom from insult or injury, and the right of the franchise).¹⁸

In terms of the whole sweep of the early discourse of Du Bois, he will adduce two orders of concept-metaphor to name the operations of social and historical distinction or forms of relation that concern him here.

On the one hand, he adduces a metaphor to name the distinction as a structure of social relation in general that appears almost as a given form of objectivity. Here Du Bois is trying to represent what he thinks of as a certain reality—a real situation rendered by an account that would be concerned to present the truth of and about that situation. In the text at hand, such distinction is named by way of a geological term, “fissure.” Elsewhere, and most often, he renders it by various syntactic deployments and semantic shadings of a geometrical or geographical term, “line.” This was a term that had become a constituent lexical and semantic element in the general colloquial formulation of the matter of the turn of the twentieth century, as in the phrase “the color line.” However, it is given a distinctive theoretical weighting in Du Bois’s reinscription of it in the phrase and thought of “the *problem of the color line*” (emphasis mine). Du Bois will adduce this name to characterize the general form of the problem that he wishes to remark, which he will construe as pertaining to all of modern history on a global scale.¹⁹ And he will attempt to exhaustively report and characterize its functioning in the American scene, even its distinctiveness within a comparative horizon, across these early years of his projection of scientific study from the middle of the 1890s through to the First World War. The characterization of this “fissure” as social condition then is the concern of the entire first section of the main body of the essay “The Afro-American,” the first paragraph or so of which I have quoted in extenso above.

Yet, on the other hand, as he turns to address at least a putative part of the audience for his representation of the situation of the African American in the United States, the matter of representation itself begins to acquire the character of an explicit part of the problematization. In order to address it, Du Bois will eventually be led to coin one of his most poignant concept-metaphors, “the veil,” as the name for the *problem of representation* of the dynamic social infrastructures in question, of the

elusive play of social distinction according to a *practical* idea or concept of race. The term “veil” appears as a descriptive verb, rather than as a theoretical nominalization, three-quarters of the way through the essay at hand, “The Afro-American.” In what is apparently the first lexical appearance of the term *veil*—here as the description of an action, to *veil* and not *the veil*—in Du Bois’s discourse in a manner that is yet epistemologically proximate to the implication that we have come to recognize in it in our time, it appears as the name for the act of avoidance that defines the “American people[’s]” engagement with “the kernel of the Negro problem.” That “kernel” is the question of the status (ontological, moral, political, legal) according to which the Negro will be recognized in America. The question is whether this figure will be proscribed within the horizon of the American republic “solely because he has Negro blood?” This, we might suggest, following the manner of his statement, could well be simply called “the *American* problem with the Negro.” At this juncture, Du Bois deploys the word *veil* in its verbal form as the name for the specifically *American* way of grappling with “the problem of the color line,” a certain denegation, which is the act of “*veiling*,” hiding or disguising, of the basic question. And that question is about the presumptive practice that is carried out in the blind of a peremptory judgment (in all truth, a prejudgment) about the status of the Negro as a form of being. He writes, “This is the kernel of the Negro problem, and the question which the American people have never boldly faced, but have persisted in *veiling* behind other and dependent problems.”²⁰ The order of problem here is, precisely, that of the *representation* of the so-called Negro problems.

We can begin to confirm this sense of the emergence of the term “veil”—“to veil,” and “a veil” or “the veil”—as a lexical mark and its eventual acquisition of the status of a theoretical nomination within Du Bois’s interpretive disposition toward the so-called Negro problem by noticing its announcement within what appears to be its next deployment, which in all truth is the epistemologically decisive one, within his discourse. It appears in the famous second paragraph of the essay “Strivings of the Negro People,” which Du Bois completed sometime between the middle and the end of June of 1897, while he was still in Philadelphia and just before he left to undertake summer fieldwork in the small southern town of Farmville, Virginia. It was then published in August of that year in the *Atlantic Monthly*. It opens an autobiographical reflection that recalls the young “black boy” of the essay “The Afro-American” of some two and a half years earlier. He describes its appearance as a reflexive figure in the relation of a failed exchange of “greeting cards”: “The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.”²¹

In the account of June 1897, the term *veil* undergoes a decisive metaphorization. Under the impress of a theoretical projection, its semantic and grammatical character begins to shift from a description of a discrete action, which

could almost appear as voluntary, to the performative nominalization of a constitutive dimension of the organization of a social field. If the 1894 deployment purported to account for an incipient action, then the 1897 operation names a repetitive and sustained outcome of an ongoing social process. If its first appearance was in the form of a verb, then its grammatical accretion in the latter presentation is now that of a noun. The “veil” then is adduced here as the fictional name of an *infrastructure* of passively inhabited yet *actively* operated representation, a form of denial or denegation in every sense, that becomes effective as the rendering of social ordination, the implication of which can be understood to function on every level of social existence from the relation of supposed collectivities to the subindividual mark of apparent self-reflexivity.

And then, in a fragment of writing titled “Beyond the Veil in a Virginia Town,” that most likely dates from the late summer or early autumn of 1897, perhaps composed during the time of his fieldwork in and around Farmville, Virginia, or shortly thereafter, Du Bois describes this order of presumptive, yet effective, distinction, this representation that is a concatenated form of a certain social “fissure,” in some detail and he does so under the heading of the concept-metaphor of “the veil.” Its yield on an epistemic level is a theoretical generalization of the problematic named therein to the whole of the social field in question.²²

Midway between the memory of Nat Turner and John Randolph of Roanoke, beside the yellow waters of the Appomattox, lies a little town whose history winds about the falling stars in '32 and about “The Surrender.” One would not call ----ville a pretty town, nor yet has it the unrelieved ugliness of the west. There is a certain southern softness and restfulness not to say laziness about it that gives a charm to its sand and clay, its crazy pavements and “notion” stores. But the most curious thing about ----ville is not its look—old brick mansions and tiny new cottages, its lazily rolling landscape and sparsely wooded knolls that beck and nod to the three-peaked ridge of the blue Alleghenies—the most curious thing about ----ville is the Veil. The great Veil—now dark, sinister and wall-like, [now?] light, filmy and silky, but every[where]²³ a dividing veil and running throughout the town and dividing it: 1200 white this side and 1200 Black beyond the Veil.

You who live in single towns will hardly comprehend the double life of this Virginia hamlet. The doctrine of class does not explain it—the caste misses the kernel of the truth. It is two worlds separate yet bound together like those double stars that, bound for all time, whirl around each other separate yet one.

Two little boys are walking along the street. “Big execution in town today,” says one; “white or colored?” asks the other. Two men are standing in the post office. “I’m running fifty hands in the foundry now,” says one. “White or colored?” asks the other. Two countrymen urge their jaded mares across the Appomattox and up main street. “Big meeting at the country,” says one; “white folks or niggers?” asks the other. And thus it runs through life: the Veil is ever there separating the two peoples. At times you may not see it—it may be too thin to notice, but it is ever there. And we have added an eleventh commandment to the decalogue down here: you may have other Gods before Me, you may break the kill commandment and waver around adultery but the eleventh must not be broken; and it reads: Thou shalt not cross the Veil.

Of the life this side of the Veil you all know much; it is the twice told tale of country town life flavored with war memories, and a strange economic experiment, curiously influenced by the other world, but withal quite like [to] Illinois or Connecticut in its business and gossip, its Church [fairs] and [____], its courting, marrying, and dying.

But beyond the Veil lies an undiscovered country, a land of new things, of change, of experiment, of wild hope and sombre realization, of superlatives and italics—of wondrously blended poetry and prose.

The epistemic significance of this fragment for us is that here the desedimentative force of the thought of the “veil” is brought to term and directly proposed. And this force moves on two registers or along two lines of concatenation. In one register, Du Bois sought to describe what we might call both sides of the veil, in their irreducible relation, in a “Southern” town. The general epistemological implication of the thought of “the veil,” that is its capacity to name the production of a putative “white” social horizon as well as that of a supposed “black” or “Negro” one within a general “American” scene, is brought into explicit relief. This general implication, that is its capacity to bring into relief something fundamental about the subjectivation of a putatively “white” social and historical subject as well as that of an ostensibly “black” one, is one of the most original dimensions of Du Bois’s discourse.²⁴ Yet, of equal import, in another register of his discourse, indeed appearing as its frame, he proposes a movement beyond the mark of limit, outlining it without a discrete nominal term as its proper name yet remarking it as “beyond the veil.” The task of a re-representation of this “beyond” then might well be understood as the first naming of the project that he would undertake five years later, more or less, in September 1902 when he began to work in earnest on the production of the text *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. This remarkable book then would

appear as the elaborative realization in narrative form of the proposal of this fragment that such a “beyond” might remain as a yet-to-come horizon of “new things, of change, of experiment, of wild hope and sombre realization,” the imagination of which could well be rendered in another form of representation than that given by way of “the veil” in its proscriptive sense—a representation that would be one “of superlatives and italics—of wonderously blended poetry and prose.” It hardly need be said then that this has been perhaps the most widely recognized contribution of Du Bois’s work of this stage of its itinerary. In this latter form, then, that given by the rhetorical dynamis of the concept-metaphor of “the veil,” the problem of the representation of a vertically “fissured” social horizon would come to provide the rhetorical frame and theoretical impetus for the narrative that comprises *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. And the thought of going “beyond” the limits of such horizon would remain its most radical contribution, that of proposing the necessity of a certain practice of interpretation, which indeed stands at the far edge of the human sciences and the humanities in general, certainly then and perhaps even now, whatever the latter is as such.

Returning, then, to the letter of the text of the essay “The Afro-American,” the whole thought of this social “fissure” and the related “veiling” of apperception by which it is engaged by “Americans” in general as it is given herein may rightly be taken by our critical and retrospective discourse as the first enunciation, within Du Bois’s own thought according to the terms of concatenation that would eventually be specific to his discourse, of the theoretical proposition of “the problem of the color line” and the theoretical metaphorization that takes shape under the heading of the term “veil.”

What is the status and implication of this social “fissure,” according to Du Bois’s thought in this essay? The most obvious impact is its negative effects upon the group that he calls “Afro-American.” It imposes or effects a proscriptive limitation of opportunity on the level of the group, individually and collectively, to fully realize the potential of the gifts or capacities that they may be able to announce within historicity. Assuming that some would claim that “these discriminations may, in some cases, be merely protective measures of society against its proletariat,” Du Bois nonetheless declares, “they change this character however, when they force back rising talent and desert among blacks, and leave uncurbed ignorance and lawlessness among whites.”²⁵ The marks comprising such a fissure are then primarily a means of maintaining a practical status quo of privilege and presumption that is without any fundamental justification. Yet, also, the impact of this “fissure” on America as a whole, in his view, has been to foreshorten its historial projection and to confound its actions on the level of the nation-state, producing both unwise and contradictory gestures.

The Peculiar Senses of the Discourses of the Negro—in Configuration

If such a condition is a historical limit on this project, how has it been addressed by reflective thought? According to what organization of thought and understanding has it been engaged? Have the dominant critical discourses, political, legal, and economic, proposed a viable understanding of this situation such that a real transformation could be produced?

Du Bois makes a basic distinction in this essay among the discourses concerned with the so-called Negro problem, between that of others, collectively configured under the heading of “the American State” (para. 10), and that of the so-called Negro American himself, understood as a self-reflexive collectivity.

1. Discourse of the State. The discourse of “the American State,” for Du Bois, is comprised of three diverse but interwoven perspectives. These are the “Ricardean” (the laissez-faire approach of the government proper), the “Philanthropic” (inheritors of an abolitionist disposition), and the “Radical” (a certain maintenance of the projection of the Old South) (para. 11). In Du Bois’s view the Negro American’s own idea of the so-called Negro problem remained distinct from such positions but still only nascent at the midpoint of the 1890s. What then is the relation between these three schools of thought pertaining to the Negro problem that has been given by others and the nascent viewpoint of the “Afro-American” intelligentsia, especially the ideas of one of the latter’s young, up-and-coming members, one W. E. B. Du Bois? In essence, none of the three positions given from outside of the discourse of African Americans themselves provide a perspective commensurate with the problematic named as the so-called Negro question, according to him. At the root however is a failure of policy and leadership on the part of the national-level state.

The hitherto dominant position has been that of the “Ricardean” (or “Smith-Ricardo”) school, taking nominal reference to the figures of Adam Smith and David Ricardo. The position named by this reference had proposed to “emancipate” the slave, in which such action meant only the legal decree of the abolition of the practice of enslavement. It would then, and in fact did, leave the slave to so-called “free” competition. According to Du Bois, the policy proposed and enacted by this school of thought was the “most extreme” case of the application of the “Smith-Ricardo” doctrine of laissez faire that had issued from the eighteenth century: “The situation violated every condition which the English school of social philosophy presupposed as necessary for the application of their laws. Instead of a stable state of society, an absence of great class differences and prejudices, and an approximate equality of opportunity for the competitors, there was a state of society only to be described as revolutionary, a maximum of class hatred and unreasoning prejudice, and the competing “equality” of master and slave. Scarce a single step was taken by the State to remedy this” (para. 11). In a crucial comparative reference, Du Bois scores this policy as outside the norms of recent historical experience as given on the continent of Europe: “Russia, to whom America has often thought it fit to read

lectures on national morality, gave the emancipated serfs a part of the land on which they and their fathers had toiled: not an inch was given America's freedmen; the builders of the monarchic Prussian state took care that the ignorant German bauer was in a condition to compete before he was left to 'free competition': the democratic American state did not give its freedmen so much as a spade" (para. 11).²⁶ This school of thought, according to Du Bois, was inapplicable in theory and the policy that issued from it was historically abnormal if not moribund from its inception. And this censure of the American scene would hold regardless of our own judgment with regard to the Russian and Prussian examples.²⁷ Obviously, so to speak, the "Smith-Ricardo" approach had simply continued and often even exacerbated the difficult problems faced by the Negro American in the United States, yielding the present of Du Bois's earlier description of the limits on opportunity experienced by this group.

Fortunately, in Du Bois's reading of the mid-1890s, "the private efforts of philanthropists in some measure, hindered its radical application, the patient stubborn striving of the freedmen accomplished unawaited results, and the white showed itself more friendly to the blacks than the freedmen had expected."²⁸ Otherwise, the outcome of the state-level "Smith-Ricardo" policy might have been far more grave than its actual dire effects. But this "Philanthropic" school, also a product of eighteenth-century thought, was "a development of those one-sided moral and social ideals which made man purely the result of his individual environment." While striving for "the highest ideals of humanity," they have yet been fundamentally limited in their approach:

they have seldom escaped narrow fanaticism or great-hearted blindness to facts. Seizing upon the Rousseau-Jefferson half-truth: "All men are created free and equal," they sought to secure the rise of the Negro by a course at College, and the recognition of this rights by legal enactment, or executive dicta. Here naturally, they largely failed. Their laws remained dead-letters, their mandates were hooted down by the mob, while the vast system of private charity which they set on foot to aid the helpless and forsaken freedmen was without general plan, expensively distributed and, shortsighted in its object. The whole philanthropic movement in regard to the Afro-American forgot the real weakness of his situation, i.e., his economic helplessness and dependence; that whatever "equality" he could be said to hold in the American state, was an equality in "poase" [sic] and not in "ease."²⁹ It gave him churches before he had homes, theories of equality instead of personal property, theological bickerings instead of land and tools, and mushroom "colleges" instead of a good common school and industrial training system. (para. 13)

And even as this perspective gradually broadened and became more systematized, it remained, although “a huge work of highest importance,” that it was “built on the narrow vacillating and humiliating basis of personal charity” (para. 13). Thus, finally, as Du Bois so deftly put it at this moment, “The better self of the American people has not yet realized that this situation is something more complicated than a case of pariah almsgiving” (para. 13). This “spasmodic charity” of a generation by the time of Du Bois’s writing had ultimately shown its inability to conceive of the whole of the so-called problem of the Negro as one pertaining to the whole of the possibility of the United States as a historical projection.

Even so, in the face of the indifference of the national state and the incoherence of the philanthropic gesture, a reaction had set in that would renounce the Negro’s status as an equal political and historical figure within the project of America as a whole and at all levels of the *socius*. This was the thought of the “Radical” school in Du Bois’s nominalization:

The grand thought of this radical school of opinion lies on the oft-repeated phrase: “This is a white man’s country,” i.e., in all questions affecting the weal or woe of America, the only people whose interests are to be considered are the members of the Caucasian race. This 15th century phrase is stated baldly and bluntly by some classes; by others it is dressed in 19th century clothes; it is said: We are dealing with facts, not theories of morality; there is among us a vast horde of people, alien to us in looks, in blood, in morals and in culture; our people will not associate with them, and cannot live in peace beside them; they stand on a lower plane of humanity than we, and never have in the past evolved a civilization of their own, nor under a favorable trial today do they show any ability to assimilate or forward modern culture; therefore as a lazy, shiftless, and bestial folk, they must in accordance with the universal law of the survival of the fittest yield before the all-conquering Anglo-Saxon, and must be either transported, isolated or left to slow and certain extermination. (para. 14)

Du Bois describes this view as belonging to “many Americans and Europeans” (para. 15). Indeed it must be noted that, throughout this essay, he is at pains to differentiate a certain reactionary radical disposition within the southern states from the whole of the American South and especially a relatively progressive wing of its leadership. Beyond the South, this disposition could be found throughout America and even abroad in Europe. Du Bois sharply and directly questions two core premises of this “school” of thought. Contrary to their presumption, he holds that their view is not the attitude of the American people as a whole and that the Negro has shown much in their development since Emancipation. While he does not respond here in the form

of a declarative statement to the most general and peremptory claim of this school, that is, that the Negro as a group “never has, and never will, do anything to aid and advance the culture and civilization of the day” (para. 15), the whole of the remainder of the essay “The Afro-American” should yet be understood as an effort to formulate a decisive answer.

It is an answer that moves on multiple registers. And it is here that the problem of the discourse of the Negro American himself is announced.

2. Discourse of “the Thing Itself.” In order to engage the terms of this latter school in their most deep-seated dimensions, a whole line of intervention is proposed by Du Bois. It is a formulation that is of signal epistemological importance for our understanding of Du Bois’s thought, for it will come to retrospectively name the initial course of his specific vocation. The terms of this “school” of thought encode the most fundamental metaphysical order of question that subtends the entire discourse of the Negro at this time, distributed across all three of these positions as described so far by Du Bois, despite its variegation within their respective locutions. A kind of knowledge that would be new in terms of the discourse of the Negro in the United States at this time would be necessary in order to propose a way to go beyond the dispute of opinion and the poor empirical measure of the present and to decisively displace the root presumption of this “Radical” school. Du Bois describes this problem of knowledge as “the kernel of the whole problem.” The “real truth and the real problems may be laid bare” only by way of a new practice of knowledge with regard to the question of the Negro (para. 17). As we have already noted above, Du Bois would be led to elaborate and formulate this necessity in a systematic fashion during late 1897 while engaged in the research that would yield *The Philadelphia Negro*.³⁰ However, already in “The Afro-American,” the most decisive epistemological dimension of that later statement, and indeed of all of Du Bois’s subsequent work, is already given its definitive theoretical place. It is the formulation of the Negro American as otherwise than a putatively simple object of knowledge. He conceptualizes the Negro as also a possible subject of such a project. The Negro, if there is such, is a fundamentally composite entity in terms of the question of human reflection, understanding, and forms of knowledge: “Meantime one of the most important elements of the problem is without doubt, the attitude of the Afro-American himself, his opinion of his situation, his aspirations, and ideals. For it is the peculiarity of problems in social science, as distinguished from physical science, that the thing studied as well as the student, is a living breathing soul, all of whose numberless thoughts and actions must be ascertained and allowed for in the final answer” (para. 18). As I notice elsewhere, this dimension of “the study of the Negro problems,” as Du Bois will come to name them in general, that which pertains to the Negro’s subjectivity, is eventually understood by him as the epitome of the problematic of such study. He will later call it in epistemological terms “a distinct social mind.”³¹ And this order of a “distinct” social life might be understood itself to yet manifest two interwoven subsidiary dimensions within it: that of the social life of

the group as a whole and that of its self-reflexive discourse, in this last sense that of its own self-criticism or self-reflexive leadership (especially that form which might be called the work of an intelligentsia, although not necessarily or predominantly an academic one).

And so for Du Bois at the end of 1894, the problem a generation after the legal abolition of slavery and the failure of the project of Reconstruction is that no perspective had arisen within this group itself that could be commensurate with its situation. It is this form of problem that takes shape as the most proper concern of the essay “The Afro-American” in a theoretical sense. Its task is thus to announce a new—“Afro-American”—understanding of the situation of the Negro in America from within the subjectivity of this group itself. As we have already noticed from the outset of our consideration of this essay, Du Bois presents the so-called Negro question in America according to a frame of reference that is fundamentally comparative on a global scale. This group, he proposes, faces a historically abnormal situation with regard to the production of a leadership:

The peculiarity of the rise of the Afro-American is that he has been compelled to advance by means of democracy toward ideals which American democracy has set before him. The invariable rule of advance among peoples is the gradual evolving of leading, ruling classes among them, who guide the masses, and incorporate strata after strata with themselves until a sufficient number of the whole race become raised to that average of culture which we call civilization. So to place a nation that [for whom] this usual method of advance was hindered, did not mean the substitution of some new method—it did not result as 18th century social philosophers taught, in the lifting of the race bodily from the bottom into one dead level of equality; it merely [merely] meant that the natural development should be slower, and the natural aristocracy longer deprived of their rightful places as leaders of their own people. Thus it has happened that the majority worship and deification of mob-rule, which has too often in America displaced the high ideals of true democracy, has within the ranks of the freedmen themselves, acted as a disintegrating force at a time when unity and subordination was most needed.³²

In the comparative sense, Du Bois formulates two ways of understanding the development of leadership and ideals. One, given in his own theoretical voice, declares that such development follows an “invariable rule,” in which there is “the gradual evolving of leading, ruling classes,” a “natural aristocracy,” who “should assume that legitimate leadership and beneficent guardianship which the cultured

classes of all nations owe their proletari[a]t.”³³ The other, the conception of which he attributes to “18th century social philosophers,” imagined “the lifting of the race bodily from the bottom into one dead level of equality.”

At variance with both of these ideas—the historical norm and the revolutionary ideal—the Negro situation in the United States from the end of the Civil War to the fin de siècle had taken a peculiar path: a more slow development of a leadership and no simple uplifting of the whole. Without the availability of any true established comparative norm for such, a situation that Du Bois will shortly describe as one in which the Negro can be understood to have “suddenly broken with his past” but yet remained “out of touch with his environment,” the Negro “ex-slave was compelled, out of the dead-level of his degradation to evolve his leaders and his ideals.”³⁴ Thus, while the ideals of the “American State” had inevitably influenced those of the Negro, their effect had actually but yielded confusion for the Negro. That is to say that, while the Negro “instinctively” withdrew from “that soul-blunting competition, that *Sturm und Drang* of the gigantic business life, as the great cause of all the disabilities and indignities he suffered,” this withdrawal only “increased the prejudice against him,” for his disposition was not “profitable” (para. 19). Yet, within the group itself, this absence of any “natural aristocracy” meant that “it has happened that the majority worship and deification of mob-rule, which has too often in America displaced the high ideals of true democracy, has within the ranks of the freedmen themselves, acted as a disintegrating force at a time when unity and subordination was most needed” (para. 19). Approaching the midpoint of the 1890s, the matter can be seen in this light as a distinctive moment in African American intellectual-political history: Frederick Douglass would shortly pass from the scene, as would Alexander Crummell shortly thereafter, Booker T. Washington would be collaboratively anointed (in late 1895, by a kind of joint disposition on the part of both Northern and Southern white economic and political leaders), and a new leadership from among the ranks of African American women would begin to announce themselves, namely Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett (among others).³⁵ The young Du Bois then would try to announce himself and his vision within this volatile and difficult moment of transition in leadership and the production of a new sense of ideals among African Americans.

Positioning himself autobiographically, he writes in the form of the first-person plural. In all of its apparent simplicity, it is the rhetorical level of the most decisive theoretical course of thought moving within and across the essay as a whole:

We Afro-Americans claim that the United States has made the dangerous mistake of calling a mass of complicated social problems which lay before the nation, by the common name of “Negro Problem,” and of then attempting to find some one radical remedy for all such distresses.

We claim to see under what is commonly called the Negro problem at least four different problems; We regard the Negro problem proper as nothing more nor less than a question of humanity and national morality. Is the American nation willing to judge, use, and protect its citizens with reference alone to their character and ability, and irrespective of their race and color? Is the conscience of the American Republic so far behind the social ideals of the 19th century, as to deny to a human being the right of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” solely because he has Negro blood? This is the kernel of the Negro problem, and the question which the American people have never boldly faced, but have persisted in *veiling* behind other and dependent problems.³⁶

The vocative position adduced here will in all truth announce another order of perspective within this American discourse of the Negro. In brief, it announces a metalevel perspective. In so doing, it shows how the discourses of the Negro are themselves a constitutive part of the so-called Negro problems. In essence, all three of the “schools” of thought that Du Bois has described, even the most benevolent (the “Philanthropic” project), along with the apparently supposedly most benign (the “Smith-Ricardo” doctrine), presume in effect if not in declared first premise (as in the “Radical” position), that the Negro group itself is the root of the problem. If one does not presume an ontological root as in the last of these three, it remains that for the other two the fundamental issue is ultimately still understood to take the shape of the historical forms of limitation manifested within this group itself. The position announced by Du Bois under the heading of the “Afro-American” begins from an equally fundamental but very different presumption: that the form of problem named as the so-called Negro problem is produced by the organization of American society in general and on the level of the nation-state as a whole. It is in this sense then that one can simultaneously name its “kernel,” “the Negro problem proper,” and yet insist that in its fullness it is not one but several “other and dependent,” interwoven, problems.

On the one hand, it need be said that in a gesture that should perhaps be understood as a counter to the premise of the Negro himself as the root of the problem, Du Bois proposes that if any conceptual breadth should be given to the nominalization “Negro problem,” then it should most properly be understood as a quite general one that is situated “as nothing more nor less than a question of humanity and national morality” (para. 23). The Negro question, if there is such, is not first of all or only a question about the Negro. In a philosophical and practical-theoretical sense, it is first a fundamental and general question about the dominant conceptions of humanity, morality, and nation afoot within the domain of the socius called America.

On the other hand, the social difficulty encoded here takes shape as a whole ensemble of social problems. Subsequently, over the remainder of the fourth section of this essay, Du Bois enumerates three domains of reference: *the educational* condition of the Negro, *the political* capacity of the group, and *the moral* forms of habitation and socialization. It must be annotated at this juncture that while Du Bois thematizes the economic condition of the Negro throughout this essay, even emphasizing the role of Negro labor in the nascent and partial economic recovery of the so-called “New” South, he does not theorize it here as a distinct sphere or order of social problem as such. In all propriety, however, it should be understood according to his stated discourse in this essay as not only interwoven within but as subtending, *in a specific theoretical sense*, all that he remarks under the heading of the Negro problems in the plural: the persistence of the Negro’s economic debility renders intractable each solution in every other sphere. The most essential theoretical statement here however is that the so-called Negro problems are something other than a form of the simple. They are not in any sense given all at once. Described by him in the context of the Negro they actually name the forms of a general social problem within the American field in general. This fundamental postulation of the essential heterogeneity of the problematic at issue here will be elaborated across his entire career. For example, it is maintained by Du Bois some three years later, in the late autumn of 1897, at the end of his period of theoretical and vocational “casting about” (as we have notated it above) when he returns to this epistemic threshold again as the opening of the programmatic essay in which he outlines a certain conception and approach to “the study of the Negro problems”:

Thus a social problem is ever a relation between conditions and action, and as condition 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. Consequently, though we ordinarily speak of the Negro problem as though it were one unchanged question, students must recognize the obvious facts that this problem, like others, has had a long historical development, has changed with the growth and evolution of the nation; moreover, that it is not one problem, but rather a plexus of social problems, some new, some old, some simple, some complex; and these problems have their one bond of unity in the fact that they group themselves about those Africans who two centuries of slave-trading brought into the land.³⁷

Whereas approximate to the end of 1894, Du Bois emphasized the non-simplicity of the so-called Negro problems (even as he remarked their historical development), in late 1897 he will insist on their temporality (thus intensifying the sense of their non-simple root or their heterogeneity). In the later moment he is able to render the

question of the historicity of such forms of problem into distinct theoretical relief. And in the later moment this insight is conjoined with a rapidly maturing sense of his conception of a general “sociology,” or science of the social, and of his specific vocation within its project. Already engaged in his work on the study of the Negro in Philadelphia, over the course of late 1896 through late 1897, Du Bois would begin to clarify for himself just what task was set for him if he would recognize an engagement with the so-called Negro problems as the most specific and concrete form of problematization that would define his own work. We see the first precocious steps along that path in this closing section of the essay “The Afro-American.”

For the young effervescent Du Bois, the Negro at the mid-1890s does not measure up to the standard that he would set: “We Afro-Americans acknowledge freely that we form a larger part of those many social problems that confront the American nation; we must educate ourselves, we must learn our duties as voters, we must raise our moral standards.”³⁸ However, just as equally, he maintained that every categorical claim about the condition of the Negro, whether presented as empirical or not, was untenable. Across the closing section of the essay he systematically defends the efforts of the Negro to uplift itself as a group. Announcing himself on the register of the orator and the preacher, he declares in the closing paragraph, “few peoples have ever striven more earnestly to gain the respect of civilization than we in the last quarter-century” (para. 26). As this project will unfold in Du Bois’s discourse over the next decade, it will eventually acquire, in the closing chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* for example, the implication not only of producing the Negro within a given horizon of respectful “civilization,” whether understood as American or the modern world in general, but eventually of deepening and improving it. The impossible possible world of the Negro “beyond the veil” becomes there, as it was already becoming in the mid-1890s, the name of the project of immanent striving that will yield another world in the time to come. In this sense we can say too that the figure of “The Afro-American,” announced within the confines of all manner of historical limit, is yet for Du Bois a name for the futural form of possibility within this American “world.”

It remains, however, to remark perhaps the most powerful theoretical aspect of this text as a discursive intervention. As part of the project of announcing an “Afro-American” sense of the Negro problems, Du Bois has been led to challenge the forms of understanding and knowledge by which the Negro question has been understood. And, more radically still, he has questioned the very terms by which the hegemonic discourses would name the problem in question. That is to say, he has questioned the terms of their *representation* of the Negro problem. And, by way of this critical riposte, the way in which the discourses themselves are part of the problem in question appears in distinct relief. This is to say that Du Bois practices a recognition that the discourses of the Negro are themselves part of the problem, even if he does not himself thematize it on a metalevel of his own discourse or in the

manner that we have done here. The “*veiling*” of the “question of humanity and national morality” that is at issue is not just a failure of understanding or knowledge with implications for an abstract construal of the question, but rather a practical-theoretical failure that leaves aside from the debate the very premises that predetermine and precomprehend the whole of the supposed question. If it would be critical and not only reflexive, the approach to this question according to the terms of a subjectivity that would understand itself in the first-person plural to be named by such a heading turns the whole question over and indeed puts at issue not only the term of its self-representation but the terms of the representation of the supposed Negro question in general. The “Negro problem” then is simply the name given within discourse to an entire dimension of historicity that has comprised the domain called America, or more specifically in this instance the United States of America.

The Thought of the Example—of Historicity

It can now be said that it is on this horizon of historicity—of a certain form of historical example, of a certain example—and within the interstices of problem announced therein that the discourse and practice of Du Bois took its initial orientation and acquired its most specific sense. Certainly, the question of the Negro in the United States is discursively projected into a comparative horizon that should be understood as global in its extension. By way of the hitherto unpublished essay “The Afro-American,” which we have recollected and introduced here, we have been able to recognize the initial steps of a self-reflexive intellectual and the first political maturation for the young W. E. B. Du Bois in terms of such an order of reference. It is an order of horizon that is global in space and epochal in temporality. The question of America and the so-called question of the Negro therein—as the names for a historical situation—are at stake within its terms.

However, we have also been able to suggest the practical-theoretical fecundity that began to announce itself within Du Bois’s inhabitation of that formation. In essence, the forms of such inhabitation as reflexively produced within his discourse—here remarked especially as the internal discourse of the essay “The Afro-American”—are understood to be anything but simple, always other than the one, somewhat and somehow always other than the simplicity of a given here and now. And, while the full implication can only be suggested here, we can remark too that the dynamic movement of question that opened this autobiographical passage to the historicity in question acquired its enunciative form only retrospectively, by way of the metaleptic and reciprocal passage from one form of historicity to another: of the individual as supposed ipseity, of nation (or nation-state), or of something else altogether on a more general level than that of the national state, transnational and beyond. (In Du Bois’s own itinerary, it acquired its legibility in the passage that opened for him joining a certain Europe and a certain America. Yet, in its eventuality,

that would remain only as the incipit of an illimitable horizon and sense of collectivity.) Thus, we can now remark, in conclusion, it was this dynamic reflection announced in the idiomatic form of the autobiographical that yet opened a distinctive epistemic view that could configure in thought an entire dimension of historicity as a problem for practical-theoretical engagement. While we note that it enabled the critical remark of limit—in the practice of both policy and discourse—it yet should be emphasized that for Du Bois it also opened an affirmative sense of the heterogeneous—of the more-than-one, of the double, of the peculiar and problematic sense of world (that of, say, “the little black boy of Atlanta”)—as a name of possibility, beyond the here and the now. For Du Bois in the 1890s—in America (whatever is such)—the “Afro-American” announced itself as a practical-theoretical name for such a thought of the beyond.

Notes

Where possible or appropriate the citations given herein to texts by W. E. B. Du Bois will be to W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Complete Published Works of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 37 vols., ed. and intro. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1973–1986), as well as to the six volumes of Du Bois’s writings and correspondence published by the University of Massachusetts Press, also edited and introduced by Aptheker, three of selected correspondence and three of selections of other texts, including previously unpublished texts and documents, from 1973 to 1986. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), however, will be cited from the first edition of its original publication, for the second edition, with no major changes from the first, is available online in scholastically reliable electronic form: W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 2nd ed., University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/duboissouls/dubois.html>.

¹ In using the word *historial* here, rather than the word *historical*, my intent is mnemonic. The theoretical concern is to propose the interest of a step toward something just beyond a historicism in the strict sense. I propose it to prompt a rethinking—in the context of discourse about something like “the African American”—of the problematic named under the heading or concept of history as something otherwise than the events of time (whatever is such), however we might adduce meaning for such. Instead, perhaps the matter here concerns the movement in which the very possibility of event—including the subjectum—is opened precisely in and as problem. In this sense, the very possibility or impossibility of existence is always at stake in any thought of history, and above all in that which is yet to come. However, no word can be simply and completely remarked for perfect service in the project of theoretical projection. My usage here then remains pragmatic even as it is guided by principle.

² See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1975).

³ Along this track one finds that Du Bois has named the historically singular situation—not spiritual profile—of the Haitian example in modern historicity. This begins with his doctoral study on the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade, which he completed just a century more or less after the incipit of the revolution there, and runs right through to his last published texts. Among the latter is one concerning the bearing of the Haitian Revolution for an understanding of the French Revolution. See W. E. B. Du Bois, “Africa and the French Revolution,” *Freedomways: A Quarterly Review of the Negro Freedom Movement* 1, no. 2 (1961): 136–51.

⁴ The essay at hand is an excerpt from that study. Nahum D. Chandler, “The Problem of Pure Being: Annotations on the Early Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois and the Discourses of the Negro” (unpublished manuscript, n. d.).

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Afro-American” (unpublished typescript, ca. 1894), Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois, Special Collections and University Archives, Series 3, Subseries C, MS 312, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst. See also W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Afro-American” (unpublished typescript), *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois, 1803 (1877–1963)* 1965, comp. and ed. Herbert Aptheker (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corp. of America, 1980–1981), reel 82, frames 1232–42. The essay is published for the first time in this issue of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1, no. 2; all references to “The Afro-American” herein are to this publication, with specific citations given by paragraph number. We can reasonably adduce the approximate time—within a given eight-month period—for the composition of this text by Du Bois on the basis of the hand script signature and title that is given on the last page of the original typescript. It is signed “W. E. Burghardt Du Bois (A. M., Professor of Ancient Classics in Wilberforce University).” We know several facts—that Du Bois was in possession of a master’s degree that had been awarded by Harvard in 1892, that he assumed his duties as a faculty member of Wilberforce at the very end of August 1894, and that he submitted his doctoral thesis to Professor Albert Bushnell Hart at Harvard University in the mid-spring of 1895, which the latter signed in official approval on the first of June of that year. See W. E. B. Du Bois, “Letter to Daniel C. Gilman,” in *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, vol. 1, *Selections, 1877–1934*, comp. and ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 38–39; and David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: H. Holt, 1993), 155. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that the text of “The Afro-American” may have been written (or at least completed) sometime after the assumption of his professorial duties and prior to his official designation as a doctor of philosophy. More specifically, two time frames seem most plausible for the text’s composition: early to late autumn 1894 and late spring 1895. On the one hand, the reference by Du Bois to his train travel on the “continent” in the opening line of the essay suggests an ongoing reflection and that Du Bois may have written this text with the memory of a last sojourn (alone) across Germany during the last weeks of March 1894 very much present to mind. See W. E. B. 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, 1968), 175–76; and W. E. B. Du Bois, “A Spring Wandering” (unpublished manuscript, ca. 1893), Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois, Special Collections and University Archives, Series 3, Subseries C, MS 312, W.

E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst. On the other hand, given that we know that Du Bois had been hard at work redrafting the text of the thesis throughout the early months of 1895 (the research for which dated back to 1889–1891), and that he delivered an address on the occasion of the death of Frederick Douglass for a memorial service held on March 9, 1895, at Wilberforce (some themes of which overlap with “The Afro-American”), it also seems quite plausible that Du Bois could have been led to engage the question of the direction and leadership of African Americans as a group and prepared the essay “The Afro-American” sometime after posting the final pages of his doctoral thesis to Professor Hart at Harvard. See W. E. B. Du Bois, “Harvard (1887–92),” in *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887–1961*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 23–25; Du Bois, “Letter to Rutherford B. Hayes,” in Aptheker, *Correspondence*, 16–17; Herbert Aptheker, *The Literary Legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois* (White Plains, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1989), 1–3; and W. E. B. Du Bois, “Douglass as Statesman,” in *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, vol. 1, 1891–1909, comp. and ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1982), 28–30.

⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1975), 54–55; and Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 208.

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11.1 (1898): 1–23; and W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” *Publications of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 219 (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1898).

⁸ While I engage the matter of Du Bois’s relation to Europe in general and Germany in particular more fully in the larger study from which this introductory reading of “The Afro-American” is excerpted, as well as other texts (Nahum D. Chandler, “The Possible Form of an Interlocution: W. E. B. Du Bois and Max Weber in Correspondence, 1904–1905; Part I: The Letters and the Essay,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 [2006]: 193–239; and “The Possible Form of an Interlocution: W. E. B. Du Bois and Max Weber in Correspondence, 1904–1905; Part II: The Terms of Discussion,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 7, no. 1 [2007]: 213–72.), here I note that the scholarship concerned with Du Bois in the 1890s on the whole has been primarily oriented toward adducing what Du Bois received from Germany and Europe. See, for example, Kenneth Barkin, “W. E. B. Du Bois’ Love Affair with Imperial Germany,” *German Studies Review* 28, no. 2 (2005): 285–302; Kenneth D. Barkin, “‘Berlin Days,’ 1892–1894: W. E. B. Du Bois and German Political Economy,” *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000): 79–101; and Axel R. Schäfer, “W. E. B. Du Bois, German Social Thought, and the Racial Divide in American Progressivism, 1892–1909,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (2001): 925–49. That is to say, too little scholarship has been situated theoretically to think of his relation to such as a kind of engagement. Such an approach would recognize in this engagement an affirmative critical inhabitation of disposition and thought as the leading edge of Du Bois’s relation to Europe, and it could account for such a practice by Du Bois as one in which the history, the political situation (in specific, but also in terms of a global horizon) and its intellectual discourses of science and philosophy are all at stake and not simply assumed; moreover, it would recognize the dynamic, yet principled, unfolding of his relation to Europe in general across

the first six decades of the tumultuous twentieth century. See, for example, Michael Rothberg, “W. E. B. Du Bois in Warsaw: Holocaust Memory and the Color Line, 1949–1952,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): 169–89; Werner Sollors, “W. E. B. Du Bois in Nazi Germany, 1936,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 44, no. 2 (1999): 207–22; and Hamilton H. Beck, “Censoring Your Ally: W. E. B. Du Bois in the German Democratic Republic,” in *Crosscurrents: African Americans, Africa, and Germany in the Modern World*, ed. David McBride, Leroy Hopkins, and C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998), 197–232. The text at hand, especially its opening dialogue, might well be taken as legible indication (among others across Du Bois’s discourse) of the possibility of a more balanced and supple understanding of this relation. Two other texts of the 1890s by Du Bois, which remained unpublished during his lifetime and were brought to publication a dozen years ago by Kenneth Barkin, give further indication of the depth of Du Bois’s critical inhabitation of Europe at that time, providing a poignant engagement with the whole crisis of liberalism and the social question (especially the problem of a certain “socialism” in the general sense) afoot in Germany and Europe at the time: W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Present Condition of German Politics (1893),” *Central European History* 31, no. 3 (1998): 170–87; and “The Socialism of German Socialists,” *Central European History* 31, no. 3 (1998): 189–96. I note that, especially given internal references within these texts, their composition should likely be dated to Du Bois’s second year at Wilberforce, that is 1895–1896—rather than to 1893 during his time in Berlin, which is the proposition given by Barkin, the editor of the texts for publication—a matter that I will address more fully elsewhere. These two texts stand then—along with the essay “The Afro-American” (circa 1894–1895), the memorial speech “Douglass as Statesman” (circa 1895, published for the first time in 1964 by Herbert Aptheker [Aptheker, “DuBois on Douglass: 1895,” *Journal of Negro History* 49, no. 4 (1964): 264–68]), and the public lecture “The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe” (circa 1896, published for the first time in 1985 by Aptheker [W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe,” in Aptheker, *Against Racism*, 33–43])—as a quite rich set of intertextually related documents marking the young Du Bois’s far-ranging and yet deeply probing critical thought on the historical (both political and economic) and ontological situation of African Americans, the project of America, and modern Europe. On one fundamental level, they form an intertextual discourse in which the problem of leadership (its moral and intellectual projection of duty to uplift society) is the foremost theoretical guide. Europe then is both part of this problematic as an example and a source of thought and ideas for its address. Yet, as I suggest below in this commentary, so is “the Afro-American” and a certain “America,” of which (with regard to both) Douglass is—for Du Bois in the 1890s—the stellar example.

⁹ Du Bois, “Afro-American,” paras. 1–4.

¹⁰ See Farah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish, eds., *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African-American Travel Writing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

¹¹ See Nahum D. Chandler, “Between,” *Assemblage* 20 (1993): 26–27.

¹² See Du Bois, “Harvard,” 6; Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 45–46; and Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 160–61.

¹³ The eventuality by which this thought takes shape within Du Bois's discourse and its radical general implication, including the place of this essay within its devolution, is the proper concern of a more fulsome annotation. Here, I wish only to situate this thought as a stage of the discourse of the essay "The Afro-American" in a discrete sense. Elsewhere, I have indeed argued for its generalizable implication. See Nahum Dimitri Chandler, "Originary Displacement," *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000): 249–86. This thought draws in part from the work of Hortense Spillers in a general sense, but for an incisive interlocution on the question, see Hortense J. Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," in "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Question of Another World," ed. Nahum Dimitri Chandler, special issue, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 (2007): 7–28.

¹⁴ The autobiographical register becomes explicit again only at the end of the five paragraphs of this opening section of the essay, when Du Bois makes reference to "even the boy born, as I was, in Puritan New England" (Du Bois, "Afro-American," para. 9).

¹⁵ This last phrase is purloined from the work of Kevin Thomas Miles, who, it might be proposed, outlined such a sense, aligning it with a presocratic sense of world given in the tragedies or archaic discourse of ancient Greece, in a remarkable discourse under the title "The Other World After Paradise: The Musical Aesthetic in *The Souls of Black Folk*" (paper presented at the international conference on "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Question of Another World," Graduate School of Education, Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan, 2006).

¹⁶ Du Bois, "Afro-American," paras. 6–9.

¹⁷ This reference is a nodal mark of a deep ore-line within Du Bois's discourse, marking the connections of the reflexivity of his practice to a certain distribution of the historical sedimentation within his thought. On the one hand, it gives legible passage to the historical nexus comprised of the ending of the Civil War (and the deep and vexed historicity encoded therein) and to the inception of the project of Reconstruction (and its complicated relation to the future of the project of America as a whole, both at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond). John Greenleaf Whittier's poem "Howard at Atlanta," referring in its titular frame to General Oliver Otis Howard, a Union military commander during the Civil War, who was with General "Tecumseh" Sherman at Atlanta in September of 1864, was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1869, 367–69. The pivotal passage to which Du Bois refers is to the fifth and sixth stanzas:

And he said: "Who hears can never
Fear for or doubt you:
What shall I tell the children
Up North about you?"
Then ran round a whisper, a murmur,
Some answer devising;
And a little boy stood up: "Massa,
Tell 'em, we're rising!"

O black boy of Atlanta!
But half was spoken:
The slave's chain and the master's
Alike are broken.
The once curse of the races
Held both in tether:
They are rising, — all are rising,
The black and white together!

It is commonly understood that the reference to the “black boy of Atlanta” of the sixth stanza refers to an event in 1868, in which a young Richard Robert Wright, a student in a “new” school for Negro children at Atlanta (who would eventually graduate as the valedictorian of his class at Atlanta University in 1876 and go on to become a pioneer in education, a prominent political activist, a Major in the US army, and a banker in Philadelphia, for which he was led to pursue study at the Wharton school of the University of Pennsylvania, as well as serve as a founding member of the American Negro Academy in 1897), in response to a query from a commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau, perhaps General Howard, replied, “Tell them, General, we’re rising.” At the time that Du Bois wrote this essay—perhaps sometime from late 1894 to early 1895—Wright was head of the State College of Industry for Colored Youth in Savannah, Georgia. On the other hand, it indexes Du Bois’s own life-course. Born in 1868, Du Bois is fully writing of—both from and about—the historicity of which he is an issue. And near the end of this opening section of “The Afro-American,” he will make this explicit, declaring in the ninth paragraph that the conditions of which he writes pertains to “even the boy born, as I was, in Puritan New England.”

¹⁸ Du Bois, “Afro-American,” paras. 7–9.

¹⁹ See W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Present Outlook for the Darker Races of Mankind,” *A.M.E. Church Review* 17, no. 2 (1900): 95–110. In the larger study from which this introduction is drawn, I attempt to track some aspects of the first declarative statements of Du Bois proposing the theoretical question of “the problem of the color line” (Chandler, “Problem of Pure Being”). Fifteen years later in a closing chapter titled “The Legacy of John Brown” in his biographical study of that figure, Du Bois will thematize this relation of hierarchical “horizontal” distinction by “class” with a kind of “vertical” form of hierarchical distinction by socially ascribed “race”—on a global scale of comparison. He writes in paragraphs 38 and 39,

We are, in fact, to-day repeating in our intercourse between races all the former evils of class distinction within the nation: personal hatred and abuse, mutual injustice, unequal taxation and rigid caste. Individual nations outgrew these fatal things by breaking down the horizontal barriers between classes. We are bringing them back by seeking to erect vertical barriers between races. Men were told that abolition of compulsory class distinction meant the leveling down, degradation, disappearance of culture and genius and the

triumph of the mob. As a matter of fact it has been the salvation of European civilization. . . . The same is true in racial contact. Vertical race distinctions are even more emphatic hindrances to human evolution than horizontal class distinctions, and their tearing away involves fewer chances of degradation and greater opportunities of human betterment than in the case of class lines. On the other hand, persistence in racial distinction spells disaster sooner or later. The earth is growing smaller and more accessible. Race contact will become in the future increasingly inevitable, not only in America, Asia and Africa, but even in Europe. The color line will mean not simply a return to the absurdities of class as exhibited in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but even to the caste of ancient days. This however, the Japanese, the Chinese, the East Indians and the Negroes are going to resent in just such proportion as they gain power: and they are gaining the power, and they cannot be kept from gaining more power. The price of repression will then be hypocrisy and slavery and blood. This is the situation to-day. Has John Brown no message—no legacy, then, to the twentieth century? He has and it is this great word: the cost of liberty is less than the price of repression. (W. E. B. Du Bois, *John Brown*, ed. Herbert Aptheker [Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1973], 286–87.)

²⁰ Du Bois, “Afro-American,” para. 23, emphasis mine.

²¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1897, 194. Du Bois will go on in the remainder of this paragraph to render the operation of this structure of distinction as a kind of social “wall”:

I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the world I longed for, and all its dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could never decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head,—some way. With other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny: their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about

them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The “shades of the prison-house” closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly watch the streak of blue above. (ibid.)

The metaphor “door” appears in “The Afro-American” at paragraph 9; it reappears in the fourth paragraph of the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. However, it is not present in the text of the first version of this chapter as the 1897 essay “Strivings of the Negro People.”

Late in his itinerary, just after his seventieth year, in *Dusk of Dawn*, he will adduce the image of a “plate glass” to remark this distinction:

It is difficult to let others see the full psychological meaning of caste segregation. It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movements, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world. One talks on evenly and logically in this way, but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited; they talk louder; they gesticulate. Some of the passing world stop in curiosity; these gesticulations seem so pointless; they laugh and pass on. They still either do not hear at all, or hear but dimly, and even what they hear, they do not understand. Then the people within may become hysterical. They scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in. They may even, here and there, break through in blood and disfigurement, and find themselves faced by a horrified, implacable, and quite overwhelming mob of people frightened for their own very existence. (Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 130–32)

²² This text, which now exists as a hand script of three pages among the Du Bois papers, was first published by Herbert Aptheker in 1985: W. E. B. Du Bois, “Beyond the Veil in a Virginia Town,” in *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887–1961*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 49–50. However, I have consulted and followed the original manuscript here: W. E. B. Du Bois, “Beyond the Veil in a Virginia Town” (typescript, ca. 1897), Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois, Special Collections and University Archives, Series 3, Subseries C, MS 312, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst. Whereas Du Bois has a long dash followed by the suffix “ville,” as in “-----ville,” Aptheker has interpolated the prefix of “Farm” inside brackets in place of the dash making it “[Farm] ville.” As well, I am uncertain of both my own attempt as well as Aptheker’s in ascertaining Du Bois’s script in the decipherment of several words, especially in the last paragraph of the sketch. Such uncertainty is indicated throughout by placing the relevant word in brackets.

²³ The word in brackets, “where,” is not on the original manuscript. It has been added here by me, following Aptheker’s interpolation of the same in the published version.

²⁴ It will acquire its fulsome elaboration in the narrative production of his biographical study of *John Brown* of 1909. And this is then maintained across the era of the First World War in the signal essays “The Souls of White Folk” (1910) and “The Culture of White Folk” (1917), which were conjoined and re-presented as the theoretical frame of *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, published in the immediate aftermath of the war in 1920 (W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, ed. Herbert Aptheker [Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1975]). It is then this general view that subtends the remarkably underread conjoined chapters of *Dusk of Dawn* in 1940. And, beyond the American horizon, it orients the critical account of Europe given in the two great essays that Du Bois issued in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War: W. E. B. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy: Colonies and Peace*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1975); and *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1976).

²⁵ Du Bois, “Afro-American,” para. 9.

²⁶ On the original typescript, the word “chance” is crossed out and the word “spade” is written next to it in hand script.

²⁷ I address some dimensions of this question in an essay on the relation of the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and that of Max Weber. See Chandler, “Possible Form of an Interlocution” (2006); and Chandler, “Possible Form of an Interlocution” (2007), especially 260n14.

²⁸ Du Bois, “Afro-American,” para. 12.

²⁹ The typescript has the word “poase” here. However, this word, if it is such, is perhaps a typographical error, for there is a famous saying that is attributed to Benjamin: “He that would live in peace and at ease, / Must not speak all he knows, nor judge all he sees.” Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard, 1736. An Almanack for the Year of Christ 1736, . . .*, by Richard Saunders (Philadelphia: Printed and sold by B. Franklin, at the new printing-office near the market, 1735), available online through the Papers of Benjamin Franklin, intro. Edmund S.

Morgan, American Philosophical Society and Yale University, digital ed. by Packard Humanities Institute, 2006, <http://franklinpapers.org/franklin//framedVolumes.jsp>. It is plausible that Du Bois is inverting the meaning of such a phrase by suggesting that the African American has a form of legal equality with other American citizens after the American Civil War and hence is at peace, but his condition is not a state of “ease.” If so, the inscription “poase” should read as the word “peace.” As the words “poase” and “ease” are both in quotation marks, this transposition seems plausible.

³⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois and Isabel Eaton, *The Philadelphia Negro*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1973).

³¹ The key statement is as follows: “The fourth division of this investigation is sociological interpretation; it should include the arrangement and interpretation of historical and statistical matter in the light of the experience of other nations and other ages; it should aim to study those finer manifestations of social life which history can but mention and which statistics can not count, such as the expression of Negro life as found in their hundred newspapers, their considerable literature, their music and folklore and their germ of aesthetic life—in fine, in all the movements and customs among them that manifest the existence of a distinct social mind” (Du Bois, “Study of the Negro Problems,” 20, para. 43).

³² Du Bois, “Afro-American,” para. 19. All words in brackets are my own interpolations into Du Bois’s text for the sake of clarity.

³³ This claim about the “invariable” is of the same order of postulation that we shall see Du Bois invoke some three years later in his address to the opening session of the American Negro Academy under the heading of “The Conservation of Races.” He speaks of it there as the “constitution” of the world. And, as will be obvious to those familiar with other aspects of Du Bois’s discourse, the passage at hand now appears as the first thematic statement of the problem and theoretical project that should set afoot a leadership group among African Americans that he will later call “the talented tenth,” in a statement whose preparation and publication occurs in the immediate aftermath of his productive assemblage of *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. See W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of Today*, ed. Booker T. Washington (New York: J. Pott, 1903), 33–75. The question of leadership in relation to democracy remained the domain of the deepest complications in his thought. While acknowledging no presumptive limit on the possible sources of leadership, that is to say, for him no group however defined maintained a preternaturally given capacity of such, he nonetheless sought a resolute basis for recognizing both the incipient sense of duty (or responsibility) and the accomplishments of the acts of leadership.

³⁴ Du Bois, “Afro-American,” para. 20, para. 19.

³⁵ And Du Bois had certainly noticed others on the scene. While he was certainly aware of T. Thomas Fortune from whom he had most likely purloined his titular nominalization, he had no doubt also noticed Charles Waddell Chestnutt and can be understood to have indirectly mentioned Richard Robert Wright (as noted above). He would later admit that, while he had read the poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar, he only discovered that he was “Negro” when the

latter visited Wilberforce where Du Bois was teaching, perhaps during the time of the composition of the essay “The Afro-American.” It is also at Wilberforce that Du Bois first met Crummell. Du Bois would reprise this whole problematic on a more sure footing in the chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* focused on Washington. The quite substantial revision of the previously published essay on leadership, notably titled “The Evolution of Negro Leadership,” into the chapter titled “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others” sharpens the edge of Du Bois’s criticism of the position from which, at 1903, he wishes to distinguish his own. See W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Evolution of Negro Leadership,” *Dial*, July 16, 1901, 53–55; and “Of Booker T. Washington and Others,” in Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 41–59. It must be noted in the light of the essay at hand, “The Afro-American,” that Du Bois would write to Washington after his famous “Atlanta Exposition” speech as a “word fitly spoken” (Du Bois, *Correspondence*, 39). This accords with Du Bois’s thematization of the economic within “The Afro-American.” It is a status that Du Bois would never disavow, even as he would come more and more to insist on the problem of ideals in general as against a simple and resolute prior insistence on the necessity of material reproduction on the part of Washington and his followers.

³⁶ Du Bois, “Afro-American,” paras. 22–23, emphasis mine.

³⁷ Du Bois, “Study of the Negro Problems,” 3, para. 6.

³⁸ Du Bois, “Afro-American,” para. 26. And this register of moral rectitude is a powerful motif in all of the discourse of Du Bois. While I have remarked it earlier, it must be recalled again here, for it leads to perhaps the single distinctively troubling dimension of this early essay: his hypothesization of the dangers of “majority worship and deification of mob-rule” (para. 19) and his proposition that the general franchise should be restricted for a time, declaring that “in its blind worship of democracy, that [America] is today ruled more from its gutters than from its homes” (para. 24). This premise of the authority to judge who has the capacity or status to *best* determine the ideals of a group remained the locus of an abiding conundrum in Du Bois’s thought. Paradoxically, he would insist that the source of genius could not be precomprehended and yet he would resolutely insist on the right of already constituted forms of such ingenuity to render decisions of leadership on the matter. This hesitation remains notwithstanding that Du Bois is asserting his own claim to authority (or that of others like him) as one of a resolute *duty* to the collective or that he is writing amid the vigilantism afoot in the 1890s.