



THE OXFORD W.E.B. DU BOIS
EDITED BY HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

The
SUPPRESSION
of the AFRICAN
SLAVE-TRADE



W.E.B. Du Bois

Introduction by

SAIDIYA HARTMAN

The Suppression
of the
African Slave-Trade
to the
United States of America,
1638–1870

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Introduction: Saidiya Hartman

The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study

Introduction: Lawrence Bobo

The Souls of Black Folk

Introduction: Arnold Rampersad

John Brown

Introduction: Paul Finkelman

Africa, Its Geography, People and Products

Africa—Its Place in Modern History

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The Black Letters on the Sign: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Canon

“... the slave master had a direct interest in discrediting the personality of those he held as property. Every man who had a thousand dollars so invested had a thousand reasons for painting the black man as fit only for slavery. Having made him the companion of horses and mules, he naturally sought to justify himself by assuming that the negro was not much better than a mule. The holders of twenty hundred million dollars’ worth of property in human chattels procured the means of influencing press, pulpit, and politician, and through these instrumentalities they belittled our virtues and magnified our vices, and have made us odious in the eyes of the world. Slavery had the power at one time to make and unmake Presidents, to construe the law, and dictate the policy, set the fashion in national manners and customs, interpret the Bible, and control the church; and, naturally enough, the old masters set themselves up as much too high as they set the manhood of the negro too low. Out of the depths of slavery has come this prejudice and this color line. It is broad enough and black enough to explain all the malign influences which assail the newly emancipated millions to-day. . . . The office of color in the color line is a very plain and subordinate one. It simply advertises the objects of oppression, insult, and persecution. It is not the maddening liquor, but the black letters on the sign telling the world where it may be had . . . Slavery, stupidity, servility, poverty, dependence, are undesirable conditions. When these shall cease to be coupled with color, there will be no color line drawn.”

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS, “The Color Line,” 1881.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963) was the most prolific and, arguably, the most influential African American writer of his generation. The novelist and poet James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) once noted the no single work had informed the shape of the African American literary tradition, except perhaps *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, than had Du Bois’s seminal collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). While trained as a sociologist at Berlin and as a historian at Harvard, Du Bois was fearless in the face of genre—even when some of the genres that he sought to embrace did not fully embrace him in return. Du Bois published twenty-two single-author works, twenty-one in his lifetime (his *Autobiography*, edited by his friend and literary executor, Herbert Aptheker, would not be published until

1968). A selection of his greatest works, *An ABC of Color: Selections from over a Half Century of the Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois*, appeared in 1963, the year he died. And while these books reflect a wide variety of genres—including three widely heralded and magisterial books of essays published in 1903, 1920, and 1940 (*The Souls of Black Folk*, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, and *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*), one biography, five novels, a pioneering sociological study of a black community, five books devoted to the history of Africa, three historical studies of African American people, among others—Du Bois was, in the end, an essayist, an essayist of the first order, one of the masters of that protean form that so attracted Du Bois's only true antecedent, Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) as well as Du Bois's heir in the history of the form, James Baldwin (1924–1987). (Baldwin, like Du Bois, would turn repeatedly to fiction, only to render the form as an essay.)

Du Bois, clearly, saw himself as a man of action, but a man of action who luxuriated within a verdant and fecund tropical rainforest of words. It is not Du Bois's intoxication with words that marks his place in the history of great black public intellectuals—persons of letters for whom words are a vehicle for political action and their own participation in political movements. After all, one need only recall Du Bois's predecessor, Frederick Douglass, or another of his disciples, Martin Luther King Jr. for models in the African American tradition of leaders for whom acting and speaking were so inextricably intertwined as to be virtually coterminous; no, the novelty of Du Bois's place in the black tradition is that he wrote himself to a power, rather than spoke himself to power. Both Douglass and King, for all their considerable literary talents, will be remembered always for the power of their oratory, a breathtaking power exhibited by both. Du Bois, on the other hand, was not a great orator; he wrote like he talked, and he talked like an extraordinarily well-educated late Anglo-American Victorian, just as James Weldon Johnson did; no deep “black” stentorian resonances are to be found in the public speaking voices of either of these two marvelous writers. Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) spoke in a similar public voice.

First and last, W. E. B. Du Bois was a writer, a writer deeply concerned and involved with politics, just as James Baldwin was; as much as they loved to write, Douglass and King were orators, figures fundamentally endowed with a genius for the spoken word. Even Du Bois's colleague, William Ferris, commented upon this anomaly in Du Bois's place in the tradition, at a time (1913) when he had published only five books: “Du Bois,” Ferris wrote, “is one of the few men in history who was hurled on the throne of leadership by the dynamic force of the written word. He is one of the few writers who leaped to the front as a leader and became the head of a popular movement through impressing his personality upon men by means of a book” (“The African Abroad,” 1913). Despite the fact that Du Bois by this time had published his Harvard doctoral dissertation in history, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade* (1896), his sociological study, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the sole biography that he would publish, *John Brown* (1909), and his first of five novels, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), Ferris attributed Du Bois's catapult to leadership to one book and one book alone, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Indeed, it is probably true that had Du Bois

published this book alone, his place in the canon of African American literature would have been secure, if perhaps not as fascinating!

The Souls of Black Folk, in other words, is the one book that Du Bois wrote which most of us have read in its entirety. It is through *The Souls of Black Folk* that we center Du Bois's place in the literary canon; it is through *Souls* that we structure the arc of his seven decade career as a man of letters. There are many good reasons for the centrality of this magical book to Du Bois's literary career, but it is also the case that the other works that comprise Du Bois's canon deserve fresh attention as a whole. And it is for this reason that my colleagues and I have embarked upon this project with Oxford University Press to reprint Du Bois's single-authored texts, and make them available to a new generation of readers in a uniform edition. The only other attempt to do so—Herbert Aptheker's pioneering edition of Du Bois's complete works, published in 1973—is, unfortunately, long out of print.

The Souls of Black Folk is such a brilliant work that it merits all of the attention that it has been given in the century since it was published. In April 1903, a thirty-five-year-old scholar and budding political activist published a 265 page book subtitled "Essays and Sketches," consisting of thirteen essays and one short story, addressing a wide range of topics, including the story of the freed slaves during Reconstruction, the political ascendancy of Booker T. Washington, the sublimity of the spirituals, the death of Du Bois's only son Burghardt, and lynching. Hailed as a classic even by his contemporaries, the book has been republished in no fewer than 120 editions since 1903. In fact, it is something of a rite of passage for younger scholars and writers to publish their take on Du Bois's book in new editions aimed at the book's considerable classroom market.

Despite its fragmentary structure, the book's disparate parts contribute to the sense of a whole, like movements in a symphony. Each chapter is pointedly "bicultural," prefaced by both an excerpt from a white poet and a bar of what Du Bois names "The Sorrow Songs" ("some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past.") Du Bois's subject was, in no small part, the largely unarticulated beliefs and practices of American Negroes, who were impatient to burst out of the cotton fields and take their rightful place as Americans. As he saw it, African American culture in 1903 was at once vibrant and disjointed, rooted in an almost medieval agrarian past and yet fiercely restive. Born in the chaos of slavery, the culture had begun to generate a richly variegated body of plots, stories, melodies, and rhythms. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois peered closely at the culture of his kind, and saw the face of black America. Actually, he saw two faces. "One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro," Du Bois wrote. "Two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." He described this condition as "double consciousness," and his emphasis on a fractured psyche made *Souls* a harbinger of the modernist movement that would begin to flower a decade or so later in Europe and in America.

Scholars, including Arnold Rampersad, Werner Sollors, Dickson Bruce, and David Levering Lewis, have debated the origins of Du Bois's use of the concept

of “double consciousness,” but what’s clear is that its roots are multiple, which is appropriate enough, just as it is clear that the source of one of Du Bois’s other signal metaphors—“the problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color line”—came to him directly from Frederick Douglass’s essay of that title. Du Bois had studied in Berlin during a Hegel revival, and Hegel, famously, had written on the relationship between master and bondsman, whereby each defines himself through the recognition of the other. But the concept comes up, too, in Emerson, who wrote in 1842 of the split between our reflective self, which wanders through the realm of ideas, and the active self, which dwells in the here and now, a tension that recurs throughout the Du Bois oeuvre: “The worst feature of this double consciousness is that the two lives, of the understanding and of the soul, which we lead, really show very little relation to each other.”

Even closer to hand was the term’s appearance in late-nineteenth-century psychology. The French psychologist, Alfred Binet, writing in his 1896 book, *On Double Consciousness*, discusses what he calls “bipartition,” or “the duplication of consciousness”: “Each of the consciousnesses occupies a more narrow and more limited field than if there existed one single consciousness containing all the ideas of the subject.” William James, who taught Du Bois at Harvard, talked about a “second personality” that characterized “the hypnotic trance.” When Du Bois transposed this concept from the realm of the psyche to the social predicament of the American Negro, he did not leave it unchanged. But he shared with the psychologists the notion that double consciousness was essentially an affliction. “This American world,” he complained, yields the Negro “no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Sadly, “the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American,” leads inevitably to “a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence.” The result is “a double life, with double thoughts, double duties and double social classes,” and worse, “double words and double ideas,” which “tempt the mind to pretense or revolt, hypocrisy or to radicalism.” Accordingly, Du Bois wanted to make the American Negro whole; and he believed that only desegregation and full equality could make this psychic integration possible.

And yet for subsequent generations of writers, what Du Bois cast as a problem was taken to be the defining condition of modernity itself. The diagnosis, one might say, outlasted the disease. Although Du Bois would publish twenty-two books, and thousands of essays and reviews, no work of his has done more to shape an African American literary history than *The Souls of Black Folk*, and no metaphor in this intricately layered book has proved more enduring than that of double consciousness, including Du Bois’s other powerfully resonating metaphors, that of “the veil” that separates black America from white America, and his poignant revision of Frederick Douglass’s metaphor of “the color line,” which Du Bois employed in that oft-repeated sentence, “The problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color line”—certainly his most prophetic utterance of many.

Like all powerful metaphors, Du Bois's metaphor of double consciousness came to have a life of its own. For Carl Jung, who visited the United States in the heyday of the "separate but equal" doctrine, the shocking thing wasn't that black culture was not equal, the shocking thing was that it was not separate! "The naïve European," Jung wrote, "thinks of America as a white nation. It is not wholly white, if you please; it is partly colored," and this explained, Jung continued, "the slightly Negroid mannerisms of the American." "Since the Negro lives within your cities and even within your houses," Jung continued, "he also lives within your skin, subconsciously." It wasn't just that the Negro was an American, as Du Bois would note, again and again, but that the American was, inevitably and inescapably, a Negro. The bondsman and the slave find their identity in each other's gaze: "two-ness" wasn't just a black thing any longer. As James Baldwin would put it, "Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black, black in white."

Today, talk about the fragmentation of culture and consciousness is a commonplace. We know all about the vigorous intermixing of black culture and white, high culture and low—from the Jazz Age freneticism of what the scholar Ann Douglass calls "mongrel Manhattan" to Hip Hop's hegemony over American youth in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Du Bois yearned to make the American Negro one, and lamented that he was two. Today, the ideal of wholeness has largely been retired. And cultural multiplicity is no longer seen as the problem, but as a solution—a solution to the confines of identity itself. Double consciousness, once a disorder, is now the cure. Indeed, the only complaint we moderns have is that Du Bois was too cautious in his accounting. He'd conjured "two souls, two thoughts two unreconciled strivings." Just two, Dr. Du Bois, we are forced to ask today? Keep counting.

And, in a manner of speaking, Du Bois did keep counting, throughout the twenty-two books that comprise the formal canon of his most cogent thinking. The hallmark of Du Bois's literary career is that he coined the metaphors of double-consciousness and the veil—reappropriating Frederick Douglass's seminal definition of the semi-permeable barrier that separates and defines black-white racial relations in America as "the color line"—to define the place of the African American within modernity. The paradox of his career, however, is that the older Du Bois became, the more deeply he immersed himself in the struggle for Pan-Africanism and decolonization against the European colonial powers, and an emergent postcolonial "African" or "Pan-Negro" social and political identity—culminating in his own life in his assumption of Ghanaian citizenship in 1963. And the "blacker" that his stand against colonialism became, the less "black," in a very real sense, his analysis of what he famously called "The Negro Problem" simultaneously became. The more "African" Du Bois became, in other words, the more cosmopolitan his analysis of the root causes of anti-black and -brown and -yellow racism and colonialism became, seeing the status of the American Negro as part and parcel of a larger problem of international economic domination, precisely in the same way that Frederick Douglass rightly saw the construction of the American color line as a function of, and a metaphor for, deeper, structural, economic relations—"not the maddening liquor, but the black letters on the sign

telling the world where it may be had," as Douglass so thoughtfully put it. The Negro's being-in-the-world, we might say, became ever more complex for Du Bois the older he grew, especially as the Cold War heated up and the anti-colonial movement took root throughout Africa and the Third World.

Ironically, Du Bois himself foretold this trajectory in a letter he wrote in 1896, reflecting on the import of his years as a graduate student at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin: "Of the greatest importance was the opportunity which my *Wanderjahre* [wander years] in Europe gave of looking at the world as a man and not simply from a narrow racial and provincial outlook." How does the greatest black intellectual in the twentieth century—"America's most conspicuously educated Negro," as Werner Sollors puts it in his introduction to Du Bois's *Autobiography* in this series—make the rhetorical turn from defining the Negro American as a metaphor for modernity, at the turn of the century, to defining the Negro—at mid-century—as a metonym of a much larger historical pattern of social deviance and social dominance that had long been central to the fabric of world order, to the fabric of European and American domination of such a vast portion of the world of color? If, in other words, the Negro is America's metaphor for Du Bois in 1903, how does America's history of black-white relations become the metaphor of a nefarious pattern of economic exploitation and dominance by the end of Du Bois's life, in 1963? Make no mistake about it: either through hubris or an uncanny degree of empathy, or a mixture of both, throughout his life, W. E. B. Du Bois saw his most naked and public ambitions as well as his most private and intimate anxieties as representative of those of his countrymen, the American Negro people. Nevertheless, as he grew older, the closer he approached the end of his life, Du Bois saw the American Negro as a metaphor for class relations within the wider world order.

In order to help a new generation of readers to understand the arc of this trajectory in Du Bois's thinking, and because such a large part of this major thinker's oeuvre remains unread, Oxford University Press and I decided to publish in a uniform edition the twenty-one books that make up Du Bois's canon and invited a group of scholars to reconsider their importance as works of literature, history, sociology, and political philosophy. With the publication of this series, Du Bois's books are once again in print, with new introductions that analyze the shape of his career as a writer, scholar, and activist.

Reading the canon of Du Bois's work in chronological order, a certain allegorical pattern emerges, as Saidiya Hartman suggests in her introduction to *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade*. Du Bois certainly responded immediately and directly to large historical events through fierce and biting essays that spoke adamantly and passionately to the occasion. But he also used the themes of his books to speak to the larger import of those events in sometimes highly mediated ways. His first book, for example, proffers as its thesis, as Hartman puts it, a certain paradox: "the slave trade flourished under the guise of its suppression," functioning legally for twenty years following the Compromise of the Federal Convention of 1787 and "illegally for another half century." Moreover, Du Bois tackles this topic at precisely the point in American history when Jim Crow segregation is becoming formalized through American law in the 1890s,

culminating in 1896 (the year of the publication of his first book) with the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* “separate but equal” decision of the Supreme Court—exactly twenty years following the end of Reconstruction. Three years later, as Lawrence Bobo shows, Du Bois publishes *The Philadelphia Negro* in part to detail the effects of the “separate but equal” doctrine on the black community.

Similarly, Du Bois’s biography of John Brown appeared in the same year as a pioneering band of blacks and whites joined together to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the organization that would plot the demise of legal segregation through what would come to be called the Civil Rights Movement, culminating in its victory over de jure segregation in the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which effectively reversed the *Plessy* decision, and in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. John Brown, for Du Bois, would remain the emblem of this movement.

Likewise, Du Bois’s first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, published just two years following his biography of John Brown, served as a subtle critique both of an unreflective assimilationist ideology of the early NAACP through its advocacy of “a black-owned farming cooperative in the heart of the deep South,” as William Andrews puts it, just as it surely serves as a critique of Booker T. Washington’s apparently radical notion that economic development for the newly freed slaves could very well insure political equality in a manner both irresistible and inevitable, an argument, mind you, frequently made today under vastly different circumstances about the role of capitalism in Du Bois’s beloved Communist China.

Du Bois registers his critique of the primitivism of the Harlem Renaissance in *The Gift of Black Folk*, as Glenda Carpio cogently argues, by walking “a tightrope between a patriotic embrace of an America in which African American culture has become an inextricable part and an exhortation of the rebellion and struggle out of which that culture arose.” In response to the voyeurism and faddishness of Renaissance Harlem, Du Bois harshly reminds us that culture is a form of labor, too, a commodity infinitely exploitable, and that the size of America’s unprecedented middle class can be traced directly to its slave past: “It was black labor that established the modern world commerce which began first as a commerce in the bodies of the slaves themselves and was the primary cause of the prosperity of the first great commercial cities of our day”—cities such as New York, the heart of the cultural movement that some black intellectuals passionately argued could very well augur the end of racial segregation throughout American society, or at least segregation between equal classes across the color line.

Paul Finkelman, in his introduction to *John Brown*, quotes the book’s first line: “The mystic spell of Africa is and ever was over all America.” If that is true, it was also most certainly the case for Du Bois himself, as John Thornton, Emmanuel Akyeampong, Wilson J. Moses, and Mahmood Mamdani show us in their introductions to five books that Du Bois published about Africa, in 1915, 1930, 1939, and 1947. Africa, too, was a recurring metaphor in the Duboisian canon, serving variously as an allegory of the intellectual potential of persons of African descent; as John K. Thornton puts it, “What counted was that African

history had movement and Africans were seen as historical actors and not simply as stolid recipients of foreign techniques and knowledge," carefully "integrating ancient Egypt into *The Negro* as part of that race's history, without having to go to the extreme measure of asserting that somehow the Egyptians were biologically identical to Africans from further south or west." The history of African civilization, in other words, was Du Bois's ultimate argument for the equality of Americans white and black.

Similarly, establishing his scholarly mastery of the literature of African history also served Du Bois well against ideological rivals such as Marcus Garvey, who attacked Du Bois for being "too assimilated," and "not black enough." Du Bois's various studies of African history also served as a collective text for the revolutions being formulated in the forties and fifties by Pan-African nationalists such as Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, who would lead their nations to independence against the European colonial powers. Du Bois was writing for them, first as an exemplar of the American Negro, the supposed vanguard of the African peoples, and later, and more humbly, as a follower of the African's lead. As Wilson J. Moses notes, Du Bois once wrote that "American Negroes of former generations had always calculated that when Africa was ready for freedom, American Negroes would be ready to lead them. But the event was quite opposite." In fact, writing in 1925 in an essay entitled "Worlds of Color," an important essay reprinted as "The Negro Mind Reaches Out" in Alain Locke's germinal anthology *The New Negro* (as Brent Staples points out in his introduction to Du Bois's fifth novel, *Worlds of Color*, published just two years before he died), Du Bois had declared that "led by American Negroes, the Negroes of the world are reaching out hands toward each other to know, to sympathize, to inquire." And, indeed, Du Bois himself confessed at his ninety-first birthday celebration in Beijing, as Moses notes, that "once I thought of you Africans as children, whom we educated Afro-Americans would lead to liberty. I was wrong." Nevertheless, Du Bois's various books on Africa, as well as his role as an early theorist and organizer of the several Pan-African Congresses between 1900 and 1945, increasingly underscored his role throughout the first half of the century as the father of Pan-Africanism, precisely as his presence and authority within such civil rights organizations as the NAACP began to wane.

Du Bois's ultimate allegory, however, is to be found in *The Black Flame Trilogy*, the three novels that Du Bois published just before repatriating to Ghana, in 1957, 1959, and 1961. The trilogy is the ultimate allegory in Du Bois's canon because, as Brent Edwards shows us in his introductions to the novels, it is a fictional representation of the trajectory of Du Bois's career, complete with several characters who stand for aspects of Du Bois's personality and professional life, including Sebastian Doyle, who "not only studied the Negro problem, he embodied the Negro problem. It was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. It made his world and filled his thought," as well as Professor James Burghardt, trained as a historian at Yale and who taught, as Du Bois had, at Atlanta University, and who believed that "the Negro problem must no longer be regarded emotionally. It must be faced scientifically and solved by long, accurate and intense investigation. Moreover, it was not one problem, but a series of

problems interrelated with the social problems of the world. He laid down a program of study covering a hundred years."

But even more important than these allegorical representations of himself, or early, emerging versions of himself, Du Bois used *The Black Flame* novels to underscore the economic foundation of anti-black racism. As Edwards notes, "The real villain," for Du Bois, "is not an individual Southern aristocrat or racist white laborer, but instead capitalism itself, especially in the corporate form that has dominated the economic and social landscape of the world for more than a century," which underscores Du Bois's ideological transformations from an integrationist of sorts to an emergent mode of African American, first, and then Pan-Africanist cultural nationalism, through socialism, landing squarely in the embrace of the Communist Party just two years before his death.

Despite this evolution in ideology, Mansart, Du Bois's protagonist in the trilogy, ends his series of intellectual transformations precisely where Du Bois himself began as he embarked upon his career as a professor just a year after receiving his Harvard PhD in 1895. In language strikingly familiar to his statement that the time he spent in Berlin enabled him to look "at the world as a man and not simply from a narrow racial and provincial outlook," Du Bois tells us in the final volume of the trilogy that Mansart "began to have a conception of the world as one unified dwelling place. He was escaping from his racial provincialism. He began to think of himself as part of humanity and not simply as an American Negro over against a white world." For all of his ideological permutations and combinations, in other words, W. E. B. Du Bois—formidable and intimidating ideologue and ferocious foe of racism and colonialism—quite probably never veered very far from the path that he charted for himself as a student, when he fell so deeply in love with the written word that he found himself, inevitably and inescapably, drawn into a life-long love affair with language, an affair of the heart to which he remained faithful throughout an eighty-year career as a student and scholar, from the time he entered Fisk University in 1885 to his death as the Editor of "The Encyclopedia Africana" in 1963. And now, with the publication of the Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois, a new generation of readers can experience his passion for words, Du Bois's love of language purely for its own sake, as well as a conduit for advocacy and debate about the topic that consumed him his entire professional life, the freedom and the dignity of the Negro.



The first volume in the series is Du Bois's revised dissertation, and his first publication, entitled *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America*. A model of contemporary historiography that favored empiricism over universal proclamation, *Suppression* reveals the government's slow movement toward abolition as what the literary scholar Saidiya Hartman calls in her introduction "a litany of failures, missed opportunities, and belated acts," in which a market sensibility took precedence over moral outrage, the combination of which led to the continuation of the Atlantic slave trade to the United States until it was no longer economically beneficial.

Lawrence D. Bobo, one of the foremost urban sociologists working today, argues in his introduction to *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899), that Du Bois was not only an innovative historian, as Hartman properly identifies him, but also a groundbreaking social scientist whose study of Philadelphia displays “the most rigorous and sophisticated social science of its era by employing a systematic community social survey method.” Although it was well reviewed at its publication—which coincided with the advent of the field of urban sociology—*The Philadelphia Negro* did not become the subject of significant scholarly attention until the 1940s, and has become, since then, a model for the study of black communities.

The distinguished scholar of black literature and culture, Arnold Rampersad, calls *The Souls of Black Folk* “possibly the most important book ever penned by a black American”—an assertion with which I heartily agree. A composite of various essays, subjects, and tones, *Souls* is both very much of its time, and timeless. It contributed to the American lexicon two terms that have been crucial for more than a century in understanding the African American experience: the “color line” and “double consciousness.” For Rampersad, that we have learned so much about both issues since Du Bois first wrote, but have not made either irrelevant to our twenty-first century experience is, in a real way, our scholarly blessing and burden.

Abandoning the scholarly and empirical prowess so vividly on display in *Suppression* and *Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois meant his biography of John Brown to be not a work of scholarship but rather one “about activism, social consciousness, and the politics of race,” argues the legal historian Paul Finkelman in his introduction to *John Brown* (1909). The only biography in Du Bois’s vast oeuvre, the book grew out of his participation in the Niagara Movement’s meeting at Harpers Ferry in 1906 (an event the centenary of which I had the good fortune to celebrate), and—with the myth of John Brown taking precedence at times over the facts of his life—marks Du Bois’s transition from professional academic to full-time activist.

There was not a genre that Du Bois did not attempt in his long career as a writer. After the John Brown biography, Du Bois turned to the novel. In his introduction to *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), Du Bois’s first novel, the literary historian William Andrews looks beyond the Victorian diction and sometimes purple prose to see a work that is the “most noteworthy Great African American Novel of its time.” *Quest* is a “Southern problem” novel writ large on a national and even mythic canvas, and one that is ultimately radical in its endorsement of strong black womanhood, equality and comradeship between the sexes, and, in Du Bois’s words, “a bold regeneration of the land,” which for Andrews means a hitherto-unheard-of proposed economic alliance between poor blacks and poor whites in the rural South.

Moving from a national to an international canvas, Du Bois published *The Negro* (1915), more than half of which is devoted to African history. In this way, John K. Thornton argues in his introduction, Du Bois firmly grounded for an educated lay readership the history of African Americans in the history of Africa. Drawing on the emergent disciplines of anthropology and linguistics

and including, even sketchily, accounts of what would now be called Diaspora communities in the Caribbean and Latin America, *The Negro* is important in that it presents, in Thornton's words, "African history [as having] movement and Africans . . . as historical actors and not simply as stolid recipients of foreign techniques and knowledge."

Dismissed by some critics and lauded by others as the "militant sequel" to *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920) appeared in a world radically transformed by the ravages of World War I. In addition to these international upheavals, and to the "crossing and re-crossing" of the color line engendered by the war, the historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham tells us in her magisterial introduction to this volume that blacks at home in the U.S. faced major changes and relocations. The Great Migration was in full swing when Du Bois wrote *Darkwater*, and the change in the center of black life is reflected in the change of scene to the North, a far, urban cry from the rural setting of most of *Souls*. If *Souls* saw the American landscape in black and white, Higginbotham finds that *Darkwater* is like chiaroscuro, the painting technique developed by artists of the Italian Renaissance: "Du Bois, like these Renaissance painters, moves beyond the contouring line of the two-dimensional and introduces depth and volume through his representation of color—through his contrast and shading of white and various darker peoples." Higginbotham goes on to say that "Du Bois continually undermines the fixedness of racial boundaries and subverts the visual coherence of racial identities to an extent that cannot be accidental." The Du Bois who emerges in *Darkwater* is increasingly a citizen of the world, whose gaze may be fixed on his native land but whose understanding of that land is inextricably bound to the larger world around him.

The Gift of Black Folk (1924) had an odd genesis as part of the Knights of Columbus's series on "Racial Contributions to the United States." In her introduction, Glenda Carpio notes that Du Bois's celebration of black accomplishments did not turn away from the bitter history of slavery that spawned them: these were not gifts always rendered freely, Carpio points out. Though less substantial than many of his other works, and primarily a catalog of black accomplishments across different fields, *Gift* is notable for the complex ways Du Bois links African American contributions in the arenas of labor, war, church and social life, fraternal organizations, and especially the arts, by both women and men, to the bitter history of slavery.

Homi Bhabha sees *The Dark Princess* (1928) as another odd work, a "Bollywood-style Bildungsroman," in which the race-man Mathew Towns teams with Kautilya, the "dark Princess of the Tibetan Kingdom of Bwodpur," to combat international colonialism in the struggle for global emancipation. But in this somewhat messy novel, which renders the international scenes with a Zolaesque precision, Bhabha detects a serious philosophical purpose: to elaborate on the "rule of juxtaposition" (first defined in *Darkwater*), which "creat[es] an enforced intimacy, an antagonistic proximity, that defines the color-line as it runs across the uncivil society of the nation."

Du Bois moved from the esoteric exercise of *The Dark Princess* to a more accessible form for his next publications, *Africa, Its Geography, People and Products*, and

Africa—Its Place in Modern History (1930). Published as Blue Books for the educated lay reader by E. Haldeman-Julius of Girard, Kansas, the two volumes are, for the African historian and African Emmanuel Akyeampong, remarkably useful and trenchant. The first volume is a relatively straightforward analysis of Africa's geography, climate, and environment, and the impact these physical factors have had on the development of African civilization. The second volume, which seeks "to place the continent at the very center of ancient and modern history," is more polemical, with economics cited as the central motivating factor behind modern colonialism and the slave trade.

The anger that was evident in the second of the two Blue Books came to full flower in *Black Reconstruction* (1935), a sweeping corrective to contemporary histories of the Reconstruction era, which (white) historians had shaped with the view of blacks as inadequate to the task of capitalizing on the freedom that emancipation had given them, and black history as "separate, unequal, and irrelevant," in the words of Du Bois's Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer, David Levering Lewis. Inspired by *The Gift of Black Folk* and from Du Bois's own withdrawal of his article on the Negro in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which demanded an excision of "a paragraph on the positive Reconstruction role of black people," *Black Reconstruction* provided original interpretations of black labor's relation to industrial wealth and, most radically, of the *agency* of black people in determining their lives after the Civil War. In his introduction, Lewis contends, rightly, that the book marks a progression in Du Bois's thought, from his early faith in academic knowledge and empiricism as a cure-all for the nation's problems, to the "more effective strategy of militant journalism informed by uncompromising principles and vital social science."

Wilson J. Moses presents *Black Folk Then and Now* (1939) as a midway point between *The Negro* (1915) and *The World and Africa* (1946). While all three volumes sought to address the entire span of black history, the special mandate of *Black Folk* was to "correct the omissions, misinterpretations, and deliberate lies that [Du Bois] detected in previous depictions of the Negro's past." In this volume, he went back to the original Herodotus and provided his own translation, which led him to affirm, with other black writers, that the Egyptians were, indeed, black (a conclusion he had resisted earlier in his career). But even in this work, with such evidence of his intellectual background on display, Du Bois is less interested in intellectual history than in social history. Even as he tracks developments in the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America, Du Bois neglects the Pan-African movement and his own involvement in it.

Du Bois's autobiography, on the other hand, shows a man far more interested in writing about his intellectual journey than his personal or social life. The philosopher Anthony Appiah, in his subtle introduction to *Dusk of Dawn*, tells us that Du Bois was famous for nothing so much as his accomplishments as an intellectual and a writer; his institutional affiliations (with the NAACP, with the Pan-African Congress) were fleeting, and his internal contradictions were vexing (he was both a committed Socialist and a committed elitist). The aim of this account, like so much of Du Bois's other work, was to address the problem of the color line, and he presents his distinguished, singular life as emblematic of that problem, and himself as hopeful for its solution.

At the time he rejoined the NAACP to oversee its global programming in 1944, Du Bois was prepared to dedicate himself completely to the abolition of colonialism, which he saw as the driving force behind all global conflicts. What was remarkable about his anti-colonialism was, as Gerald Horne rightly points out in his introduction to *Color and Democracy* (1946), Du Bois's inclusion of Asia, and particularly Japan, in the discussion. As fertile ground for colonial enterprises, Asia yielded still more evidence of the "inviolable link between color and democracy."

Color continued to preoccupy Du Bois, and in *The World and Africa*, he attempted to correct the ways in which color (black) had affected history. Mahmood Mamdani tells us in his introduction that Du Bois's motivation in writing this somewhat hasty volume was to tell the story of "those left out of recorded history" and to challenge, in effect, "an entire tradition of history-writing . . . modern European historiography." Du Bois was aware that this was just a beginning to a much larger project, to connect the history of Europe that dominated the academic discipline of history to events and progress in the world at large, including Africa.

In Battle for Peace: The Story of My 83rd Birthday features an embattled Du Bois enduring prosecution by (and eventually winning acquittal from) the federal government whose indictment of him as an unregistered agent for the Soviet Union was, according to Manning Marable, a trumped-up means by which to discredit the great black leader and frighten his fellow supporters of international peace into silence. It worked, at least in part: while Du Bois drew support from many international associations, the NAACP essentially abandoned him. Ten years later, in 1961, Du Bois would permanently leave the United States for Ghana.

Brent Hayes Edwards in his introduction calls the *Black Flame* trilogy of novels Du Bois's most neglected work. Written in the last few years of life, *The Ordeal of Mansart* (1957), *Mansart Builds a School* (1959), and *Worlds of Color* (1961) follow the life of Manuel Mansart from his birth in 1876 (the last year of Reconstruction) to his death in 1956, a period which spans his rise from a noted but provincial Southern educator to a self-educating citizen of the world of color. With its alternating apocalyptic and utopian tone, its depiction of real historical figures and events, and its thoughtful "animation of economic history and especially labor history," the *Black Flame* trilogy offers, according to Edwards, "the clearest articulation of Du Bois's perspective at the end of his life, and his reflections on an unparalleled career that had stretched from Reconstruction through the Cold War."

Du Bois was a largely marginalized figure in the last decade of his life, and his work published at that time, most notably the *Black Flame* trilogy, went into the critical and cultural abyss. Mark Sanders suggests that the "invisibility" of the trilogy, then and now, can be explained by an evolution in literary "taste" in the 1950s, wrought by new trends in literary criticism and magazine culture, the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, and Du Bois's own development. Even if we have rejected in many real ways the ethos of the 1950s, for Sanders, our prescriptions for taste still owe a great deal to that decade.

Werner Sollors finds "four major narrative strains" in the posthumously published *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois* (1968): the personal (including "startling"

sexual revelations from the famously staid Du Bois); the academic, editorial, and organizational, in which his work is fully explored, and the political is always personal even while science and reason are held to be the solution to the race problem; the Communist, first as interested onlooker and then as Party member; and the elderly, in which an old man takes stock of contemporary youth culture with something of a jaundiced eye. Sollors suggests that far from being disjointed, the various strands of the *Autobiography* are united by Du Bois's ongoing quest for recognition. I would argue that there is nothing pathetic in this quest; it is simply the desire for respect from the society (black and white) that Du Bois spent his long life trying to understand.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Cambridge, Massachusetts
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Introduction

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THE DEAD LETTER OF THE LAW

Writing in his room at Shorter Hall, the twenty-eight-year-old Professor W. E. B. Du Bois envisioned all the paths not taken. The pastoral campus of Wilberforce University with its manicured lawns and rolling hills was not able to quell the doubts about his future or that of the race. As he added handwritten footnotes to the typed manuscript of his dissertation, he reflected on the queer world in which he had landed after two years of studying abroad at the University of Berlin, and no doubt he longed for the freedom of his *Lehrjahr* (learning years). In the small dusty village of Wilberforce, Ohio, his cane and gloves marked him as the foreigner; in the hostile country of the United States, his skin marked him as an alien. In his first year, the professor of classics taught Latin and Greek, and to his surprise he was also asked to offer classes in English, German, and history.¹ In addition to his teaching duties, Du Bois labored diligently to revise what had been a master's thesis on "The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870" into a twelve-chapter Harvard doctoral dissertation. The dissertation was completed in 1895 and was published in 1896 as the first monograph in the Harvard Historical Studies Series.

The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America was well received in its time. The review in the *Nation* said that it was "an honor alike to its author, to the university whose approval it has received, and to American historical scholarship." "A valuable review of an important subject," wrote Stephen B. Weeks in the *American Historical Review*. His only criticisms concerned those passages in the text where the voice of the advocate was louder than that of the dispassionate historian.

At the time of its publication, *Suppression* was at the forefront of developments in historiography. It embodied the principles of a new kind of history, which was guided less by overarching grand stories of universal laws or by metaphysical historicism than by science, empirical data, archival materials, and primary sources.² At Harvard, Du Bois's teacher Albert Bushnell Hart had instilled in his students the value of primary documents and hard data. History was a science that depended upon the careful scrutiny of facts and evidence.

Sharing this faith in empiricism, Du Bois set out "to do his work with scientific accuracy," and the positivism of the scientific method is displayed in *Suppression* and in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899).³ This positivist approach, writes Shamoon Zamir, was "a means of analyzing and improving African American life at a time when this method is being used in American social science largely in support of a legitimization of progressive and exceptionalist accounts of American social process, as well as in defense of racist apologetics."⁴

Five decades later, Du Bois apologized for the moral tone of *Suppression* and for the shortcomings of his analysis of capitalism and racism, which he explained as the consequence of his ignorance of Marx and Freud. By then Du Bois had produced works "written in tears and blood"⁵ and had abandoned his empirical and scientific studies because "one could not be a calm, cool and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved."

Despite his professed ignorance of Marx, *Suppression* details the primacy of capital in determining the government's reluctance to abolish and then suppress the slave trade, and it also illuminates the contradictions of liberal philosophy in the era of the trade. As he writes of the slave-trading ports in New England, "This trade, no moral suasion, not even the strong 'liberty' cry of the Revolution, was able wholly to suppress."⁶

The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States remains an important text in the historiography of slavery. Today the major criticism of *Suppression* is that Du Bois overestimated the volume of the illegal slave trade to the United States by failing to account for the growth of the enslaved population through biological reproduction; but it was impossible for him to know this when he wrote the text. His discussion of the importance of the Haitian Revolution and its role in the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade is no less groundbreaking today than it was more than a century ago.

Opening the pages of this pioneering study, the reader might first expect a celebratory history of a wrong undone or of a crime against humanity redressed. But this is not the story that Du Bois tells. His story is quite unlike the self-congratulatory account proffered by British and American abolitionists, in which the abolition of the trade was viewed as "the inevitable outcome of moral and cultural progress."⁷ Nor is his a story of the triumph of humanitarianism or of the West rectifying its fatal mistakes.

The history of the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade as it is narrated by Du Bois is a litany of failures, missed opportunities, and belated acts. As he details in the scrupulous recounting of congressional debates and aborted legislative efforts, profit rather than progress directed the actors and determined the events that culminated in the suppression of the slave trade. A laissez-faire market sensibility eclipsed the avowed commitments to liberty, equality, and freedom heralded by the nascent republic. The primacy of the marketplace and the interests of planters, shipbuilders, and financiers dictated the course of the nation and caused lawmakers and politicians to equivocate about the abolition and suppression of the traffic in African lives. Du Bois succeeds in documenting the ways in which the accumulation of profit made black life disposable and exchangeable.

As C. L. R. James observes in “The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery”, the title of Du Bois’s book is in some respects misleading, since the actual efforts at the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade (1807–1825) are not discussed until chapter eight.⁸ Rather than writing a straightforward history of the suppression of the slave trade, Du Bois underscores a paradox: the slave trade flourished under the guise of its suppression. The monograph is rather a detailed study of failed efforts, belatedness, and the consequences of compromising with slavery. *Suppression* is as much about the failures of the American Revolution and the freedom it did not deliver to the enslaved as it is about the Atlantic slave trade. By allowing the slave trade to continue officially for another two decades, the new republic allied its future with slavery.

The suppression of the slave trade is a nonevent in *Suppression*. In chapter eight, Du Bois describes the passage of the 1807 bill that prohibited “the importation of Slaves into any port or place within the jurisdiction of the United States, from and after the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eight.” “The period so confidently looked forward to had arrived,” but as Du Bois observes, the bill had little or no effect. *Suppression* draws attention to this noncompliance by the shift from “Attempted Suppression” to “Continuance of the Trade” on the headers of the pages. The passage of the act actually signaled the opposite, the continuance of the trade in the guise of its suppression. “The Act of 1807 came very near being a dead letter,” writes Du Bois. Its only real consequence was that it forced the slave trade to assume “a Spanish dress, [which] was in reality only the trade of other nations in disguise.”

It was not until the outbreak of the Civil War, Du Bois contends, that the U.S. government “expressed a willingness to do all in its power to suppress the slave trade.” The chapter closes on a melancholy note, quoting a letter of Secretary Seward: “Had such a treaty been made in 1808, there would now have been no sedition here.” Chapter ten details the consequences of the compromise with slavery made at the Federal Convention in 1787: “Here it was that the fatal mistake of compromising with slavery in the beginning, and of the policy of laissez-faire pursued thereafter, became painfully manifest; for, instead now of a healthy, normal, economic development along proper industrial lines, we have the abnormal and fatal rise of a slave-labor large farming system, which, before it was realized, had so intertwined itself upon the economic forces of an industrial age, that a vast and terrible civil war was necessary to displace it.” As he concludes at the end of chapter eleven, it was the Thirteenth Amendment that “legally confirmed what the war had already accomplished, and slavery and the slave trade fell at one blow.”

Suppression is primarily a documentary history, yet ethical and political questions animate the text. What happens when the government fails to eradicate wrongs at the earliest opportunities? What catastrophes unfold when profit rather than principle dictate the nation’s course of action? What futures are eclipsed when the path to freedom is not taken?

In 1896, Du Bois could see all too easily—in the escalating racial violence of his time and in the backlash against the Negro—the debris of the Compromise

of the Federal Convention of 1787, which had permitted the Atlantic slave trade to flourish legally for an additional twenty years and illegally for another half century. In recounting the history of the suppression of the slave trade, or, more accurately, the failure of the U.S. government to suppress the slave trade, Du Bois did not use the poetic figures that later came to define his oeuvre. Words like "twilight," "dusk," and "disappointment" do not appear on the pages of this largely empirical study of the events and legislative acts that culminated in the suppression of the slave trade. However, in the welter of details that constitute the bulk of the study and the four appendices that augment it, the reader nonetheless senses this great disappointment—a disappointment that had its full expression in an essay that Du Bois published the following year, "The Strivings of the Negro People," which later became "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

"The Strivings of the Negro People" fleshed out the meaning of this disappointment and historicized its emergence. "The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found freedom in the promised land," Du Bois writes. "Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people." This disappointment registers the elusiveness of emancipation and the impending threat of what he describes as a "second slavery." It is made explicit in "Strivings" but lurks beneath the surface of *Suppression*. In later works, including *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *Black Reconstruction* (1935), and *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), the disappointment develops as a historical sensibility skeptical of the notion of progress and concerned first and foremost with the space of the interval—that is, with the chasm between the no longer and the not yet, between what is and what might have been. The interval describes the disjunctive time of Afro-modernity or the temporal lag between the promises of modernity and the realization of those promises. This lag or belatedness occupies a central role in the history that Du Bois recounts and it also describes his own times.

The abandonment of Reconstruction, the escalation of racist violence, and the establishment of Jim Crow define the moment in which *Suppression* was written. Leading intellectuals of the time promoted theories of Negro morbidity and retardation in national best sellers. In *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*, also published in 1896, Frederick Hoffman advanced the idea that blacks would soon be extinct. Death and disease would solve the race problem. Even former abolitionists and friends of the race had begun to doubt whether it was possible for the Negro to survive without the support and tutelage of slavery. The social Darwinism ascendant in the U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century proclaimed that progress rested on "the death of the inferior individual and nowhere more so than race problems."⁹

In 1896, the year that *Suppression* was published, the Supreme Court decided in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that racial segregation was not a violation of equal protection guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment, and "separate but equal" became the law of the land. In the first thirteen years of Du Bois's teaching