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W. E. B. Du Bois's Critique of U.S. Imperialism

John Carlos Rowe

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it,
I heard the singing on the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
– Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

If the slave cannot be taken from Africa, slavery can be taken to Africa.
– Du Bois, *Darkwater*

Throughout his long career and its many different phases, Du Bois consistently criticized the United States for pursuing imperialist aims both at home and abroad. He is one of the few American intellectuals to understand U.S. imperialism to differ from earlier forms of Eurocolonialism and to antedate considerably the Spanish-American War. For Du Bois, U.S. imperialism originates in slavery and depends on racism to legitimate colonial practices of territorial conquest, economic domination, and psychological subjugation. Anti-imperialist writers like William Dean Howells and Mark Twain had criticized the United States for following the leads of England, Spain, and Germany in expansionist ventures around the globe, and Twain certainly understood slavery in the United States to be a colonial phenomenon.¹ Nevertheless, slavery is for Twain a venerable example of human cruelty and just another reminder of how little we have progressed from our feudal past. On the contrary, Du Bois understands U.S. slavery to be especially modern, insofar as it is based on *racial distinctions* unknown in earlier forms of serfdom and enslavement. He may well agree with Twain about the persistence of human cruelty throughout history, but he sees it differently deployed in the modern period. In the modern work of colonial domination and its system-

¹ See my "How the Boss Played the Game: Twain's Critique of U.S. Imperialism in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain*, pp. 175-192.

atic, thus *imperial*, application to peoples defined thereby as “other,” Du Bois judges the United States to have taken the lead.

Du Bois’s theory of racial imperialism is still very profoundly *modern*, especially in Du Bois’s insistence from his earliest book, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* (1896) to his posthumously published *Autobiography* (1968), on the economic roots of all imperialisms. But Du Bois comes the closest of the American intellectuals critical of U.S. imperialism before World War II to understanding U.S. imperialism as a *neoimperialism* of the postmodern sort we now associate with the political control of “spheres of influence” and the corporate manipulation of foreign cultures to create new markets by exporting American lifestyles and cultural products. Because Du Bois understood race and class to be the crucially related fictions by which modern nations justified the inequitable distribution of wealth and thus power, he viewed with special clarity the extent to which cultural work was indispensable to colonial hierarchies both at home and abroad. For this very reason, Du Bois also understood the power of culture to combat imperialism by challenging such hierarchies and building powerful coalitions of the oppressed to resist domination.

As Du Bois grew older and angrier about the unrecognized involvement of the United States in colonial ventures around the world, especially in Africa, the United States, and Latin America, he endorsed an increasingly dogmatic economic thesis that is both vulgarly Marxist and curiously blind to the equally zealous imperialism of the Stalinism he espoused.² This turn in Du Bois’s career has often distracted scholars from the subtlety of his earlier discussions of United States as an imperial power and its novel use of culture to disguise and naturalize its practices of domination. Given the tendency of even America’s most vigorous modern critics to localize its imperialism to such specific foreign ventures as the Spanish-American War and the general myopia of Americans until quite recently in regard to the imbrication of U.S. racism and imperialism, Du Bois was right to suggest that U.S. culture has played a major part in disguising its imperialist roots. Wrong as Du Bois was about Stalinism or the inevitable triumph of socialism in the twentieth century, his insistence on connecting cultural analyses to their economic consequences ought to be heard by contemporary cultural critics.³

² For a good summary of the several scholarly explanations for Du Bois’s stubborn adherence to the “Stalinist violation of his democratic principles in the 1940s and 1950s,” see William E. Cain, “From Liberalism to Communism: The Political Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois,” in *The Cultures of United States Imperialism*, pp. 456-471.

³ In her October 1996 inaugural address as the new President of the American Studies Association, “Insiders and Outsiders – The Borders of the Nation and the Limits of the ASA,” Patricia

I want to look again, then, at the role played by culture both in the legitimation of and the possible resistance to U.S. imperialism, especially in those earlier works by Du Bois in which he expressed hope in the utopian possibilities of culture. I shall focus my attention on *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920), with some reference to *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), each of which connects explicitly U.S. domestic policies toward African Americans with global imperialism and each of which offers means of social emancipation for African Americans who will align themselves with other oppressed peoples of color around the globe.

Du Bois's often quoted prediction and recollection in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line. . . . It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War," is obliquely elaborated in that work.⁴ In particular, Du Bois never centrally works out the frequent hints linking slavery and racism in the United States with global imperialism, preferring instead to leave the reader to work out such implications. Of course, such indirection is very much in keeping with the unique style of *Souls*, a work that Du Bois believed "conveyed 'a clear central message,' but that around this center floated 'a penumbra' of vagueness and half-veiled allusions."⁵ Throughout the text, it is nonetheless clear that the "black folk" of the title are represented in an historically dramatic struggle to constitute themselves as a community against the many threats by white culture to destroy them as a people, ranging from the division of black families under slavery to the failure to deliver the economic, educational, and political promises of emancipation.

It requires the perspective of Du Bois's more explicitly Marxist perspective in *Black Reconstruction* for the reader to understand fully the anti-imperialist argument implicit in *Souls*. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois makes clear that the *racialization* of labor conflicts in the United States is the foundation for a new imperialism, which he names in *Darkwater* "modern

Nelson Limerick warns contemporary scholars to be careful not to stress cultural factors at the expense of economic forces in understanding minority and marginalized groups. As she points out, a rich cultural heritage can often be seen as a sort of consolation prize for a group repeatedly exploited by the prevailing forces of production and the market. Du Bois's increasingly strident insistence that we focus on economic factors in the shaping or deformation of minority cultures may thus be explained in part by his frustration with other American intellectuals, especially after the Stalinist purges and show trials of the late 1930s and 1940s, abandoning economic explanations for injustices and retreating to safer and more exclusive analyses of culture.

⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 13. Further references in the text as *Souls*.

⁵ Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*, pp. 69-70.

industrial imperialism.”⁶ Du Bois’s Marxist reinterpretation of Reconstruction as the emergence of an African-American racial and class consciousness considers this awakening of collective action to herald an international movement of peoples of color similarly exploited by global capitalism: “Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal. The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black.”⁷ In this volume, Eric Sundquist writes, Du Bois “codified his long-evolving characterization of slaves and ex-slaves as an industrial proletariat whose surplus labor was the cornerstone of global capitalism.”⁸ Du Bois interprets slavery in the United States as the economic and cultural system that rationalized its injustices in terms of racial hierarchies that would become the means for first world nations to justify economic and political involvement in underdeveloped communities around the world on the basis of first-world racial and thus cultural superiority. Du Bois always understands U.S. slavery to be fundamental to industrial capitalism, which would merely replace rural bondage with factory feudalism in the developed nations and economic enslavement of colonized peoples of color in the Third World.

Instead of viewing antebellum slavery as an increasingly impractical agrarian practice swept away by Northern industrial progress, Du Bois views slavery as a crucial step in “modern industrial imperialism.” In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he writes: “And now the golden fleece is found; not only found, but, in its birthplace, woven. For the hum of the cotton-mills is the newest and most significant thing in the New South today. All through the Carolinas and Georgia, away down to Mexico, rise these gaunt red buildings, bare and homely, and yet so busy and noisy withal that they scarce seem to belong to the slow and sleepy land. Perhaps they sprang from dragon’s teeth” (*Souls*, p. 112). To be sure, the “slow and sleepy land” is Du Bois’s invocation of the cliché about the old agrarian South, and the fantasy that the New South’s cotton-mills, whose “gaunt, . . . bare and homely” buildings recall the slaves’ quarters, must have sprung “from dragon’s teeth,” as in the myth of Cadmus,

⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, p. 138. Further references in the text as *DW*.

⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880*, p. 16. Further references in the text as *BR*.

⁸ Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, p. 542.

only underscores how little we have understood slavery's part in preparing for modern industrial exploitation.⁹

As Du Bois makes clear in *Black Reconstruction*, cotton was introduced as an antebellum agricultural product primarily because of its potential for the global market: "On free and fertile land Americans raised, not simply sugar as a cheap sweetening, rice for food and tobacco as a new and tickling luxury; but they began to grow a fiber that clothed the masses of a ragged world" (BR, 4). As the demand for cotton rapidly grew, as Du Bois carefully documents in the empirical manner of such earlier studies as *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), "the black workers of America" found themselves "bent at the bottom of a growing pyramid of commerce and industry" whose growth "became the cause of new political demands and alignments, of new dreams of power and visions of empire . . . in Florida, in Louisiana, in Mexico" (BR, 5). As Rampersad points out, Du Bois consistently blames the industrial age for having "spawned slavery and the excesses of capitalism," even before Du Bois had developed the thoroughly Marxian analysis of the exploitation of labor and race in *Black Reconstruction*.¹⁰ Rejecting the prevailing historical view in the 1920s and 1930s of nineteenth-century America as divided between "manufacturing and industry . . . in the North" and "agrarian feudalism . . . in the South," Du Bois insists that Southern slavery was fundamental to the development of "a new slavery of the working class in the midst of a fateful experiment in democracy" (BR, 715).¹¹

Despite Du Bois's gloomy assessment that Southern slavery was finally abolished only to be promptly replaced by Northern wage-slavery, his argument in *Black Reconstruction in America* is utopian in its effort to gain historical recognition for African Americans' contributions to their own emancipation and socioeconomic organization in Reconstruction. What African Americans attempted to achieve in the decades following the Civil War was

⁹ Du Bois's use of the Greek myth of Cadmus seems to be intended as an ironic commentary on both the speed of industrial development in the New South but also its future end in the sort of industrial "suicide" Du Bois often predicted for capitalism, much in keeping with Marxist dogma. In the myth, Cadmus sows the teeth of the dragon, sacred to Ares, that he has killed and armed men spring up from the ground. Flinging a stone among them, Cadmus causes them to kill each other, except for five survivors who become his allies. Du Bois seems to have in mind the conflict between white and African-American workers in the industrialized South and North after the Civil War. For Du Bois, the survivors will be those workers who not only seize the means of production, but establish political and cultural coalitions across racial lines.

¹⁰ Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*, p. 183.

¹¹ In this passage, Du Bois is criticizing Charles and Mary Beard's *Rise of American Civilization* not only for its neglect of the contributions of African Americans to "American Civilization" but also for its "sweeping mechanistic interpretation" of Northern industrial progress in the post-Civil War era.

nothing less than the first step of decolonization that Du Bois declares in the early twentieth century must now be taken by peoples of color in Asia and Africa. During Reconstruction, Du Bois argues: "International and commercial imperialism began to get a vision. Within the very echo of that philanthropy which had abolished the slave trade, was beginning a new industrial slavery of black and brown and yellow workers in Africa and Asia" (*BR*, 632). When viewed from the perspective of the African Americans who attempted such a grand project, the failure of Reconstruction, sealed by the separate-but-equal ideology of the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision and the Jim-Crow laws of turn-of-the-century America, can only be understood in mythic terms appropriate to this historical tragedy:

The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell; and in the third century they arose from the dead, in the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen. It was a tragedy that beggared the Greek; it was an upheaval of humanity like the Reformation and the French Revolution. (*BR*, 727)

In this vision of an African-American *nekuyia*, or descent into the Underworld, Du Bois offers a myth of African diaspora with its own history ("in the third century they arose from the dead"), but one that deliberately parallels the classical origins of Western Civilization.

Du Bois's messianic style in this passage is familiar to readers of *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Darkwater*, and many of his other works, and it is itself part of Du Bois's strategy of decolonization both within the domestic United States and in more recognizable colonies around the world. By arguing that Abolition and Reconstruction are original acts of revolution against modern industrial imperialism, Du Bois makes African-American history prophetic of what needs to be done elsewhere around the colonized globe, even as he acknowledges that without such global decolonization the project of racial emancipation in the United States must be judged a failure. Indeed, the style itself contributes to the process of political and social reform Du Bois advocates, because it invokes the forgotten or deliberately neglected history of African-American self-emancipation during Reconstruction and revitalizes that history by connecting it with the utopian project of global decolonization. Africa America becomes the site of this crossing of past, present, and

future, and thus it holds a privileged position as the *origin* of resistance to modern imperialism.¹²

Even when he is most critical of European colonialism in the writings that stretch from *The African Slave Trade* to *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois continues to connect the revolution of peoples of color against colonial domination with the Euroamerican revolutionary heritage. The African-American revolt of Abolition and reform of Reconstruction “beggars” Greek tragedy by its greater historical significance, and it is *compared* favorably with the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. Du Bois’s point here is not simply that African Americans were persecuted under slavery on the basis of religion and class, as well as race, but also that the great emancipatory project of the European Enlightenment remains unfinished without the liberation of peoples of color, especially those non-Europeans typically enslaved by colonialisms of various sorts around the globe. Once again, the uniqueness of African Americans becomes apparent in Du Bois’s argument, because they are in the enviable position of saving U.S. democracy from its corruption by the commercial interests that drive Southern slavery, Northern capitalism, and Euroamerican imperialism.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois famously condemns vocational training for African Americans of the sort advocated by Booker T. Washington and practiced at his Tuskegee Institute on the grounds that it merely reinforces the commercialism of the modern age. Less commonly recognized is Du Bois’s insistence that such practical training is integrally related to the “tendency . . . , born of slavery and quickened to renewed life by the crazy imperialism of the day, to regard human beings as among the material resources of a land to be trained with an eye single to future dividends” (*Souls*, 79). Equating the exploitative disciplining of the laborer’s body with the colonial subjugation of foreign territory, Du Bois thus views liberal education of the student’s spirit – the “soul” of the title – to be one means of resisting such colonization both of body and land. Attentive as Du Bois is in all of his writings to the importance of economic self-determination, he knows well the danger “of interpreting the world” exclusively “in dollars” (*Souls*, 67).

Racism is itself part of this process of commodifying the spirit, and it is thus not surprising that in *Darkwater* Du Bois makes “modern industrial

¹² As Eric Sundquist puts the matter in *To Wake the Nations*, p. 548 : “Du Bois tended to view African retentions, such as those he found evident in the African American church and the spirituals, to be as much a set of theoretical ideals as a set of concrete practices that had left their stamp on post-Civil War black culture. The study of black history therefore became an act of recovery that could itself rekindle latent African sources of spiritual belief in African America.”

imperialism" depend crucially on what he considers the "very modern" "discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples" (*DW*, 29-30). The claim to white superiority is "a nineteenth and twentieth century matter," Du Bois argues: "The Middle Age regarded skin color with mild curiosity; and even up into the eighteenth century we were hammering our national manikins into one, great, Universal Man, with fine frenzy which ignored color and race, even more than birth" (*DW*, 30). Du Bois's very romantic notion that the Enlightenment was color-blind serves his polemical purpose of identifying racism with the "modern industrial imperialism" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it also has the advantage of affirming a "purer" Enlightenment rationality whose salvation from capitalist degradation he makes one of the important goals of African-American solidarity in both *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater*.

Du Bois places the United States at the vanguard of this "silent revolution that has gripped modern European culture in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries," whose "zenith came in Boxer times: White supremacy was all but world-wide, Africa was dead, India conquered, Japan isolated, and China prostrate, while white America whetted her sword for mongrel Mexico and mulatto South America, lynching her own Negroes the while" (*DW*, 42). Du Bois refers here to the development of U.S. imperialist policies from the Spanish-American War (1898) to the Russo-Japanese War (1905) under Secretary of State John Hay, and their consolidation during the First World War. He explicitly aligns the continuing persecution of African Americans at home — from their murder by white mobs in Atlanta and East St. Louis — with the expansionist policies of the United States.¹³ Sarcastically referring to the U.S. government's claims from Secretary of State John Hay to President Woodrow Wilson to negotiate peacefully the otherwise violent struggles for colonial territories by the European powers, Du Bois concludes: "It is curious to see . . . the United States looking on herself, first, as a sort of natural peace-maker, then as a moral protagonist in this terrible time. No nation is

¹³ Du Bois appears to be referring here to specific events in the "classic" period of U.S. imperialist foreign policy, including U.S. negotiations for the Panama Canal and the Canal Zone (1903), Hay's formulation of the "Open Door Policy" in China (1899-1900) in response to the Boxer Rebellion, Hay's negotiation of the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War in the Portsmouth Treaty (1905), and U.S. military intervention in the Mexican Revolution in 1914 (the year U.S. marines landed in Vera Cruz). Given Du Bois's clear purpose of identifying U.S. slavery and racism with the origins of nineteenth and twentieth-century "modern industrial imperialism," it seems odd that Du Bois does not take into account earlier extraterritorial ventures by the United States, such as the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. In regard to Hay's "Open Door" policy in China, Du Bois writes: "Where sections could not be owned by one dominant nation there came a policy of 'open door,' but the 'door' was open to 'white people only'" (*DW*, 48).

less fitted for this rôle. For two or more centuries America has marched proudly in the van of human hatred, – making . . . a great religion, a world war-cry: Up white, down black . . .” (*DW*, 50).

Recognizing that “the using of men for the benefit of masters is no new invention of modern Europe,” Du Bois nevertheless insists that modern colonialism is unique for its “imperial width” and goal of exploiting cheap labor (*DW*, 43). Eric Sundquist criticizes Du Bois’s 1915 essay, “The African Roots of the War,” for anticipating Lenin’s mistaken conclusion in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) “that colonialism was driven by the investment of surplus wealth.”¹⁴ But Sundquist acknowledges that when Du Bois revised this essay for inclusion in *Darkwater* as “The Hands of Ethiopia,” he placed “less emphasis on economic statistics and [his] forecast of Lenin” in favor of advancing “a philosophy of ‘Africa for Africans.’”¹⁵ In fact, *Darkwater* does not abandon an economic explanation for modern imperialism; in place of Lenin’s tenuous thesis, Du Bois offers his own theory of European and American imperialism as a solution to the growing labor problem in the first-world nations:

The scheme of Europe was no sudden invention, but a way out of long-pressing difficulties. It is plain to modern white civilization that the subjection of the white working classes cannot much longer be maintained. Education, political power, and increased knowledge of the technique and meaning of industrial process are destined to make a more and more equitable distribution of wealth in the near future. . . . But there is a loophole. There is a chance for exploitation on an immense scale for inordinate profit . . . of darker peoples. . . . Here are no labor unions or votes or questioning onlookers or inconvenient consciences. These men may be used down to the very bone, and shot and maimed in ‘punitive’ expeditions when they revolt. In these dark lands ‘industrial development’ may repeat in exaggerated form every horror of the industrial horror of Europe, from slavery and rape to disease and maiming, with only one test of success, – dividends! (*DW*, 43-44)

Far more effectively than Lenin’s theory of exported surplus value, Du Bois’s theory of modern colonialism anticipates our contemporary hierarchy of first and third world nations, with their relative scales of economic “development” often being confused with their respective degrees of “civilization.” By suggesting that these “dark lands” reflect imperialists’ desires to hide their ugly exploitation from critics in the metropolitan centers, Du Bois

¹⁴ Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, p. 546.

¹⁵ Sundquist, “Introduction” *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, p. 27.

also begins to counter the familiar Victorian racialization of colonial territories in such titles for Africa as "the Dark Continent."

Crucial to such an imperial hierarchy is a racial division that will align first-world white workers with these imperial masters, in order to render invisible the exploitation of third-world workers of color. Once again, slavery and racism in the United States have played vanguard roles in such cultural mystification, insofar as the exclusion of African Americans from the American labor movement, first under slavery and then during Reconstruction, maintained within the United States just the sort of racial divisions of labor that would work so well in the twentieth-century exploitation of foreign colonies in Africa, the Middle East, the Pacific, and Asia. Crucial to maintaining this arbitrary distinction between "white" and "colored," "first" and "third," "superior" and "inferior" has been the work of human culture: "Everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is 'white'; everything mean, bad, blundering, cheating, and dishonorable is 'yellow'; a bad taste is 'brown'; and the devil is 'black.'" The changes of this theme are continually rung in picture and story, in newspaper heading and moving-picture, in sermon and school book. . ." (*DW*, 44). Just as the industrialization of the South has led to the new peonage of African Americans, so the European development of Africa will "likely . . . be a hell" with "no voice or law or custom to protect labor, no trades unions, no eight-hour laws, no factory legislation" (*DW*, 63).

Du Bois suggests several ways to overcome the problem of "modern industrial imperialism" in *Darkwater*, and they range from armed revolution to political, economic, and cultural coalitions of exploited peoples of color around the world. Although most of these solutions are framed within the utopian prospect of an "industrial democracy" that for Du Bois means the socialization of the means of production, the post-colonial prospects in *Darkwater* are by no means dogmatically Marxian, especially when the role of culture is considered in this revolutionary project. Du Bois does, of course, stress the need for a basic economic transformation that is thoroughly Marxian: "We are rapidly approaching the day when we shall repudiate all private property in raw materials and tools and demand that distribution hinge, not on the power of those who monopolize the materials, but on the needs of the mass of men" (*DW*, 100). What Du Bois adds to the familiar slogan that proletariat must seize the means of production is that "no real reorganization of industry could be permanently made with the majority of mankind left out. These disinherited darker peoples must either share in the future industrial democracy or overturn the world" (*DW*, 100).

Educating the white working-class regarding its need to align itself with international workers of color is thus one of Du Bois's main tasks, and this is not simply a typically Marxian project of awakening "class-consciousness." True "class consciousness" can succeed only with the destruction of racial hierarchies and the concomitant exposure of the lies of cultural superiority on which imperialism is built:

There are no races, in the sense of great, separate, pure breeds of men, differing in attainment, development, and capacity. . . . The world today consists, not of races, but of the imperial commercial group of master capitalists, . . . predominantly white; the national middle classes of the several nations, white, yellow, and brown, with strong blood bonds, common languages, and common history; the international laboring classes of all colors; the backward, oppressed groups of nature-folk, predominantly yellow, brown, and black. (*DW*, 98)

Du Bois suggests potential coalitions among bourgeoisie, proletariat, and third-world native peoples that are already suggested in these modern class distinctions, but the actual work of forming such coalitions is clearly a complex task.¹⁶

Labor organization alone cannot do this work. As he had argued in *The Souls of Black Folk*, so in *Darkwater* Du Bois insists that education is a crucial and continuing part of economic and political revolution. The fourth essay in *Darkwater*, "Of Work and Wealth," begins with Du Bois's meditation on his years teaching at Atlanta University. What begins as an autobiographical reverie turns quickly into Du Bois's lecture on the East St. Louis riots of 1917, when "the threat to white jobs from black newcomers" provoked "the worst urban violence yet experienced in the peacetime history of America."¹⁷ Analyzing an historical event that is still likely to be left out of the curriculum of modern U.S. history, Du Bois stresses not only the practical economic losses resulting from white attacks on African-American laborers, but also connects these riots with other pogroms against minorities throughout history: "It was the old world horror come to life again: all that

¹⁶ In his "Introduction" to *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, pp. 17-18, Sundquist argues that "as early as *The Philadelphia Negro*, economic and environmental factors played a large role in Du Bois's view of the constructedness of race. . . . but in his cultural and historical works at least through *Darkwater* and *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924), he clung to distinct modes of racialism." Passages of the sort I just quoted from *Darkwater* challenge the idea that Du Bois's racialism dominates this work.

¹⁷ David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois, Biography of a Race: 1868-1919*, p. 536.

Jews suffered in Spain and Poland; all that peasants suffered in France, and Indians in Calcutta; all that aroused human deviltry had accomplished in ages past they did in East St. Louis. . .” (*DW*, 95). In so doing, Du Bois not only stresses the colonial situation under which African Americans continue to live in modern America, but he also calls attention to the internal colonialisms that have haunted European history.

Du Bois wants the reader to understand in this chapter how the teacher “works,” especially in the important task of forging the international awareness that will help bring about working-class and post-colonial consciousness. Du Bois had given special status to such intellectual labor in *The Souls of Black Folk* as belonging properly to that “talented tenth” that would provide leadership in the formation of a cohesive African-American community. But in *Dark-water*, he rejects such elitism; the teacher is merely one among many who share the knowledge both of African-American exploitation and of its utopian promise:

There must . . . persist in this future economics a certain minimum of machine-like work. . . . It must be accepted with the comforting thought that its routine need not demand twelve hours a day or even eight. With Work for All and All at Work probably from three to six hours would suffice, and leave abundant time for leisure, exercise, study, and avocations. . . . Who shall be Artists and who shall be Servants in the world to come? Or shall we all be artists and all serve? (*DW*, 104)

Throughout *Darkwater*, Du Bois’s advocates a post-colonial socialism built on a “spiritual” democracy that would encourage all peoples and classes to subordinate material production to the higher purpose of producing community. Among the many sins of modern imperialism, chief among them is its destruction of local communities and the suppression of native cultural traditions and languages. Du Bois works against such imperialism by reviving such traditions, recalling minority history, and celebrating the widest and most diverse sorts of cultural representations:

To tap this mighty reservoir of experience, knowledge, beauty, love, and deed we must appeal not to the few, not to some souls, but to all. The narrower the appeal, the poorer the culture; the wider the appeal the more magnificent are the possibilities. Infinite is human nature. We make it finite by choking back the mass of men, by attempting to speak for others, to interpret and act for them, and we end by acting for ourselves and using the world as our private property. (*DW*, 140).

This ideal and “infinite human nature” still resembles the Hegelian *Geist* that previous critics have noted plays such a central role in *The Souls of Black Folk*.¹⁸ Indeed, Du Bois’s continuing reliance on European literary and philosophical models, even when these are accompanied by African and African-American examples, is most pronounced in both *Souls* and *Darkwater* when he is trying to illustrate the highest reach of civilization, yet Europe serves in the latter work as a preeminent example of the selfishness and cruelty – the “barbarism,” as he frequently terms it – of imperialism.

From *The Souls of Black Folk* to *Darkwater*, Du Bois undoubtedly expresses ambivalent attitudes toward European culture as either representative of liberating ideals or the tool of imperialism. In *Souls*, he would famously claim the inherent liberty and racial blindness of Europe’s greatest writers and thinkers: “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas. . . . I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension” (*Souls*, 90). Du Bois’s inclusion of Alexandre Dumas, who was of mixed-blood parentage, suggests to the careful reader that the great European cultural tradition has always been shaped by multicultural and mutiracial influences.¹⁹ It is difficult to reconcile this positive view of European culture, shaped in part by African and other non-European cultural traces, with what came to be the anti-imperialist vehemence typified by the following remarks in his 1915 essay, “Africa and the Slave-Trade:”

Such is the story of the Rape of Ethiopia – a sordid, pitiful, cruel tale. Raphael painted, Luther preached, Corneille wrote, and Milton sung; and through it all, for four hundred years, the dark captives wound to the sea amid the bleaching bones of the dead; for four hundred years the sharks followed the scurrying ships; for four hundred years America was strewn with the living and dying millions of

¹⁸ Lewis, pp. 139-140, traces Du Bois’s interest in Hegel back to his graduate work at Harvard with William James and at the University of Berlin. Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*, pp. 402-413, stresses Du Bois’s use of Hegel’s notion of the *Volkgeist* to theorize African-American solidarity in *Souls*, although Rampersad, pp. 74-75, traces Du Bois’s concept of “black folk” to Americanized versions of Johann Gottfried von Herder’s writings.

¹⁹ Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870) was the grandson of Antoine Alexandre Davy, marquis de La Pailletterie, and Marie Cessette Dumas, an African-Haitian; his father, Alexandre Demas (1762-1806), was their natural son and took his mother’s name after his break with his father, the marquis. In *Darkwater*, p. 199, in his eulogy for the Anglo-African composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Du Bois writes: “He was one with that great company of mixed-blood men: Pushkin and Dumas, Hamilton and Douglass, Browning and many others,” but he goes on to conclude about Coleridge-Taylor, “but he more than most of these men knew the call of the blood when it came and listened and answered.”

a transplanted race; for four hundred years Ethiopia stretched forth her hands unto God.²⁰

Du Bois's suggestion that the great artists and thinkers of early modern Europe contributed to the slave-trade of colonialism either because they neglected its reality or were supported by its profits could be extended to include Hegel's epic of the historical unfolding of *Weltgeist* as a philosophical legitimation of European expansionism. Indeed, it is just such a critique of Hegel that Frantz Fanon develops in *Black Skins, White Masks*, even as Fanon adapts the Hegelian model of self-consciousness to the anti-colonial struggles of non-European peoples.²¹

Some scholars solve this apparent contradiction in Du Bois's thought by arguing that Du Bois grew increasingly critical of the early European influences on his thought, especially such seminal figures as Hegel, Emerson, and Nietzsche. According to this argument, Du Bois's participation in the Pan-African Congresses of 1900, 1919, 1921, and 1923 focused his attention increasingly on African cultural sources, both as alternatives to Euroamerican industrial capitalism and as foundations for African-American social solidarity. As Eric Sundquist writes: "However powerfully, Africa exists in [*The Souls of Black Folk*] for the most part in the register of cultural retentions. Within the next two decades, however, Du Bois more and more tied American slavery and European imperialism together in a net of exploitation that brought into sharp relief the meaning of Pan-African spirituality and the early modern political poetics of diaspora."²² In his biography of Du Bois, however, David Levering Lewis suggests that Du Bois's Eurocentrism, especially when it came to European letters, was still a strong element in his thought as late as 1918-1919, when Du Bois visited France to witness the conclusion of World War I and to attend the 1919 Pan-African Congress. Thus Lewis can trace at least to the year before the completion of *Darkwater* the survival of what he terms "the eccentric Eurocentrism and radicalism-from-above that still resided in the marrow of the author of *The Souls of Black Folk*."²³

Darkwater unquestionably shows the influence of African cultures in Du Bois's thought, but the persistence of European culture in this work argues against a consistent Afrocentrism or black nationalism. Instead, Du Bois

²⁰ "Africa and the Slave Trade" is part of Du Bois, *The Negro*, and it is quoted here from *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, p. 637.

²¹ Shamoon Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought*, pp. 208-210.

²² Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, pp. 547-548.

²³ Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois, Biography of a Race*, p. 566.

argues that African and African-American cultures can *redeem* the best in Euroamerican culture by recalling its "spiritual" or democratic aims and rejecting its commercial and colonial applications. Du Bois does this in several strategic ways in *Darkwater* by invoking influential European ideas or intellectuals, identifying their limitations, and then *revising* them in terms of his knowledge of African and African-American history. From our contemporary perspective, we might understand this process of reinterpretation and adaptation to be deconstructive, but in the historical context of Du Bois's writings from *Souls* to *Darkwater*, it is probably more accurate to understand it as *dialectical* in the manner of modern revisions of Hegel.²⁴

Decolonization thus involves economic reorganization, political coalitions among exploited peoples of color around the world, and cultural revision of those Enlightenment ideas that once promised universal freedom but have been corrupted to serve Eurocolonial mastery. The simultaneity of these different modes of revolt against global imperialism helps explain the formal complexity of texts like *Souls* and *Darkwater*, both of which mix empirical historical and economic analyses, rhetorical appeals for political solidarity, poetry and music, and prose allegories or fables. If we add to these differential forces Du Bois's persistent revision of prevailing European intellectual paradigms, we can begin to understand the innovative character of Du Bois's writing in both these works.

Just how Du Bois achieves this cultural revision of the European intellectual tradition is well illustrated by his use of Hegel in *Darkwater*. As in *Souls*, Du Bois frequently invokes in *Darkwater* the Hegelian *Weltgeist* and its historical progress: "The history of the world is the history of the discovery of the common humanity of human beings among steadily-increasing circles of men" (*DW*, 148-149). Du Bois makes this Hegelian appeal, however, to conclude a paragraph in which he has discussed the need for exploited men to recognize their solidarity with women, who have for centuries been marginalized by patriarchy. Du Bois's argument in this regard is critical of Hegel's early nineteenth-century assignment of women to the domestic and men to the public spheres in his general social theory:

None have more persistently and dogmatically insisted upon the inherent inferiority of women than the men with whom they come in closest contact. It is the

²⁴ Shamoon Zamir's *Dark Voices*, especially chapters 4 and 5, is a sustained interpretation of Du Bois's revision of Hegelian thought in accord with "Marx's, Sartre's, and Alexandre Kojève's existentialist and materialist commentaries on Hegel" (14). My argument here is much indebted to Zamir's argument, although I wish to call attention to Du Bois's crucial use of black women and thus gender issues in his revision of Hegel.

husbands, brothers, and sons of women whom it has been most difficult to induce to consider women seriously or to acknowledge that women have rights which men are bound to respect. So, too, it is those people who live in closest contact with black folk who have most unhesitatingly asserted the utter impossibility of living beside Negroes who are not industrial or political slaves or social pariahs. (*DW*, 148).

While invoking the ways Hegel contributed to the nineteenth-century European ideology of the family and its gender hierarchies, Du Bois adapts Hegel's progressive *Weltgeist* to the emancipation of women and peoples of color otherwise subordinated in Hegel's philosophy.²⁵

Writing on the eve of the passage of the nineteenth amendment, guaranteeing women's suffrage, Du Bois remedies in *Darkwater* his neglect in *The Souls of Black Folk* of women, especially African-American women, as a distinct political group. His revision of Hegel, then, also corrects his own earlier views, in keeping with the ever-more inclusive democratic idealism of Hegelian romanticism. Du Bois's inclusion of women's rights in *Darkwater* is by no means a mere gesture to political fashion. The passage discussed above occurs halfway through the sixth essay in *Darkwater*, "Of the Ruling of Men," which precedes "The Damnation of Women," an essay Du Bois wrote specifically for this volume. *Darkwater* is systematically organized into nine essays and one short story ("The Comet") interwoven with eleven intertexts – poems and parables – that complement the essays. It is remarkable how many of these intertexts revolve around a woman's – black or white – struggle to transcend racism; taken together, they prefigure the allegory of the white woman, Julia, learning to recognize the humanity of the African-American man, Jim Davis, in "The Comet," the short story that is the final chapter in *Darkwater*.

The brief parable that connects "Of the Ruling of Men" with "The Damnation of Women" is entitled "The Call," and this title refers to the "call" made by a "King, who sat upon the Great White Throne," for his "servants" (*DW*, 563). Exhausted from battle, the servants of the King do not respond to his call until "the third blast of the herald struck upon a woman's heart," and she "straightway left her baking and sweeping and the rattle of pans . . . and . . . her chatting and gossiping and the sewing of garments" to humble herself to the king: "'The servant of thy servants, O Lord'" (*DW*, 161). Despite her

²⁵ See Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, pp. 478-479, for a typical example of how he analyzes the "distinction of the sexes" and their very different "ethical content." For a more developed discussion of Hegel's contribution to the nineteenth-century ideology of the family, see my discussion in *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature*, pp. 70-72.

identification with domestic labor and because of her humility, the woman is commanded by the king to "Go, smite me mine enemies, that they cease to do evil in my sight" (162). Still not understanding the king, the woman repeats her inferiority, but the king turns this response into a ritual investiture of the woman with mythic power:

"O King," she cried, "I am but a woman."

And the King answered, "Go, then, Mother of Men."

And the woman said, "Nay, King, but I am still a maid." Whereat the King cried: "O maid, made Man, thou shalt be Bride of God."

And yet the third time the woman shrank at the thunder in her ears, and whispered: "Dear God, I am black!"

The King spake not, but swept the veiling of his face aside and lifted up the light of his countenance upon her and lo! It was black. (*DW*, 162)

This investiture of a Black Madonna by a black god to go forth and battle what clearly is the racism and imperialism of the day "when the heathen raged and imagined a vain thing" complements Du Bois's more celebrated "Black Christ," who takes upon himself the history of violence toward black people and often expresses their rage, as does John in chapter 13, "Of the Coming of John," in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Women of color are not, however, merely complements to the idealization of black male struggle in the "Black Christ." Not only does Du Bois represent mythically women of color in intertexts like "The Call" and "Children of the Moon," a poem narrated by Isis, he also elaborates an African-American women's cultural heritage and addresses the specific political and economic issues of black women in the first decades of the century. In "The Damnation of Women," he links the rights of women of color with those of white women and the emancipation of both groups to that of men: "The future woman must have a life work and economic independence. She must have knowledge. She must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion. The present mincing horror at free womanhood must pass if we are ever to be rid of the bestiality of free manhood" (*DW*, 164-165). Tracing the "mother-idea" for social organization back to Africa, identifying "father and his worship" with Asia, and marginalizing Europe as "the precocious, self-centered, forward-striving child," Du Bois reminds us how patriarchal and paternalistic Western Civilization has its origins in Africa and Asia. But he is also pointing out how matriarchal social organizations in African tribal cultures may well be means of reforming to bourgeois capitalism and thus reviving Enlightenment ideals of universal democracy.

In just this spirit, Du Bois constructs an African-American feminine tradition of cultural and political resistance to slavery and patriarchy that includes artists, like Phyllis Wheatley and Kate Ferguson, children's rights' activists, like Kate Ferguson and Louise De Mortie, and abolitionists and women's rights activists, like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Like the African-American male tradition he constructs in *The Souls of Black Folk*, this feminine cultural and political heritage is one with which he explicitly identifies himself, both by invoking the "four women of my boyhood" at the beginning of this essay and by mythologizing black womanhood as the "mother-ideal" of his African origins (*DW*, 163). Neither this historical recovery nor mythologizing of black women is done to the neglect of the political concerns of women in general and black women in particular. Analyzing the economic causes for the high rate of single black working mothers, as well as the social consequences to black families when black men's earning power is so much lower than white men's, Du Bois balances the cultural empowerment of women with specific accounts of their material circumstances and differences.²⁶ In an extraordinary conclusion to this essay, he indicts the cult of feminine beauty not only because it excludes so many women who do not happen to be "beautiful in face and form," but also because of its consequences for those women who when celebrated for their beauty must often endure versions of a slavery familiar to their sisters of color: "A sister of a president of the United States declared: 'We Southern ladies are complimented with the names of wives, but we are only the mistresses of seraglios'" (*DW*, 170).

It should not surprise us, then, that the intertext immediately following "The Damnation of Women" begins with a mythic woman speaking in her own voice, even if she does announce paradoxically, "I am dead" (*DW*, 187). Nevertheless, the Isis who utters the poem "Children of the Moon" combines both life and death in her mythic representation of Nature, just as Du Bois presents her as both an African origin of a revived "mother-ideal" for political action and social organization as well as an idealization of the African-American feminine tradition he has recovered in the preceding es-

²⁶ Contemporary with our own age as Du Bois sounds in "The Damnation of Women," he is nevertheless dated in a number of respects. He compares, for example, African-American women's wages primarily with white women's wages, concluding that the greater disparity between African-American and white men's salaries to be a cause for special alarm. Arguing that this disparity in wages between African-American women and men has caused more women to go to work, Du Bois concludes that two-income families in the African-American community have actually contributed to higher rates of "broken families" in that community (*DW*, 180). In short, Du Bois's strong endorsement of women's rights in *Darkwater* does not escape the gender ideology of its times.

say. Du Bois's Isis is a version of black feminine self-consciousness won from the struggle of black women to confront the bondage imposed on them by slavery and imperialism.²⁷ In short, Du Bois refigures the Hegelian model of self-consciousness in the Master-Servant dialectic as a struggle in which Hegel's *Knecht* may also be *ein Mädchen*: "The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause. When, now, two of these movements – woman and color – combine in one, the combination has a deep meaning" (*DW*, 181).

In the political and cultural work of overturning the false hierarchy of mastery and servitude on which Western self-consciousness has been founded, Du Bois strives to replace it with a genuinely democratic "free rationality" of the sort never yet realized in the Euroamerican tradition. In several of the intertexts in *Darkwater*, Du Bois offers parables of the recognition of the Black Christ by white women, notably in "Jesus Christ in Texas" and the concluding short story, "The Comet." In both of these stories, the black messiah is recognized only briefly before he is returned to his customary status as a "black convict" to be lynched (in "Jesus Christ in Texas") or as a servant to be paid and dismissed (in "The Comet"). But in these moments of recognition, each black mythic figure is identified by a white woman – the Southern colonel's wife in "Jesus Christ in Texas" and the rich man's daughter, Julia, in "The Comet" – as a divine embodiment of human suffering that is imagined to encompass each woman's hitherto unrecognized bondage as a woman. "Jesus Christ in Texas" ends with a divine annunciation, in which the woman is told by "a voice . . . out of the winds of the night, . . . 'This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise'" (*DW*, 133). Even more explicitly, "The Comet" ends with a scene that mingles spiritual and sexual ecstasy "as the shackles seemed to rattle and fall" from the African-American's "soul" and the white woman recognizes his divinity: "Their souls lay naked to the night. It was not lust; it was not love – it was some vaster, mightier thing that needed neither touch of body nor thrill of soul. It was a thought divine, splendid" (*DW*, 270).

Taken by themselves, such literary moments of ecstatic self-consciousness are merely melodramatic, hortatory gestures for the despairing victims of racism, sexism, and imperialism: a fantasy of a "new world beyond the veil," where interracial union and Pan-African idealism are not contradictory.²⁸ Read as parables that illuminate Du Bois's scholarly and

²⁷ Wilson Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism*, pp. 162-167, reads "Children of the Moon" as a combination of Western and African myths.

²⁸ Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, p. 618.

historical arguments, however, such scenes of recognition not only call attention to the continuing racism of the age, but they contribute to the work of decolonization by constructing alternative myths of self-consciousness – and thus of individuality and reason – that cross the boundaries separating the imperial imagination of Western Civilization and the early twentieth-century Afrocentrism known then by the names of “Ethiopianism” or Pan-Africanism. From *The Souls of Black Folk* through *Darkwater* to *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois still imagined that the sins of “modern industrial imperialism” could be redeemed by concerted political organization, economic reforms, and cultural transcodings of African, African-American, and Euroamerican traditions. By grafting European and African ideals to the real historical struggles of African Americans, Du Bois contributes to such cultural redemption and empowers his own people within the rhetoric of the dominant ideology.

Du Bois’s later writings do not, of course, live up to this promise. Much as he would continue to cling to the notion that “the United States . . . is still a land of magnificent possibilities,” he would insist that “democracy is for us to a large extent unworkable.”²⁹ Rightly condemning U.S. imperialism around the globe and Cold War ideology, he would nevertheless rationalize stubbornly and blindly Stalinist oppression both within and outside the Soviet Union, ignoring the fact that state communism had been as corrupted in practice in the Soviet Empire as democracy was corrupted by western capitalism.³⁰ Du Bois himself should have listened to his own teachings in his earlier writings that the new forms of imperialism, especially as practiced by the United States, made the work of the anti-imperialist especially complex, necessarily cooperative, and ineluctably multicultural. In *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater*, Du Bois was one of the first U.S. intellectuals to challenge Euroamerican imperialism as a system of racial and gender, as well as class, hierarchies. In his effort to theorize new modes of self-consciousness that would attempt to overcome racial and gendered differences, he anticipated our contemporary efforts to theorize postmodern subjectivity. He was also one of the few intellectuals of his generation to understand that modern imperialism had to be combated at a *cultural* level, because such imperialism relied as much on cultural as on economic and military forces. In imagining

²⁹ Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, pp. 418-419.

³⁰ William Cain, “From Liberalism to Communism,” p. 471: “Du Bois was one of the great pioneers of anti-imperialist scholarship, yet even as he exposed and corrected one form of bad history – the whitewashing of what imperialism had wrought – he transcribed another himself. He saw what he wished and needed to see, and thus he replicated the hard, domineering consciousness he condemned.”

ways to transcode the cultural rhetoric of neoimperialism, especially as it perpetuated stereotypes of race, class, and gender, he anticipated contemporary cultural criticism and opened for us several paths to the elusive but still imaginable goal of global democracy.

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