

Example

We can open our consideration in medias res, as it were, by reckoning that for Du Bois the Negro American example, incipiting for him as fate or instituted chance, overdetermined in both its freedom and its necessity, posed a question about possibility—ontological and historical, onto-historical—that remained exorbitant for traditional formulations of philosophical question in the modern epoch. The Negro American example, in Du Bois’s discourse, is always both and neither, never the simple, always a figure of the double, and never exemplary of the so-called pure, whatever such might be. Thus, from Du Bois’s pen comes the inimitable concept-metaphors at the time of the writing of *The Souls of Black Folk* in the years straddling the turn of the twentieth century—“the veil,” “double consciousness,” “intermingling,” “second-sight,” “the dawning,” “the gift,” or even “America,” for example. Thus, the question with which he closed that text—one that is itself already a kind of response—could stand as the exemplary form of a world historical question.

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. Around us the history of the land has centered for thrice a hundred years; out of the nation’s heart we have called all that was best to throttle and subdue all that was worst; fire and blood, prayer and sacrifice, have billowed over

this people, and they have found peace only in the altars of the God of Right. Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people? (Du Bois 1903d, 262–63, chap. 14, para. 25)

To stand with Du Bois in this vocative position shall we say is to exist on both sides of the ostensibly “American” form of limit. In this locution by the narrator of *The Souls of Black Folk*, one must inhabit the problem of existence on both sides of the veil, one must traverse “the veil,” and one must render “the veil,” all in the same movement of thought and critical discourse. Yet, the movement of Du Bois’s practice would accede to an order that is for him even more radical. It might, perhaps, be understood as a certain relation to what has for too long been understood under the heading of death. One must thus also accept the risk of the illimitable as the very configuration of that which one might understand as one’s own most belonging: to accede to the limit of possibility and beyond, perhaps, such can only arise as one is truly only always other than oneself. In this sense one only becomes what one is by this carrying forth beyond the limit of (possible) world. Perhaps the name Negro-Colored-Afro-Afra-Black-African American, or even African in this context, is only the name for this tarrying at the threshold at the limit of the impossible possible world.

Let me open the staging of these thetic formulations of a problematization of long-standing within discourse pertaining to matters African American by way of a direct challenge to contemporary theoretical discourse—and such is always *practical* theoretical in its claim—within the various horizons of discussion of modern history, contemporary globalization, and the thought of the postcolonial horizon of our historical present and future.

For what is at stake here is an existential sense and an inner theoretical sense in which no aspect of its possible reference—from which it moves or toward which it moves—is simple. Stated otherwise, its theoretical sense of sight, for example, is always at least—and never only—double. Or, to put

it in other terms still, I propose that critical thought more assiduously take resource, implicit or otherwise, in the historically announced plenum for theoretical reflection that Du Bois formulated under the heading of a kind of existential sense of “double consciousness,” specifically in its affirmative yield—a kind of “second sight” within and yet beyond the historicity in which it is produced. And, further still, such modes of reflexive and reflective practical-theoretical inhabitation arise as *critical* engagements of that dimension of modern historicity that can be metaphorically nominalized under the heading given by Du Bois as world-historical *problem*—a global level “problem of the color line”—if we understand the sense of problem in his thought to refer to the promulgation of *categorical* forms of proscription, no matter the guise or terms under which such is carried out (the religious, the economic, the so-called racial, the terms of *sex*, *sexual difference*, *gender*, *nationality*, *citizenship*, etc.). In addition, we can accede to this thought if we also recognize that the term *color* bespeaks not only problem but also possibility—the prospect of new forms and ways for groups of humans to attain or create full realization of historical capacity, or even to open paths toward the possibility of an horizon of unlimited generation and generosity. And, on both levels—of “problem” and “color”—let us here, for the sake of our own historical topos, call it the question of the general necessity and possibility of the migrant (whether forced or unforced, coerced or uncoerced).

To accede to this thought requires the inhabitation of certain “pronounced parallaxes”—never only one. Or, at least this is a register by which one might translate Du Bois’s thought of the critical possibilities of “double consciousness,” or more properly its yield, “second sight,” into vocatives that contemporary critical discourse might find more resonant to its theoretical ear than has been the case up to now—not only in the Americas, north and south, and the Caribbean, or in Europe, but in Asia (remarking Japan as a nodal reference to the announcement of these reflections), and—especially on the horizons of what I am nominalizing herein by way of a paleonymic practice—a certain sense *of* Africa.

We might usefully proceed toward such a proposed interlocution by way of an annotation of the recent accession to a thought of the parallax in certain contemporary critical discourse in and about modern historicity—such as we find it in the deep and inspiring commitment of the relatively recent work of Kōjin Karatani placed under the heading of a “trans-critique” (and also in the various avatars or interlocutions with his formulation of problem). Karatani remarks in his prefatory that his projection is *of* and *from* Japan but not yet so directly *about* Japan, for it follows Karl Marx in the

nineteenth-century thinker's "project that elucidates the nature and limit of capital's drive [*Trieb*]" (Karatani 2003, viii). Yet, as a specific production of Karatani's own discourse, his elaboration of the project of a "trans-critique" attains its theoretical opening for the chance of a renewed thought of transformation within and perhaps beyond capitalism by way of a reference to the "parallaxes" of reason adduced in the precritical discourse of Immanuel Kant (but a precritical reflection that, in the epistemic sense, was already working over the terrain through which the path to critical thought would later become tractable) (Karatani 2003, viii, 3–4, 30–53).

Yet I propose that Karatani's initiative might find itself rendered more generative still by way of an engagement with the formulation of the problem at stake in Du Bois's discourse and itinerary of practice. Indeed, such resource in interlocution may also enable us to allow Du Bois's thought to take us toward *its* own limit and pose a question that would yet remain beyond such limit as practice.

If this is so—why and how?

In a word, neither proposing nor affirming an accession to a pure term beyond *the movement of* double reference, a radicalization of Du Bois's thought and practice, in part by way of his own example, would affirm the maintenance of such double (or redoubled) movement—a movement of the double—as the very root (if there is such) of critical sense, reflex, judgment, and practical-theoretical intervention. It would be otherwise than the traditional sense of ambivalence; it would be ambivalence with an edge, ambivalence always charged on the bias, of a responsibility for a possible intervention within historicity.

The thought of parallax from which Karatani takes resource is offered in the fourth chapter of Kant's 1766 text *Dreams of a Spirit Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics*. The formulations of the status of a parallax in a practice of reason that would be otherwise than naive are produced as the opening and frame of the concluding chapter of the book as a whole and thus remarks on the very opening for thought to which Kant had acceded in the course of that work.

Scales intended by civil law to be a standard measure in trade, may be shown to be inaccurate if the wares and the weights are made to change pans. The bias [*Parteilichkeit*] of the scales of understanding is revealed by exactly the same strategem [*Kunstgriff*], and in philosophical judgements, too, it would not be possible unless one adopted this strategem, to arrive

at a unanimous result [*einstimmiges Fazit*] by comparing the different weighings. . . . I formerly used to regard the human understanding in general merely from the point of view of my own understanding. Now I put myself in the position of someone else's reason which is independent of myself and external to me [*in die Stele einer fremden und äusseren Vernunft*], and regard my judgements, along with their most secret causes, from the point of view of other people. The comparison of the two observations yields, it is true, pronounced parallaxes, but it is also the only method for preventing optical deception, and the only means of placing the concepts in the true positions which they occupy relatively to the cognitive faculty of human nature. . . . But the scales of the understanding are not, after all, wholly impartial. One of the arms which bears the inscription: *Hope for the future*, has a mechanical advantage; and that advantage has the effect that even weak reasons, when placed on the appropriate side of the scales, cause speculations, which are in themselves of greater weight, to rise on the other side. This is the only defect [*Unrichtigkeit*], and it is one which I cannot easily eliminate. Indeed, it is a defect which I cannot even wish to eliminate. (Kant 1992, 336–37)

I leave aside here any attempt to offer the fulsomeness of my engagement with Kant's discourse; and, instead, simply name our recognition of several principal nodes of theoretical reference for Kant's later architectonic as offered by way of this passage. First, Kant's formulation of the first step, or proto-step (in terms of his own itinerary), of a critical practice as "to put myself in the position of someone else's reason" should acquire a highlight here in the context of our proposed interlocution. Second, so too should its implication: "pronounced parallaxes" (which I will translate in a summary manner here as a shift in the appearance of the object by way of shift in the reference according to which the subject can address such an objective, a shifting that then finds no register or generality according to which one position, a supposed singular might be maintained), a proposition to which we might diacritically add the sense of *hue* or *color*. It is always otherwise than the supposed singular. And, third, we annotate—in a manner that we, along with Du Bois, might share with Karatani, Marx, and Kant—that despite all caution, a certain bias will always have remained an ineluctable dimension of *the relation within the movement of parallaxes*, for all forms of

judgment are practical-theoretical: they are concerned to determine, *what must be done*, to intervene in the present on behalf of the future.

Perhaps Kant in the critical works sought the resolution of such “pronounced parallaxes” in an attempt to give critical guidance in the negotiation of the “transcendental illusions” produced as “ideas of pure reason” (ideas of—whole or limit, perhaps—which have as such no object for intuition, but appear as necessary for thought—such as *I* or *self*, *world* or *cosmos*, and *God*; to which I would likely propose we add, for example, *species* and *race*, but that is properly a matter of another scene of interlocution) as remarked in his “Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic” in the *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1781, and as practiced in both his turning point essay on teleology and the concept of race of 1788 and the exfoliation of the passage within the labor of critical thought according to the latter formulation of the problematic as the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* of 1790 (Kant 1998, 590–623, A642/B670–A704–B732; Kant 2007; Kant 2000).

The track of Karatani’s engagement with Kant’s formulation here, seems to suggest that for this contemporary thinker the accession to the “unanimous result [*ein stimmiges Fazit*]”—as given in the passage quoted above from the eighteenth-century thinker—would not only mark the opening toward the transcendental, and make “us face the problem of universality,” but also bequeath access to judgments of such (Karatani 2003, 46–49).

Yet, if Kant’s or Karatani’s disposition is allowed a reasonable recognition in the recollection that I have given, it can be offered in contradistinction to such a path that having proposed the critical thought of the transcendental and still proceeding by way of its interminable passage, for example the always already given critical recognition that no sense is simple, one must still set afoot or adrift, *always again*, according to a practice that would be—to use an old language, as paleonymy—*ultra-transcendental*: that the transcendental is not, and can never be, a position; or, it is *only* position, always partial and hence nonsimple, and finds its possibility only by way of that which is otherwise and thereby (that is, as always otherwise) allows its articulations (Derrida 1976, 60–62ff.). This is to say, if there is parallax, there can never be only one. And, the unresolvability of parallax will have always been a remainder of the only fundamental possibility of imagination, understanding, and hope. The maintenance of such parallax, as we are elaborating it here, the thought of the double, is precisely the responsibility of practice as thought.

What meaning does this passage through the references to Kant and Karatani have for us, or what can such mean, in the horizon of the ensemble

of problematics crisscrossing, as some possible impossible whole, the thought of the future that I am proposing herein?

Let us turn, at this conjunction, and translate this discussion of parallax in the direction of the thought of Du Bois, leaving aside and open for future consideration—that of others as well as our own—much remainder. I take recourse first to Du Bois’s signal thought of “a sense of double consciousness” that took shape within a certain formation of subjectivation—as a “Negro” and an “American,” within a certain historicity, the turn to the twentieth century—and the critical capacity it allows, a kind of “second sight” in that world, namely, that “American world,” in which it arose.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, for merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America; for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois 1903d, 3–4, chap. 1 paras. 3–4)

Should we not recognize Du Bois’s formulation on “the meaning of being black at the dawning of the Twentieth Century,” as he put it in the “forethought” of his book of *The Souls of Black Folk* of 1903—a form of “seeing oneself through the eyes of the other world”—as addressing in

its own manner the horizon of question that Kant broached in his 1766 ruminations on metaphysics (with Europe awash with the heights of the beneficence arising from a then three-centuries-old Atlantic slave trade, for example) (Du Bois 1903d, 3–4, chap. 1, paras. 3–4)? And too, should we not see within the movements of Du Bois’s discourse of a “second sight”—a form of parallax, or better, a movement of “pronounced parallaxes,” as Kant put it, but here shaded “darkly as through a veil”—that allowed Du Bois to open a critical thought not just on an “American world” of the turn to the last century, but rather on the whole trajectory of modern historicity, including especially its epistemic gathering, in which a critical production such as Kant’s (and Marx’s too) could arise, which yielded for Du Bois the theoretical intervention of his own elaboration across some six subsequent decades a discourse of a global level “problem of the color line” emerging over the half-dozen centuries before our own and remaining at stake within our moment for those yet to come (Du Bois 1903d, 3, 8, chap. 1, paras. 3 and 9; Du Bois 1900; Du Bois 2015d)?

For, indeed, it was this double and redoubled sense of critical perspective that allowed Du Bois to think otherwise than an alignment with a dominant Europe or a strident and precipitative America, and prophetically as it were with regard to Asia as a whole—to nominalize an example, which would name not only Japan and China, but India, Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and so forth—indexing in this case the massive attempts by the European powers and the United States at the complete colonization of the vast majority of the world across the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Indeed, the reference here is to the colonial and postcolonial global level horizon as some kind of ensemblic whole. Thus, finally, it was that Du Bois proposed to name the possibility of an Asian future—which we now remark as a certain sense of an Afro-Asia to come—for example, as other than that bequeathed to the world by the “West.” For was it not indeed his sense of the possibility of another world, a future different than what that “West” had made it in the past, that gave the bias, the critical edge to Du Bois’s sense of world history astride the years following the First World War, and before the Second World War had fully announced itself, when so much of our contemporary sense of the world historic interest of modern Asia (now definitively remarked in its implication by its Diasporas) was quite literally being fought out on a global scale? The neutrality of a certain liberalism—a kind of Kantianism (whether self-reflexively understood by the thinkers in question or not) if you will—is not presumed within Du Bois’s practice. Nor can the putative universalism

of a certain Marxism be simply granted by his reflection. While remaining otherwise than a naive realism, according to Du Bois's practice, there is no way into and through our sense of historicity than its production of what is at stake for us here and now—even despite or otherwise than any hope we maintain about the future.¹

For, in this path of reflection, Du Bois's itinerary of the double, or a new theoretical sense of critical parallax, the practice of thought does not arrive at a "unanimous" or common understanding of difference as a simple formation. Yet, neither is it an account of a mode of "parallelism" to or within various forms of limit within modernity, nor a contraversion or "counter" formation of the same; and less still is it a simple "duality."² Along with the feints and dissimulations that attend its emergence, its yield remains as both a problem and a critical resource (two ways of formulating the same matter)—of existence and thought as practice (Chandler 1993). In turn, its problematic status, that is, its partiality, is precisely the source of its generativity. It must always reference the more than one or affirm such as its futural historicity, which is already at stake in its present as given. And, in only an apparent paradox, this partiality is precisely its way of acceding to a sense of possibility (rather than simply a given whole or idea of totality), which in its reception of the heterogeneity of originary irruption is both more radical and more fundamental than the long-standing dominant avatars of freedom and universality. It is both of, but remains always an exorbitance to, all senses of limit within the given that make it possible. It will thus have always remained a radical order of name for the general possibility of the historicity in which and according to which it could be announced.

And, further, for example, by way of theoretical metaphor, Du Bois's thought of the double can be understood to announce the irruption of a certain "pronounced parallax," which reveals irreversibly, in turn, that within the very possibility of seeing there is not now, nor has there ever been, any sustainable way of claiming or maintaining a supposed prior or ultimate order of simple or pure sight. Or, that is to say, sight can arise only according to a certain distribution of shading or shadow, hue, and color.

It is here then that we can turn further still, as if by way of an axis, but in truth more as if by way of the receptive tracking of the movements of shadow on the sundial, toward the horizon as such, remarking thereby the inception of our path of reflection, the irruption of the historical under the heading named African American.

Understood according to a certain historical sense encoded in Du Bois's formulation, the African American problematic can be understood

to open on its other side to a whole dimension of historicity, one perhaps susceptible to a certain inhabitation. It is that dimension that in truth can be said to open the historical form of the question of the African American. Du Bois places it under the heading of the “*problem* of the color line.” A critical thought of the problem of the color line proposes the terms of an epistemic desedimentation of historicity, not only of the past, but also of the present, in such a manner that one can remark the limits of such historicity as yet also outlining the thresholds by which one could reimagine possibility. It is in this sense that a continual desedimentation of the past is of fundamental necessity in practical thought. In this sense, a certain thinking of the problem of the color line might allow a different sense of world, a different sense of horizon, to arise. It would be one that is different than what has been given in the present. This too, as I have begun to propose, is the scene of a fundamental epistemological contribution by Du Bois that has yet to be fully elaborated as a theoretical intervention in modern thought as critical discourse.

In such a world, another one, different than those which have yet existed, and specifically one in which “the problem of the color line” has been rendered obsolete, groups such as the African American, *whose originarity necessarily remains at stake in every instance of its promulgation* and thus always in a sense yet to come, might be exemplary for human existence: not exemplary as the final or absolute example, but rather, exemplary of the historicity of our time and of the possibility of the making and remaking of ideals in, or as, the matter of existence in general.

However, it must be remarked that one of the astonishing facts about the current resurgence in the reading and study of Du Bois’s works is the absence of any true scholastic account of his formulation and deployment of the thought of a global “problem of the color line.”³ While it remains that his most famous words are “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,” this oft-quoted statement has been understood or used primarily for its apparently prosaic truth or as if it were merely apocryphal. Thus, the phrase has been primarily used over the decades, if taken up at all, as a slogan or idiom. It has not been taken up so much as the name of a fundamental motif in Du Bois’s thought or as a problem for contemporary thought in general: one that would fundamentally be epistemological even as it is irreducibly political.

In terms of the discussion of Du Bois’s discourse itself, due, perhaps, to this same limited effort to think with him on this line, it has often been deduced or implied that a global perspective arose more or less suddenly

for him as an effect of his participation in the *Exposition Universelle* held at Paris, and the first international conference called by the name “Pan-African” in London during the months of June and July in 1900.⁴ And then others have operated this logic with reference to many other dates in his later career, with some mentioning the 1920s as a time when such a perspective developed, and others proposing that such an event occurred as late as 1945, when Du Bois was in his late seventies. This kind of premise and such logic has governed much of the interpretation of Du Bois’s thought with regard to modernity as a whole or as it concerns the global in general no matter what period of his itinerary has been under discussion. Yet such a premise does not bear up under scholastic scrutiny and the theorizations and interpretations deduced by way of it are profoundly misleading for any attempt to judge the implication of the itinerary of Du Bois’s practice for contemporary thought. Thus, it should be understood as both a scholastic paradox and a political conundrum, certainly definitive in the American and Anglo-European academic discourse, but perhaps decisive in other geo-epistemic domains by way of the dissemination of such discussion, that most people—including many Du Bois scholars—know the famous line, “the problem of the twentieth century . . .” from the reprinting of his 1901 essay “The Freedmen’s Bureau,” as the second chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, with virtually no idea of the fundamental level of sedimentation that it has within his thought: (1) that the global perspective adumbrated in that chapter was developed initially from Du Bois’s attempt to understand the specific African American situation; (2) that it bespeaks a whole conception situated at a global level that Du Bois had begun to formulate during the half-dozen years prior to the publication of his most famous book; and (3) that it remained an epistemological formulation that he would elaborate on many registers across his entire career, serving to formulate the theoretical horizon for the most ambitious works of the later stages of his career, from *Black Reconstruction* in 1935, including both *Color and Democracy* and *The World and Africa* from the signal era at the end of the Second World War, to *The Black Flame* trilogy from 1955 to 1961 (Du Bois 1976a; Du Bois 1975a; Du Bois 1976d; Du Bois 1976c; Du Bois 1976b; Du Bois 1976e).

It is for this reason that a kind of restatement of the paradoxes engendered by this mistaken approach can perhaps underscore the still timely pertinence of a clarification of the issue at hand. So, on the one hand, those who know of the line just quoted from the second chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* usually have a quite limited sense of its global framing in Du Bois’s thought; or, if they do gesture toward such a frame,

they have little or no grip on the depth of the conception involved. But, on the other hand, those who rhetorically grasp this line as a way to link Du Bois's thought to a global context in a general sense, tend to do it by using it as a kind of weapon, under the authority of his name, against what they mistakenly think or opportunistically characterize as a kind of parochialism in the discourse of African Americans in the United States, or the apparent historic dominance of such a topic in discussions of the question of the African Diaspora or the problem of race in a global context.⁵ Yet the pertinence of such announced interventions might at best be their rendering legible matters of position and authority in our contemporary discursive and institutional scene. For beyond any matter of polemics, it remains that the most troublesome aspect of readings of Du Bois that would conscript his discourse primarily for affirming our own ideas about the truth of modern global history is that it makes it very difficult if not impossible to access and to judge, first on the terms of Du Bois's own declarations, what he thought he was saying.

If one undertakes such an examination, it renders a quite legible track that shows Du Bois was first led to this global frame precisely by trying to think the African American situation in the United States in the most fundamental and general manner possible. That he was, in this sense, first solicited by the specific ground of his own emergence articulates a general protocol of a commitment to thinking immanence that one disavows at one's own epistemic peril. That he sought to situate such immanence in relation to a passage of thought to the most general itself solicits and radicalizes this thought of the specific and the immanent. In an empirical sense this meant that he was led to a global frame precisely *by way of* this preoccupation with the situation of African Americans in the United States and *not despite* it. Yet, in a theoretical sense, Du Bois was *simultaneously* insisting that the African American situation could only be understood as part of a global horizon and that global modernity could only be understood if one recognized the constitutive status for the making of modern world history as a whole of the historical process by which this group was announced in history.⁶ The African American situation was a global one for Du Bois. And, *in this way*, at a ground level of historicity, shall we say, it was an exemplary example of a global problematic.⁷

Let me briefly restage here a scholastic question that I believe suggests in succinct manner what is at issue. What if the apparently most local and parochial chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk*, if situated, for example, in relation to the labor of thought presented in the essay "The Present Out-

look for the Dark Races of Mankind,” dating from December 1899, can be rendered as profoundly marked by a global perspective (Du Bois 1900; Du Bois 2015d)? Yet what if it is also the case that it therefore becomes clear that the means to the development of such a perspective for Du Bois, that of a certain sense of global modernity, was through and through by way of his concern with the only apparently parochial or relatively local situation of the African American in the United States? I suggest that this double remarking can come into profound relief by such juxtaposition. Thus, it is of some import that “The Present Outlook for the Dark Races of Mankind,” which was first presented in public in December 1899 as the presidential address at the third annual meeting of the American Negro Academy, bears at most an extremely limited citation in the contemporary literature and in an essential sense remains unread in our time. It remains that up to now there is no contemporary approach to Du Bois’s work that has accomplished such an interpretive positioning.

Yet this essay is one of Du Bois’s most important: for it is in fact the first place where he actually enunciates his most famous statement—the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—according to an achieved principle of formulation and clarified epistemological frame. This essay is certainly as important as “The Conservation of Races,” an essay that has rightly spawned a small cottage industry on both sides of the Atlantic over the course of the past generation. Thus, it is only an apparent paradox that Du Bois’s essays on the African American situation in the United States, from the time just after the completion of his doctoral study in 1895 to the years immediately following the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, and especially including the chapters of the latter text that to a superficial reading would appear most particularistic; for example, those on the “Freedmen’s Bureau” or on the “relations of Black and White Americans in the South,” acquire their most powerful legibility and theoretical importance, then or now, only when seen as the very path for Du Bois’s development of an interpretation of modernity in general, certainly of America as a distinctive scene of its devolution, but also of a global or worldwide historical conjuncture understood from the trajectory of human history as a whole. For taken as a whole singular enunciation, even as it is threaded with multiple motivations, claims, and levels of utterance, Du Bois’s discourse at the turn of the twentieth century bespeaks a powerful sense of the way that the question of the African American is a question about the possibilities of a global modernity in general. Such an understanding should play a large role in getting rid of an often understated

but widely held sense that the study of African Americans in the United States is a parochial or naively nationalistic discussion, and so forth. It can also go far in showing that in fact the problem of the Negro in America has long been understood within the most astute configurations of the African American intellectual community in the United States as a fundamental part of the question of colonialism and its aftermath, that the differentiation of the two discourses, for example, one concerned with “African American” matters and another concerned with “the colonial” in general in contemporary academic discussions in the Americas and in Europe, but especially in the United States, is an instituted one of recent and superficial lineage. We can underscore, that Du Bois, for example, from the very inception of his itinerary had announced a conception of a thought of the African American in which the premise and implication of this common historicity was the very terms of enunciation.

In the context of contemporary discussions about the aftermath of colonialism, or postcolonial discourse of one kind or another, or debates about globalization, Du Bois’s early negotiation of the epistemological paradoxes involved in conceptualizing the modern history of imperialism, slavery, and colonialism in a way that accounts for its worldwide provenance and does not simply reproduce a self-congratulatory narrative of the making of the West, along with his prophetic thematization of *the way in which* the question of historical difference (for which we have no good names—such as ethnicity, race, nationality, culture, etc.) among groups of people would come to dominate future discussions of politics and authority in general on a global level in the twentieth century and beyond, bear renewed and somewhat paradoxical force (Chandler 2006b; Chandler 2007). Thus, the current discussion of Du Bois must be rearticulated such that it may become possible to thoroughly think through the implications for contemporary thought of his understanding of the African American situation as part of a worldwide problematic, whether we call it modernity or postmodernity, the persistence of colonialism, or postcolonialism, a conflict of civilizations, or simply globalization or *mondialisation*, or something else altogether.

On such a path of critical thought, the African American example—by way of Du Bois’s elaboration of its configuration in the movement of an always at least and never-only double organization of heading—might appear as precisely a resource in a new thought of contemporary historicity.

Second, we might say, to continue our elaboration on the track of this order of example, Du Bois was concerned with *the question of Africa*—certainly through and by way of and always in the existence of those peoples *of the*

continent known by this name—with regard to its implication for how one might think of possibility in human history on a global scale. Such question came to him initially by way of his concern with the African American question. The two were for him inseparably interwoven. This was in the first temporal instance by way of the history of the slave trade stemming from the fifteenth century. It was also by way of the promulgation of an imperial colonialism by European states on the African continent during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Yet, it must be emphasized here, in a way that contravenes the too common formulation of question in contemporary discussions that have proceeded under the heading of the postcolonial for the past generation or so, that from within the horizon of the twenty-first century one can only get to the problem of the global level of modern colonialism by way of a first coming to terms with or passing through the history of modern systems of enslavement announced across the Atlantic and in the Americas. This earlier moment then is the incipient reference for Du Bois's theorization of Africa as a problematic of his present. The latter moment is the very time of Du Bois's first formation as a thinker, thereby naming both what is at stake for him and the practical nominal presentation of historicity that organizes the directions of the initial steps of his inquiry. However, within his engagement with these two specific references, given by time and place, Du Bois's concern with the historical character of Africa was general and fundamental. As such, it can be said that its futural status remained for him the question of the future of *the whole* of the world. His question, announced already in the 1890s at the very beginning of his itinerary and persisting throughout all stages of his work, even right to the end, was about the place of Africa in world history, that is, in the historicity of world. Three tracks might be remarked: the place of ancient Egypt in historicity, both its relation to historical groups in other parts of the continent and its relation to the history of human civilization in a general or global sense; the original character of historical practice among groups throughout the continent; and the possible futures for the new forms of historical entity that had already become definitive, or would shortly become so, especially political entities, across the African continent. The place of a "pan-African" proclamation for Du Bois then turns on the question of how to inhabit an historically given situation: that the devolution of modernity has been in its fundamental organization by way of the production of something that he called, from early on in his writings, "the Negro problems." Thus, Du Bois's abiding concern for a putative Africa was for the production of a collective subject (political or legal, economic, and ideological or "cultural") that

could respond to this historic denegation, transform it, and move beyond its horizon to an alliance with the most far reaching possibilities of human freedom as such had emerged in the modern epoch.

It should be remarked here, for it has yet to be generally understood, that Du Bois's concern with Africa is the place of a major intervention (like so much else in his itinerary): the resolute proposition of the principle of elucidating and interpreting the historical form or organization of groups on the African continent as an indication of an original historicity as such. This is the root narrative movement of this 1915 text, *The Negro* (Du Bois 1975d). I consider it in an epistemic sense the pioneering statement of a possible African studies in the discourses of the United States and for discourses that would try to think the Continent and its Diaspora together, even if it was not programmatic in register and even if today it still remains unrecognized as such in general.⁸ It is perhaps this “pan-Africanism” that later academic Africanist discourse thought it should disavow in the name of a supposedly more impartial perspective. The epistemic bearing of Du Bois's attempt remains as pertinent today as it was in 1915. This bearing is organized along two inextricably interwoven lines of implication: first, that the specific forms of inhabitation and practice by groups of sub-Saharan Africa are of basic implication for the interpretation of the meaning of human practice in the *modern* era in general; second, that given its distinct role in the making of the modern world systems of power—political and economic—in which its exploitation could be proposed as an irreducibly decisive and historically determining means of the passage to the modern in the West, its *historically* given status stands as a judgment of the same and an arbiter of futural limit for the world in general. The great surge in the excavation and elaboration of the symbolic that has been definitive in the study of the continent since the 1960s, building on premises that were institutionalized in the 1930s and 1940s in the United States, was already proposed by Du Bois in his early text. And while Du Bois had already disavowed any biological determinism to the concept of race in his 1897 text “The Conservation of Races,” in the 1915 text he explicitly declared the impertinence of such putative determination for conceptualizing something called “the Negro” in a global sense as well as for thinking the relation of Africa and “its” historic Diaspora. The thought of a “black Atlantic” or a horizon of “Africana” as an epistemic problematization is already assayed in his discourse at the advent of the First World War. As such, Du Bois had broached the very question that would be another key term in the formulation of both an academic African studies and an academic African Diasporic

studies from the 1930s forward and has since remained a perennial—even if at times submerged—nexus of question.

With all of this in mind we can excerpt a passage from Du Bois's concluding words in his 1915 text, his first sustained discussion of Africa, and take note of that poignant irony that is the very lacing by which so much of his writing is sustained. It points us toward a radical thought by which the name of "Africa" stands not as an indication of a closed and primordial figure in the history of the modern world, whether such might be understood as a good thing (the Africa of a reactionary pan-Africanism) or bad thing (the Africa of an unjustifiably presumptive European philosophy), but as the scene by which the passage of historical possibility might be tracked and perhaps announced.

There is slowly arising not only a curiously, strong brotherhood of Negro blood throughout the world, but the common cause of the darker races against the intolerable assumptions and insults of Europeans has already found expression. Most men in this world are colored. A belief in humanity means a belief in colored men. The future world will, in all reasonable probability, be what colored men make it. (Du Bois 1975d, 146)

This apparently prosaic proposition by Du Bois mobilizes an ensemble of highly overdetermined terms in the first sentence of its statement, appearing in one register of its enunciation to thereby reaffirm them. Nonetheless, it can be understood to produce an ironic displacement of their pertinence. For the second, third, and fourth sentences of the passage take up the apparent nominal limit as it is announced in the terms of the historical present—the figure of the "colored"—and affirms it as the name of a possibility that would extend in every sense—spatial and temporal—beyond such limit. Thus, his reinscription of the terms of historical limit as they were announced in his historical present sustains an ironic affirmation which would precisely mark as relative such limits and point toward an exorbitance within that very historicity. The name of Africa, then, may well be understood therein to remain as the paleonymic inscription for such possibility beyond the limit of world.

Third, in a manner that we have already begun to remark by way of reference to the African American example in the United States and the question of the African example, Du Bois was concerned with a global horizon to which he would give many names across his long life (some that

we might affirm today and others that we would most likely reject), such as “the dark races of mankind” in 1900 or “worlds of color” in 1925 and again in 1961 or the “dark colonized laborers of the world” in 1944. Elucidating this horizon, characterizing its historicity, and effecting a transformation of the conditions of its emergence and persistence—the general form of modern colonialism and its aftermath—might well be taken as the most general political frame of Du Bois’s life work. *The paramount question is: what might these massed millions, now billions, contribute to the making of possibilities for the future of human existence in a global sense if they were free to cultivate their most specific and originary character to its fullest.* (And such character would have no determination that could be understood simply on the basis of an a priori, such as the biological premise of the concept of race.) It appears as an achieved epistemological focus as early as December 1899, on the occasion of his first presentation of the text, “The Present Outlook for the Dark Races of Mankind,” in the form of a public lecture (Du Bois 1900). It can then be tracked across his entire career and registered at every level of his discourse: for example, in summary restatement as a declaration in “The Color Line Belts the World” (1906) (Du Bois 1906a); as the global frame that is especially resounded in the last two chapters of *John Brown* (1909) (Du Bois 1973a) and which later resonates as the drone throughout that complicated evening *raga* that is *Black Reconstruction* (1935) (Du Bois 1976a); as the guiding interpretive principle of “The African Roots of War” (1915) (Du Bois 1915; Du Bois 1982a), as well as *Darkwater* (1920) (Du Bois 1975b) and “Worlds of Color” (1925) (Du Bois 1982f); as the operative question at stake in the narrative of *Dark Princess* (1928) (Du Bois 1974a); as the governing thought in the unpublished epistolary narrative “A World Search for Democracy” (1937) (Du Bois 1980d), and in the epistemological coda for it that is *Color and Democracy* (1945) (Du Bois 1975a); and as the relic problematic of the *Black Flame Trilogy* (1957–1961), especially its last volume *Worlds of Color* (1961) (Du Bois 1976c; Du Bois 1976b; Du Bois 1976e). This is the track of a whole possible investigation into the thought and contributions of Du Bois at a level of profundity that has not yet been attempted. This order of attention would mean that both the object, the “thought of Du Bois,” and the required subject of inquiry would doubtless exceed the terms of a discourse signed by one author or encoded in one textual statement. It should be the operative horizon by which Du Bois’s thought is reengaged critically and articulated as a an essential reference within the scene of a most contemporary and ongoing global-level discussion.

Most profoundly here a certain form of hyperbolic renarrativization of the world historical would be the most fundamental demand. Is this not the practice of that mischievously erudite novel of the Harlem Renaissance—*Dark Princess*—to take but one example? World history is announced therein on the subterranean orders of existence as they have been canonically given in the figure of the West as the devolution of modern history. Thus, in the narratives of this text, the historicity of the present becomes nameable according to an ensemble of axes and temporalities that are not according to either the line or the point. In one sense, they displace topical orientation—underground there is no absolutely given direction as such. In another, they extend and interweave relation according to temporal rhythms that recognize the present only under the heading of its possible dissolution—something like the always multiple movement of the waves of the ocean. Such are the implication of the scenes of renarrativization set afoot in this novel: the interlocutions among “the council of the darker races of mankind” in its opening scenes; the “back rooms”—whether of the bar or the train—that provide the scenes for the development of an insurrectionary movement of the Negro American; in the meditations that occur in the mind’s eye of our would-be hero as he serves in the excavation of an underground railroad that will go nowhere; or, in the configured imagination of the two mothers who yield the figure of a narratable history of a global south coming by way of a joining of a certain North American “south” across the “southernmost” landforms of the Americas and of Africa, and across the Atlantic and Indian oceans, to “South” Asia and thence to Asia and beyond to the “islands of the [other] sea.” Such narration has to announce the possible production of the very epistemic horizon that it would proclaim as the terms of its authorization: this is a performative historiography that would extend itself beyond the temporalities and the spaces of the given understanding of historical possibility. Such is the burden and the task of the historiographic voice proposed in this narrative. It is perhaps no wonder that its demands remain at stake in our own time of interlocution.⁹

Fourth, it may surprise many to imagine Du Bois, the Pan-Africanist, as a profound thinker of the question of the historicity of Europe. Yet, it is not too much to propose that he is perhaps the most unread or underread of the major thinkers of the twentieth century on the historical figure of Europe.¹⁰ For Du Bois, as is well enough known, Europe was reflexively at issue at the autobiographical level already from the early 1890s. What has yet to be rendered clearly is that Europe is announced as a philosophical

problematic in his thought from the late 1890s onward: such is evident in two lectures that remained unpublished during his lifetime, “The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe” (ca. 1896) (Du Bois 1985a) and “The Spirit of Modern Europe” (ca. 1900) (Du Bois 1985b), as well as its articulation as a problem and example in “The Present Outlook for the Dark Races of Mankind” (1899), one of his most important essays, as I have already remarked and will annotate further below (Du Bois 1900; Du Bois 2015d). From this time through to the end of his career, this order of interrogation and reflection about Europe forms a fundamental line of sedimentation in Du Bois’s thought, especially just before, during, and after, the First World War (Du Bois 1910; Du Bois 1915; Du Bois 1917; Du Bois 1975b). Starting from the historically given role of Europe in modern world history, the question of its historial status appears in every major aspect of Du Bois’s attempts to think through the historicity of modernity. Certainly this is true everywhere that he discusses colonialism and the question of “the darker world” in the future; thus each of the texts mentioned above on this theme are pertinent here. Yet what is not so readily recognized is how in each of his major engagements with Africa, there is an abiding examination and critique of Europe; this is due to the deep mutually constituting relation, as Du Bois understands it, of these two historical entities as each are announced in modern history. Thus it is that the first three chapters of *The World and Africa* (1947), for example, are an acute questioning of the tenability of the legacies of Europe for the future as they stand just after the Second World War and at the midpoint of the century in which the global problem was “the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men” (Du Bois 1976d). And, for example, Du Bois’s last major published extended narrative, the last volume of the *Black Flame* trilogy, *Worlds of Color* maintains this line as a major passage. The novel opens with the protagonist embarking on a worldwide tour, much as Du Bois had done in 1936, to inquire about the future of democracy in the world as a whole. The first stop is Europe where a sustained and ironic discussion recurs across the national historical figures of Western Europe about their respective places, as well as that of the “continent” as a whole, in such a future. In the background always is the question of how to situate Europe’s past and present exploitation of the continent of Africa in world historical terms. Another superb example of this approach in Du Bois’s thought is one of his last published texts, “Africa and the French Revolution,” dating from July 1961.¹¹ What must be underscored here is the transformation in his thought about the status of Europe with regard to the terms of historicization. If at 1900 he was hopeful that Europe might still