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# W.E.B Du Bois' Late Thought In and After In Battle for Peace

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### Introduction

When World War II ended, W. E. B. Du Bois was 77, an age that most would regard as an appropriate point to retire. Yet from 1945 until his death in 1963, Du Bois remained active as a public thinker, propagandist, and activist. Du Bois' political philosophy at this time was oriented around a developing synthesis of Pan-Africanism and socialism, and he was also a strident critic of U.S. foreign policy during the early Cold War period. The rhetorical thrust of Du Bois' public writings and lectures between 1944 and 1948 consisted of lampooning America for its "alliance with colonial imperialism and class dictatorship in order to enforce the denial of freedom to the colored peoples of the world". Integrating a Leninist critique of imperialism as the deployment of militarism in the interests of monopoly capital, Du Bois argued that big business had corrupted the radical democratic ideals which he viewed to be the perennially unrealised basis of the American republic. Equally scathing were his critiques of U.S. domestic policy. He viewed the red scare as undermining the liberty of all Americans, but in particular black Americans, who as a constituency at the time skewed to the political left.<sup>2</sup> Du Bois' militancy would increase friction between him and the leadership of the N.A.A.C.P, which he had co-founded four decades prior, to the point of breaking. During the war, the organisation had maintained an anti-imperialist line, but afterwards moved to an anticommunist position.3 After his 1948 ouster, Du Bois threw his full weight into the international peace movement, attending the congresses in Paris and Moscow in 1949, and serving as the Chairman of the Peace Information Center, a short-lived New York-based anti-war organisation that existed for around nine months in 1950. The organisation's activities were limited to circulating accruing signatories for the Stockholm Appeal, an international petition for multilateral disarmament and de-escalation drafted by the World Peace Council that same year. In Battle for Peace: The Story of my 83rd Birthday (henceforth, Peace) is an autobiographical account of Du Bois' indictment by the federal government for his leadership role in the PIC. In a campaign spearheaded by then-Secretary of State Dean Acheson, the government charged the centre as an undeclared "agent of a foreign principal".4 The "foreign principal" was unnamed but understood to be the Soviet Union. There was never any proof of any relationship between the centre and the Soviet Union, but that was not the point of the indictment; the PIC was targeted as part of a widespread anticommunist push by the Truman administration, which relied on public smears, vague innuendo, and financial warfare to stifle the American peace movement for espousing similar views to the Soviet-led peace effort. As one of the most prominent black leftists in postwar America, Du Bois was, in a sense, doubly vulnerable, as paranoia about a black fifth column suffused American conservatism at this time.<sup>5</sup> Peace documents the international campaign for defence, but even as a first-hand account it does not communicate the full scale of the trial and the mobilisation that took place in response.6

The trial pushed Du Bois to a psychological and physiological limit, to the point that medical professionals were concerned for his health once

- 1 Manning Marable, W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), pp. 169–170.
- 2 Ibid., p. 172.
- 3 Gerald Horne, Black and Red: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 41–49.
- 4 W.E.B Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace: The Story of My 83rd Birthday* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 14.
- 5 Eric Porter, *The Problem of the Future World: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 153.
- 6 For a more thorough historical account, see: Horne, pp. 151–183.

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he was finally acquitted. At age 84, Du Bois was all-too-aware that he was approaching the absolute limit of lived time. By closely reading Du Bois' reflexive commentary of his personal experience of the trial, following where and how he places emphasis in the text, I posit that Peace marks a threshold at which Du Bois' long-held assumptions about the relationship between history and race were tested to a point of rupture. This was precipitated by the loss of the support of the black middle class, which led him to declare the falsity of his Talented Tenth theory. The significance of this ideological transformation has been understated, in part because the Talented Tenth tends to be understood as a political program of elite education and racial uplift, whereas the historical and theoretical aspects of the text tend to be overlooked. While scholars like Joy James, Kate Baldwin, Eric Porter, and others have noted the significance of Du Bois' realisation of a sharp cleavage of the black community along class lines, I proceed to show that this in turn yields a series of further destabilisations in Du Bois' thought. This paper focuses on Peace; however, in my conclusion, I will discuss how the problems raised in *Peace* structure his last literary work, the Black Flame trilogy.

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Literature Review

With the exception of Kate Baldwin's chapter in Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain, scholarly treatments of Peace tend to regard it as a political document with scant theoretical content.8 Like Baldwin, I read Peace more microscopically, as a work of autobiographical literature that registers important transformations in Du Bois' thought. I intend to further recover Peace from the status of a document, to a proper late work, and address the role of the diaristic fragment with which Du Bois opens the text, the value of Du Bois' deployment of the literary trope of the threshold and limit, and the meaning of the literary sequence that concludes the text. There might be easy answers to these questions: abruptly losing the venue for Du Bois' birthday celebration was a symbolic precursor to subsequent further marginalisation; the notion of a "threshold" might simply express an anguished mental state during the trial; and the ending does not wholly differ from the rhapsodic, embellished prose that appears at the ends of other texts. However, I believe that there is more to be found. In a sense, my analysis retreads, but extends past, some of what is covered in Joy James' Beyond the Talented Tenth, in which she correctly notes how Peace marks a "final transformation to [Du Bois'] ideology on political leadership and agency." My interest is in the precise nature of this transformation—I believe it is epistemological in addition to political—and rendering legible its reverberations within the text and subsequent writings.

My focus is *not* on situating *Peace* and the activities of the PIC within the broader historical conjuncture of the burgeoning Cold War, as there is already an extensive and well-researched body of literature on this topic. Both Manning Marable's *Black Radical Democrat* and Gerald Horne's *Black and Red* offer thorough treatments of this period in Du Bois' life, plotting important moments such as his ouster from the N.A.A.C.P, the death of Nina Du Bois, Du Bois' relationship with the Council of African Affairs, his campaign for

- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- 8 Kate Baldwin, *The Color Line and the Iron Curtain* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), ch. 3, e-book.
- 9 Joy James, Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 27.

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senator, the indictment, the defence campaign, and his acquittal. Marable's biography addresses Du Bois' entire life in a relatively slim volume and is thus less comprehensive than Horne's longer text, which is bound in scope to the postwar period. Horne provides a richer historical and institutional context, with Du Bois emerging as the exemplary figure at the nexus of broader social movements of this period: black internationalism, the Cold War, the Civil Rights movement, and the Peace Movement. However, both texts are similar in motivation, understood as book-length elaborations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s comment that "it is time to cease muting the fact that Dr. Du Bois was a genius and chose to be a communist." They are meant to correct the pre-1980s record—itself a product of the extension of McCarthyism into scholarly output—on Du Bois' late life turn to the political left, seeing it not as a disjunctive, abrupt radicalisation, but continuous with a lifelong interest in socialism, and a sensible decision for someone with his moral commitments to make during that period. My interest in Du Bois' idiosyncratic literary style in Peace departs, but is in a sense, indebted to these texts which advanced late Du Bois' writings as important objects of scholarly inquiry. They stand in contradistinction with David Levering-Lewis' thorough two-volume biography, which is particularly breezy in its treatment of the late period, engaging little with the content of Du Bois' book-length texts from this period, and is interspersed with such embellished commentary as "an eloquent grumpiness seemed to overtake [Du Bois] ... a rutted readiness to pontificate apocalyptically that was less due to advanced age than to ideological predilections in need of updating and fine tuning."11 While this sort of insight into Du Bois' mannerisms provides illustrative emotional content to those seeking to understand Du Bois' personality, for those interested in him as a thinker, it seems to miss the point. Arnold Rampersand's Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois, valuable for its most thorough engagement with Du Bois' fiction out of any of the biographies, stakes out a position that "Du Bois' greatest gift was poetic in nature, and that his scholarship, propaganda, and political activism drew their ultimate power from his essentially poetic vision of human experience and from his equally poetic reverence for the word."12 It is an unapologetically idealist text, grounding Du Bois' vision of uplift and his humility before the beauty of the world in the early presence of Calvinism in Great Barrington. I try to plot a course between the political biographies of Marable and Horne, Rampersand's emphasis on visionary poetics, and Levering-Lewis' psychological portrait, by arguing that Du Bois' first-hand experience of political repression precipitated a personal crisis of thought, inferred through a close reading of Du Bois' literary imaginary.

All four biographies are, as Eric Porter has noted, "constrained by their genre." Porter's own *The Problem of the Future World*, represents a corrective focusing on the texts published between 1940 and 1952. Porter identifies how Du Bois responded to a number of postwar changes: the outmoding of scientifically-rooted notions of racial difference and a transition to a culturalist racism, new forms of imperial sovereignty, and the paradoxical status of African-Americans during the Cold War as both exemplary national subjects fighting for overdue rights and critical weak links to be exploited by the Soviet Union. Although he overextends himself in his efforts to justify the

- 10 Marable, p. 217.
- 11 David Levering-Lewis, W.E.B Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century: 1919–1963 (New York: Owl Books, 2000), ch. 14, e-book.
- 12 Arnold Rampersand, *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. vii.

relevance of the texts to later developments such as post-Cold War neoliberalism and the 9/11 security state, Porter's articulation of Du Bois' vexed relationship with American ideals, and how it led him to an "embrace of a disidentificatory Americanism, forged from a simultaneously alienated and complicit position," provides an astute reading of *Peace* as a work of political criticism. 14 However, Porter is dismissive of the last works—he sees a significant drop in sophistication in the Black Flame trilogy and the Autobiographywhich leads him to miss the ways in which Peace is continuous with them. Lastly, Porter does not sufficiently address the relationship between the trial and Du Bois' theory of historical motions, which is a key point of emphasis for Du Bois himself in the latter half of the text. Porter's text builds on Kate Baldwin's chapter on Du Bois in Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain, which focuses on the role of the Soviet Union in the late writings, focusing both on Peace and the unpublished manuscript Russia and America. Baldwin shows that Russia was many things for Du Bois throughout his life—a site onto which he projected his aspirations for black Americans, a political ally and an important megaphone during a time of political marginalisation, and later, a crucial ally to anticolonialism throughout the Global South. On the impact of the trial on Du Bois' thought, Baldwin writes that he "rejected his previous Talented Tenth idea of racial uplift and replaced it with the terms of black struggle as primarily class based". 15 As I will show, what this rejection precipitated was something more complex than a flight from race to class.

My conception of Peace as a threshold text is inspired by Nahum Chandler's ability to find fractal complexity in Du Bois' early formulations, including the "problem of the color line." Where Marable and Horne focus on Du Bois' political continuity, Chandler focuses on epistemic continuity, showing Du Bois as singularly concerned with how the figure of the "Negro" occasions a constant "epistemic desedimentation" of the question of human difference within, and at the limit of, the historical epoch of global modernity.16 Chandler pays close attention to, and to a certain extent, imitates the language through which Du Bois thinks—problem, question, limit, line, and world are for him loaded, specialised terms. Inspired by Chandler, I retrace a sort of "epistemic desedimentation" in Du Bois' own thought in the wake of the trial, focusing on the language of the limit. Chandler's creativity is also its own limit, in a sense, as by putting Du Bois in conversation with intellectual traditions that Du Bois himself did not engage much with, like deconstruction and Husserlian phenomenology, we can sometimes lose sight of the relationship between Du Bois' thought and the particular intellectual and discursive milieu from which it emerged. Two older texts in the idiom of intellectual history, Shamoon Zamir's Dark Voices and Adolph Reed's Fabianism and the Color Line meet this need, with Zamir focusing more on the influence of European and American philosophy, particularly Hegel and William James, whereas Reed focuses on how racial discourse functioned materially outside the ivory tower during an era of civic disenfranchisement of black Americans following Reconstruction.<sup>17</sup>

- 13 Porter, p. 6.
- 14 Porter, p. 165.
- 15 Baldwin, ch.3.
- 16 Nahum Chandler, *Toward An African Future—Of the Limit of World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), p. 12.
- 17 Adolph Reed, W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Shamoon Zamir, Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888–1903 (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press)

# Du Bois, Ageing, and Lateness

Opening *Peace* with a diaristic fragment penned on the eve of his 25th birthday while he was studying in Berlin indicates its continued, or renewed importance to Du Bois nearly six decades later. He relates his personal relationship to racial uplift using the metaphor of a "limit":

I am striving to make my life all that life may be—and I am limiting that strife only in so far as that strife is incompatible with others of my brothers and sisters making their lives similar. The crucial question is now where that limit comes. I am too often puzzled to know. ... The general proposition of working for the world's good becomes too soon sickly sentimentality. I therefore take the work that the Unknown lay in my hands and work for the rise of the Negro people, taking for granted that their best development means the best development of the world. <sup>18</sup>

"Strife" has an archaic usage, referring to an earnest endeavouring disposition. To avoid an undisciplined, vectorless petering-out, Du Bois' "strife" requires a "limit", which is something like a structuring condition, given, telos, horizon, or guiding axiom. In choosing to align his striving with the "rise of the Negro people", Du Bois does not just announce his personal raison d'etre. He stakes out a historical location, sketching a relationship between his own future, the future of his race, and the "best development of the world". Further problems arise immediately. Consider how Du Bois refers to "their best development", not "our best development", cleaving a separation between himself and that group entity.<sup>19</sup> A few sentences later, he resumes his position as a race leader in the making, speaking in the possessive: "these are my plans: to make a name in science, to make a name in literature and thus to raise my race". 20 This switch between "their" and "my" betrays the difficulty of Du Bois' project of attempting to render the concept of race in autonomous terms as he finds himself a racialised subject imbricated within the matrices of racial modernity. It also registers the rhetorical instability in what Adolph Reed describes as "a form of political synecdoche" that characterized uplift ideology at the turn of the century, in which a "monadological" subject, "the American Negro" was conjured up by aspirational black leaders purporting to ventriloquize on behalf of the whole heterogeneous bloc.<sup>21</sup> The tension between the artificiality of this monadological, ideological construction, what Alain Badiou calls "the infinite and self-evident multiplicity of human-kind", and the racial hem that circumscribes modernity never gets resolved, but instead is organised and parsed out in writing.<sup>22</sup> The mode of autobiography provides a literary fix, or a "working-through"—in the sense of an interpretive overcoming—of this problem.<sup>23</sup> Reflecting on the decision Du Bois made to subtitle his 1940 autobiography Dusk of Dawn "an essay toward the autobiography of a race concept", Chandler remarks that through the use of autobiography, "Du Bois practices a recognition ... that in order for ... a social idea or formal concept of race to operate as an iterable distinction, as a system of repetitive marks, it can only do so in the making of subjects—in the making and not before".<sup>24</sup>

- 18 W.E.B. Du Bois, "Celebrating His Twenty-fifth Birthday (1893)" in *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887–1961*, ed. by Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), pp. 27–28.
- 19 *Ibid*, 29; see also: Zamir, *Dark Voice*, p. 136. Zamir discusses further "Du Bois's own peculiar positioning between this [white] audience and the 'black folk'."
- 20 Du Bois, "Twenty-fifth Birthday," p. 29.
- 21 Adolph Reed, "The "Color Line" Then and Now: The Souls of Black Folk and the Changing Context of Black American Politics" in *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought* ed. by Adolph Reed and Kenneth W. Warren (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 253; Reed, *Fabianism and the Color Line*, p. 188; see also: Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
- 22 Alain Badiou, Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil, (New York and London: Verso, 2001), p. 26.
- 23 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 488.
- 24 Nahum Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 82.

Kenneth Mostern has also described how Du Bois' autobiographical works mediate the "particular relationship between autobiographical truth and political-theoretical truth". <sup>25</sup> In the autobiographical fragment that opens *Peace*, Du Bois establishes three levels of abstraction that will recur in his work: himself as an individual subject, a concept of race in general, and the sociohistorical totality, or world.

The presumed relationship between these three phenomena is spatiotemporal and cautiously optimistic—onwards and upwards. Autobiographical, racial, and historical motions are proposed to be not synchronous, but coordinated in some to-be-determined way. Du Bois' intellectual project can be understood as a continued elaboration, testing, and revision of this hypothesised historical entanglement between subject, race, and world. The 25th birthday fragment remains important for Du Bois because it contains the distilled fundament anchoring this hypothesis, tested in much of Du Bois' subsequent writing. Both the theory of racial historical motions in "Of the Conservation of Races" and Du Bois' proposed program of black education and uplift, the "Talented Tenth", dovetail with the 25th birthday fragment, representing two significant elaborations of the notion that "best development [of the black race] means the best development of the world" in the early writings.<sup>26</sup> However, there is a further tension to be parsed out here, having to do with Du Bois' conception of history. According to Nahum Chandler, Du Bois conceives the "arrivedness" of the historical present as radically contingent and in need of constant interrogation in order to discern the historical conditions under which the figure of the Negro was, and remains possible. Which is to say, for Du Bois, history is also unstable. Chandler reads the colour line not as it is often colloquially invoked, as an internal division within the human species, but the name for an outer limit that circumscribes "the global horizon of modern historicity."27 What Chandler calls the "epistemic desedimentation" occasioned by the colour line refers to Du Bois' practice of parsing out the distortions in history produced by the race concept, with an understanding that, as Hannah Black has written, "the wild strangeness of race ... is the experiential mode of the strangeness of history". 28 It is Du Bois' radical estrangement from the present that leads him to continuously think and revise his own philosophy of history, for although his colour line formulation renders the narrative of the divinely or biologically sanctioned triumph of the white race that much more spurious, it does not presuppose exactly what might replace it. In a famous formulation, Frederic Jameson wrote "history is what hurts", and the colour line is as sharp an incision as has ever been cut in history.<sup>29</sup> It is precisely in this incision that Du Bois finds a locus, plumbing it for personal and historical meaning. In other words, anchoring Du Bois' conception of historical agency is not so much a principle, but something like a knot, or a negativity.

It is critical to remember the kernel of arbitrariness, the "taking for granted" at the core of this claim, as it produces both conviction and insecurity, attachment and ambivalence towards the race concept. Ever the aesthete, Du Bois dresses this arbitrariness in aesthetic terms: working for the betterment of the *tertium quid* is presented as a harmonious third way between myopic solipsism and unbounded universalism. "Limit" has a mathematical

- 25 Kenneth Mostern, Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 59.
- 26 Du Bois, "Twenty-fifth Birthday," p. 28.
- 27 Chandler, Towards an African Future, p. 30.
- 28 Hannah Black, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," *Bookforum* September/October/ November 2020, <a href="https://www.bookforum.com/print/2703/claudia-rankine-discusses-race-with-friends-and-strangers-24167">https://www.bookforum.com/print/2703/claudia-rankine-discusses-race-with-friends-and-strangers-24167</a> >
- 29 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious:* Narrative as a socially symbolic act (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 88.

connotation, having to do with graphical plotting, and generally speaking, in writings of this period, geometry provides a comfortable grammar of literary abstraction through which Du Bois reflects on his own life and the world. Earlier in the same text, Du Bois represents his future graphically, with "Beauty", "Truth" and, "Good" as the three axes along which Du Bois models his "greatest and fullest life" in the quintessential Platonic form of the cube. Around this time, Du Bois also authored an unfinished short story in which racism is presented as originating in a "fourth dimension". 30 Du Bois considers his own life at risk, potentially unwieldy, if it were to be insufficiently grounded in the unstable topsoil of "sickly sentimentality". His own striving might become attenuated, ailing, rudderless, and the shape of his life amoebic. This echoes a remark written the same year by Pan-Africanist philosopher Edward Blyden that the abandonment of the race concept would result in the human species becoming a "formless protoplasm".31 Formlessness is a problem from early on, as Shamoon Zamir notes, Du Bois' early writings depict the black masses as formless, in need of moulding.<sup>32</sup> Wariness, expressed in formal terms, leads Du Bois to embrace a racial logic over a blithe, abstract universalism, and an asinine pseudo-philanthropic disposition exemplified in the original fragment by vegetarianism. However, that Du Bois is even in a position to decide "where that limit comes" distinguishes him as a budding member of the black elite.<sup>33</sup> It is unlikely that in 1893, poor and working class black Americans would use this bourgeois grammar of personal fulfilment, nor would they be desirous of limits, as there were already so many external limits imposed on them. Following Zamir's reading of double-consciousness as race and class specific, it seems that Du Bois' particular consciousness, as a black upwardly-mobile intellectual or "savant" whose "absence of all given determination" is expressed in the desire for a limit.<sup>34</sup> In a sense, the 25th birthday fragment is an expression of what Brent Hayes Edwards calls Du Bois' dialectical formalism: he resolves his individual ambiguous formlessness by choosing to identify strongly with his race as an exemplary figure, then positions himself as a leader who will help the formless black masses do the same.<sup>35</sup> In my reading of *Peace*, I will argue that this provisional solution is worn out, paying close attention to how Du Bois formalises his thought in writing, focusing on expressions of limit, breakthrough, rupture, and clarity in Peace, and formlessness in the Black Flame trilogy. Implicitly, I regard Du Bois' strategy of formal representation as not, contrary to Reed's assertion, "crudely instrumental" to his political philosophy, but rather, a sort of wayfinding tool that points toward its limits.<sup>36</sup>

A reminder of the absolute boundedness of life, birthdays also produce estrangement from the present. In the 25th birthday fragment, Du Bois zooms out so that he can see the entire shape of his life, legible in its totality against the unknowable backdrop of history. Du Bois' age at the time of writing *Peace* introduces the question of *lateness*. History, the substrate of Du Bois' lifelong inquiry, is almost in the rear-view, and his autobiographical experiment could expire any second. *Peace* is the first text in which he brackets his political remarks with reflections on ageing, death, bodily debility, and the feeling that he is running out of time. These comments bookend *Peace*, run thematically throughout the multigenerational historical fiction *Black Flame* 

- 30 See: Nancy Bentley, "The Fourth Dimension: Kinlessness and African American Narrative" *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 35 no. 2, 270–292.
- 31 Edward Blyden, "Study and Race," quoted in Robert Bernasconi, "Our Duty to Conserve': W. E. B. Du Bois's Philosophy of History in Context," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108:3 (2009), 519–540 (p. 525.)
- 32 Zamir, p. 151.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Zamir, p. 51.
- 35 Brent Hayes Edwards, "Late Romance," in *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexualty, and W. E. B. Du Bois* ed. by Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 126.
- 36 Reed, Fabianism, p. 178.

trilogy, and structure the interlude and postlude of the posthumously-published *Autobiography*.<sup>37</sup> Because of the wilful entanglement of his own autobiographical arc with the arc of world history and the black race's place within it, these remarks cannot be dismissed as neurotic biographical fluff. Rather, they are symptomatic of the texts' lateness—how they are conditioned by, and yet, irreducible to their proximity to death.

Adorno was the foremost theorist of lateness as a heuristic through which to understand cultural texts. Developed in an influential essay fragment on Beethoven titled "Late Style in Beethoven", the concept of late style is developed to correct an "abdication" on the part of theorists to defer to the "dignity of death", psychologise rather than analyse, and relegate late works to the status of a "document". 38 Adorno seeks to transcend "psychological interpretation" that would declare "mortal subjectivity to be the substance of the late work", and instead identify lateness formally. He lists a flurry of qualitative attributes of late works, all of which apply to Peace and everything after it: fragmented, cipher-like, furrowed, unabashedly primitive at times, mysterious, discordant, ravaged, bipolar, and catastrophic.<sup>39</sup> Yet, as Ben Hutchinson has noted, Adorno cannot expunge the subject from late style, as proximity to death remains fundamental to the concept. 40 In the late work, subjectivity approaching death is registered in the absence of authorial subjectivity itself: "the power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves". 41 This indicates the productive difficulty of transposing Adorno's blueprint to a discussion of Du Bois' late works, for we are dealing again with a particular kind of subject, the black creative intellectual whose temporal perception is yoked to three meters autobiographical, racial, historical. So, we must open the question of how Du Bois' racialised, and therefore, historical consciousness transforms the subjective negativity of lateness. Provisionally, it seems that the scars accrued by the psychic internalisation of the sociohistorical structure of race resemble and partially occlude the scars left by the subjective evacuation of a late artwork.

This is evinced by the fact that there is a germ of lateness already in the 25th birthday fragment, in its formalisation of an unreconciled relationship between the arbitrariness of race and the pursuit of truth, and Du Bois' fixation on the untranscendable limit of death. Chandler has also written that "Du Bois's practice would accede to an order ... understood as a certain relation to what has for too long been understood under the heading of death".42 To say that Du Bois is fundamentally oriented by, and tarries at, the limit of death, is bound up with his own compulsive honesty that persists even under the duress of the trial, during which Du Bois emphasises "for fifty years I had always blurted out the truth on all occasions". 43 Peace describes a real-world political enactment of Hélène Cixous' provocation that "something renders going in the direction of truth and dying almost synonymous".44 This relationship between truth and death helps clarify the peculiar, manic, urgent, messianic voice legible in the 25th birthday fragment in which as a young man, Du Bois writes towards an untranscendable limit concluding with a dramatic flourish, a quotation from the Book of Esther: "and if I perish—I PERISH". 45 R.A. Judy has described Du Bois as an "asymptotic thinker", which might suggest Du Bois fits into Cixous' category of "writers of extremity, who take

- 37 Du Bois, Peace.; W.E.B. Du Bois, The Ordeal of Mansart (New York: Mainstream Publishers, 1957), p. 315.; W.E.B. Du Bois, The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century (New York: International Publishers Co., Inc.), p. 13.
- 38 Theodor Adorno, Essays on Music (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 566.
- 39 Ibid., pp. 564-567.
- 40 Ben Hutchinson, "Lateness as 'a European Language': Theodor W. Adorno and Late Style" in *Lateness & Modern European Literature* ed. by Ben Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 257–274.
- 41 Adorno, p. 566.
- 42 Chandler, Toward an African Future, p. 4.
- 43 Du Bois, *Peace*, p. 87.
- 44 Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 36.
- 45 Du Bois, "Twenty-fifth Birthday," p. 30.

themselves to the extremes of experience, thought, life". 46 What makes *Peace* particularly interesting for analysis is that it emerges from a nexus of so many extremes—political marginalisation, biographical lateness, the limit of fundamentally held metaphysical assumptions, and a perceived eschatological threshold of history.

We might proceed by looking more broadly at the role ageing plays in the narrative structure of *Peace*. Du Bois notes a tendency among speakers at his birthday celebrations, who would indicate "subtly that I was about at the end of a rather too long career, and could hardly be expected to keep sane and busy much longer". 47 Sardonically, Du Bois describes these attitudes as nationally-specific: "it is an old American custom to write off as a liability, if not total loss, the age of men in public work after they have passed fifty, and to regard them as practically dead at seventy". 48 Orienting the narrative around his birthday serves a number of functions: first, the venue declining Du Bois' birthday celebration was a prelude to the chaos of the indictment. It illustrates the absurd cruelty of the state, as they are targeting an old man, and gives Du Bois' insights an arrived-at, final quality. However, none of these reasons fully account for how Du Bois deploys his age rhetorically. Consider the passage, "I was not only getting older, but now passing the limits which folklore custom had allotted to human existence". 49 As he writes it, Du Bois emplots Peace as a text at a threshold, signalled by the presentism of the word "now". In other words, age is one modality through which Du Bois locates the reader in history, and prepares us for a transition, break, or rupture, after which knowledge will takes on a vulgar, forbidden, unvarnished, counter-normative quality, as by even existing, Du Bois violates "folklore custom".

The phenomenological experience of ageing introduces a new axis of alienation that interacts syncretically with that produced by racism. Du Bois feels society judges his life as having a perverse quality, having gone on too long, gone too far, and there is a homology between Jean Améry's description of alienation arising from age—"in ageing, we become alienated from ourselves, doubled and inscrutable"—and Du Bois' original double consciousness formulation. 50 Du Bois invites this alienation, using it to buttress a refashioned critical standpoint.<sup>51</sup> Age affords Du Bois a newfound "clarity", itself a hallmark of late style, as Edward Said has noted, "lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present".52 If double-consciousness was conceived of as a "second sight", age further transforms ocular perception.<sup>53</sup> Together, racialisation and age prop open a distance from reality that yields a schematic understanding of the patterns of social relations, resulting in a viewpoint that is concurrently clearer and more abstract. This might also speak to something more specific about Du Bois, insofar as he seemed to think in social abstractions in some fundamental way, hinted by a quip from a colleague at Atlanta University that remarked that Du Bois "very seldom thought in terms of individuals".54

Beryl Gilroy offers a useful phrase for this convergence of racialisation and ageing, as a "diaspora of the senses". For Du Bois, this sense of psychical dispersion is compounded by bodily stress: "I can stand a good deal, and have done so during my life; but this experience was rather more than I felt like bearing, especially as the blows continued to fall." Using the metaphor

- 46 R.A. Judy, Sentient Flesh: Thinking in Disorder, Poiesis in Black (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 86.; Cixous, p. 34.
- 47 Du Bois, Peace, p. 3.
- 48 *Ibid*.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 50 Jean Améry, On Aging: Revolt and Resignation (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 50.
- 51 Thomas C. Holt, "The Political Uses of Alienation: W. E. B. Du Bois on Politics, Race, and Culture, 1903-1940," *American Quarterly* Vol. 42 no. 2 (1990), 301–323, (p. 306.)
- 52 Edward Said, On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), ch. 1, e-book.
- 53 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 8.
- 54 Marable, p. 142.
- 55 Beryl Gilroy, "Black Old Age... the diaspora of the senses?" in *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader* ed. by Kwesi Owusu (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 129.
- 56 Du Bois, Peace, 43.

of a fight, Du Bois expresses a feeling of being at the threshold of his own capacity, with "more than I felt like bearing", demarcating a physiological or psychological limit. This sense of precipitousness is reflected further in the commentary on his unsuccessful, but educational campaign as the Labor Party senatorial candidate in New York. Du Bois writes, "I found myself increasingly proscribed in pulpit, school and platform. My opportunity to write for publication was becoming narrower and narrower, even in the Negro press. I wondered if a series of plain talks in a political campaign would not be my last and only chance to tell the truth as I saw it."57 Political marginalisation crashes into the experience of ageing. The urgency of a "last and only chance" produces a hyperbolic register that poses a challenge for literary interpretation. It could be chalked up to a rhetorical flourish, the drama of biographical lateness. However, the text was also produced within the paranoid psychopolitical atmosphere of the Cold War, in which radical fellow travellers of the political left such as Du Bois were harassed by the state, and propelled by the spectral image of nuclear annihilation.<sup>58</sup> As Horne notes, some leftists targeted at this time faced heart attacks or committed suicide from the pressure.<sup>59</sup> Biographical lateness and real political threat cross the text like a lattice, producing a novel textual form that might be mistaken as merely journalistic because it addresses a militant, activist audience. Peace is pointed, and can perhaps be understood as what Alain Badiou calls an intervention "in which the opportunity for action takes precedent over the preoccupation with making a name for oneself through publications... neither system nor treatise, nor even really a book. [The author] propounds a speech of rupture, and writing ensues when necessary".60 Tendentiously, I take Du Bois' language as not hyperbolic, but pitched to the amplitude of a crisis of thought that followed a trial that was exactly as "extraordinary" and life-changing as described.61

# Peace and the Rupture of Historical Motions

Du Bois describes feeling isolated and vulnerable due to the lack of sympathetic press coverage, the heavy costs of the legal fight, and the conspicuous silence by the black professional class before and during the trial. As he and his legal team conduct what he calls a "pilgrimage for defense"—consisting of a national campaign involving a speaking tour to raise funds and bring awareness to the trial, combined with a media blitz, and the solicitation of notable intellectuals and organisations worldwide for support—Du Bois interprets the campaign sociologically, cataloging the race, class, and ideological makeup of who shows up, and who does not. From this impromptu dataset, Du Bois extrapolates provisional conclusions on the changing political economy of race. His key realisation in *Peace* is that of a "distinct cleavage" in "American Negro opinion", in which most of his "educated and well-to-do Negro friends" remain mute on the trial, whereas "an increasing mass of the Negro working class, especially the members of the so-called left-wing unions, rallied ... with faith and money".62 The abandonment of Du Bois' class and race peers strikes him on a personal level, indicated by how he bemoans a lifelong

- 57 Ibid., p. 28.
- 58 See: David Caute, *The Fellow-Travellers:* Intellectual Friends of Communism (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973)
- 59 Horne, p. 293.
- 60 Alain Badiou, Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 31.
- 61 Du Bois, Peace, 33.
- 62 Du Bois, *Peace*, pp. 51–52.

inability to make friends and speaks of a newfound empathy for the "poor, friendless and black".<sup>63</sup> Du Bois stresses both the novelty and the painfulness of a new realisation, a "new outlook on social stratification within this group, which I once hoped would never develop".<sup>64</sup> Here, Du Bois' language speaks to a threshold—a new understanding, flanked by allusions to a crisis of faith. What is this perspective that Du Bois regards with dread, but is unable to avoid? To hope that something does not happen, one has to conceive of it as a possibility. What is this realisation that Du Bois anticipated, but avoided?

In 1897, Du Bois published the original Talented Tenth essay, outlining his vision of social betterment for African-Americans through the development of an elite, educated subgroup that could guide and lead the race to material and spiritual prosperity, and ultimately make a contribution to world history.<sup>65</sup> The original essay tends to be read as a theory of education and a political program.<sup>66</sup> Returning to the text, however, it is notable that Du Bois builds his case historically, before moving into an empirical analysis of Black colleges and their graduates.<sup>67</sup> For Du Bois, the Talented Tenth existed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as a hidden historical motor. The first wave was defeated by reactionary forces of capital; figures like Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Banneker, and James Derham "were persons of marked ability, leaders of a Talented Tenth, standing conspicuously among the best of their time ... but all they could do was nullified by Eli Whitney and the curse of Gold. So they passed into forgetfulness." The next generation included figures such as Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, and Sojourner Truth, who were also overlooked: "too little notice has been taken of the work which the Talented Tenth among Negroes took in the great abolition crusade". However, it is these "men [sic] who made American slavery impossible". In other words, the Talented Tenth begins as a work of historical revisionism, and it is only after he has restored past members to their rightful roles as historical actors that he outlines his political program for the future. Put differently, the educational program of the Talented Tenth is the political formalisation of a theory of historical self-consciousness. If there is any ambivalence around the idea that the Talented Tenth is staked in, and contains, a philosophy of history, consider Du Bois' assertion that "The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth saving up to their vantage ground. This is the history of human progress."68

In a sense, both the Niagara Movement and the Pan-African conferences present the attempted realisation of a Talented Tenth program on a national, and then international, scale. Du Bois also returned to the hypothesis throughout his inter- and postwar writings. In 1937, he reaffirmed the need for a "conscious dictatorship of intelligence". In Dusk of Dawn, grappling with the influence of Marx, his experience of the Depression, and an increasingly relational conception of race, Du Bois entertains the thought that race is less of "a concept' rather than as a group of contradictory forces, facts and tendencies". Straining in an attempt to reconcile his political interest in socialism with the elitism of the Talented Tenth, Du Bois concedes that the Talented Tenth will not be a "panacea," and addresses the possibility that the black population could reach a political impasse due to the contradictory material interests of the black working class and bourgeoisie. However,

- 63 Ibid., p. 106.
- 64 Ibid., p. 52.
- 65 Du Bois, Souls, pp. 189-205.
- 66 Reiland Rabaka, "W.E.B. Du Bois's Evolving Africana Philosophy of Education," *Journal of Black Studies* vol 33 iss. 4 (2003) 399–449.
- 67 Du Bois, Souls, p. 192.
- 68 Ibid., pp. 190-193
- 69 Marable, p. 120.
- 70 Marable, p. 148.
- 71 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 67.

since the black population circa-1940 has "least class differentiation in wealth," he thinks it can still be unified based on race and led by a trained, educated superstratum.<sup>72</sup> Eight years later, in a speech hosted by the prestigious graduate fraternity Sigma Pi Phi, Du Bois further refashions the Talented Tenth concept in a more internationalist, democratic direction.<sup>73</sup> However, his relationship with the fraternity would sour during the trial; in *Peace*, he makes special note of their abandonment and resigned from the organisation after the trial.<sup>74</sup>

It would be a mistake to regard the attenuation of the Talented Tenth theory as a linear, incremental process. Its transformation was dialectical: over time, the original Talented Tenth theory was not eroded, but revealed to be less likely and more necessary. In *Dusk*, this is exemplified in how Du Bois justifies his continued adherence to the theory by invoking sheer historical necessity: "that mass and class must unite for the world's salvation is clear". Here, rather than a new situation precipitating a refashioning of ideas, the opposite happens: historical novelty shores up, vindicates, and intensifies an attachment to the original proposal. This was true in both the interwar period, and in the aftermath of World War II. As Du Bois writes in *Peace*,

Formerly I had assumed with most folk that the path of human progress lay necessarily through war, and that if the colored peoples of the world and those of America ever secured their rights as human beings, it would be through organized violence against their white oppressors. But after the First World War, I began to realize that under modern conditions such means to progress were self-defeating. With modern techniques in world war, there could be no victory. The victor was, in the end, as badly off as the vanquished. Reason, education, and scientific knowledge must replace war.<sup>76</sup>

Du Bois supported militant self-defence by black Americans, admired the Russian Revolution, and entertained the prospect of revolutionary violence through the 1920s.<sup>77</sup> However, while the Talented Tenth hypothesis was at odds with Du Bois' growing interest in the revolutionary agency of the masses, he also found a renewed attachment to it with the advent of modern tools and infrastructures of mass killing. As Du Bois would write in the 1944 essay "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," "I believed that revolution in the production and distribution of wealth could be a slow, reasoned development and not necessarily a blood bath."78 Du Bois' comments on the Russian Revolution in Dusk are useful, as they further elucidate his tendency to assimilate new events into his Talented Tenth theory of historical progress, rather than allowing countervailing information to disrupt it: "[the revolution] made the assumption, long disputed, that out of the down-trodden mass of people, ability and character, sufficient to do this task effectively, could and would be found. I believed this dictum passionately. It was, in fact, the foundation stone of my fight for black folk; it explained me." Du Bois' image of a "foundation stone" further emphasises that the concept does structural, load-bearing work. The phrase "it explained me" shows that this work is personal, bound up with Du Bois' literary conception of himself as a historical subject, suturing his origin story, his *raison d'etre*, and his theory of history.

- 72 Ibid., p. 109.
- 73 W.E.B. Du Bois, "The talented tenth, August 12, 1948," *W.E.B. Du Bois Papers* <a href="https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b199-i022">https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b199-i022</a>.
- 74 Du Bois, Peace, p. 52.; Horne, p. 180.
- 75 Du Bois, Dusk, p. 109.
- 76 Du Bois, Peace, p. 13.
- 77 Marable, p. 94.
- 78 W.E.B Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," *Clinical Sociology Review* Vol. 8 iss. 1 (1990), 27–57, p. 50.
- 79 Du Bois, Dusk, p. 142.

Returning to his relationship to his historical foil, Booker T. Washington, Du Bois writes, "in the alembic of time, a strange dichotomy has arisen between the long contrasted teachings of Booker T. Washington and myself."80 The metaphor of the "alembic of time" suggests clarity—something has been distilled. It also implies something volatile, gaseous, or chemical, denoted by the fact that Washington has been dead for 37 years at this point—Du Bois has decanted a ghost to spar with. The unstable truth Du Bois has distilled is the realisation that his Talented Tenth hypothesis has been proven "true, but in much lesser degree than I expected".81 It is critical not to misread Du Bois' hedged language, which might obscure the fact that Du Bois is admitting the falsity of the hypothesis as a metaphysics of historical change. The Talented Tenth exists, but contingently, as a minor bloc within history, not as its prime mover. Du Bois describes a crisis of faith: "my faith hitherto had been in what I once denominated the 'Talented Tenth.' I now realize that the ability within a people does not automatically work for its highest salvation."82 The word "faith" here further emphasises that the trial has rubbed raw the arbitrary core of Du Bois' racial-historical metaphysics. "Automatically" here suggests that Du Bois' conception of history had been mechanistic, insofar as he "studies history in order to divine the laws that actually govern its operations and writes history in order to display in a narrative form the effects of those laws".83 But now, ability is revealed to float freely from the operations of history. The falsity of the Talented Tenth hypothesis marks an abandonment of a position that Du Bois held for nearly five decades. A truth has crystallised under duress, but it is a negative one, the truth of a falsity, yielding only fragments without, in Adorno's words, "harmonious synthesis". 84 With the outmoding of the Talented Tenth hypothesis, so too go hopes for racial unity, which as recently as 1944 Du Bois had reaffirmed the necessity of, writing then "it is the duty of the black race to maintain its cultural advance, not for itself alone, but for the emancipation of mankind, the realization of democracy and the progress of civilization".85 Now, eight years later, Du Bois decisively states that the "spiritual" or "cultural unity" of "the Negro group" has become historically "improbable". 86 Both Du Bois' philosophy of history and his political horizon are compromised. The historical role of the "would-be black savant" is thrown into ambiguous indeterminacy.87 Du Bois concludes "not from the inner problems of a single social group, no matter how pressing, could the world be guided".88 The tether between autobiographical, racial, historical motions is severed.

Now, the task is to consider the consequences. After all, what happens when a "foundation stone" shifts? That Du Bois' fundamental conceptions of temporality, history, agency, subjectivity, and race are all in profound disarray is expressed in the evocative, hyperbolic conclusion to *Peace*:

For many years now I have viewed in long procession the pale dreams of men wandering vaguely yet rhythmically down the years. Yet never in any single year has the frustration and paradox of life stood out so clearly as in this year when, having finished 83 years of my life in decency and honor, with something done and something planning, I stepped into the 84th year with handcuffs on my wrists.<sup>89</sup>

- 80 Du Bois, Peace, p. 120.
- 81 *Ibid*.
- 82 Ibid., p. 52.
- 83 Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 17.
- 84 Adorno, p. 567.
- 85 Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," p. 57.
- 86 Du Bois, *Peace*, p. 107.
- 87 Du Bois, Souls, p. 9.
- 88 Ibid., p. 125.
- 89 Ibid., p. 124.

History is conceived of as a ghostly processional sequence of dreams, the funerary theme reflecting Du Bois' increasing identification with the dead, further articulated in the poem that concludes the text: "Scream, / O silent Dead, / Into whose sad and sightless faces / I stand and stare. / I feel what you felt."90 Du Bois' standpoint is schematic: the length of the procession suggests that the phantomlike, dimly perceived rhythmic order of history is legible only at a distance. Crucially, his vision after the trial is exceptional for its clarity of form, not the novelty of its content. Read closely, the word "yet" marks a contrast of magnitude, not contradiction. What has crystallised is not a new understanding, but rather an old problem in high relief: "the frustration and paradox of life" seems to have been already known, but now, is uniquely clear. The proximity between "paradox" and "rhythm" here evokes Du Bois' 1905 essay "Sociology Hesitant", in which he argues that all philosophical thought thus far points towards "the Paradox" between "the evident rhythm of human action" and "the evident incalculability in human action". 91 Du Bois continues, "the Great Assumption of real life is that in the deeds of men there lies along with rule and rhythm—along with physical law and biologic habit, a something Incalculable", concluding that, "Sociology, then, is the Science that seeks the limits of Chance in human conduct". 92 Du Bois' theory of sociology and his theory of history are related, as it is through the delimitation of the realm of contingency in human affairs that the discernment of historical motions might be possible. With Du Bois' later interest in Freud, the delimitation of a zone of contingency is complicated by the advent of the unconscious, which, in a sense, increases the volatility and the ineffability within this domain of contingency, as this would no longer be the realm of free will. Du Bois' own realisation of this is signalled by a passage from Dusk in which he notes a burgeoning interest in the role of "folkways, habits, customs and subconscious deeds" in racial prejudice. "Here perhaps is a realm of physical and cosmic law which science does not yet control."93

So what exactly has crystallised in the conclusion of *Peace*? And what is the relationship between the paradox of determination and contingency, and the apocalyptic sequence that follows? In my reading, what it means for Du Bois to say that the "paradox of life"— taken here to refer to *problem* of delimiting that domain of incalculable unknowability in human affairs—is clearer than ever before, is that the *placement* of those limits is more obscure than ever before. Which is to say that *Peace* crystallises a negativity that thought must address, but presently cannot. In Badiouian terms, the trial is an "event", that reveals a structuring void. What Du Bois describes as the clarity of a paradox is roughly synonymous with what Badiou describes as the event's capacity to name "the not-known of the situation". That Du Bois follows with a metaphor of negativity—the "utter rending of precious fabric"—is fitting. Again, *Peace* does not articulate a new synthesis of ideas, but rather, indexes a destabilisation. This is what links these remarks with the rest of the sequence:

Like the utter rending of precious fabric I was witnessing the bloodstained collapse of Atlantic culture finding burial on the ancient ruins of the Mediterranean efforts to civilize mankind. I saw this caricature

- 90 Ibid., p. 125.
- 91 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Sociology Hesitant" boundary 2 vol. 27 no. 3 (2000) 37–44, p. 41.
- 92 *Ibid.*, pp. 41–44.
- 93 Du Bois, *Dusk*, p. 111.
- 94 Badiou, *Ethics*, pp. 68–9.

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and contradiction of mighty ideals, in frantic dying struggle, trying with lewd incest again to rape the All-Mother Asia from northern Heartland to southern sea, from Russia to India. And when weak and isolated by race I tried to make faint protest against this world suicide, I was slandered and shamed and threatened with five years in prison and \$10,000 fine.<sup>95</sup>

With the gleaming clarity of the "frustration and paradox of life" occluding all else, anything appears possible, and we enter a volatile, quantum space in which this could very well be the worst of all possible worlds. Du Bois' language communicates a sense of disorientation, and in this state, he flails towards a linguistic limit. Rape, incest, and suicide are taboo concepts that circumscribe the limit of normative discourse; they point towards that which is unassimilable and irredeemable. Although their proximity to each other leads me to read this language for its intensity rather than its particular sexual connotation, it bears noting that the gendered figuration of Asia as a female sexual assault victim is a strong indicator of Du Bois' unfortunate, antiquated, conservative Orientalism and his gendered conception of world history. 96 Furthermore, incest in particular demarcates a constitutive limit of consciousness in psychoanalysis, as incestuous desire is the sui generis repressed impulse that, according to Lévi-Strauss, marks "the universal law and the minimal condition of the differentiation of a 'culture' from 'nature". 97 It is notable that after professing an unparalleled sense of clarity, Du Bois does not conclude the text with a cogent, meticulous analysis of the political economy of the early Cold War, but with an eschatological gothic depiction of total civilisational collapse and the extinction of the human species. The lack of preordained subjective determination that once afforded Du Bois a kind of plasticity, a freedom to choose how and where to limit, align, and orient his consciousness in history, has as its inverse a profound loss of sense of self. The borders between autobiographical and historical experience appear not synchronous, but confused, permeable and volatile, as personal plight rapidly escalates in language to the scale of a historical catastrophe. Yet it also communicates a personal truth of sorts, following Ato Sekyi-Otu, an "apprehension of the existing order as being 'as far from our way, the way, as it is possible for human beings to go".98 This might result from his grasping towards a sort of universal humanism similar to that which he once dubbed "sickly sentimentality", but now tentatively approaches: "I began to enter into a World conception of human uplift".99 Race, unrealised and therefore obsolete as a possible historical unity, untethered from historical motions, figures here as a catalyst for debility and atomisation—a far cry from the vitalist affirmative philosophy of race that characterized his early writings. Now, race is that which makes him feeble and alone. It also identifies him formally with the dead: "I weep the tears you can no longer weep / For you are dead and Death is black / And I am black."100 At the end of *Peace*, it is revealed that the compounded alienation of age and race that has in the past afforded Du Bois a unique, schematic distance from which he observes the patterns of social relations can tip over into a hallucinatory, visionary voice. This is the threshold that *Peace* walks, and that the Black Flame trilogy accedes to.

- 95 Du Bois, Peace, p. 124.
- 96 For further discussion of this passage in particular, see: Porter, p. 168 and Baldwin, ch. 3.; on Du Bois' gendered conception of historical agency, see: Hazel V. Carby, "The Souls of Black Men," in *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexualty, and W. E. B. Du Bois* ed. by Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. 234–268.
- 97 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* quoted in Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 286.
- 98 Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Left Universalism*, *Africacentric Essays*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), p. 27.
- 99 Du Bois, Peace, p. 125.
- 100 Ibid., p. 126.

# The *Black Flame* Trilogy

The Black Flame trilogy was Du Bois' final work of fiction. Published in 1957, 1959, and 1961, the texts defy quick summary. The opening sequence of The Ordeal of Mansart sees Tom Mansart, an honourable black labor leader, falsely framed for the abduction of southern aristocrat Mrs. Breckenridge, née Clarice Du Bignon, whom he was actually saving from planned mob violence committed by local whites. Threatened by the prospect of organised black labor, the whites have conspired to kill Mrs. Breckenridge and blame it on a black person, in order to incite a race panic and consolidate a white political alliance for an upcoming election. Mansart is subsequently lynched by the Klan, after which Mrs. Breckenridge kills herself out of guilt. That same night, Mirandy Mansart, Tom's spouse, gives birth to a son, Manuel, whom the Bishop dubs "the Black Flame" in a prophecy issued at birth. Taking place across multiple generations, the timespan of the works corresponds with the long lifespan of its author. We follow the Du Bignon family through the generations; when we meet Clarice, we learn the family is rumoured to have African ancestry, and in the next generation, Jean Du Bignon embraces this drop as a political identity, and ends up working as an assistant to Manuel Mansart. The scandal and meaning of mixed-race ancestry is one theme that Du Bois returns to in the trilogy, dovetailing with a renewed focus on questions of the relationship between sex, desire, and the colour line. The Mansart family saga focuses on the Black Flame himself who in the second novel, Mansart Builds a School, has succeeded in becoming the President of a black university in Georgia. We also follow the exploits of his four children: Bruce's life ends in tragic demise after he murders a policeman in a fit of rage; Douglass serves in the US army during World War I and, after a dispute with his father, relocates to Chicago to work in politics; Sojourner, the only daughter, becomes a musician; and Revels pursues a career in law, ultimately becoming a judge. Characters tend to stand metonymically for political archetypes—for instance, John Pierce for Northern philanthropic capital, Scroggs for poor resentful whites. The intergenerational story is set against a thick historical backdrop in which events such as the Atlanta Riot, the Russian Revolution, and both World Wars mark important conjunctural points in the text. Continuous with much of Du Bois' writings since the 1930s, the novel deals extensively with the way that racism continuously fractures and impedes the development of class consciousness in America. Capitalism is the supreme evil, conceived of in conspiratorial terms. Real world figures—Booker T. Washington (depicted in the most excoriating manner out of all of Du Bois' works), George Washington Carver, Harry Hopkins, FDR, C.L.R. James and many others also appear more or less as themselves. Three of the characters, Jean Du Bignon, Manuel Mansart, and James Burghardt, are distorted portraits of Du Bois himself. Following Lily Wiatrowski Phillips' suggestion that the best way to approach the Black Flame trilogy is to draw out thematic threads, rather than trying to approach them as a whole, I will discuss how the trilogy can be read as the continued expression of the epistemic crisis encoded in Peace. A revealing starting point is the postscript to the Ordeal of Mansart, in which Du Bois

101 Du Bois, Ordeal, p. 72

justifies his decision to write a work of historical fiction rather than another revisionist historiography:

If I had had time and money, I would have continued this pure historical research [similar to *The Supression of the African Slave-trade to the United States of America* and *Black Reconstruction*]. But this opportunity failed and Time is running out. Yet I would rescue from my long experience something of what I have learned and conjectured and thus I am trying by the method of historical fiction to complete the cycle of history which has for a half century engaged my thought, research and action. <sup>102</sup>

Du Bois is in a rush. Fiction is speedier, and he has an urgent message that must be "rescued". The project is capacious: he is trying to "complete a cycle of history". To do so, he must go beyond the field of history, which is constrained by "eternal paradox". 103 Here, Du Bois returns to a similar problem to that raised at the end of Peace. Sociology is constrained by the fact that "we can never know current personal thought and emotion with sufficient understanding rightly to weigh its cause and effect". Historical writing, consigned to issues of the past, seems to be more up to the task, however its possibilities are also circumscribed, as "dependence on documents and memory leaves us all with the tale of the past half told or less". At best, through historical writing, we can "secure some picture of the total truth, but it will be sorely imperfect, with much omitted, much forgotten, much distorted". 104 Later in the text, Jean Du Bignon, one of Du Bois' proxies, imagines the possibility of achieving "a scientific knowledge of the truth, even in sociology, a discovery of its rhythms, a realisation of the possibility of prophecy". 105 However, after the trial, systematic analysis of the past, present, and future seems more difficult than ever before. This is reaffirmed by the opening remarks to a speech Du Bois gave in the year after the trial, "On The Future of the American Negro", in which he stipulates "my attempts at prophecy in the last half century have not been conspicuously successful". 106 Fiction provides Du Bois with a sort of deprecated alternative through which he can reach beyond the present and "imagine something of such unknown truth". 107 Indeed, as others have noted, the trilogy stands out for the visionary sequences that punctuate the text, often bracketed by a kind of permissive gesture that sanity and insanity have been inverted, for instance, when Jean Du Bignon says "sanity, ... after all, is a comparative thing. What I am about to say may seem a little insane to you, but what insanity is to a few or to a time or to a place may in the larger world be the reality of a greater sanity." The content of these hallucinatory sequences is thematically continuous with the bloody, doomsday conclusion to Peace. In his chapter on the trilogy, Arnold Rampersand writes that these sequences represent particularly uncompromising instances of Du Bois' "lifelong impulse towards prophecy" that previously tended to emerge at the ends of Du Bois' essays. 109 Brent Hayes Edwards, who has offered the most sophisticated reading of the trilogy through the concept of "late style" thus far, writes that these "unintegrated moments haunt the reader, not only because they are melodramatic and 'horrible' but also because they seem to run so thoroughly contrary to the trilogy's progressive historical framing". 110

- 102 Ibid., p. 316.
- 103 *Ibid*.
- 104 Ibid., p. 315.
- 105 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Worlds of Color* (New York: Mainstream Publishers, 1961), p. 85.
- 106 W.E.B. Du Bois, "On The Future of the American Negro" in *W.E.B Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1920–1963* ed. by Dr. Philip S. Foner (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 268.
- 107 Du Bois, Ordeal, p. 316.
- 108 Du Bois, Worlds of Color, p. 314.
- 109 Rampersand, p. 283.
- 110 Edwards, p. 137.

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Another way to read these gothic sequences would be as serving a similar function to Marx's famous description of capital emerging onto the historical scene "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt". 111 Such representations might pierce a sanguine fishbowl of appearances to provide the reader a peek at the visceral violence of the real. My reading is similar to Edwards', however, I disagree with the idea that these sequences run "contrary to the trilogy's progressive historical framing". Rather, they are the formal expression of the epistemic crisis of history that precipitated in *Peace*. Once again, the most lofty, embellished sections of the text serve a function: they point towards the structuring limits of Du Bois' thought. These sequences represent a kind of hypertrophied intensification of Du Bois' schematising vision. A helpful precursor to the formal language in the trilogy can be found in "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom":

The 'studies' which I had been conducting at Atlanta I saw as fatally handicapped because they represented so small a part of the total sum of occurrences; were so far removed in time and space as to lose the hot reality of real life; and because the continuous, kaleidoscopic change of conditions made their story old already before it was analyzed and told.<sup>112</sup>

As Jonathan Crary has written, the kaleidoscope became a sort of shorthand for antinomian transformations in modernist perception. <sup>113</sup> For Du Bois, the word has an contradictory quality as well. "Kaleidoscopic change" renders sociological inquiry immediately obsolete, and is here a formal expression of what Du Bois elsewhere described as a paradox between rhythm and chance. Kaleidoscopic images are, in a sense, patterns without limits, by virtue of being nothing but limit. They are part and totality, seamless and constituted by seams. Du Bois can conceive of a pattern in the change of social conditions, but cannot methodologically demarcate the disciplinary contours by which he might be able to substantiate empirically what seems to be ordered in a kind of mechanistic manner. Proceeding to look at the hallucinatory sequences of the *Black Flame* trilogy, we can see that pretty much all of them feature some kind of metaphor of immersive reflectivity as the preferred expression of an epistemic crisis of conceptual delimitation.

To conclude, I turn to the first extended visionary sequence, which takes place on the eve of the Atlanta Fire in the second book in the trilogy, *Mansart Builds a School.* The medium is wise old Dr. Sophocles Thrasymachus Baldwin. A "teacher and a philosopher" who was an outlying exemplary representative of the Talented Tenth of the poor white community, Baldwin was friends with Colonel Breckenridge, and surprised him by marrying his daughter, Betty Lou.<sup>114</sup> At his withered old age he is "thrust ... over the thin line which leads to lunacy"—another threshold—and foretells of planetary extinction through World War, before starting the fire in collaboration with an undead lynching victim. Baldwin preaches,

War is murder and murderers murder, until all is done and there is Peace and Nothing. After the Phantasmagoria, learned jackasses, spawning like flies, in lovely old universities will explain it all in thick

- 111 Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 926.
- 112 Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," p. 47.
- 113 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 116.
- 114 Du Bois, Ordeal, p. 52.

books and decadent lectures: Everybody was right; nobody was wrong; all was Logic and Rhythm and Evolution; all was Good for the greater Good. And all readers and hearers will be silent for none will believe a word of what is said.<sup>115</sup>

According to Susan Buck-Morss, Marx adopted the term phantasmagoria from the magic lantern shows of the early 19th century to refer to "the world of commodities that, in their mere visible presence, conceal every trace of the labor that produced them". 116 Benjamin would then use the term to describe transformations in the built environment of European cities into patterned visual stimuli that were essentially the inverse of the brutalisation of the synapses by the factory system.<sup>117</sup> When Du Bois first deploys the term in Black Reconstruction, it refers to a kind of crude, violent social edifice whose mortar is cognitive dissonance. 118 In the Black Flame trilogy, "phantasmagoria" refers almost exclusively to war. But it still has something to do with cognition: in a sense, Du Bois' phantasmagoria is the literary expression of the epistemic problem of war, and the kaleidoscopic mental scattering that catastrophe provokes, resisting comprehension. Thus, it makes sense that it persists in the Black Flame, in which the preferred mode of narration is loosely historical materialist, for as Étienne Balibar has noted, historically "the problem of war ... produced a profoundly deconstructive effect, stretching Historical Materialism to its limits and showing that it could not really give an account of these limits". 119 This is why Dr. Baldwin's vision switches from bemoaning world war to a pessimistic critique of knowledge, which is said to provide a post-facto rationalisation of war, perversely assimilating it to a status of ordered knowability. In other words, the true content of this hallucinatory sequence remains philosophical; Du Bois remains interested in the paradox between rhythm and rupture, law and chance, determination and contingency. However, in this vision, these terms take on a polemical thrust; "logic", "rhythm", and "evolution" are not just fraught and unclear, but implicated in the crime. The next appearance of the word "phantasmagoria" in Mansart Builds a School takes place as Mansart rides a train and reflects on the dawn of World War II:

So Mansart, settling himself comfortably on his pillows and staring out at the flying, changing landscape, began to collect and marshall his thoughts and attempt to think through this new and, to him, unexpected war aspect of the world in which he lived ... Then he came back to ... his own people—where did they belong in this new phantasmagoria?<sup>120</sup>

Here war is not war, but the "war aspect of the world", the latter being the main object of thought. War and change represent, in a sense, the two limits of Mansart's ability to think about the world. As Mansart approaches these limits he slips into a hallucinatory nightmare in which capital, represented by a spider, envelops the world in a web of "thin tendrils of American gold". This figuration is consistent with an overall figuration of capitalism as an organised conspiracy throughout the text, and as Fredric Jameson has noted, conspiracy and demography are two common and inadequate solutions to the "fundamental representational problem" posed by global capitalism.

- 115 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School* (New York: Mainstream Publishers, 1959), p. 31.
- 116 Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* Vol. 62 (1992), 3–41, (p. 25).
- 117 Ibid., p. 22.
- 118 W.E.B Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), p. 705.
- 119 Étienne Balibar, "Marxism and War," *Radical Philosophy* 160-2, (2010), 9-17.
- 120 Du Bois, Worlds of Color, p. 163.
- 121 Du Bois, Worlds of Color, p. 164
- 122 Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 2.

However, if we consider these hallucinations not as literary diagrams, but as literary expressions of a crisis of delimitation, then a more compelling trajectory can be perceived from the beginning of *Peace* through the *Black Flame* trilogy. The *Black Flame* trilogy marks an attempt at giving form to the crisis that emerged in *Peace*, which was, as I've shown, quite total, scaling from Du Bois' conception of himself all the way up to his theory of historical change. This is what gives the text, following Lily Wiatrowski Phillips, a "recursive" character: the hallucinatory sequences in the *Black Flame* trilogy in tone—messianic, urgent, schematic—and in content are in a sense, similar and oppositional to the 25th birthday fragment that opens *Peace*. Considered side by side, they register a transformation from a teleological, stadial, racial theory of historical motions helmed by the Talented Tenth, to a rickety historical materialism heavily circumscribed and potentially undermined by the possibility of war.

## Coda: Lateness and Communism

Although he loved Beethoven so much that he requested the 9th symphony as his funerary music, Du Bois was not a composer. 123 Bracketing the difficulty of transposing a heuristic based around musical analysis to the study of autobiographical and fictional texts, Adorno's concept of late style is also challenging as it seems to assume a contemplative standpoint afforded by old age.<sup>124</sup> Du Bois' late life was quite the opposite. Not only was his old age disrupted by anti-black, anti-red persecution, but it was lived in defiance of the retreat to hermeticism that he felt pressured into as he aged. Old Du Bois was a prolific, politically active, globetrotter. His late works contain a tension between an explicit concern with political strategy and the reality that he will not get to see how things play out. Recent reconsiderations of literary lateness have broached the question of how individual lateness relates to the epochal lateness of modernity, referring to a sense of anteriority and belatedness that suffuses some works of modern European literature. 125 Du Bois' writings defy this criteria. Despite being overcoded by a feeling of reckoning with the tragedy of Reconstruction from the beginning, Du Bois' literary production remained future-oriented and historically anticipatory throughout his life. His interest in historiography and his identification with the dead are sophisticated but instrumental to the project of making "what was worth living for ... live again". 126 The late writings do describe a decadent, ravaged world, but his pessimism derives not from a past world that has fallen, but rather the possibility that a decent, pre-eminently deserved one might never arrive, a possibility which Du Bois began to find literally unthinkable. This is why he entertains it but keeps it at bay, consigned to the limits of thought. However, by the end of his life, lacking tools of delimitation in the midst of a kaleidoscopic phantasmagoria, it is a commitment to politics that in a sense stabilises, and provides a way out of, the antinomies of lateness. Why Du Bois would join the CPUSA and state "frankly and clearly: I believe in communism" at age 91 remains a vexing question for scholars. <sup>127</sup> Du Bois' turn to communism has been represented as a slight to the U.S. government, a refusal to go quietly 123 Horne, pp. 15, 355.

124 Reed, Fabianism, pp. 177-178.

125 Ben Hutchinson, "Introduction" in *Lateness and Modern European Literature* ed. by Ben Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 12.

126 W.E.B. Du Bois, Autobiography, p. 423.

127 Ibid., p. 57.

into the night, and the culmination of long-held convictions. However, his last statement on communism, the first section of the *Autobiography*, is not framed as a protest, but is rather couched in both the theological vernacular of "dictum" and "belief" and the actually-existing examples of the Soviet Union and Communist China. Du Bois' communism has not really been read in relation to his turn to fiction, however. Read together, it seems that communism, like fiction, was what nourished his future orientation during a moment in which the metaphysics of historical change appeared increasingly anarchic, all while the clock was running down. As a concrete enactment of a stubborn orientation toward tomorrow, Du Bois' communism remains admirable.

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