

W.E.B Du Bois' Late Thought In and After

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Vijay Masharani

he was finally acquitted.⁷ 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

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."¹⁰ They are meant to correct the

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 *Dark Matter* as a work of political criticism.¹⁴ However, Porter is dismissive of the last works—he sees a significant drop in sophistication in the *B, F,* trilogy and the *A, , ,* — which leads him to miss the ways in which *Dark Matter* 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

themselves to the extremes of experience, thought, life”.⁴⁶ What makes 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 *So Much Water So Close to Home*. 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 Sardonicly, 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 employs *now* 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 take 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.⁵¹ 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.⁵³ 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”.⁵⁵ 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.”⁵⁶

of a ght, 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.⁵⁸ As Horne notes, some leftists targeted at this time faced heart attacks or committed suicide from the pressure.⁵⁹ 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. This is pointed, and can perhaps be understood as what Alain Badiou calls an *événement* “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

and the Rupture of Historical Motions

Du Bois describes feeling isolated and vulnerable due to the lack of sympa-

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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, 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 partial 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 man” 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 the book:

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.⁸⁹

80 Du Bois, *Darkwater*, p. 120.

81 *Ibid.*

82 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

83 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Post-Positivist Historiography* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 100.

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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.⁹⁵

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 sails 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 glorification 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 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

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 *A*, *B*, and *C*]. 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.¹⁰²

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 shbowl 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 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 intensi cation 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.¹¹²

As Jonathan Crary has written, the kaleidoscope became a sort of shorthand for antinomian transformations in modernist perception.¹¹³ 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 *B, F,* trilogy, we can see that pretty much all of them feature some kind of metaphor of immersive re ctivity 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, *B* the medium is wise old Dr. Sophocles rasymachus 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.¹¹⁴ 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 re 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 ies, in lovely old universities will explain it all in thick

111 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (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, . . . , p. 52.

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 *Black Boy*, through the *B, F, F* trilogy. The *B, F, F* trilogy marks an attempt at giving form to the crisis that emerged in *Black Boy*, 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.

It is what gives the text, following Lily Wiatrowski Phillips, a "recursive" character: the hallucinatory sequences in the *B, F, F* trilogy in tone—messianic, urgent, schematic—and in content are in a sense, similar and oppositional to the 25th birthday fragment that opens *Black Boy*. 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.¹²⁴ 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 *Black Boy*'s lateness relates to the *B, F, F* lateness of modernity, referring to a sense of anteriority and belatedness that surfaces 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. It 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 stabilizes, 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.¹²⁷ 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, *F*, pp. 177-178.

125 Ben Hutchinson, "Introduction" in *Black Boy*, ed. by Ben Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 12.

126 W.E.B. Du Bois, *A*, p. 423.

127 *I*, p. 57.

into the night, and the culmination of long-held convictions. However, his last statement on communism, the first section of the *American Revolution*, 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 action, however. Read together, it seems that communism, like action, 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.

White, Hayden, *Canonization* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972)

Zamir, Shalom, *The E. B. White Book* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press)