

Self-Respect and Self-Segregation: A Du Boisian Rejoinder to Kant and Rawls

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Abstract:

In this essay I develop W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness to demonstrate the limitations of Kant's and Rawls's models of self-respect. I argue that neither Kant nor Rawls can explain what self-respect and resistance to oppression warrants under the conditions of violent and systematic racial exclusion. I defend Du Bois's proposal of voluntary black self-segregation during the Jim Crow era and explain why Du Bois believes that the black American community has a moral right to assert its self-respect by mitigating exposure to racial violence and animus in a white-controlled polity.

Key Words

Self-respect, segregation, voluntary self-segregation, reform, racial justice, Jim Crow, democratic theory

Introduction

The Michigan Daily, a student-run newspaper at the University of Michigan, ran the headline: "Frequent bias incidents affect campus mental health, experts say."¹ The author Maya Goldman reports that an increase of racist incidents on campus correlates with a decrease in the wellbeing and academic success of the targeted students. In the reported incidents, students of color received death threats and were subject to racial slurs. Posters appeared in their dormitories that read "Make America White Again" and "Free Dylann Roof," the white supremacist who murdered eight black parishioners and the pastor of the Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston,

¹ M. Goldman, "Frequent bias incidents affect campus mental health, experts say," *The Michigan Daily* 13 October 2017.

South Carolina in 2015. Goldman describes “the physical and mental wear-and-tear” that leads to “alarming occurrences of anxiety, stress, depression and thoughts of suicide, as well as a host of physical ailments like hair loss, diabetes and heart disease.”² In the aftermath of these incidents, social support networks on campus are crucial for the targeted students to cope and complete their degrees. Recounting his painful formative experience of racial exclusion during his school years, “then it dawned on me,” writes the noted African philosopher W.E.B. Du Bois, “that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from the world by a vast veil.”³

Goldman’s report confirms what many of us suspect: the way that others treat you affects your sense of self. Social denigration can diminish a person’s sense of self-worth as possessing innate moral value and a moral entitlement to justice and the pursuit of a good life. Du Bois develops the concept of double consciousness to articulate the damage that the lack of social recognition inflicts on segregated black communities during the Jim Crow era.⁴ Structural inequality, anti-black prejudice, and the threat of racist violence warps a victim’s self-understanding. That is, the exposure to anti-black social values and practices undermines their positive sense of self-worth as a person with innate moral value and moral entitlements. Unfortunately, in a white-controlled world, a person’s very survival can depend on learning to anticipate hostility. There is hardly anywhere they can go to avoid encountering anti-black social values and practices. Consequently, Du Bois writes, self-consciousness “doubles.”⁵ On the one hand, a person identifies as a member of the African-American community and seeks to resist participating in demeaning social interactions; on the other hand, they are often forced to look at

² Goldman, “Frequent bias incidents,” online.

³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 8.

⁴ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 386.

⁵ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, p. 1-4.

themselves from a denigrating third-person perspective. They struggle to assert their “true” self as Black and as American inasmuch as widespread social values and practices impose disgusting and irrational conventions for judging black humanity.

In this essay, I follow Du Bois to foreground the risks that victims incur in hostile social encounters to theorize self-respect.⁶ I present the challenge that the black experience of double consciousness poses for two dominant models of self-respect.⁷ Du Bois’s formulation of the concept of double consciousness demonstrates that neither Kant nor Rawls can explain what self-respect warrants under the conditions of violent and systematic racial exclusion. Instead, with the aid of Du Bois, I argue that a person has a moral right to avoid demeaning confrontations, which need not indicate their lack of self-respect, especially if they fear for their lives. On the contrary, if a person withdraws from hostile social encounters, and they experience double consciousness,

⁶ By focusing on risk, I show that Du Bois offers a promising alternative for theorizing self-respect in contrast to the recent trend in Kant scholarship that defends the duty of victims to resist their oppression and to assert their self-respect by confronting hostile persons. For an excellent overview of this trend, see A. Vasanthakumar, “Recent debates on victims’ duties to resist their oppression,” *Philosophy Compass* 15/2 (2020). For a rejoinder of the trend, see S. Khader, “Against a Self-Regarding Duty to Resist Oppression,” in R. Dean and O. Sensen (eds.) *Respect*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Forthcoming). For defenses of victims’ self-regarding duties, see B. Boxill, “The responsibility of the oppressed to resist their own oppression,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41 (2010), 1-12; C. Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, & Feminism: Resisting Oppression*. New York: Palgrave, 2013; D. Silvermint, “Resistance and Well-being,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 21 (2013), 405-25; A. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 197-201.

⁷ The idea of self-respect figures prominently in theories of racial justice: T. Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016) & “The Ethics of Uncle Tom’s Children,” *Critical Inquiry*, 38 (2012), 513-32; M. L. Rogers, “Rereading Honneth: Exodus Politics and the Paradox of Recognition,” *European Journal of Political Theory*, 8/2 (2009), 183-206. See also F.M. Kirkland, “Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black,” *Philosophical Forum* 4/1- 3 (1993), 136-65; M.M. Moody-Adams, “Race, Class, and the Social Construction of Self-Respect,” *Philosophical Forum* 24/1-3 (1992- 3), 251-66. L.M. Thomas, “Rawlsian Self-Respect and the Black Consciousness Movement,” *Philosophical Forum* 9 (1978), 303-14 & “Self-Respect, Fairness, and Living Morally,” in T.L. Lott and J.P. Pittman (Eds.) *A Companion to African-American Philosophy* (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), pp. 293-305. B.R. Boxill, “Self-respect and protest,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6.1 (1976):58-69 & *Blacks and Social Justice* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), pp. 186-99.

then it strongly indicates that the polity is unjust and not well-ordered. That is, the polity fails to promote a basic requirement of justice that all persons stand as moral equals in social and public life. The burden should lie with the polity at large, not with vulnerable persons, to promote interracial social cooperation. In a *de jure* and *de facto* segregated polity, Du Bois argues that black Americans have a moral right to voluntary self-segregation in order to protect their self-respect.⁸

In Section I, I examine Du Bois's concept of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* (from here on *Souls*). The black experience of double consciousness showcases that black Americans are vulnerable to social denigration and racial violence. It illustrates that asserting a sense of self-worth is difficult without social support. In Section II, I sketch Kant's model of self-respect and its limitation. Kant neglects to emphasize that others' bad behavior and unjust institutions undermine a person's exercise of self-respect and diminish their sense of self-worth. In Section III, I demonstrate that Kant's model of self-respect ultimately fails in the light of the black experience of double consciousness. Finally, in Section IV, I show the limitation of Rawls's alternative social conception of self-respect. Rawls rightly stresses that the social recognition of persons' equal moral worth is a basic requirement of justice, but he fails to consider the destructive impact of widespread hostility on vulnerable groups. By 1934, Du Bois comes to hold that black self-respect warrants voluntary self-segregation to mitigate the exposure to racist hostility. Voluntary self-segregation can shield the black community, especially children, from anti-black social values and practices, and thereby promote the social bases of self-respect for black Americans on a small scale.

⁸ This essay complements the work of Michael S. Merry. See his excellent essay, "Equality, self-respect and voluntary separation," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 15/1 (2012), 79-100.

I. Double Consciousness: A Subjective Effect of the Color Line

In the first chapter of *Souls*, published in 1903, during the Jim Crow era in the U.S., Du Bois famously argues the problem of the color-line is the problem of the twentieth century.⁹ He formulates the concepts of the color-line, the veil, and double consciousness to illustrate *de jure* and *de facto* segregation from the black perspective. The U.S. polity is historically a racial caste society.¹⁰ With the rise of Jim Crow, the state and federal governments failed to protect the constitutional rights of black Americans that the Reconstruction Amendments had granted with the end of the Civil War. Blacks lacked access to basic rights and opportunities, including the right to vote, sit on juries, education, property and employment protections, and freedom from physical violence and death. They endured brutal daily assaults on their security and welfare.

Du Bois proposes the metaphor of a “veil” to capture the black experience during the Jim Crow era. The “veil” that fell over black Americans exposed a “color line.”¹¹ The color line represents physical racial segregation and the lack of basic rights and opportunities. Red-lined neighborhoods that ghettoized black and brown Americans, the suppression of the ballot, anti-miscegenation laws, the segregation of public spaces, such as buses, movie theaters, and water fountains, and unfair housing practices, the denial of fair employment and educational opportunities, and disproportionately high black and brown incarceration and poverty rates are just some examples that illustrate the material reality of Jim Crow. But the veil, for Du Bois, is also a metaphor that characterizes whites’ attitudes that underlie interracial social encounters. In other words, the color line structures material reality, but it also shapes the white moral

⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 3.

¹¹ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 8.

imagination, which reveals “veiling” evaluative judgments that withhold recognition or impose disgusting and unfair standards of recognition in an attempt to uphold the legitimacy of a white-power regime.

What does it mean for the color line to shape the white moral imagination? Consider Du Bois’s account of his first encounter with the color line as a child playing in a schoolhouse.¹² In a children’s game, a white girl refused his visiting card “—refused peremptorily, with a glance.”¹³ His white playmate rejected him as an equal participant in the game. The veil that the white child had pulled over him signified his invisibility in their encounter. He could not appear as himself: a black child wishing to share a game with other children. It also forced him to partake in an interracial social encounter on terms that he did not accept as consistent with his equal moral worth. His exclusion disclosed to him the social meaning of his identity as a black American. He learns—in a “revelation”—that he is “different from the others” and that this “difference” works to systematize an asymmetrical structure of power in interracial social encounters.

Veiling evaluative judgments thus consist of two dimensions that track the color line in the white moral imagination. First, the veil renders one absent from dominant social and public institutions. One struggles to exercise practical agency in that one cannot achieve one’s goals or hold meaningful sway in a white-controlled world, which appears somehow impervious to black outrage, condemnation, and public scrutiny. Anticipating Ralph Ellison’s exquisite novel, Du Bois surmises that the veil renders him an ‘invisible’ person whose judgment and interests do not matter for others. Second, veiling evaluative judgments are also productive: they create racist myths, stereotypes, and expectations. As Robert Gooding-Williams observes, the black

¹² Du Bois attended integrated schools in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He was the only black student in his graduating class in the local public high school.

¹³ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 8.

experience of double consciousness entails a “racially prejudiced disclosure of Negro life that misrepresents and obscures Negro life as it is.”¹⁴ The veil illustrates the perverse *creativity* of the white moral imagination to produce anti-black social values and rituals to uphold white power. After all, what kind of moral imagination would celebrate in a family outing the torture and dismemberment of a black person whose limbs are then sold as souvenirs?¹⁵

Double consciousness is an effect of the black first-person experience of the material and the symbolic veil that establishes the color line. Du Bois describes double consciousness as a “peculiar sensation” that reflects the “strange meaning” of being black in Jim Crow America.¹⁶ He explains double consciousness is “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the other, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”¹⁷ One is “shut out from the world by a vast veil,” but in approaching the white-controlled world, one does so by way of the veil, that is, by way of dominant grotesque caricatures of black lives.¹⁸ He continues, the world “yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”¹⁹ Paul Taylor elaborates that double consciousness is “the condition of being *in* but not *of* the modern world.”²⁰ One is “in” the world insofar as one has a place in major social and public institutions, but one is not “of” the modern world because one has little say about one’s social station and the social meaning of

¹⁴ Gooding-Williams, Robert. *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. p. 78.

¹⁵ In *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois recounts that finding Sam Hose’s knuckles on sale in an Atlanta store window crumbled his faith in fact-based reasoning to alter the moral sensibilities of white people. Hose was a black laborer who had been lynched the day before.

¹⁶ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 8.

²⁰ P.C. Taylor, “W.E.B. Du Bois,” *Philosophy Compass* 5/11 (2010), 904-15, p. 912. My emphasis.

black racial identity. Frank Kirkland adds that “the strangeness [of] the meaning of being black is that to say or represent what is or is not the case about being black” is not controlled by black people.²¹

Double consciousness instills a “conflictual two-ness” in those who experience it: American identity and black racial identity appear as “two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body.”²² A black American confronts a version of themselves that they cannot recognize nor accept as consistent with their equal moral worth. They face two difficult options, which each exacerbates the subjective experience of double consciousness: they can either engage or reject the world. Engagement entails repeated exposure to anti-black prejudice and ill will. In the pursuit of basic rights and opportunities, they are coerced into participating in demeaning social encounters. Engagement also risks exposure to racial violence. With time, the pressure to conform to a white-controlled world can prove disorienting, as they are made to feel that success requires apologizing for or distancing themselves from their black racial identity. Repeated exposure to anti-black prejudice, ill will, and an omnipresent threat of violence undermines one’s sense of self-worth: “The facing of so vast a prejudice could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and the lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate.”²³ Yet, the rejection of the world would force a person to abandon the pursuit of the good life altogether, leaving intact the color line that devalues black life and “doubles” consciousness in the first place.²⁴

With his first experience of the color-line in a schoolhouse, Du Bois grows resolved to

²¹ F.M. Kirkland, “On Du Bois’ Notion of Double Consciousness,” *Philosophy Compass* 8/2 (2013), 137-48, p. 138-9.

²² Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 5.

²³ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 12.

²⁴ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 8.

“wrest [...] prizes and opportunities” from “the other world.”²⁵ He confesses ambivalence about his resolution, which racial contempt had motivated, and juxtaposes his resolution with those of other black children for whom “the strife was not so fiercely sunny”:

[T]heir youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking disgust of everything white; or wasted in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue [sky] above.²⁶

He confides to his reader that his “fiercely sunny” strife did not lift him above “the walls of the prison-house.” In noting the “tasteless sycophancy” of other black children, he does not fault them with the moral failure of lacking self-respect. Instead he places all the “sons of night” inside the walls of the prison-house, including himself with his exuberance to “beat his [white] mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads.”²⁷ He traces resignation, sycophancy, and fierce strife to a spectrum of black attitudes *within* double consciousness, identifying each attitude as a subjective effect of the color-line and that each holds its own potential harms on the black psyche. Even as a black scholar who came to achieve so much against such impossible odds, he still faced a white-controlled world that derogated his singular accomplishments, intellect, and moral personhood. To overcome double consciousness, he writes, one must reform the institutional structure of the white-controlled world: “One simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit on by his fellows, and the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.”²⁸ But the merging of the “double self” is only possible if black embodiment does not invite antipathy from

²⁵ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 8.

²⁶ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 8.

²⁷ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 8.

²⁸ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 9.

non-Blacks. Only then can he fully reconcile “two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals” to “merge his double self into a better and truer self.”

Du Bois conveys the black experience of double consciousness in order to impress upon the reader of *Souls* that whites’ habits of judgment *about* non-whites causes the color line.²⁹ The so-called “Negro Problem” or “Race Problem” is and has always been about the reluctance of the white-controlled world to share power and resources with non-whites. The black subjective experience of double consciousness highlights that those subjugated by the color line are, in a profound sense, vulnerable: disrespectful and denigrating social values and practices are imposed on them from without. Whites must discern their role in the creation and recreation of the color line and learn to recognize the moral equality of persons across it. For all his misgivings about white people, Du Bois is not content to give up the world to them. At least in his early work *Souls*, he is optimistic that white moral sensibilities can change to welcome black Americans as moral equals.

II. Kant on Self-Respect

In Kant’s model of self-respect persons are responsible for asserting their equal moral worth before others. The failure to do so is a moral failure for which servile persons are blameworthy. Kant does not consider the grave moral injury that systematic exclusion inflicts on a person’s sense of self-worth nor does he foreground the omnipresent threat of violence faced by victims. These omissions are unsurprising, given the repulsive racism and sexism of the

²⁹ Cf. David S. Owen’s “Whiteness in Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*,” *Philosophia Africana* 10.2 (2007): 107-26.

historical Kant.³⁰ Yet it is worth showing why his original model of self-respect cannot make sense of victims' experiences and fails in profoundly nonideal circumstances.

According to Kant, we have a perfect duty to avoid the destruction of, and damage to, our rational nature, as well as an imperfect duty to develop our moral personality and rational nature. Kant defends the moral obligation to resist social denigration as a private person and as a matter of rightful public honor (*honeste vive*).³¹ This follows from his formulation of the categorical imperative as the principle of humanity: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."³² He explains, "every rational being exists as an end in themselves and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will. They must in all their actions, whether directed to themselves or to other rational beings, always be regarded at the same time as an end."³³ A person must not allow themselves to be used as a "mere means" in others' arbitrary pursuit.³⁴ At a minimum, they owe it to themselves as a moral requirement to think and act in a fashion that asserts their innate equal moral worth in social interactions.

By way of clarifying what the lack of self-respect amounts to, Thomas Hill distinguishes between two dimensions of self-respect. Basic self-respect, Hill submits, establishes that the moral law is authoritative for all practical agents. In other words, the categorical imperative is

³⁰ Cf. E. Basevich, "Reckoning with Kant's Racism," *The Philosophical Forum* 51/3 (2020), 221-45; P. Kleingeld, "On Dealing with Kant's Sexism and Racism," *SGIR Review* 2/2 (2019), 3-22.

³¹ I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 29.

³² I. Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), p. 36.

³³ Kant, *Grounding*, p. 35.

³⁴ There is debate in the secondary literature about what being used as a "mere" means amounts to. For an original consent-based proposal, see K. Kleingeld, "How to Use Someone 'Merely as a Means,'" *Kantian Review* 25.3 (2020), 389-414. Kleingeld acknowledges that her account does not explain how a person can fail to give *themselves* consent for their own actions and thereby use themselves as a "mere" mean.

unconditionally binding for all persons who can act on the basis of reasons. The basic capacity to legislate on principle (or legislative reason) indicates that a person is the author of the moral law. The capacity for legislative reason establishes the innate moral value of persons as practical agents. Jacqueline Mariña characterizes legislative reason as a kind of irremovable “graced nature” that suggests that humans are “favored” in the order of the universe by holding the seat of reason: “[T]his feature of our nature cannot be lost; Kant notes that we are ‘never able to lose the incentive that consists in the respect for the moral law, and were we ever to lose it, we would also never be able to regain it.’”³⁵ In *Religion*, Kant argues that the “interest” of pure practical reason supports the predisposition to a moral personality, which is the subjective ground of choice in the formulation of maxims or subjective principles of action that a person submits to the categorical imperative.³⁶ The predisposition to personality is both spontaneous (that is, a fixed feature manifest in the fact of legislative reason), as well as subject to historical development. Persons can cultivate their habits of judgment to increasingly elicit a good will to improve their behavior and reform unjust public institutions: “the goal of the human being is to become what in some sense they already are, that is, to develop out of themselves that which is in some sense already within.”³⁷ In the case of basic self-respect, there is no duty to self-respect as such, only a self-conscious awareness of the authority of the moral law, which is “in some sense” already within us. There is nothing special or extra that a person must do to have basic self-respect.

Basic self-respect does not entail that a person actually thinks and acts to protect their

³⁵ J. Mariña, “Kant’s Robust Theory of Grace,” *Con-Textos Kantianos* 6 (2017), 302-20. pp. 304.

³⁶ I. Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. pp. 52-8. “The [moral] law impose itself on him irresistibly, because of his moral predisposition.” Conversely, Kant rejects attributing a “diabolical will” to persons, as if they can become so perverse, so as to be somehow exist “beyond” morality.

³⁷ Mariña, “Kant’s Robust Theory of Grace,” pp. 305-6.

equal moral worth. Hill thus contrasts basic self-respect with moral self-regard:

[It] is something that all moral agents ought to have, though many do not. To have it is to choose to live in a self-respecting way, expressing proper regard for one's humanity in one's acts (e.g., preserving and developing one's rational capacities) and one's attitudes (e.g., readiness to affirm and honor one's moral status of dignity and equality as a person.)³⁸

Kant's account of self-respect requires that we express "proper" moral self-regard for our humanity by "choosing to live in a self-respecting way." Persons should act on the intention to respect the moral law and interact with others accordingly. On Kant's model of self-respect, servile behavior indicates that a person has not formed the right intention to determine their judgment and action. Servility "[w]aives any claim to moral worth in oneself, in the belief that one will thereby acquire a borrowed worth."³⁹ According to Cynthia Stark, for Kant, "failures of self-respect are deliberate or involve a kind of self-deception."⁴⁰ Stark elaborates: "they involve either the intentional ignoring of one's moral worth when one knows better [...] or a kind of mental subterfuge [...] whereby one rationalizes or neglects to undergo a proper degree of self-scrutiny."⁴¹ A servile person uses their personhood as a mere means to pursue a conditional end, such as power or money. In addition to deliberate self-instrumentalization, a servile person can engage in self-deception. They rationalize bad choices by convincing themselves that an extant social relation in which they lack respect is not that bad or that there is nothing they can do about it. They thus permit themselves to be passively used for somebody else's arbitrary ends.

³⁸ T.E. Hill, Jr. "Stability, a Sense of Justice, and Self-Respect," in J. Mandle and D. A. Reidy (eds.), *A Companion to Rawls* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), pp. 200-15, p. 209.

³⁹ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 186-7.

⁴⁰ C.A. Stark, "The Rationality of Valuing Oneself: A Critique of Kant on Self-Respect," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35/1 (1997), 65-82, pp. 66-7. Stark's essay focuses on cases of people's ignorance about their own moral value. My concern, however, is not with cases of "genuine" ignorance of the moral law, but with the moral injury to self-respect of sustained racist judgment in a deeply unreasonable state.

⁴¹ Stark, "The Rationality of Valuing Oneself," p. 71.

But are all injuries to a person's self-respect—or the most troubling kind—the result of a deliberate self-instrumentalization or self-deception? Moral self-regard requires persons to defend themselves against social denigration and physical destruction. In profoundly nonideal circumstances, however, matters are complicated. Others refuse to recognize a person's equal moral worth inasmuch as they belong to a despised group. Social encounters often expose them to an evil will. An evil will rejects the authority of the moral law and seeks to destroy or seriously damage people's lives, family, and community. Kant ignores that members of vulnerable groups often incur excessive risk by expressing good will towards hostile strangers.⁴² The exercise of moral self-regard can make them an instrument of evil that expedites their brutal self-destruction. He does not consider that apparent servility to pursue a conditional end, such as power or money, might be coerced by the threat of violence and death. Neither deliberate self-instrumentalization nor self-deception defines the intention of a victim ostensibly acquiescing to a hostile person.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant famously argues that those threatened with death by a tyrant can refuse to give false testimony.⁴³ He concedes that many people in the scenario would lie, but views a resolution to truth-telling as a powerful example of moral courage. Yet to treat this example as if it offers an essential insight into his moral philosophy is misleading.⁴⁴ It mischaracterizes the relation between virtue and happiness that is critical in his

⁴² Of course, all moral action involves "risk" in its spatiotemporal expression. In a sense, "risk" is the ineliminable condition of autonomous moral agency. We can have no guarantees that others will not attack or denigrate us. However, systematic social injustice of the kind generated by the color line "pools" or "concentrates" risk in certain vulnerable racial communities in a way that other (white) members of the polity do not experience. Du Bois's idea of double consciousness helps us understand the racialization of moral risk.

⁴³ I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 27.

⁴⁴ Marcia Baron and Carol Hay use this example as offering essential insight into Kant's moral philosophy. See Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 44-45 and Hay, *Kantianism, Liberalism, & Feminism*, pp. 152-3.

teleological conception of the highest good or Kingdom of Ends. He does not believe that moral life should demand ongoing, extraordinary self-sacrifice as the condition for a person's participation in it. In fact, he holds the opposite view: the virtuous ought to find happiness in proportion to their virtue. The idea of the Kingdom of Ends functions as the final end or goal of history. It envisions an ideal historical end-state in which all people respect the moral law and no one faces arbitrary insult and attack at the hands of the unreasonable.

The idea of the highest good is supposed to capture an intuitive notion: The lives of the good should not be filled with suffering and random acts of violence. If morality were always rewarded with capital punishment, then a person would be unable to form a sense of self as practically free. The causality of practical reason would appear to be impotent. Kant is so disturbed by the possibility that practical reason seems impotent in an unjust world that his conception of the highest good includes the immortality of the soul and the existence of god. These religious ideas are “practically” necessary to assure good people that they might one day find the happiness that they deserve, whether in this world or the next.⁴⁵ Otherwise even the best of us will lose the resolution to be moral. The idea of the highest good is a teleological principle that orients practical judgment and action in world history. Kant posits that it should motivate the emergence of just republican states and a peaceful cosmopolitan world federation. That is, historical development should mitigate the chaos and unpredictability of moral life, thereby facilitating the convergence of virtue and happiness through the public administration of justice, which functions as an imperfect placeholder for “divine” justice.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ J. Tizzard, “Why Does Kant Think We Must Believe in the Immortal Soul?” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (2019), 1-16.

⁴⁶ Just institutions cannot eradicate the innate propensity to evil in human nature. In the *Anthropology*, Kant notes: “In a civil constitution, which is the highest degree of artificial improvement of the human species’ good predisposition to the final end of its vocation, animality still manifests itself[.] [...] One’s volition is generally good, but achievement is

In sum, good deeds should not be rewarded by the threat of arbitrary acts of violence and death. On the contrary, Kant believes that reliable forms of recognition develop a person's sense of practical agency. Of course, for him "reliable" recognition could be either social (a just state) or divine (a just god). Be that as it may, Kant still holds that recognition instills the conviction into persons that acting for the sake of the moral law can eventually generate a social order where all persons equally recognize its binding authority on the will, e.g. the Kingdom of Ends. With the aid of Du Bois, I explain in the next section that, unfortunately, Kant ignores what it takes to build moral community in systematically unjust states, where entire sections of the population are treated, as if they are still in the state of nature with "no rights which the white man is bound to respect," as the U.S. Supreme Court ruled about black Americans in the Dred Scott case of 1857. In a systematically unjust polity, vulnerable groups are coerced into participating in demeaning social encounters that expose them to an evil will. Such is the political order that black and brown Americans encountered during the antebellum and Jim Crow eras. As I explain below, in these nonideal circumstances, respect for the moral law requires that victims limit their interaction with, rather than engage, hostile persons.⁴⁷

III. Double Consciousness Reconsidered

Let us consider again the phenomenon of double consciousness. I have argued that the phenomenon captures the black first-person experience of the color line, as black Americans

difficult because one cannot expect to reach the goal by the free agreement of individuals, but only of a progressive organization of citizens of the earth into and toward the species as a system that is cosmopolitically united." pp. 232-8.

⁴⁷ The closest Kant comes to apprehending that moral self-regard might involve risking one's life is his "casuistical" discussion about whether vaccinations against small pox are morally justifiable: To gain immunity a person risks exposing themselves to the disease. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 220.

encounter material and symbolic veiling practices that undermine their pursuit of a good life. A recurrent theme in Du Bois's writing is the interaction between black and non-black people. Let us consider, then, the example of a black person yielding the sidewalk to a white person in the Jim Crow South. In this example, the person who yields need not have relinquished the innate moral value of their humanity. Indeed, they subjectively cling to the authority of the moral law to uphold the dignity of their personhood, but they nonetheless act in accordance with a system of anti-black social values and practices: they step aside. They experience double consciousness inasmuch as they are forced to look at themselves through a denigrating third-person perspective. They need not endorse that perspective, but they must learn to anticipate and accommodate it to survive.

Let us also clarify what coercion means in this scenario. The black person is coerced under a credible threat of violence and death to step aside. That threat is communicated by the sociohistorical context that frames the encounter. Black Americans are systematically subject to the denial of good will by a dominant white racial group that controls *de jure* institutional arrangements and creates a *de facto* asymmetrical structure of power in interracial social encounters. To be blunt, white people overwhelmingly refuse to recognize black humanity and will likely face no legal repercussion for the physical destruction of black bodies. I have also stipulated in this example that the black agent above subjectively affirms the authority of the moral law. That is, to borrow Carol Hay's phrasing, they 'internally' resist their oppression, even as they step aside. In this example, we accept that their intention is neither deliberate self-instrumentalization nor self-deception. On the contrary, their intention is to assert their moral self-regard in the most meaningful way available to them. In the last instance, then, have they succeeded? Have they asserted their self-respect by stepping aside, characterizing their wish not

to see their humanity destroyed and all their future life projects vanquished?

Note that coercion mitigates blame. In extreme cases, victims are nonculpable for failing to resist ‘externally’ because we cannot reasonably accept them to be ready to fight to the death. It is unfair to blame a person who yields of exhibiting servility, given they really had no choice to act otherwise. However, for us to refrain from ascribing blame to a person is not the same thing as granting that they, in fact, acted in a self-respecting fashion. Nonculpable or permissible action is not equivalent to morally worthy action. Nor does withholding blame for victims coerced into submission explain the moral injury to their sense of self-worth that they suffer as a consequence, particularly in a sociohistorical context that demands ongoing submission under the threat of violence and death.

Most contemporary Kantian formulations of self-respect ascribe duties of victims to assert their self-respect by resisting their oppression. They assume that victims *confronting* aggressors is a moral good for them to do and that therefore they ought to do it. With few exceptions, none seriously explore whether *avoiding* confrontations should count as an instance of moral self-regard.⁴⁸ For example, Hay defends the imperfect ‘wide’ duty of self-respecting victims to confront aggressors, even if they cannot resist ‘externally’ in their actions, as in my example above. Whereas Ann Cudd identifies a supererogatory duty of moral heroism for victims to resist, others still, such as Marcia Baron, maintain that the victim’s duty to resist is consistent with the universal requirement to respect the moral law.⁴⁹ The perfect duty to assert self-respect is not mitigated by oppressive circumstances nor does it differ in kind from an ordinary moral duty.⁵⁰ Then again Helga Varden stipulates that in nonideal cases one commits a

⁴⁸ For an exception, see Shelby “The Ethics of Uncle Tom’s Children,” p. 517.

⁴⁹ Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, p. 199.

⁵⁰ Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*, pp. 44-45.

‘formal’ wrong, though not a ‘material’ wrong, in scenarios that coerce a person’s dishonesty and servility.⁵¹ Although these accounts give vastly different characterizations of the duty of victims to resist, they all share the same preoccupation: telling victims what to do. Moreover, they all agree that confronting aggressors is morally worthwhile for victims to do, even if it is sometimes okay for the most terrorized among them to refrain from fighting monsters every now and again.⁵²

A focus on the moral duties of victims downplays three important considerations for a viable model of self-respect, which I consider in turn below with the aid of Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness:

- i. Victims confronting hostile persons is *not* an obvious moral good for them to do. On the contrary, actions that avoid such encounters have moral worth.
- ii. Social denigration in the long term damages a victim’s sense of self-worth, regardless of how victims choose to engage their oppressors.
- iii. The public protection of reciprocal relations of good will is a basic requirement of justice that should fall on the polity at large, not on victims.

In the light of these three neglected considerations, following the work of Du Bois from 1934 onward, I conclude in the next section that self-respect merits voluntary self-segregation to mitigate a vulnerable group’s unnecessary exposure to an evil will.

With respect to i. The black experience of double consciousness illustrates that even under coercion a moral ideal is still at play for victims. Human survival is not a norm-free, instinct-driven activity. It is one wherein the moral law is authoritative and motivating. The moral injury

⁵¹ H. Varden, “Kant and Lying to the Murderer at the Door,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41/4 (2010), 403-21, 409.

⁵² For the purpose of this essay, I do not detail the ways contemporary Kantians treat the duty of victims to resist. Suffice to say that they all agree that victims confronting their oppressors is a moral good for them to do.

of double consciousness is precisely that in yielding to a white person, a black person remains unsure if they had succeeded in asserting their equal moral worth in an inhospitable environment. In the example above, they could have risked it and refused to yield. If they held their ground, their action may have contributed to the disruption of a racial caste society. Or, they may have endured public humiliation, economic destabilization, arrest, sexualized torture, and a slow, excruciating death, which was the fate of countless black Americans whose untimely deaths are not recorded in history books.⁵³ In other words, when a person yields in the face of coercion, they are often still tormented thinking that they could have done more, even if ‘doing more’ was impossible on pain of death. To entertain that they ‘could have done more’ implies that fighting is a moral good, but that concession is what the victim who yielded ultimately—and rightly—refused to take for granted. In other words, confrontation is not an obvious way for them to avoid becoming an instrument of evil. On the contrary, it will likely incur their involuntary anonymous martyrdom. For the mature Du Bois, it is perverse to present black victims’ willingness to confront, time and again, much less to die before hostile whites, as a requirement of morality, justice, virtue, or a species of the moral good at all. It is not merely permissible that victims avoid hostile confrontations, but the action of stepping aside has moral worth, if a person deems the encounter sufficiently risky to them.

With respect to ii. Kant’s model of self-respect overlooks the devastating impact of an indefinite struggle to win recognition from hostile others. The phenomenon of double consciousness illustrates an even more pressing issue than whether or not a victim’s action has moral worth. For even in holding tight to the intention to respect the moral law, a person nevertheless suffers a

⁵³ See C.M. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 173-4.

moral injury *because* they are coerced into yielding and adopting ends that are not their own. Recall that Du Bois views resignation, sycophancy, and fierce strife as a spectrum of black attitudes *within* double consciousness. Each course of action takes its own distinct toll on the black psyche. In other words, the person who yields in my example above and those who share Du Bois's fierce strife can both experience the moral injury of double consciousness. The crucial insight here is that through the experience of double consciousness, a person finds—again and again—that others simply refuse to leave a space for them. They thus become estranged from the ends that they would otherwise freely endorse and publicly act on, and act instead on arbitrary ends that they do not consider a genuine or meaningful expression of their practical agency. If one yields to an oncoming white on a sidewalk or becomes resolved to prove one's excellence before mocking and indifferent white people, in both cases one feels compelled to defer to whites as the arbiters of value and foregoes asserting one's own moral ideal.

Inevitably, there is a cost to foregoing a moral ideal in the anticipation of others' bad behavior. Du Bois describes the moral injury of double consciousness as the strain of the indefinite suspension of a moral ideal.⁵⁴ Over a prolonged period of time, cynicism and apathy infect subjectivity.⁵⁵ The long term outcome of double consciousness is that the world begins to appear as a "prison-house" that extracts a "bitter cry" from the bodies it shackles, "Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?" One might feel as if they are just at the point of slipping into despair because they experience the viable scope of their sense of practical agency narrow.

Because the black person in the example above steps aside, their intention to respect the moral law has not found spatiotemporal expression. Their moral ideal is, instead, as Frank

⁵⁴ Kirkland, "On Du Bois' Notion of Double Consciousness," p. 141.

⁵⁵ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 386.

Kirkland puts it, suspended in “abeyance,” that is, they temporarily set it aside to avoid self-destruction in a particular instance.⁵⁶ Paradoxically, although the action of stepping aside has moral worth, a moral ideal suspended in “abeyance” still damages one’s self-respect *through no fault of one’s own*. For the institutional conditions of social and public life do not give one an opportunity to act in a fashion consistent with the free and successful exercise of one’s practical agency. This moral injury persists in a systematically unjust polity, regardless of the moral worth of the course of action a victim might choose to pursue.

With respect to iii. We need not focus on the moral worth of victims’ actions to gauge the moral injury that they sustain to their self-respect, one that they did not inflict on themselves through their own moral failure. Rather, the example above showcases the responsibility of *the polity at large* to cultivate good will towards all persons as a basic requirement of justice. Anyone should be able to take for granted their equal moral standing in social and public life. No one should have been forced to step aside in the first place. The U.S. polity at large fails to give black Americans their just due, if it does not promote reciprocal interracial relations of good will in social and political life that protect black equal moral worth.⁵⁷

At the very least, public institutions must not be so profoundly unjust, so as to render black existence *risky*—a disturbing feature of American public life that continues to this day. If

⁵⁶ Kirkland, “On Du Bois’ Notion of Double Consciousness,” p. 141; Shelby invites us to think more carefully about the relevant considerations of foregoing moral self-regard to survive: “There are moments [of] acquiesc[ence] to injustice to avoid serious physical harm, to protect loved ones, to live to fight another day, or to die a more meaningful death at a later time.” A new ethics of the oppressed, he hopes, would supplant an ethics of fear, where moral choices are not determined by fear of repercussion. Shelby, “The Ethics of Uncle Tom’s Children,” p. 517.

⁵⁷ Pablo Gilabert describes the obligation of justice in Kant’s political philosophy as a “basic positive duty to reasonably contribute to the existence of the basic conditions for other people’s exercise of their capacities of autonomous agency” in “Kant and the Claims of the Poor,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81/2 (2010), 382-418. p. 386.

‘internal’ resistance is the only viable option for acting in the world, then a person’s deeds are not identified with the spatiotemporal expression of their practical agency. The very fact that there is a rift between a person’s express intentions and what they can ultimately do in the world tracks the moral injury of double consciousness. This rift is the reason that a victim puts their moral ideal into abeyance and indicates the moral degeneration of the polity at large, as evident in its gross failure to protect black lives against random acts of violence. Du Bois rejects that justice is the primary responsibility of the oppressed, even though oftentimes, on the whole, they tend to manifest the strongest commitment to advancing its requirements.⁵⁸

IV. Voluntary Black Self-Segregation: Building the Social Bases of Self-Respect

Du Bois argues that overcoming double consciousness requires that whites respond reasonably to black Americans. Otherwise, the experience of double consciousness can undermine a black person’s sense of self-worth, as they are coerced into participating in demeaning interracial social encounters. Similarly, Rawls argues that if a person is not treated as a moral equal by others, then their self-worth suffers. On Rawls’s model, self-respect consists in (1) a person acquiring a positive sense of self-worth and (2) believing themselves capable of accomplishing their goals.⁵⁹ Pace Kant, Rawls like Du Bois contends that persons depend on positive social encounters to develop and exercise their practical agency in the manner that (1)

⁵⁸ The commitment to justice is shored up through a commitment to democratic values in predominantly black-controlled associations such as the black church. See E. Basevich, “Du Bois’s Critique of American Democracy in the Jim Crow Era: On the Limitations of Rawls and Honneth,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 27/3 (2019): 318-40.

⁵⁹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 386. Rawls’s repeated conflation of self-respect and self-esteem has generated much discussion, but the distinction is not relevant to my argument. My aim in this paper is to defend the social bases of self-respect, which assumes that a person should be the object of respect in order to discern their own unconditional moral worth and widen the scope of their sense of their capacity for practical agency.

and (2) propose. Unfortunately, like Kant, Rawls too ignores what it takes to survive in unjust states that systematically exclude vulnerable groups, leaving its members especially vulnerable to being denied the recognition of their equal moral worth.

Du Bois's social conception of self-respect supports a conclusion that, at first blush, does not appear to square with Rawls's model of self-respect: voluntary self-segregation protects black self-respect in profoundly nonideal circumstances by building a supportive moral community for black Americans.⁶⁰ Du Bois's formulation applies a social conception of self-respect to involuntarily segregated black communities. He holds that if black Americans take control to the extent that they can the terms of *de jure* and *de facto* racial segregation and develop intragroup solidarity, it can protect black equal moral worth in a hostile white-controlled world in the interim. In other words, black intragroup solidarity can achieve (1) and (2). One should thus grant the merit of Du Bois's program of voluntary black self-segregation on the grounds that a social conception of self-respect is really optimal. That is, a social support is necessary for a person to achieve (1) and (2), but impracticable in a hostile world at large.⁶¹

Rawls provides a social conception of self-respect, which he describes as the "social bases" of self-respect. An individual alone can never secure the social bases of self-respect; no set of duties that we might ascribe to particular victims in isolation from each other can secure it. Rather the social bases of self-respect entail that others reliably recognize a person's equal moral worth; it is a primary social good that the polity must distributed *to* vulnerable persons as a basic

⁶⁰ Though she is an unconventional Rawlsian, I have in mind here Elizabeth Anderson's influential work defending integration. For further discussion, see Merry, "Equality, self-respect and voluntary separation," pp. 87-89.

⁶¹ Though it is beyond the scope of my essay, it is critical to flag that Du Bois also believed that voluntary black self-segregation could also promote black economic well-being. For further discussion, see C. Haynes, Jr. "From Philanthropic Black Capitalism to Socialism: Cooperativism in Du Bois's Economic Thought," *Socialism and Democracy* 32/3 (2018), 125-45.

requirement of political morality, or justice. Rawls contends that the social bases of self-respect is a social need protected by justice, attaching it to the principle of fair equality of opportunity and to just institutional arrangements of a well-ordered society.⁶² Unlike Kant's "subjective" model of self-respect, for Rawls, self-respect has an "objective" character.⁶³ A person's sense of equal moral worth is an outcome of their social station in the world at large, i.e., its institutional arrangements and fellow citizens' habits of judgment. The "objective" character of self-respect highlights our inevitable dependence on positive recognition to discern and assert our self-worth. The systematic misrecognition of persons indicates that a society is unjust and poorly ordered.

Rawls does not discuss race-based forms of misrecognition that disproportionately target vulnerable racial groups behind the color-line or its potential impact on victims' sense of self-worth in the nonideal circumstances of *de jure* and *de facto* racial exclusion. Yet, given the vital importance of recognition for self-respect, one might ask, with Du Bois, what is a black American to do in profoundly nonideal circumstances, where whites simply refuse to recognize their moral equality? Once we concede—as I think we must—that self-respect has an objective character that demands positive social support for persons' healthy psychological development, we can better appreciate why Du Bois comes to favor voluntary black separation in the Jim Crow era. Self-respect is a social good the U.S. polity owes *to* all persons. In its absence, a viable option left to victims is to come together in intragroup solidarity in order to avoid—not confront—hostile strangers and bolster their positive self-understanding. For Du Bois, voluntary self-segregation protects black self-respect in the context of systematic racial exclusion and anti-black social values and practices. It is extremely difficult to build moral community with white

⁶² Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 477-78.

⁶³ Hill, "Stability, a Sense of Justice, and Self-Respect," p. 208.

strangers whom one does not trust and on whose *de facto* good will one cannot rely.⁶⁴

Du Bois understands that building a new political order—and, by extension, transforming the social bases of self-respect in the polity at large—takes time. Reform is often slow and piecemeal, as many whites resist giving up the illicit privileges of white power. In the interim, he recommends that the black American community provisionally self-segregate to build up black-run associations and construct, on a local scale, the social bases of self-respect.⁶⁵ In other words, he explicitly links black self-respect with voluntary self-segregation inasmuch as black Americans reliably affirm each other's equal moral worth. He maintains that if the white world does not wish to associate with him because he is black, he nevertheless deems it an honor and a privilege to associate with himself and other black people.

We have got to renounce a program that always involves humiliating self-stultifying scrambling to crawl somewhere where we are not wanted; where we crouch panting like a whipped dog. We have got to stop this and learn that on such a program [we] cannot build manhood. No, by God, stand erect in a mud-puddle and tell the white world to go to hell, rather than lick boots in a parlor.⁶⁶

He had hoped that the U.S. polity might one day recognize black Americans as equal rights-bearers entitled to the good life, but by the 1930s, the optimism that he had expressed in *Souls* about whites' readiness to welcome black Americans into American society had dramatically declined. Until whites express good will towards black people and are prepared to recognize their equal moral worth, Du Bois maintained that black Americans should shield themselves from anti-black social values and practices, and develop black-run associations that uphold their

⁶⁴ See Shelby's essential work on black political solidarity to which I am indebted, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁶⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Separation and Self-Respect," in D. L. Lewis (ed.), *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*. (Ontario: Fritzhenry & Whiteside, 1995), 559-62. p. 559. Cf. Shelby's notion of "pragmatic black nationalism" in *We Who are Dark*, chps 6-7.

⁶⁶ Du Bois, "Counsels of Despair," p. 1255.

self-understanding as free and equal persons. In a self-segregated community, black Americans have the chance to act on a moral ideal left in suspension; and they can act in concert, strengthening intragroup solidarity. They thereby mitigate the injury to their self-respect that the white-controlled world attempts to inflict on them.

Du Bois's controversial proposal to protect black self-respect earned him the ire of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a civil rights organization that he co-founded in 1909. He resigned in 1934 over the dispute about his program for voluntary self-segregation. Du Bois edited the monthly magazine *The Crisis* from 1910-34; it was the principal media outlet of the NAACP and under his direction, at its height, it reached a circulation of nearly 100,000 in the years preceding the Great Depression.⁶⁷ In the early 1930s, he penned a series of articles in *The Crisis* that explained because whites still refuse to show good will towards black Americans a new program of self-organization is called for. The NAACP leadership balked at voluntary self-segregation as a national model of black protest and accused Du Bois of cowering before white segregationists.

Yet, Du Bois remained opposed in principle to *de jure* and *de facto* racial segregation and continued to uphold the ideal of interracial social harmony in domestic and cosmopolitan justice. He aspired for all groups to co-exist in mutual respect, esteem, and reciprocity.⁶⁸ For him, segregation

is the separation of human beings and separation despite the will to humanity. Such separation is evil; it leads to jealousy, greed, nationalism, and war [and yet] without it, the American Negro will suffer evils greater than any possible evil of separation: we would suffer the loss of self-respect, the lack of faith in ourselves, the lack of knowledge

⁶⁷ H.L. Moon, "History of Crisis," *The Crisis* (1970), 385.

⁶⁸ For further discussion of ideals in Du Bois's political thought, see: C. Jeffers, "Appiah's Cosmopolitanism," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51/4 (2013), 488-510. M.L. Rogers, "The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*," *The American Political Science Review* 106/1 (2012), 188-203; Kirkland, "Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black," 136-65.

about ourselves, the lack of ability to make a decent living by our own efforts and not by philanthropy.⁶⁹

Self-segregation is thus an imperfect means to protect black moral equality, shoring up social support networks to safeguard the development of a strong sense of self-worth. As an organized community, Du Bois believed that black Americans should continue to engage whites in calculated collective actions to dismantle the color-line, but no individual or group of individuals should be forced to sacrifice themselves to extract recognition from them.⁷⁰ To be sure, ultimately, black public refusal to yield to white power is necessary to galvanize change. However, given the pernicious effects of the color-line, any particular individual's actions must be uplifted by a moral community prepared to publicly defend them, when the polity at large refuses to do so. Du Bois thus defends a social conception of self-respect that promotes solidarity among like-minded persons. A social conception of self-respect aims to cultivate reciprocal relations of good will, or intragroup black solidarity, to avoid pushing individuals into becoming inadvertent martyrs or instruments of evil at the hands of white people.⁷¹ Successful political

⁶⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Segregation in the North," in *Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1239-43, p. 1243. See also Du Bois, "Integration," pp. 1247-8.

⁷⁰ For further discussion of black counter-publics, see: E.B. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). M.C. Dawson, "A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics," *Public Culture* 7/1 (1994), 195-223; M.L. Rogers, "Rereading Honneth: Exodus and the Paradox of Recognition," *European Journal of Political Theory* 183/8 (2009), 183-206.

⁷¹ The more extreme the color line is, the more unclear and horrifying the demands of the moral law can appear to victims, as they try to limit their exposure to evil or avoid becoming its instrument. There are numerous powerful illustrations of this dilemma in African philosophy and literature. Particularly heartrending are depictions that suggest that respect for the moral law appears to justify destroying one's own—or a loved one's—life. These actions are, at the very least, intelligible from the standpoint of respect for humanity.

Consider two illustrations. (1) Frederick Douglass describes a young, half-clothed black woman running from her white captors, before leaping off a bridge to her death. She chose death, rather than a lifetime of slavery and sexual brutalization. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), 413. (2) Toni Morrison's *Beloved* culminates with the revelation that Sethe, a runaway slave, takes a handsaw to her toddler's throat once slave-

action is a collective political action. The power of Du Bois's concept of double consciousness is that even the most resilient and courageous spirit can eventually be crushed by the unflagging hostility of the world, if they do not find a moral community to uplift them.

Du Bois was particularly keen to mitigate the exposure of black children to racial prejudice. Two decades before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, in the essay "On Separation and Self-Respect" (1934), he cautions against sending black children to integrated schools "where white children kick, cuff, or abuse [them], or where teachers openly and persistently neglect or hurt or dwarf [their] soul[s]." ⁷² He was not inclined to sacrifice black children to defend the promise of equality in America. He stated: "Let us not affront our own self-respect by accepting a proffered equality which is not equality, or submitting to discrimination simply because it does not involve actual and open segregation." ⁷³ He would be uncomfortable with the now much vaunted image of a black child facing down a jeering white mob in the de-segregation efforts of the 1950s and 60s. In a world all too ready to condone assault on black lives, it is unfair to expect black children to make the ultimate sacrifice—their very selves—for the sake of a moral ideal that the republic at large stubbornly refuses to prioritize. In honoring black sacrifices, we must avoid inadvertently displaying a vicious lack of regard for black lives, an indifference that continues to define American public life.

Segregated schools protected black children from circumstances that would have compelled them to accept a debased view of themselves and to defer to whites in their day-to-day lives. As M.S. Merry notes, Du Bois rejected the notion that "all schools with high minority

catchers descend on her and her children. She wants to "release" her daughter, Beloved, from life on a Kentucky slave plantation. Sethe explains that she was trying to put her children somewhere "where they would be safe." Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 163.

⁷² Du Bois, "Separation and Self-Respect," p. 559.

⁷³ Du Bois, "Separation and Self-Respect," p. 560.

concentrations are ipso facto inferior.”⁷⁴ On the contrary, in black-run schools, children found black teachers who confirmed their value as moral and epistemic agents, among other critical resources. Merry elaborates:

In light of insistent segregation patterns, it will not suffice for a school with high needs simply to have a few good teachers. Other critical resources, often not in abundance for stigmatized minorities in so-called integrated schools, include teacher attentiveness, a caring ethos, shared values, cultural recognition and a sense of belonging. These can be further strengthened through a committed school leadership, positive role modelling, camaraderie among ethnic peers, parental intimacy and involvement, communal support and neighbourhood safety. Taken together these represent crucial resources with intrinsic benefits favourable to self-respect; these, in turn, are conducive to academic achievement and its instrumental benefits.⁷⁵

Moreover, Du Bois stressed that in black schools there were high standards of academic excellence, stating that none has a “right to sneer at the ‘Jim Crow’ schools of South Carolina, or at the brave teachers who guide [children] at starvation wages.”⁷⁶ Teachers were typically educated at historically black colleges and instructed black children about their political rights, when so few others did so beyond the color line. In conjunction with the black church, segregated black schools often strove to inculcate into children a commitment to black intragroup solidarity in the face of the inevitable shared hardships to come, and prepared them for a lifetime of navigating—and struggling against—a white-controlled world.

V. Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness demonstrates the limitation of Kant’s and Rawls’s models of self-respect in nonideal circumstances. The black experience of double consciousness highlights that its victims cannot control how badly others

⁷⁴ Merry, “Equality, self-respect and voluntary separation,” p. 88.

⁷⁵ Merry, “Equality, self-respect and voluntary separation,” p. 91.

⁷⁶ Du Bois, “Separation and Self-Respect,” p. 559-60.

are inclined to treat and misjudge them. Kant's model of self-respect fails to countenance that a victim's choice to avoid confrontation with hostile persons has moral worth. Rather than argue that such actions are merely permissible action, I argue with the aid of Du Bois that it asserts moral self-regard. However, given that a victim is nonetheless coerced into submission, they still suffer a serious injury to their self-respect inasmuch as they lack public standing as free and equal persons. In contrast, Rawls's model of self-respect demonstrates that the polity must leave a space for all persons to exercise their practical agency. The failure to leave a space is a miscarriage of justice, whose advance is the responsibility of the polity at large, not that of victims. However, Rawls neglects to consider that in the light of a recalcitrant color line, black Americans—and any systematically disrespected and denigrated group—has the moral right, provisionally, to self-segregate to develop associations that form the social bases of self-respect on a small scale in their local communities.

The black experience of double consciousness illuminates that it is a crucial requirement of justice for people to learn to respect black Americans across the color-line and to prioritize the creation of a racially inclusive polity that might one day end segregation in all its forms. Voluntary self-segregation by vulnerable groups is only called for to the extent that the polity at large systematically withholds good will. Voluntary self-segregation protects a group's self-respect when they cannot take for granted good will and safety among strangers. Though the U.S. public today accepts clubs and associations that nurture the bonds of vulnerable groups, we must remember that intragroup solidarity becomes increasingly vital the more irrational and hostile the world at large grows.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ In grassroots organizing today, self-segregation and the creation of “safes spaces” remains a critical strategy for social and political mobilization in a toxic public sphere that still condones anti-black violence, social values, and practices. My aim here is to highlight what Du Bois believed are its merits and why it might be an important way for vulnerable social groups to

I recently met the mother of a black student who was the target of racist harassment on the University of Michigan campus. She shared with me that her child plans to transfer to a historically black college. I submit that her child's experience conveys, in Du Bois's words, "the sobering realization of the meaning of progress."⁷⁸

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assert their self-respect in nonideal circumstances.

⁷⁸ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 10.

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