

**WE.B. Du Bois:**  
**The Lost and the Found**

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**Book Manuscript for the Black Lives Series in Polity Press**

*for my teachers*

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## **Introduction.** Du Bois Among Us:

### A Contemporary, A Voice from the Past

In a tape-recorded conversation with Margaret Mead in 1971, James Baldwin describes the problem of racism in the United States: “So that’s what makes it so all so hysterical, so unwieldy and so completely irretrievable. Reason cannot reach it. It is as though some great, great, great wound is in the whole body, and no one dares to operate: to close it, to examine it, to stitch it.”<sup>1</sup> Baldwin describes racism as an open wound that spans “the whole body” of the republic. Poets, philosophers, and social scientists struggle to explain its stubborn bloodletting rituals; like a chant, it has no clear beginning or end, pervading the legal and social conventions of our past and reaching out to cloud our future. In *Between the World and Me*, a spellbinding reckoning with white Americans’ complicity in white supremacy, Ta-Nahisi Coates remarks that racism has left him wounded, unable to console his young son in the face of perpetual loss.<sup>2</sup> “I can only say what I saw, what I felt,” writes Coates. “There are people whom we do not fully know, and yet they live in a warm place within us, and when they are plundered, when they lose their bodies and the dark energy disperses, that place becomes a wound.”<sup>3</sup> If one were to place a stone or a flower at every tree, church basement, stairwell, or dark stretch of road where a person of color has lost their body and left there a wound still painful to touch, a cemetery could overlie

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<sup>1</sup> Baldwin, James and Margaret Mead. *A Rap on Race*. Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1971. p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> For an incisive critique of Coates, see Rogers, Melvin L. “Between Pain and Despair: What Ta-Nehisi Coates Is Missing,” *Dissent* 31 July 1995: online.

<sup>3</sup> Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Random House, 2015. p. 69.

the entire geography of North America. Marx had once warned of the specter of communism haunting Europe, whereas actual ghosts haunt the United States.<sup>4</sup>

In his characterization of American racism, Baldwin invoked two notions that, at first blush, appear to stand in opposition. He observed that reason “cannot reach it” and yet the “wound” remains open because “no one dares to operate: to close it, to examine it, to stitch it.” Reason is both powerless against racism and an indispensable tool to combat it. And so, one is left wondering if it is possible to mend the wound using the power of reason in some broad sense, employing persuasion, imagination, and fact-based arguments. The long history of racial violence and terror might suggest that racism is too resilient to crumble under public scrutiny or government intervention, however well-intentioned. And yet, Baldwin maintained that one must nevertheless “dare” to “close [the wound], examine it, stitch it.” He thus asked his reader to redress the evil of racism. In doing so, we realize that racism, like all evil, as Hannah Arendt puts it, is “banal”; that is, it is a social phenomenon that, like any social phenomenon, originates in the human will and is therefore capable of being rooted from the world, however monstrous its proportions and stranglehold on institutions. What people have willed into existence, including a force as recalcitrant as white supremacy, by the same token, can be willed out of existence. Racism is not a random and unstoppable event in the natural world, like an earthquake or the death of a star. To be sure, the fight against it must stretch the boundaries of the imagination, drawing on cultural and spiritual resources that are often overlooked as inspirations for democratic agency. The process must also support the transformation of major social and

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Neiman notes that a major difference in the twentieth-century political history of Europe and North America is that the Europe was willing to confront its atrocities and genocide—at least with respect to the Holocaust—and thus attempted to atone for the past, whereas the U.S. has never really tried. See her *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019.

political institutions. But the prospect of a just world, nevertheless, remains viable. The question is only how and when to build it.<sup>5</sup>

The driving question in W.E.B. Du Bois's writings as a whole—a question that also inspired Africana philosophers from Frederick Douglass to James Baldwin—was the following: Can reason close the wound of racism that spans the whole body of the republic; and if reason cannot reach it, how else might it be closed? Africana philosophers do not all share the same optimism about finding solutions to anti-black racism.<sup>6</sup> But Du Bois had faith—a kind of moral attitude of sustained hope for a better world—that the wound of racism *can* close and heal, even if it will leave an irremovable scar on the U.S. republic and the world.

Though we cannot imagine that we can go back to a world untouched by racism, we have a moral obligation to figure out how to repair the world we have inherited, to put the ghosts of the dead to rest. The conviction that our profoundly nonideal world is reparable, I believe, is the conviction that inspired W.E.B. Du Bois's life and work. In his career as an academic, writer, and activist, this conviction motivated him to experiment with a great variety of methods for stitching shut the wound that racism has left on the body of the U.S. republic and on the world. From the scientific method to literature and the arts, Du Bois had a lifelong dedication to theorizing new approaches to anti-racist critique. In my mind, his originality and willingness to adopt new methods sets him apart from most political theorists. His methodological

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<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the “Afropessimist” intellectual movement posits that anti-black racism is almost an unstoppable, permanent, and quasi-natural force in U.S. history. See Wilderson III, Frank B. *Afropessimism*. New York: Liveright, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Africana philosophy is an umbrella term that categorizes philosophical inquiry centrally focused on the experiences of African and Afro-descendent peoples. For an overview of the subfield, see Outlaw, Lucius T. “Africana Philosophy,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/africana/>

experimentation is perhaps why his scholarship is both so exciting and so challenging to reconstruct using general philosophical principles.

With the aim of presenting some of the principal methods Du Bois developed to combat anti-black racism and to build a more just world, this book provides an account of the life, activism, and scholarship of W.E.B. Du Bois. In a storied and prolific life, Du Bois's accomplishments were considerable and wide-ranging. He is recognized in the United States and around the world as an influential civil rights leader of the twentieth century. He co-founded in 1910 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was the editor of *The Crisis* (1910-34), the official magazine of the NAACP, widely circulated in the segregated black community during the Jim Crow era. What is more, as a social scientist, he pioneered empirical methods to study black neighborhoods, founding modern "scientific" sociology.<sup>7</sup> His spellbinding *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, is a foundational text of Africana philosophy and African-American arts and letters. During his lifetime, he adopted liberal, Marxist, Pan-African, and black nationalist frameworks to fight anti-black racism; and he published poems, short stories, and novels, and was involved in the Harlem Renaissance to use the arts to enhance the moral literacy of the white-controlled republic about racial matters. The characters who people his creative writings move through an uncertain world, disfigured by slavery and segregation, wondering if it is reasonable to hope for a better world in the aftermath of so much suffering.

In this book, I take the view that Du Bois is a modern political philosopher for whom the ideal of basic civil and political rights for all, as well as the ideal of racial inclusion in political

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<sup>7</sup> See Morris, Aldon. *The Scholar Denied W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*. Oakland: University of Californian Press, 2017.



and economic life, is an indispensable basis for combating anti-black racism and for advancing racial justice. My presentation of Du Bois's thought, in part, builds on and puts pressure on the noted philosopher Charles W. Mills's recent argument that Du Bois is a "black radical liberal" who aims to realize the public values of freedom and equality for all in order to welcome black and brown people, refugees, and immigrants, into a reconstituted democratic polity.<sup>8</sup> Mills maintains that, for Du Bois, the process of advancing true freedom and equality for all requires a radical reorganization of modern American society from the point of view of historically excluded groups. Mills thus offers a theoretical exposition of Du Bois's original claim that a color line draws a "veil" over communities of color by withdrawing respect and esteem from black and brown people.<sup>9</sup> The readiness of the American public to dismantle the color line reflects whether or not the republic is truly "modern"—that is, free and equal for all persons regardless of race. As Du Bois put it, "the advance of all depends increasingly on the advance of each," such that respecting and esteeming historically excluded groups is instrumental for the development of American modernity.<sup>10</sup> I flesh out Mills's interpretation of Du Bois by looking at the breadth of Du Bois's writings and activism, and present Du Bois's changing positions as broadly consistent with a "radical" political liberalism. The challenge, of course, would be to show what Du Bois packed into liberalism to make it "radical" and which liberal ideals are valuable in the first place. Christopher Lebron provides an elegant definition about what it means to be a "radical," one that complements Mills's view and on which this book elaborates:

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<sup>8</sup> Mills, Charles W. "W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Liberal," in Nick Bromell (Ed.) *A Political Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2018. pp. 19-56.

<sup>9</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Penguin, 1989. pp. 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Development of a People," In N. D. Chandler, ed., *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. p. 244.

“Radicalism is the imagination and will to think and act outside the bounds of the normally acceptable.”<sup>11</sup> Rethinking the bounds of the normally acceptable in social, economic, and political life is the heart of Du Bois’s political project for reconstituting the U.S. polity.

In this book, I introduce three themes that inform Du Bois’s critique of American democracy. These themes characterize his political liberalism and map some its radical potential: (1) inclusion, (2) self-assertion, and (3) despair. In the beginning of his professional life (late 1890s-1934), Du Bois advocated the civic enfranchisement of African Americans *as* American citizens, a principle that is the hallmark of his political liberalism. By the early 1930s, he continued to assert that African Americans must become equal participants in modern American life, but grew skeptical about the white public’s readiness to respect and esteem people of color. As a consequence, to the shock of the NAACP, he began to defend voluntary black self-segregation in order to shore up black civil and economic standing during the Jim Crow era. With the rise of McCarthyism in the 1950s, Du Bois was prosecuted by the U.S. Justice Department and this marked the beginning not of intellectual decline but something like despair. The U.S. federal government accused him of acting as a foreign agent for the Soviet Union because of his activism for world peace. He later shared: “I have faced during my life many unpleasant experiences: the growl of a mob; the personal threat of murder; the scowling distaste of an audience. But nothing has so cowed me as that day, November 8, 1951, when I took my seat in a Washington courtroom as an indicted criminal.”<sup>12</sup> Although he avoided jailtime, he was blacklisted and slid into poverty. He had confronted—time and again—the color line and had

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<sup>11</sup> Lebron, Christopher. *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. p. xx.

<sup>12</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. *In Battle for Peace: The Story of my 83<sup>rd</sup> Birthday*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. p. 82.

dedicated his life to fighting against it, only to be attacked the state and abandoned by lifelong friends and allies. Like Socrates, he was rejected by the polity for whose soul he had so passionately fought. His prosecution ultimately drove him into exile under the patronage of Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah (in office 1960–66). Du Bois died in Ghana in 1963, the night before the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, when Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous “I have a dream” speech.

The themes of inclusion, self-assertion, and despair that I explore here do not exhaust the range of plausible interpretations of Du Bois’s thought. Rather, on my view, they provide a helpful lens for establishing his unique place in modern political philosophy and the contemporary significance of his critique of American democracy. For example, in focusing on the ideal of civic enfranchisement, we can ask whether the U.S. federal government could be a vehicle for racial justice in spite of its sustained attack on those who criticize it and the history of white supremacy. Though Du Bois held on to the emancipatory potential of the ideal of a racially inclusive polity, some of the questions that his political liberalism raises for us today include: Does the Trump presidency spell the decisive end of appeals to the government for racial justice? Or, on the contrary, does the ascendancy of white power movements confirm the importance of interracial grassroots movements to seize local, state, and federal power? Additionally, what role might black solidarity and self-segregation continue to play in democratic politics? Felony disenfranchisement, gerrymandering, and the suppression of voter rights remain destructive vehicles for disenfranchising communities of color; and the escalating attacks on and the criminalization of migrants and asylum seekers from Central and South America and the Caribbean illustrates that racial whiteness is still taken to be a marker of Americanness. It appears as if with each step forward the republic takes two steps back. The urgency of the

questions above shows why Du Bois remains relevant in the struggle for racial justice today. For his work showcases how and why race defines who is be considered a legitimate member of the American social fabric and what rights and resources political membership should entail.

Some might object to a presentation of Du Bois as centrally focused on theorizing domestic justice in the U.S. By foregrounding the U.S. domestic context for most of this book, I do not mean to suggest that his political thought is exhausted by the ideal of civic enfranchisement. Neither do I believe that a focus on domestic justice bars thinking with Du Bois about cosmopolitanism and global justice or grassroots social movements in other countries. The Du Bois scholars Chike Jeffers and Inés Valdez offer rich analyses that extend the promise of Du Bois's cosmopolitanism with respect to his philosophy of race and pan-Africanism, respectively.<sup>13</sup> Juliet Hooker examines the influence of Latinx political theory on Du Bois, challenging assumptions about the role of the global south in his intellectual development.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, there is much to say about the intersection between domestic and cosmopolitan justice, as well as about the influence of Latinx and indigenous liberation movements on his theorization of the African American struggle for emancipation. That is to say Du Bois's political thought raises many rich avenues that I will not be able to pursue here. However, I do not take his critique of American democracy to foreclose other important lines for thinking with him about justice and democracy. Instead, I assume that his political thought consists of an interlocking system of concepts and principles that fashion a comprehensive, broadly liberal framework for

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffers, Chike. "Appiah's Cosmopolitanism," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 51.4 (2013), pp. 488-510; Jeffers, Chike. "The Cultural Theory of Race: Yet Another Look at Du Bois's 'The Conservation of Races,'" *Ethics* 123.3 (2013): 403-26; Valdez, Ines. *Transnational Cosmopolitanism: Kant, Du Bois, and Justice as a Political Craft*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Hooker, Juliet. *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. pp. 113-54.

theorizing global and domestic justice. To illuminate a mere element of this system is not to banish the remaining conceptual architecture into the dark.

One might also object to presenting Du Bois in the context modern political philosophy or to my emphasis on his political liberalism. In providing a philosophical reconstruction of Du Bois's critique of American democracy, I establish, among other notable accomplishments, his contributions to modern political philosophy. I build bridges between Du Bois and major figures in the history of philosophy, including Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel. My aim is neither to canonize Du Bois in order to prove that he is a formidable political philosopher nor to chastise and chuck central philosophical figures for neglecting the problem of race and racism in general and of Du Bois in particular. Yet where racial violence abounds, and a nation still struggles to be free, it is instructive to see why more mainstream philosophical schools struggle to make sense of phenomena like the color line and double consciousness; and I believe that it is worth the effort to show their limitations. What is more, even in his so-called "late" period when Du Bois read Marx more closely, his major published works confirm that he continued to share some basic ideals with modern political philosophy, such as a commitment to civil and political rights and representational democracy; to be sure, he also experimented with political strategies and developed a critique of empire, colonialism, and global racial capitalism.<sup>15</sup> Even if political liberalism does not exhaust the richness of the Duboisian framework, it is nevertheless indispensable to it.<sup>16</sup> However, unlike most modern political philosophers, Du Bois concentrated on theorizing white supremacy, which he considered to be a defining obstacle to the advance of

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<sup>15</sup> In my view, it is not plausible to hold that Du Bois became an anarchist who rejected the legitimacy of the modern state or an anti-democratic who favored strong-man leaders like Stalin and Chairman Mao. He did, however, write several opinion pieces in support of the latter.

<sup>16</sup> Mills, "Du Bois: Black Radical Liberal," pp. 49-50.

modernity.

Finally, I would like to briefly comment on my decisions regarding the structure of the book, as well as my personal motivation for writing it. The book has a chronological organization. It opens with the birth of Du Bois and ends with his death. Most chapters begin with a brief biographical statement about the particular stage of Du Bois's life that we find him, where he was living and working, and his vision of political struggle at that point in his career, drawing in particular on D.L. Lewis's and Manning Marable's exquisite biographies of Du Bois. As a man who described himself as "bone of the bone" and "flesh of the flesh" of the people living and striving behind the color line, Du Bois noted that the "veil" too fell over his own life and that of his family.<sup>17</sup> His life provides some insight into his political thought, as he often reflected on his personal experiences to chart new directions in his research and activism. I therefore surmised that it would be helpful to include biographical information in an overview of his life and work. The inclusion of biographical information also meets the objective of the Black Lives Book Series to represent the singular lives of powerful and neglected black thinkers.

I take the subtitle of the book, *The Lost and the Found*, from the dedication that Du Bois wrote to his children in *The Souls of Black Folk*: "To Burghardt and Yolande, The Lost and the Found." Du Bois's firstborn son, Burghardt, died from diphtheria in Atlanta in 1899, "The Lost." "I saw his breath beat quicker and quicker, pause, and then his little soul leapt like a star that travels in the night and left a world of darkness in its train."<sup>18</sup> A daughter, Yolande, was born the following year, "The Found." The Du Bois family, however, never fully recovered from the loss of their firstborn. In chapter eleven of *Souls*, "On the Passing of the Firstborn," Du Bois invites

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<sup>17</sup> Du Bois, *Souls*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 142.

his reader to mourn the loss of his toddler with him, to join his family in its grief. Mourning is a sign of respect that is often denied to black children; and the loss of black life hardly bereaves a white-controlled world. The subtitle of the book is also a comment on the reception of Du Bois in academia and the American public. To suggest that Du Bois *is* the lost and the found is not just to foreground his life, work, and experience of the twentieth century. It is a call for the formation of new habits of judgment that realize his vision of a racially pluralistic democracy. In that sense, to “find” Du Bois is to learn to respect and esteem historically excluded groups and to move through the world from their perspective.

I would like to conclude my introduction with a brief note about my interest in Du Bois. As a white woman, I am often asked by well-meaning people for an “origin story,” so to speak, explaining my interest in a black philosopher. I doubt my research would inspire as many calls for an explanation, if it were limited to the study of Kant, Hegel, and analytic political philosophy. I reject the suggestion that a scholarly interest in Du Bois deviates from established norms; if this remains the widespread perception, then every new book on Du Bois must make a claim to “finding” him anew. Absurdly, Du Bois’s prodigious writings would remain perpetually “lost,” in spite of a growing body of Du Bois scholarship.

Yet, it would be naïve to ignore the connection between identity and the development of intellectual interests, though, on my view, family background and racial identity ultimately explain little. My family arrived in the U.S. as asylum seekers from the former Soviet Union. I grew up in a diverse immigrant community in south Brooklyn and remember Clinton’s welfare reform of the ‘90s not as a newspaper headline but through the gradual disappearance of my favorite breakfast items on the kitchen table. Because my parents did not speak English well, I was often the intermediary between public school teachers, welfare administrators, and census

workers, translating my parents' fear and insecurity into a moral claim before the federal government. I felt like David slinging stones at Goliath, inserting myself and my family before a state apparatus that at any moment can leave us adrift or quash us. I struggled to explain on what basis anyone had any responsibility towards us—in what way were we part of a greater whole? The question preoccupied me, especially given the radical contingency of our being here in the first place. Why was our desperate need reason enough for someone to help?

In my philosophical studies, I focused on how social identity—especially racial identity—amplifies or mitigates a community's vulnerability to the excess of state power or the withdrawal of state resources. Whether one even has public standing to make a formal claim for rights, resources, and legal protection is often a reflection of one's position in a racial hierarchy. In a philosophy canon dominated by whites, I was fortunate to have teachers who turned my attention to Du Bois to help me theorize the influence of race on the organization of politics and inspired me to contribute to Du Bois scholarship.

On a more personal note, Du Bois's writing gave me a version of America that I can make my own, inasmuch as it showed me a way of assuming responsibility for the white supremacist violence and racial trauma on which the republic was built. Even as my own family had experienced the vertigo of making formal claims before the federal government, so many communities of color and immigrant communities lack a formal platform to even assert their rights and to protect their needs, and have existed—and continue to exist—outside the formal domains of political power. Their humanity remains invisible, or as Du Bois puts it, "veiled." With so much at stake in adopting the U.S. as my newfound homeland and making myself at home as a white person in a white-supremacist polity, Du Bois's vision of the future of American democracy gave me an opportunity to make sense of my own potential role in the country: I



strive to make the future Du Bois's dreamt for America real. Only in a still to-be-born America might I be at home. In a sense, I have accepted that to be fully committed to justice I must remain a refugee. Yet I am grateful to have been welcomed by a community of Du Bois scholars from whom I have learned so much and will continue to learn. I am especially indebted to Du Bois scholars of color and the public alike who have placed a modicum of trust in my voice. I can only hope that my work can carry the moral faith to achieve what seems impossible in light of the history of the irrevocable failures of white humanity: to rebuild an interracial political community in the aftermath of the sorrows of the past and the still burgeoning structural inequalities of the present.

My turn to Du Bois as a philosophy student also coincided with the popular resurgence of white nationalist movements in the U.S. in the 2010s. With the aid of Du Bois, I aim to restore a vision of American democracy that dethrones white supremacy as the "true" meaning of our republican heritage and whiteness as the condition for being a "true" American. In turning to Du Bois, then, I would like to contribute, however little, to repairing the moral spirit of American democracy, telling a different story about how the part relate to the whole we are always building and rebuilding. With Du Bois, I refuse to believe that white fear and insecurity asserts complete sovereignty over the human spirit, though it will likely take uncharted moral imagination to properly mourn the black lives lost to bombs, nooses, and knives. I am grateful to the life and work of W.E.B. Du Bois and to the community of scholars and teachers who have taught me to feel the warmth and power of a new world being born and that what it means to be an American is an inversion of the inscription Dante read over the gates of the inferno: "*Never abandon all hope, ye who enter here.*"