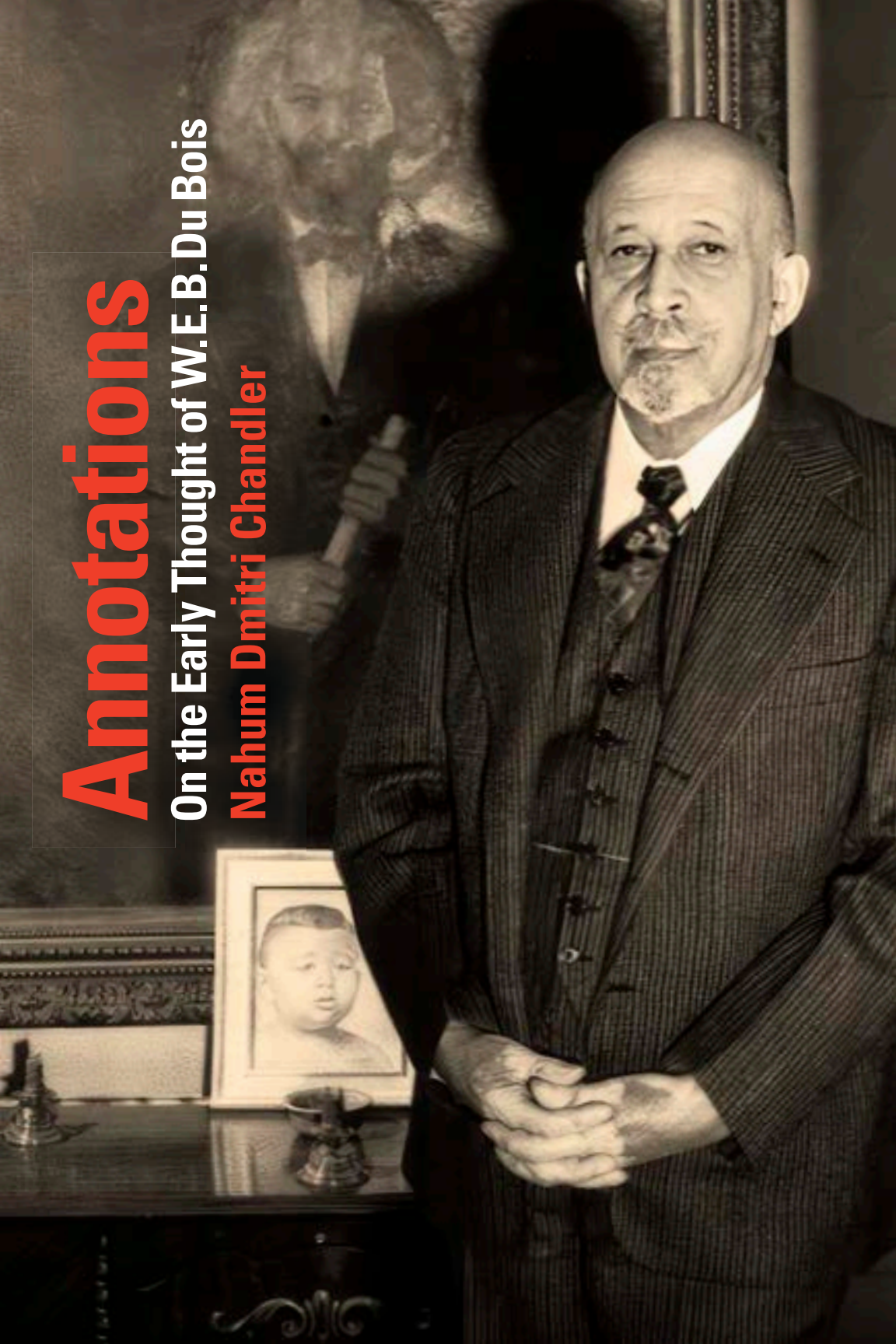


Annotations

On the Early Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois

Nahum Dmitri Chandler



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NAHUM DIMITRI CHANDLER

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On the Early Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois

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PREFACE

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I

This book is an expression of my thought that W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the most committed, gifted, hard-working, and accomplished thinkers of our era, from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, in America and across the world in general.

It is likewise my judgment that in order to challenge and determine in what way we may go beyond his accomplishments we must first take an acute and knowledgeable measure of his thought. Above all such a determination requires a reading of his writing with a commitment to be or become responsible in our thinking for what is most at stake therein, his thought, as given and exemplified in his practice, of thinking in writing.

This book is one expression of my own efforts in such critical engagement, that is to say, with Du Bois as a thinker.

II

Across the duration of the past half century, the practices of a relatively unprecedented critical accounting, sifting, and judgment in contemporary thought—within the discourses and disciplines of the study of politics, history, literature, artistic practice and architecture, forms of engineering, discourses of law and legality, and philosophical discourses as well as the interpretive dimensions of the disciplines of the human sciences—emerged and enabled the inception of an ongoing reconfiguration of the worldwide context for leading edge work in such practices. On the one hand, we may remark on the tendentious generalization of critical practice, that is, a reflection and astringent judgment within thought on the very terms, that is to say the conditions and limits, of its own possibility. On the other hand, during those same decades, throughout all of the

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domains just noted, the articulation of theory has emerged as essential, necessary, and general for any practice of thought that would be radical with regard to any and all that is at stake within it. We can thus surmise in our own time that the past several decades of critical reflection have rendered the general condition that for thought to approach the possibility that it may be commensurate with the problematization that has brought it forth, it must become theoretical, even practical theoretical—that is to say, it must ceaselessly proceed by always, no matter whatever else it undertakes in general, by asking after its own possibility.

III

Yet, too often engagement with the work of a thinker-writer from among folks or people of “color,” to maintain and stake Du Bois’s metaphor of “the problem of the color line,” has meant that criticism has relentlessly approached the practice of such a thinker as ultimately, or perhaps only, a determined expression of a context, whether that context is understood as social, political, economic, or a discursive and theoretical horizon.

The writing and legacy of the extraordinary Frantz Fanon, because there is so much at stake in his superb example, may help to make clear my thought here. It may be that Fanon, in all senses of reference, has been appropriated, in part, over the past several decades because it has seemed apparent to many that one could imagine that more clearly than ever he could be situated in relation to already assumed, perhaps hegemonic or leading, theoretical dispositions, specifically a context such as psychoanalysis (however diverse and contested) or, more generally, a broad context such as mid-twentieth century French thought (of the social, cultural, or aesthetic) that rose to new international recognition and engagement during those same years. As well, his work and example may seem to offer the potential that by way of such references it could be assimilated to, or understood as existentially continuous with, emergent forms of political and economic concern and discourse, notably all that has recently been evoked under the heading of the postcolonial. Yet, it may well come to light that no such appropriation of Fanon’s legacy ought be understood as radical for future thought in general. In likewise regard, a notice of such approaches with regard to C. L. R. James may be at once apposite and illuminating, by contrast, perhaps (for in terms of the circumstance

of historical conjuncture and timing Du Bois was in fact of an entirely other generational reference from those I have mentioned here), efforts from the 1960s through the 1980s to enfold Du Bois under a Marxist banner, such as has been done with James, for example, gradually became incoherent, despite the older thinker's great regard for Karl Marx as a practical theoretical thinker. Then, in like manner, it was discovered in the 1990s that one could not so easily place Du Bois as a pragmatist philosopher. Nor could one carry out in a successful manner what has been repeatedly attempted since the 1960s: to simply declare Du Bois a certain traditional sociologist; that limit in the contemporary engagement with the thought of Du Bois remains, despite his own great aspiration, and his pioneering contributions to sociological thought, as discipline and even as an institution. Nor likewise has it been decisive during these same decades for contemporary scholars and thinkers to approach Du Bois as if he were and ought to be understood first or ultimately, in his historiographical practices, as an exemplary academic empiricist historian.

What has remained elusive is a careful, sustained, supple, and generous reading of the internal emergence and theoretical articulation of Du Bois's own thought in his writing practices. It would seem that many have so far remained uncertain that such an approach could be realized.

In this book, I read Du Bois as a generative and original thinker whose thought may be understood to offer another context for modern and contemporary theoretical practice, as much as it may itself be submitted to critical contextualization.

To establish this argument, I deliberately move with a certain close regard for the rhythms of enunciation and registers of discourse given in a handful of early texts by Du Bois, as best that I can recognize and respond to them, such that, in turn, a reader may be able to find, and to recognize, a distinct articulation of values and judgments from a standpoint that is first situated within Du Bois's own manner of thinking in writing. I believe this closeness will at once challenge readers in their initial engagement and yet also sustain them, holding them close to the argument and the potential contributions of Du Bois's discourse, his practice in thought, in the common pursuit with me of an ongoing and somewhat new inhabitation of Du Bois's thought and example: that is, another understanding, by way of this address of his example, of the traditions that may now be understood anew of African American intellectual and theoretical production in critical thought.

The approach I take in this study is in contrast to that of most contemporary approaches to Du Bois, both in comparison to others (such as figures who have followed after him that I have noted above simply as examples or references—that is, Fanon or James), and in the most direct approaches that seek to situate him as a figure of legacy, whether in affirmation or in negation. The key thought I propose herein may be understood in quite simple and direct terms. In this book, I do not apply theory to the reading of Du Bois. Rather, I understand, approach, and elaborate (in a critical sense) Du Bois's work as itself theoretical. That is to say, Du Bois's own work can be understood to adduce, indicate within its engagement, a questioning of the conditions and possibility of its own conception and its enunciation. It can be studied and reengaged according to such terms. If so, Du Bois's text, in a general but quite practical sense, may be approached as a problem for those who would seek to understand it, as a solicitation rather than as a solution of any kind.

IV

In a manner of speaking, this work is a philosophical study—by way of a close reading of a key text by W. E. B. Du Bois from the second half of the last decade of the nineteenth century, that is to say: proximate to the turn to the twentieth century. The principal text in question is “The Conservation of Races,” first presented in public on the March 5, 1897. In that essay, Du Bois sought to produce a truly general understanding of the historicity that announced the African American as a form of social and historical human being. My study addresses two primary aspects of this work. The initial consideration concerns the concept of race, of which he gave a distinctive critical account. The further consideration offered here is Du Bois's conceptualization of the historicity attendant to matters African American, in general. These considerations are each tethered to the other; one is at stake in the other, in mutual and reciprocal implication. This study thus undertakes (1) to provide a theoretical annotation of Du Bois's complex engagement with the concept of race (which is nothing other than the problem of the concept of the human as an *historial* entity) and (2) to cultivate and elaborate from the premises of Du Bois's early thought a distinct approach, in a theoretical sense, for thinking about the historicity in which matters African American are produced. On the latter, Du Bois sought to cultivate a conception that might account for the

emergence of matters African American—as world historical—that is, the context of modern history on a planetwide scale of reference.

It must also be noted, however briefly, that there is at least one fundamental domain of Du Bois's concern at the turn to the twentieth century—the other principal one in my estimation, along with the concept of race (or the human) and the conception of modern historicity—that is not addressed in this study. That matter is the question of the genesis, character, and historical organization of forms of subjectivity that constitute the social and historical experience of African Americans. This is the question addressed by Du Bois's inimitable concept metaphor of “double-consciousness” and its attendant tropes, concepts, metaphors, and lexemes, the most notable of which is “second sight.” This dimension of Du Bois problematization produces such a fundamental dimension of his itinerary—perhaps the most sedimented and fundamental—that it may be rendered legible and resonant for us in virtually every major reference at multiple levels of his writing and activity. Likewise, it articulates with contemporary horizons of thought in such a manner that the magnitude of the references to thought worldwide since the eighteenth century that it places at stake always remain exorbitant to any nominal critical engagement with them. Thus, Du Bois's practice on this order of problem yields for me a demand that it be considered in a study devoted to its critical elaboration on its own terms, of context and understanding; thus, I have determined to do so elsewhere.

V

The study manifests two distinct kinds of annotation. The first form of annotation is a work of theoretical desedimentation, if you will. Part I is focused on one paragraph in Du Bois's essay “The Conservation of Races.” It attends to the logic, in the general sense, of the claims made therein in relation to thetic propositions of the paragraph. The second form of annotation is a kind of theoretical elaboration. This manner of proceeding is given in part II. It is an effort to recognize by way of my own theoretical narrative a principle of narration that is exemplified in Du Bois's practice across the middle paragraphs of this same essay. In those middle paragraphs of his text, Du Bois produces an account of the past of human existence according to the premise that he had formulated with regard to the idea of race (which I annotate in part I,

here), that is to say in accordance with his critical re-conceptualization of such idea.

The principle of narration in Du Bois's thought that I, in turn, adduce in part II, by way of a kind of theoretical narrative of my own, may be given a concise general prefatory formulation. To adduce the status of an historial entity, a form of being whose futural standing is not given, Du Bois was led to cultivate a theoretical sense of *an alogical logic* as a way to address in knowledge and discourse the organization and operation of social genesis, that is as the constitutive (infra)structure in the processes of idealization, in the development, formation, and organization of values. In the understanding that I propose here, Du Bois cultivates such a thought to account for the historial status of the form of social being that goes under the heading of the Negro or African American. In part II of this study, I propose that such genesis may indeed be characterized by the phrase *the alogical logic of the second time*.

The work of the late pianist and composer Cecil Taylor provides exemplary reference and guidance for my elaboration of this thought. Likewise, I annotate the work of Jacques Derrida, of the same generational cohort as Taylor. Yet, still, it is Taylor's practice that I signal here, for what is most at stake is given in the practice of art; it is otherwise than a mathesis, a genealogy, an archaeology, or even a possible new thought of a grammatology. If anything, it might be a call for a new inhabitation of all that we might put at stake under the heading of a musics (Chandler 2018).

It is my hope that the reader might recognize a theoretical through line across the whole of this study. Du Bois is seeking to formulate a conception of history for those he would nominalize as African American. Yet, he ultimately seeks to realize this theoretical objective, not by the declaration of a finality but as the formulation of a problem, for thought, or thought as action, or action as always already of the thoughtful. The first stage of his effort, an account of which is given in part I here may be understood as an adjudication or analytical determination of the terms of his own thought on the matter. The second stage, an approach to which is offered in part II here might well be understood as a kind of speculative claim—of his thought as of the pertinence and provenance of his theorization, certainly for those who might be understood as African American, in part by the exemplarity of that form of example, but also, somewhat surreptitiously, as of pertinence and provenance for those who might be understood as persons or peoples committed to the futural efflorescence of all manner of difference amongst humans, in general.

Whereas part I of this study is an effort to dislodge some of the sedimentation that has embedded our understanding of Du Bois's work on a decisive seme, the idea and concept of race, in modern thought. On its submerged face, this seme and engagement of it addresses our very idea and concept of the human and historicity, in general. Thus, I consider part II of this study an elaboration of his work toward a re-inscription of the terms of our understanding of historicity and dispositions toward historical narration. The respective forms of the two parts of this study are thus somewhat distinct. One may be understood as an effort in the patient sifting and working through of layers of conceptual formulation. The other might be understood as a re-inscription of the terms of reference thus rendered available for a certain recognition and theoretical re-interpretation. Although I am hopeful that it may be understood as a reasonably supple approach, in that it is an address of the records of a specific locution given by Du Bois, it is my hope that the reader may find value and pertinence in the very necessity, as I see it, of the diversity of the two forms of annotation offered herein.

VI

It is thus that I offer here some brief considerations of the thought of W. E. B. Du Bois on the human and historicity at the turn to the twentieth century.

Although the text of this study was completed by the end of the last day of the year 2007, at the inception of the direct institutional expression of the massive worldwide calamity in economic and social well-being attendant to the last years of the opening decade of the twenty-first century, these few prefatory paragraphs by which I make reference to the contexts in critical practice that have enabled my own formulation of problem in thought in this study, written almost as a lapidary postscript proposing a retrospective perspective on the work I have attempted in this study, these prefatory paragraphs acquired their shape almost a short generation later, during the last weeks and days of that momentous and fateful year 2020, as we stood again amidst worldwide calamity, which became, for a time, at once catastrophe and disaster. The passages of this text are thus articulated amidst an incipient ongoing shifting, sliding, colliding, collapsing—that is to say, radical reformation—of long held sedimentations of episteme and practical theoretical projection. Yet, too, I hope that the perspective I have

sought to adduce within these prefatory paragraphs along with this book as a whole may be understood also to maintain an abiding and tenacious hope that the rising generations may find buried herein an untimely yet ongoing resonance for their own imagination, both now and in the future, that is to say, in the imagination of another past—through its renewal—as another future, in thought, in all senses of this word.

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Throughout the preparation of this work, the ongoing support of friendship has been fundamental within my own sense of the world, most especially for my sense of hope therein—essential, thus, to this book’s realization. Along with many others, who shall remain unnamed, I wish to thank Scott Michaelson, Peter Cowan, Satoshi Ogihara, Christine Council, Brad Bonneville, Lewis Ricardo Gordon, Kimiyo Murata-Soraci, Ben Barker, and Yasuhisa Kitamura, for their friendship. I am most grateful for the support of Maria Phillips and Franc Nunoo-Quarcoo, which has been perennial over the decades and years. Of the several dozen whom I hold, across the generations, as family, two are *of* each day; thus, my wife and son are, always, the opening of my gratitude, for the gift that is care, for so opened the space by which this discourse could find its way forth.

It is my pleasure to be able to share here my appreciation for Ryan Kendall and to thank Jessica Ryan and Matthew Tauch, along with Lisl Hampton and Leslie Watkins, each of Duke University Press, for their considerate attention to the production of this text as a book. It is my honor and gratitude to acknowledge here the generous editorial guidance and affirmation of Ken Wissoker, throughout, especially for the duration of the final stages of the preparation of this study for publication.

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NOTE ON CITATIONS

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I

While I have taken scholastic reference to the original publication or to the unpublished manuscript of texts by W. E. B. Du Bois, in every case of his writings engaged in this study, with citations noted within the text, where possible or appropriate, I have also without exception consulted the versions of all published texts included in the thirty-seven volumes of the *Complete Published Works of W. E. B. Du Bois* issued from 1973 to 1986 by the Kraus-Thomson Organization and edited and introduced by the late Herbert Aptheker as well as the six volumes of Du Bois's texts published by the University of Massachusetts Press (1973–1985), also edited and introduced by Aptheker, which include three volumes of selected correspondence and three of selections of other texts, including previously unpublished texts and documents. The bibliographical details of those texts edited by Aptheker, if cited herein, are listed in the reference list at the end of this book.

II

The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches is cited herein from the first edition of its original publication (Du Bois 1903c). A full-text version of the second edition, which has no major changes from the first, is available in electronic form through the University of North Carolina's Documenting the American South project, available as an open access online text at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/duboisouls/dubois.html> (Du Bois 1903d). I consider that presentation of the book (based on its second edition, June 1903) an accurate and reliable work of scholarship. The pagination is the same in the first and second editions. In-text citations are given below in parentheses with the relevant page number(s), the chapter number, and the paragraph number(s) within the chapter. For example, the in-text cite (Du Bois 1903c, 213, chap. 11, para. 13) indicates *The Souls*

of *Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, page 213, chapter 11, paragraph 13, according to the pagination of the first edition of the book, issued in 1903.

III

With *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* of 1899, when quoting or referencing specific passages of the text, I cite from its original publication (Du Bois and Eaton 1899).

IV

The early essay by Du Bois that is our main focus of interpretation in this study—"The Conservation of Races"—is always cited by an abbreviated title, CR, the page number in the original publication of the text and paragraph number, with the paragraph enumeration determined according to the original publication (Du Bois 1897a). For example, the in-text cite (CR 5, paras. 1–3) refers to the original publication of "The Conservation of Races" issued in 1897, page 5, paragraphs 1–3. Notably, however, this essay is also included in *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays*, a collection that I prepared in support of the present work as well as additional studies that I have carried out on Du Bois's early writings. As the edited and annotated edition of "The Conservation of Races" in that book includes the paragraph number in the margins of the text, although I give citations to only the original 1897 publication, attentive readers with that collection at hand may find the relevant passage simply by reference to the paragraph number of this essay in the 2015 publication (Du Bois 2015e). That collection includes complete versions of essential early essays by Du Bois as originally published or as extant in his unpublished papers, edited and annotated, with paragraph enumeration throughout, according to contemporary scholarship.

V

Finally, I occasionally refer to material that may be found only among the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers of the Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, housed

in the W. E. B. Du Bois Library (MS 312). (Occasionally, such material is referenced according to the microfilm version of those papers [Du Bois 1980a]). These papers have been digitized under the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries online repository Credo and are now available as open access material at <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/collection/mums312>. Additional bibliographic detail for some notable specific citations from among these papers may be found in the notes or in the reference list at the end of this book. The original papers were compiled and edited by Herbert Aptheker, whereas the microfilm edition was supervised by Robert C. McDonnell.

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