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The Du Boisian Challenge

RETHINKING SOCIOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

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EDITED BY

José Itzigsohn, Ricarda Hammer, and

Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz

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Dedicated to W. E. B. Du Bois
and all Du Boisian sociologists,
past, present, and future

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Acknowledgments

This book is the outcome of a collective journey. It is a journey that began many years ago. For some of us it began during graduate school, as we began to think about how to do sociology in a Du Boisian vein. While we have long been learning from Du Bois and seeking to forge a sociological "road not taken," this volume enabled us to come together to reflect on the methodological lessons and practices we have learned along the way. We did so, however, with heavy hearts, cognizant of the political context in which we live and write. The stakes could not be greater for Du Boisian sociology in these times of genocide, colonial dispossession, fascism, emboldened white supremacy, environmental catastrophe, political repression, and the censorship of the study and teaching of many topics that Du Bois himself inaugurated.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who has contributed their support along the way. Most of all, we would like to thank all of the book's contributors. We asked more of contributors than often is the case for edited volumes. Each has not only shared their intellectual labor but also dedicated their time and effort to provide feedback, suggestions for improvement, and mentorship throughout this process. It was an honor to be in intellectual comradeship with such an amazing and inspiring group of critical Du Boisian sociologists.

This volume owes much to the broader sociological, specifically Du Boisian, community. Over the years, we have benefited immensely from conversations with Aldon Morris, Karida L. Brown, Marcus Hunter, Paget Henry, Zine Magubane, Anthony Bogues, Vilna Bashi, Julian Go, Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, katrina quisumbing king, Ali Meghji, Melissa Weiner,

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At Duke University Press, Elizabeth Ault immediately embraced this book. We are grateful for her guidance and dedication to the Du Boisian sociological project. We also thank Ihsan Taylor, who expertly stewarded this project over the finish line. Two anonymous reviewers closely and carefully read the volume. We are grateful for their valuable comments and suggestions. We also thank Joselen X. Contreras for her bibliographic assistance.

Our hope is that this book will serve as inspiration or tool for others that may want to journey together on this road less traveled, which, as Antonio Machado once reminded, is made by walking.

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INTRODUCTION / José Itzigsohn, Ricarda Hammer, and Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz

Toward a Du Boisian Sociological Methodology: An Invitation

Sociology is living through an epistemological and ethical reckoning. A diverse set of far-reaching proposals invites us to fundamentally rethink the value of sociological knowledge, transform the relationship between scholars and communities, and elaborate alternative, non-Eurocentric decolonial projects (e.g., Bhambra 2007, 2014; Connell 2007; Go 2016; Weiner 2018; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Meghji 2020). At the center of this intellectual uprising is William Edward Burghardt Du Bois.

Although long silenced by the discipline's racist and colonial logics, critical scholars have, for decades, advocated a return to—and recovery of—Du Bois's sociological thought and work (e.g., Rudwick 1974; Dennis 1979; Green and Driver 1978; Rabaka 2010; Winant 2011; Wright 2006; Zuberi 2004; Zuckerman 2004). Of these statements, the most impactful has been Aldon Morris's (2015) *The Scholar Denied*. Morris's book has forced sociology to recognize Du Bois as the founder of empirical US sociology.

Further extending the recuperation of Du Bois's sociology, Itzigsohn and Brown (2020) foreground Du Bois as a social theorist. Du Bois, these authors argue, theorized modernity as racialized modernity and capitalism as racial and colonial capitalism. The history of the modern world, Du Bois maintained, could not be understood without an account of the color line. As he wrote in the opening pages of the prophetic *The Souls of Black Folk*, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea"

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(Du Bois 1903, 15). Unlike most of his white contemporaries, Du Bois theorized the historical, structural, phenomenological, and ideological dimensions of—and the subaltern resistances to—modern colonialism, enslavement, resource and land extraction, exploitative racialized labor regimes, violence, and the imposition of race thinking and white supremacy.

Recent efforts to center Du Bois have thus focused on his empirical and theoretical contributions to sociology. This scholarship has begun to lay the foundations for a contemporary Du Boisian sociology. However, it is our conviction that rethinking sociology in a Du Boisian vein will also require attending to matters of methodology and method. We agree with Conwell and Loughran (2024, 2) that it is due time for "Du Boisian scholars to make a methodological turn."

But what is a methodology? What are methods? Philosopher of science Sandra Harding's provocative essay, "Is There a Feminist Method?," offers a helpful starting point. Methodology, she instructs, refers to "a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed" (Harding 1987, 3). At the interstices of the practical and the normative, research methodologies inform the questions we ask, the way we design our research, and how we understand the relationships between theory and data, as well as between scholarship and society. Far from neutral, methodologies bring to light the politics and ethics of knowledge production in the social sciences. By methods, on the other hand, we mean the concrete techniques and tools researchers use to collect empirical information and produce data, such as participant observation and surveys. Thus, although often conflated, methodologies shape how we employ methods.

The Du Boisian Challenge thus explores and reflects on sociological methodologies and methods. Du Bois's decisions about research design, theory, and data, as well as his ethical and political commitments, serve as significant sources of inspiration. However, the book is not primarily about Du Bois's own methodological stances and the methods he employed. We instead stage a conversation on methodology and method among contemporary Du Boisian sociologists. To this end, we invited several colleagues who work in different sociological subfields and with different methods to share their research perspectives and experiences. These contributors aim, broadly speaking, to develop a sociology that builds upon—and expands—Du Bois's use of social science research for human equality and emancipation.

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Creating such a sociology is a collective project. This book is but one contribution to this effort. We believe that the development of an emancipatory, Du Boisian sociology must abandon the fetishism of the individual scientist and instead embrace a collective practice of deliberation and knowledge formation. We have endeavored to practice this vision in the production of this volume. Although each contributor is the intellectual and creative force behind their chapter, we organized two opportunities for collective learning and dialogue among all involved. The first step was a virtual conversation with the contributors at the beginning of the process, where we, as editors, shared our ideas and aspirations for the book, and the contributors shared their own perspectives. This conversation was further developed in a follow-up in-person workshop, held after we and the contributors had completed our initial drafts. Our time together was generative. It offered us all space to reflect on what a Du Boisian sociological methodology could and should mean, practically, politically, and professionally. This introduction benefited from feedback from the volume's contributors, whom we asked to engage—but not necessarily endorse—the methodological approach proposed below. We have learned a great deal from the questions, modifications, and critiques we received throughout the process. Thus, the book in your hands grew from conversations and encounters between all the contributors—chapter authors and editors alike. The result, we believe, is a more cohesive volume. Still, this is not the final word on methodology and Du Boisian sociology. It is an invitation.

The "Du Boisian Moment"

Du Bois's influence on sociology has never been greater.[1] To be sure, Du Bois was at the center of critical sociologies of race then and always, but his work languished in the margins of the discipline as a whole. This sea change is the culmination of decades of labor by, first and foremost, Black sociologists and scholars in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) who insisted on the centrality of Du Bois to sociology (e.g., Blackwell and Janowitz 1974; Green and Driver 1978; Bracey et al. 1973; Ladner 1998). Most recently, Morris's (2015) *The Scholar Denied* changed our disciplinary conversation, catalyzing multiple events, joint deliberation, and community building around Du Bois's interventions and current Du Boisian scholarship. A new generation of younger scholars has since

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fortified this Du Boisian turn. This profound unsettling of sociology's epistemic architecture also coincided with a postcolonial turn, making visible not only sociology's whiteness but also its rootedness in colonial ways of viewing the world (Go 2016; Magubane 2016; Meghji et al. 2024).

Most of the knowledge produced during what Aldon Morris has on numerous occasions labeled the Du Boisian moment follows one of three threads. The first of these has sought to recuperate Du Bois's thought as an exercise in intellectual reparations. As Marcus Hunter (2016, 1383) defined the concept, intellectual reparations refer to "the systematic corrective repair and redress of the epistemological, ontological, and pedagogical status quo through the purposeful inclusion of previously denied minoritized scholars and their contributions to knowledge production." Demonstrating that Du Bois was an unrecognized founder of the discipline and specific subfields, contributors to this thread ensure that he is no longer a scholar denied.

In *Against Epistemic Apartheid*, Rabaka (2010) detailed how Du Bois contributed to numerous subfields in sociology beyond race, including religion, education, and gender. Some works have explored his insights about and relevance for other domains, such as historical sociology (Hammer and Itzigsohn 2025; Itzigsohn 2013; Martin 2016), public sociology (Morris and Ghaziani 2005), sociology of crime and deviance (Rocha Beardall et al. 2024; Werth 2024), sociological theory (Burawoy 2021, 2022; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Morris et al. 2021), political sociology (de Leon and Rodríguez-Muñiz 2024; Hammer 2026), the sociology of the future (Davidson 2021), rural sociology (Jakubek and Wood 2018), sociological pedagogy (Alicea 2024; Blume Oeur 2024), and environmental sociology (Bhardwaj 2023; Carrera 2023). In a series of works, Wright (2016, 2020) has explored how Du Bois and his Atlanta colleagues confronted "Jim Crow sociology." Together, such works have positioned Du Bois at the center of the discipline's intellectual history.

Although far from complete, this transformation is increasingly evident. Take, for example, the recent volume *The New Pragmatist Sociology* (Gross et al. 2022). Unlike earlier statements on pragmatist sociology (e.g., Joas 1993), this work positioned Du Bois as a significant figure. As stated in the book's introduction, "the classical sociologist most closely studied by the current generation of graduate students—W. E. B. Du Bois—was both a contributor to pragmatist theories of action and education and an engaged and careful critic of pragmatist philosophy" (Reed et al. 2022,

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3; see also Brown and White 2022). Alongside this centering of Du Bois has been growing attention to some of his limitations, such as his silences on settler colonialism and Indigenous genocide (Edwards 2026; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Pulido and De Lara 2018) and his elitist and gendered approaches to research (Green 2025; Hartman 2019; James 1996, 2014; Vásquez 2024).

The above scholarship has, however, not only revived and reassessed Du Bois in sociology. It has also reminded us that, as remarkable as he was, Du Bois was no lone genius. Instead, he was part of a broader US Black intellectual tradition. Of particular importance here are HBCUs. Indeed, as Hudgins (1994, 887) noted, Du Bois and other "early black pioneers in sociology made most of their professional contributions while employed at HBCUs." Du Bois, for instance, drew on existing knowledge and infrastructures to launch his Atlanta University Studies (Wright 2024). Nurtured in HBCUs and other Black intellectual spaces, Du Bois and other Black sociologists built a "parallel world" of scholarship, in short, Black sociology (Wright 2024; Meghji 2024a).

The second thread of new Du Boisian scholarship is indebted to the first, but its aim is different. The goal is not to recover or recuperate Du Bois. It is to enlist him for empirical, analytic, or theoretical purposes in current research (e.g., Benjamin 2017; Rawls and Duck 2020; Clair 2021; Thomas 2021; Pérez 2022). Like scholarship in the first thread, scholarship in the second has included but gone beyond the traditional emphasis on Du Bois's sociology of race and urban sociology. For instance, Clark, Auerbach, and Zhang's (2018) historical sociological account of the nineteenth-century trade in guano, a highly sought-after fertilizer, drew on what they described as the "Du Bois nexus." Their article found valuable resources in Du Bois's work for the analysis of the "relationship between intersectionality, political economy, and environmental justice" (56). With a similar attentiveness to mechanisms of exploitation, Hammer and Park (2021) followed Du Bois in breaking with methodologically nationalist analyses of digital economies and artificial intelligence developments. Du Bois, they contended, offers a means to both globalize and historicize the social inequalities that these developments not only produce but also rest upon. His writings on the global color line and capitalism help reveal "how these digital products get constituted, how exploitation is hidden, and why they keep in place colonial power relationships" (Hammer and Park 2021, 226). A historicizing thrust also animated Hatch's (2020) reflection on the relationship between "post-truth"

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politics and anti-Black racism. In this case, Hatch returned to Du Bois's essay on propaganda in the concluding chapter of *Black Reconstruction in America* (Du Bois [1935] 2017). He argued that Du Bois's dual account of propaganda—as a means to both obscure truth and contest ignorance—can better equip scholars in science studies and the sociology of science to confront the long-standing and ongoing occlusion of racism and anti-Blackness. Grundy (2021), in turn, employed Du Bois's concept of the veil to unpack racialized rape cultures. In a study of Morehouse College, Grundy showed how Black men, aware of their position beyond the veil, confronted the white gaze by adjusting their projection of masculinity. Their attempt to upend the veil often sustained gender dominance by highlighting not the cost of rape, but the cost of rape reporting for Black masculinity.

At other moments, Du Bois serves as an inspiration, an interlocutor, more than a source of empirical insights. In *Chocolate Cities*, Hunter and Robinson (2018) contemplate, among other prominent Black intellectuals, activists, and cultural workers, Du Bois's self-imposed exile from the United States in the waning years of his life. His departure from the United States illustrates one of *Chocolate Cities*' central arguments: The South is not merely a region. "Perhaps the South is the world for Black people as long as anti-Blackness permeates global politics" (Hunter and Robinson 2018, 183). In Karida Brown's *Gone Home*, Du Bois not only offers analytic material to assist her study of the Black Appalachian diaspora but also inspiration to meditate on the "continual tug-of-war between struggle and striving" (2018, 2) that has characterized African American life and community.

The third thread is deeply in conversation with the other two. However, its primary objective is neither to give Du Bois his intellectual due nor to apply his insights to advance specific substantive or theoretical arguments. Instead, works in this thread explicitly seek to articulate a Du Boisian research perspective or orientation. We make this shift—from Du Bois to Du Boisian—in the present volume as well. A vital resource here is Itzigsohn and Brown's (2020) manifesto for a "Du Boisian sociology," to which we return below. As we might expect, efforts to build such a sociology often emphasize Du Bois's ontological focus on racialized modernity (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020). Race and racial domination are not secondary or epiphenomenal features of social life, nor can we understand the modern world without the structuring power of the global color line (Itzigsohn 2025). However, beyond this anchor point, scholars have

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foregrounded different aspects of Du Bois's expansive intellectual production to revise old lines of inquiry and stimulate new ones. In the process, they—and we—seek to reorient a set of sociological subfields.

Let us briefly highlight some examples. Conwell (2016), for example, noted that the sociology of education has largely ignored Du Bois. In seeking to outline a Du Boisian sociology of education, Conwell argued that Du Bois articulated a "micro-macro" framework for integrating the structural and interactional dynamics that inhibit Black educational achievement. Further, he contends that this framework offers crucial contextualization for "research findings on issues such as microaggressions, racialized tracking, racial inequalities in parent involvement in schooling, and discriminatory school cultures within a broader analytical context" by addressing the impact of "long-standing political economic inequalities and related discourses of Black inferiority" (Conwell 2016, 37). Battle and Serrano (2022) focused their study on the family. For these scholars, a "Du Boisian paradigm" can provide family sciences with a social justice orientation. Approaching families from this perspective transforms the field's governing ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions. For example, a Du Boisian approach reconsiders the standards and strict boundaries that define what constitutes "legitimate scientific inquiry" (Battle and Serrano 2022, 359). This approach also introduces ethically challenging phenomenological questions that distinguish it from both critical and participatory approaches to research.

Writing on the sociology of religion, Mayrl (2023) developed a Du Boisian research agenda for the white church. Recent scholarship on Du Bois's work, he noted, has had little to say about Du Bois's thoughts on religion, and when it does, it has confined its attention to Du Bois's analyses of the Black church. But just as Du Bois wrote both *The Souls of Black Folk* and "The Souls of White Folk" ([1920] 1999) his sociology of religion was attentive to the "white church." Blending the first and second threads, Mayrl identified six mechanisms that, according to Du Bois, reproduce white supremacy: legitimation, revisionism, inaction, segregation, missionary work, and charitable giving. Yet the essay is not merely an exercise of recovery; Mayrl invites readers to embrace a "Du Boisian framework." In line with other programmatic statements, he stressed, among other features, its utility for "historicizing and globalizing a conversation about white religion" (Mayrl 2023, 33). Rocha Beardall and colleagues (2024, 336) proposed a "mended windows" urban sociology that centers power relationships that "manufacture social, racial,

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and economic disadvantages." Building on Du Bois, they begin with the needs of the most marginalized and focus on "institutionalizing local resources to meet these needs." Hammer and Itzigsohn (2025) proposed a revision of the practice of historical sociology based on Du Bois's epistemology and methodology. They argued that taking Du Bois seriously implies rethinking our modes of explanation, our comparative method, and the way we relate to archives. In these and other works, sociologists have synthesized Du Bois's corpus and identified questions, orientations, and sensibilities that can help reimagine and reanimate critical research agendas (see also Abbott 2023; Yazdiha 2021). In doing so, such work has challenged long-standing "ontological myopias" in sociological knowledge (Rodríguez-Muñiz 2015).

In contributing to the third thread, this volume goes beyond reorienting specific sociological subfields to tackle a more fundamental question. We ask: What are the methodological underpinnings and contributions of Du Boisian sociology? Answering—or beginning to answer—this question, we contend, is vital for this intellectual project. Deepening and expanding Du Boisian sociology demands it. Indeed, we have arrived at a moment where we could build a different sociology, one that takes the path not taken in Du Bois's time.

The Du Boisian moment urges us to engage larger methodological questions of knowledge production: How can we produce antiracist and anticolonial knowledge in a racist and colonial world? How can we engage in a project of knowing the social world but place it in the service of oppressed communities? How can we ensure that we do not replicate the racial and colonial orders between researchers and the researched?

As we approach these questions, we draw inspiration, once more, from Du Bois, who grappled with them throughout his long life. As we read him, he never abandoned his sociology. Instead, he pursued it in ways that went against the reigning epistemologies and methodologies of an ever-changing racist and colonial world. Yet Du Bois also thought there was something valuable about sociology and refused to settle for the sociological status quo. We agree wholeheartedly. Another sociology is possible. We hope this book will be part of an ongoing collective process to transform sociology's methodological sensibilities and practices. To begin this task, we must first confront—as Du Bois did—the racialized and colonial politics of knowledge production in the social sciences, past and present.

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Knowledge Production in a Colonial and Racialized World

Sociology and the social sciences, more generally, originated in the context of—and to some extent as vehicles for—racism and colonialism (see Bhambra 2014; Connell 1997; Go 2016; Magubane 2016; Meghji 2020). These origins have shaped and continue to shape sociological ways of knowing the world. Following Aníbal Quijano and Sylvia Wynter, we can trace these logics back to 1492, when European intellectuals began to produce colonial knowledge about the world, thereby claiming their subject status in the production of history, knowledge, and science.[2]

The political economy of colonialism and enslavement kindled and sustained the social scientific enterprise (Drayton 2000; Ferdinand 2022; Steinmetz 2023). Protosociologists dispatched to the colonies rendered newly conquered peoples and territories legible, resulting in a wealth of information and data extracted from the colonies and concentrated in Europe (Latour 1987; Steinmetz 2023). Far from innocent, sociology was central to the establishment, maintenance, and reproduction of racial colonial systems. As Zine Magubane (2016) and others have reminded us, the first two monographs in the United States with *sociology* in the title were defenses of chattel slavery—George Fitzhugh's (1854) *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* and Henry Hughes's (1854) *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical*. Hughes went on after the book's publication to become a Mississippi state senator, and he advocated for reintroducing the transatlantic slave trade. Although most sociologists were not apologists for enslavement or involved in colonial rule, they inevitably wrote from a specific social position (Go 2020). The sociologists who have been canonized were located within the metropoles of empires, a social context that shaped their ideas and influenced the questions they asked, the problems they perceived, and the worldviews they brought to bear in their analyses (Connell 1997; Chakrabarty 2009; Go 2016; Magubane 2016).

A powerful example of this reality is the Chicago School of Sociology's approach to urban life. Rather than explain the sources of racial inequalities in settler colonialism and Indigenous genocide, colonization and enslavement, segregation and racial and colonial capitalism, Robert Park and others often saw the poor, racialized minorities, or immigrants as "social problems" (McKee 1993; Morris 2015; Myers 2022). This approach ushered in a sociology that measured the degree of convergence or divergence

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between migrants, the impoverished, or nonwhite others, and the standards, norms, and habits of the (white) middle class. Obsessed with deviance and disorder, the Chicago School began with debates over the capacity of such populations to assimilate into a white social order (Jung 2009; Montalva Barba 2023).

Similarly, English and French sociology came to prominence through its role in tackling colonial social problems, including labor migration, detribalization, and urbanization in the twentieth century (Steinmetz 2023; Fassin and Steinmetz 2023). Sociologists involved in studying colonized peoples often imported racist frameworks to constitute the "problem of immigration" in European metropoles (Bailkin 2012). Seeking to understand the habits and norms of "the other" in urban centers, sociologists throughout the Global North hardened the line between those who belong and those who need to assimilate (and those that presumably cannot assimilate), all the while erasing the history of colonial rule or the fact that colonial subjects had long been part of these imperial formations (Carby 2021; Gilroy 1993; Hall 2017; Itzigsohn 2023). Sociological "experts" raised alarms about the Black presence in Britain as a novel and surprising ascendence, even though many of the same researchers had spent years studying Britain's colonial others. "The black presence" was not, in fact, new to them at all (Bailkin 2012, 30). What was new, rather, was the upending of the spatial logics of empire. It was the presence of populations racialized as nonwhite in metropolitan Europe that needed solving (Coenders 2024; Hall 2017).

Leading white US and European sociologists articulated racialized civilizational standards while at the same time constructing others as unable to achieve those standards. Central to this conception were studies that produced knowledge of gender and sexuality. With a Victorian family model in mind, sociologists investigated the abrogation of gendered norms, concluding that women in the colonies or those of racially subordinated groups in the metropole needed to be taught to fill their proper roles in the household (Hall 2002; Stoler 1995). Deviant female sexuality was of primary concern. Sociologists constructed the figure of the prostitute as dangerous and counter to social progress (Hartman 2019; Mitra 2020). Sociologists and anthropologists queried the ability of the newly freed to live up to the Western standards of freedom, asking whether they would be able to form responsible families in the image of the European bourgeois family and thus become worthy of citizenship rights (Cooper and Stoler 1997; Hammer 2020; Hammer 2026; Hartman 1997). In this

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way, dominant and imperial forms of sociological knowledge helped to enshrine a norm against which the world's others were to be assessed.

Though white social scientists shaped and were shaped by the world in lasting ways, many embraced the idea that social scientists could transcend their immediate social contexts and know the world as an "objective" outside observer. Following this Enlightenment model of knowledge production, the social scientist, it was assumed and articulated, could rise above his immediate context and know the world "from nowhere," thus making possible objective, abstract claims about reality (Haraway 1988, 581). Not everyone could attain this ability to view the world "objectively." Colonial logics informed the distinction between legitimate producers of knowledge and those who were not. Indeed, as Go (2020) explains, it was white men in the heartland of metropoles who were seen as possessing the capacity to reason and research, while women, the colonized, and the racially marginalized were understood as and reduced to objects of knowledge production. Deemed unable to transcend their subjective experiences, the objects of research—and their experiences, worldviews, and lifeworlds—became mere data. All the while, Western observers established themselves as capable of theorizing the world, transcending their positionalities, and making supposedly objective claims about the social world (Al-Hardan 2018; Go 2020; Meghji 2020; Quijano 2000; Said 1978).

The discipline of sociology has long failed to reflect on its own colonial history. Instead, Western sociologists led us to pursue a ruse of knowledge production that purports to be objective and abstracted from the social context in which it arose. Undoubtedly, the history of dominant forms of sociology is marked by a double deceit. At once, sociologists were deeply influenced by and shaped the world around them, while also seemingly speaking without a positionality. Thankfully, reflections on sociology's history, erasures, and knowledge politics (Bhambra 2014; Connell 1997; Go 2016; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Morris 2015; Sabbagh-Khoury 2022) have uncovered alternative paths, revealing thinkers and researchers who have used—often in creative and critical ways—the tools of the social sciences to challenge colonial ways of knowing. Against denied, erased, and silenced disciplinary histories, we revisit a counterstory that begins fundamentally with W. E. B. Du Bois.

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Knowing the World to Change the World

Du Bois rejected the Western model of the detached scientist. Instead, his work provides us with an example of how ethical and political commitments, born out of one's lived experience, can be the starting point for sociological questions and investigations. His positionality as a Black man in the United States—and indeed, in the world at large—encouraged reflection on the structures of racialized oppression. While the white world denied the humanity of Black people, Du Bois knew his own humanity. He also looked back at the white world and saw the operation of racism, anti-Blackness, and power.

Du Bois's thinking must be placed in the context of a larger conversation of marginalized, particularly Black, writers who experienced life in a white, patriarchal, colonial world, while at the same time being ostracized from it. Cedric Robinson (2021) highlighted that the Black Radical Tradition developed from the experience of enslavement and colonialism and in resistance to it. Robinson notes how scholars such as Du Bois leveraged this historical experience to produce analyses of racial and colonial oppression and, in so doing, created an archive of struggle.

Many others, alongside Du Bois, have theorized how coming up against power structures can become the beginning for knowing the world. As Stuart Hall (2021, 375) famously recounted, C. L. R. James concluded that he was "in, but not of, Europe." James's location allowed him to note the historical absence of the Haitian Revolution in Marxist analyses and to then, in turn, situate Haiti's revolutionary history as a world-historical event (James, 1938). Hall (2017) built a diasporic subjectivity in a similar vein, explaining how, despite having lived in England for over fifty years, he would never be English yet was able to know the English better than they knew themselves. Patricia Hill Collins (1986) theorized the position of the "outsider within" as a starting point for a knowledge production that gave Black women the capacity to critically see racism and patriarchy because they had to traverse multiple, stratified worlds. A similar insight animates feminist standpoint theory (Collins 1990; Harding 1993; Hartsock 2004; Smith 2004), queer theory (Ahmed 2006), and Chicana and women of color theorizing "in the flesh" (Anzaldúa 1987; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2022).

Given the diverse structures of oppression and resulting distinct forms of marginalization, no single experience or positionality provides a comprehensive view of how the world works. There are many forms of oppressive relations in the margins, including patriarchal, heteronormative,

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colorist, and class forms of exclusion. As a result, knowledge and practices at the margins may also be oppressive and reproduce the existing order. Thus, understanding and truth emerge from an ongoing dialogue among different viewpoints and experiences arising from variously marginalized and colonized populations.

Du Bois sought to counter the dominant narratives of US and European social scientists and, in doing so, brought about different ways of understanding the world. He was clear that the European social sciences served racial domination and colonialism. For this reason, he oriented a series of his writings, such as *Black Folk Then and Now* ([1939] 2007) and *The World and Africa* ([1947] 2014), to countering Western social science narratives about Africa and the African diaspora. Perhaps most influentially, his magnum opus, *Black Reconstruction in America* (Du Bois [1935] 2017), challenged the historiography of the Civil War and Reconstruction period.[3]

If colonial and racist projects had located "History" within Europe, while confining the rest of the world to its waiting room (Chakrabarty 2009), *Black Reconstruction* conceived the enslaved and later freed people as world-historical actors. Du Bois showed, first, that enslaved people carried out a general strike to gain their freedom, ultimately securing a Northern victory in the US Civil War. He then told the story of Reconstruction, as he explained, "as though Negroes were ordinary human beings" (Du Bois [1935] 2017, preface). Reconstruction was not a story that pivoted on the nature or capacities of freed persons. Instead, it was a story of institutions, the state, and capitalism, and of movements. In recuperating the thought and practice of freed people, Du Bois noted that it contained an opportunity for a more expansive "abolition democracy." Its denial, Du Bois maintained, became a failure for US democracy as a whole. The purpose of Du Bois's sociological enterprise in portraying this was to read the archive differently to produce new political openings—in this case, for lost opportunities and the potential for a better social and political order.

For Du Bois, the social sciences could provide concrete tools for intellectual and political struggle. He emphasized the importance of empirical research to understand the possibilities of human agency. He did not study the workings of the color line and racial and colonial capitalism just for the sake of producing theory; instead, he provided a road map for how to link sociological knowledge to antiracist and anticolonial practice in concrete terms. The purpose of this kind of sociological knowledge was

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to think against racist and colonial categories of the world and recognize colonized people as subjects and authors of their own history.

We can find this orientation to the world in a set of anticolonial writers who complement Du Bois's interventions. Frantz Fanon, born in the French colony of Martinique in 1925, too developed key insights upon encountering racism in the metropole. He insisted knowledge production had to move beyond European categories. As he asserted at the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*, "We must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man" (Fanon 1963, 316). If colonialism and racism had located the center of thought within European metropoles, the experience of colonization provided a window to know not just their own situation, but also the making of the world at large. Stuart Hall (2018) also suggested that the purpose behind knowledge production could simply be to help people make sense of the world and take seriously the life lessons they were already experiencing. The wager here is that a more truthful history—one that confronts the colonial imagination—would open new political possibilities. For Hall, the point was to consistently intervene in public debate, for example, in countering Britain's colonial denial and reminding metropolitan populations that postcolonial immigrants had always been "the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea" (Hall 2018, 70).

Like Fanon, Hall, and others, Du Bois drew on his own experiences and reflections to fuel a different, more politically committed sociology.

Du Bois's Evolving Praxis

Throughout his life, Du Bois maintained a commitment to understanding the world and developing empirical research strategies that would serve the emancipation of racialized and colonized people. Du Bois's scholarship drew from his activism, and his activism relied on his scholarly knowledge. His use of research to advocate for the emancipation of Black people and colonized peoples, his commitment to Pan-Africanism, and his efforts to document the histories and predicaments of the African diaspora remained constant throughout his career. Yet the way he thought about these questions changed.[4]

Du Bois started his career as a liberal pragmatist who used social scientific research to discredit racial prejudice and improve the conditions of Black people in the United States. During this period, he believed that

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the Black community's "talented tenth"—its educated and organized elite class—was responsible for uplifting the masses. He also hoped that his urban and community sociological research program, which started during his stay at the University of Pennsylvania in 1896 and developed during the years he taught at Atlanta University (1897–1910), would convince white elites to enact policies that would confront the legacies of enslavement and dismantle racist barriers to social, political, and economic integration.

By the time Du Bois left Atlanta in 1910, he had come to the conclusion that scientific evidence would not sway the minds of the white power elite. As he recalled, "There was no such definite demand for scientific work of the sort I was doing" (Du Bois [1940] 2014, 34). Concerted political action was needed. He left Atlanta University because he was struggling to obtain funding for his research program—something he attributed to his public conflict with Booker T. Washington—and moved more fully into organizing and activism for civil and political rights. He joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), where he edited its magazine, *The Crisis*.[5] During these years, it became increasingly clear to Du Bois that knowledge production was not confined to universities, as social movements, community organizations, and public intellectuals also produce critical knowledge (Meghji 2024b).

Du Bois underwent another transformation in the 1930s. He left the NAACP in 1934, disillusioned with the practical limits of integration. He still believed that integration was the long-term objective, but until that became possible, he held that the Black community needed to develop its own autonomous economic institutions. That year, he returned to Atlanta University, where he taught until 1944, when he was retired by the university. There he attempted to revive his empirical research program, this time focusing on addressing the economic challenges facing the Black community (Du Bois 1968; Itzigsohn and Brown 2020). During his second period at Atlanta University, he began to creatively incorporate some elements from the writings of Karl Marx, as seen in *Black Reconstruction in America*, his key work of this period.

Turning his focus to political economy, Du Bois's analysis at this stage was influenced by Marxism but transcended its analytical framework by positioning the color line as a structuring force in capitalism (Itzigsohn 2024; Morris 2025). He argued that capitalism emerged through the trade of enslaved people and Europe's colonial expansion, with racial and colonial difference as intrinsic components of its historical development.

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Further, Du Bois argued that while it was initially a justification for the racialized exploitation of labor, the color line evolved into a defining framework for identity, politics, and broader systems of oppression and exploitation.

For Du Bois, the emancipation of humanity was inseparable from the emancipation of labor, though not in conventionally Marxist terms. While white workers experienced oppression, their circumstances differed from those of workers of color. White workers retained a faint possibility of equality based on their racial identity—an opportunity entirely denied to Black and colonized workers. The white working class, he argued, actively embraced racial distinctions, driven partly by economic competition but more fundamentally by what he called the "public and psychological wage" of whiteness (Du Bois [1935] 2017, 700). Rather than centering the proletariat writ large, Du Bois focused on the majority of racialized and colonized workers, who were overexploited and often subjected to coercive labor. He made clear that capitalism—the specific forms it took across different times and places—was fundamentally structured by colonialism and the global color line. Going forward, he began to develop the radical anticolonialist position that would define his thought and activism for the latter part of his life (Danns and Henry 2024). In 1947, Du Bois published *The World and Africa*, perhaps his strongest and most sustained analysis of how the global racial color line and colonialism have structured modernity. His Pan-African positions had been a constant in his life, but they reflected an evolution of his views. He once believed that the Black diaspora would uplift the peoples of the African continent, as the diaspora had received a Western education (Chandler 2014). By the end of his life, he recognized the central role of African anticolonial movements in leading the African diaspora (Magubane 2024).

In the final years of his life, Du Bois became deeply engaged in anticolonial and Pan-African research, politics, and activism, as well as opposition to nuclear weapons. He visited the Eastern Bloc and China, and he wrote positively about communism, although he never became dogmatic when considering the means to build a desirable future for Africa. He advocated for Pan-African socialism, which he understood as combining elements of central planning, welfare states, and African communal political traditions. In 1951, at the height of McCarthyism, he faced indictment as an agent of a foreign power, and although the case was dismissed, he faced ostracism from mainstream Black civil rights organizations. This shunning caused him profound pain as—for all the political differences—he

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saw this group as his peers (Du Bois 1968). He left for Ghana in 1961, at the invitation of Ghana's President Kwame Nkrumah, to direct the writing of an encyclopedia of the African diaspora, one of his long-standing ambitions (Du Bois 1968).

Throughout it all, Du Bois's theorization and practice of the social and historical sciences were dedicated to the freedom of Black people and other racialized and colonized peoples. For this purpose, he used all the means at his disposal, including political organization, scientific research, literature, theater, and poetry. His positions evolved as the practice of antiracism led his quest for knowledge, and as the knowledge he acquired informed his antiracist and anticolonial practice. At the end of his life, Du Bois was an anticolonial scholar and thinker, but one who never abandoned his commitment to empirical scientific social science research.

Toward a Du Boisian Sociological Methodology

A contemporary Du Boisian methodology builds upon the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, while adapting and expanding it for the present. As we elaborate in the next section, it also acknowledges Du Bois's blind spots—of which there were many—by addressing issues to which he devoted little attention or that were not central in his historical context. At the same time, it incorporates insights from other critical traditions. The Du Boisian methodology we propose here rests on two premises. The first is analytical: Racism and colonialism must be understood as constitutive elements of both capitalism and modernity. The second is epistemological, grounded in Du Bois's concept of "second sight" (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020).

Concerning the first premise, the argument is that racism and colonialism are not external to capitalism and modernity but integral to them. They permeated economic and political structures, shaped social relations, and informed dominant forms of knowledge and culture. By *modernity*, we mean the historical formation that emerged from the European conquest of the Americas and the rise of the Atlantic world system. This world was organized through dispossession, racialization, and coerced labor, which together structured economic institutions, political authority, and cultural production. Although the specific forms of these patterns have shifted over time, we continue to live in a world fundamentally shaped by racism and colonialism. In this sense, capitalism and modernity cannot be

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understood apart from the colonial project and the racial hierarchies it produced; they are historically and structurally tethered.

The second premise, epistemological in nature, draws on Du Bois's idea of "second sight." Our lived experience—our positionality vis-à-vis the color line—shapes how we perceive and interpret the world. As previously noted, Western social sciences have historically valorized the scholar's detachment from their social position. Du Bois, however, articulated a different practice, one that took lived experience as a starting point for analysis and theoretical elaboration. *Dusk of Dawn* illustrates how lived experience functions as a foundation for sociological analysis, showing that people—including scholars—think and interpret the world from their specific social locations (Du Bois [1940] 2014).

This fact does not mean that all individuals who share a social position perceive reality in the same way. Rather, positionality generates shared experiences that may make it easier—or more difficult—for certain groups to discern particular aspects of social life. For instance, specifically, those who experience the color line and colonialism are more likely to recognize and critique these phenomena. Yet these shared experiences can give rise to a wide range of responses, as similarly situated people may come to interpret and analyze their conditions differently and, at times, even stand in contradiction (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020). Furthermore, people from privileged backgrounds can, under certain conditions, move beyond their positionality. Du Bois's biography of John Brown illustrates how he was able to see beyond the veil, which led him to rebel against enslavement. To do so, he had to transcend the rationalizations of whiteness (Du Bois 2015).

From these two premises arises the central task of contemporary Du Boisian sociology: to analyze the diverse historical and geographical manifestations of racialized modernity, tracing how its forms have been produced, reproduced, and transformed across time and space. This mandate, however, rests on four methodological pillars, which Itzigsohn and Brown (2020) identified, and upon which we expand. The pillars are historicity, conjunctural explanation, relationality, and phenomenology.[6]

The first methodological pillar—historicity—refers to the practice of sociology as a historical social science. Rather than treating history as a field to which generalizable sociological concepts or ideal types can be applied, as Max Weber and Robert Park suggested, we follow Du Bois in rooting sociological analysis in history, recognizing the historicity of both social life and sociological knowledge. This approach implies that

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sociological analysis cannot be confined to the present. Researchers must investigate the historical underpinnings of the phenomena under study and develop historically specific explanations and theories.

Du Bois consistently modeled this methodological commitment in his own work. In his article "The Study of the Negro Problems" (Du Bois 1898b), he rejects the tendency to focus narrowly on the contemporary realities of the US Black community. This habit led commentators to blame the population for its so-called problems. Instead, Du Bois insisted that understanding Black life at the turn of the century required a much longer historical perspective. As he writes, "One cannot study the Negro in freedom and come to general conclusions about his destiny without knowing his history in slavery" (Du Bois 1898b, 12). *Black Reconstruction in America* offers another illustration of the same methodological orientation. In analyzing the class structure of American racial capitalism in the US South, Du Bois turns to the specific historical actors present at that moment: the Black worker, the white worker, and the planter. His analysis of Reconstruction and its collapse further emphasizes the agency of these actors within specific historical contexts.

The second methodological pillar—conjunctural explanation—involves focusing the analysis on the specific political, cultural, ideological, and economic forces that shape the possibilities and constraints of agency in particular places and times. Unlike approaches that seek generalizable rules from the outset, a Du Boisian methodology begins with the study of particular conjunctures, attending to the contingent ways in which actors and structures interact in specific settings. This methodology emphasizes interpretive analyses of historical change. When causal analysis is undertaken, it focuses on complex, multicausal explanations that examine the interaction among social structures, cultural constructions, and purposive agency—processes that may or may not recur across historical settings (Decoteau 2018; Hammer and Itzigsohn 2025).

Du Bois articulated this orientation in "Sociology Hesitant." There, he argued that sociology ought to "frankly state the Hypothesis of Law and the assumption of Chance and seek to determine by study and measurement the limits of each" (Du Bois 2015, 276), further adding that "behind chance we place free human wills capable of undetermined choices" (277). This formulation highlights his rejection of deterministic accounts and his emphasis on contingency, complexity, and agency in historical processes. Du Bois's analysis of the demise of Reconstruction is again illustrative of this pillar: Outcomes were not predetermined, and

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chance was present throughout the historical process. He demonstrates that racial and class structures and relations are always the product of historical contingencies that must be carefully considered.

From this perspective, every historical case must be analyzed in terms of its particular combination of structural constraints, cultural constructions, and human agency—in short, through the interplay of law and chance in specific historical processes. This does not mean that a Du Boisian methodology avoids generalization. Rather, generalizations arise only after acknowledging the specificity of historical conjunctures and are developed through careful comparisons that identify what can, and what cannot, be generalized.

The third methodological pillar of a Du Boisian methodology, implicit in the preceding, is relationality. Du Bois was a deeply relational thinker. From his earliest works to his last, he remained attentive to the concrete historical, structural, interactional, and ideological relations that organized social and political life. As Weheliye (2015, 24) notes in his analysis of Du Bois's early works and use of diagrams, "Du Bois interrogated systematically the historical genesis of the Negro while not losing sight of the multiple ways in which this category stood in relation to other contemporary racial groups (Southern white or recent European immigrants, e.g.) and social structures." Yet, as we have emphasized above, Du Bois did not confine relations to his immediate communal, municipal, regional, or national contexts. He consistently recognized and analyzed relations that exceeded the boundaries of the nation-state (quisumbing king 2019).

A Du Boisian methodology thus never treats the local as an autonomous unit of analysis. It seeks to understand historical formations and social actions in their specificity, but always in relation to the wider, often global processes of racial and colonial capitalism. For instance, *Black Reconstruction in America* examines the history and ultimate defeat of Reconstruction in painstaking detail, accounting for the political context of individual states, while never losing sight of how this historical moment was embedded in the global color line and localized manifestations of racial capitalism.

Importantly, what counts as the local and the global is not given in advance. These categories must be defined in light of our theoretical understanding of a historical moment and the particular characteristics of the processes or institutions under study. In this way, a Du Boisian sociological methodology avoids what Go and Lawson (2017) have referred to as the

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traps of methodological nationalism, substantialist ontologies, and analytical bifurcations.

The fourth methodological pillar is phenomenology. As *The Souls of Black Folk* famously states, Du Bois ([1903] 2007) anchored this pillar on the question: "How does it feel to be a problem?" For Du Bois, this was not a narrowly psychological inquiry but a profoundly sociological one. From this question emerges the analysis of double consciousness and racialized subjectivities, first articulated in *Souls* and further developed in *Dusk of Dawn* (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015, 2020). In the latter book, aptly subtitled *An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, Du Bois relied on his lived experience to analyze the structures and forms of racial power, the complicity of science with racism and colonialism, the different forms of antiracist movements, and possible ways of building an emancipatory social science.[7] In short, Du Bois drew, with depth and complexity, on his own experiences as a point of departure—a provocation—for sociological analysis. The distinctiveness of Du Bois's phenomenology thus lies in its ability to bridge the analysis of lived experience with the examination of the broader social relations and structures of racial and colonial capitalism at both local and global levels.

Importantly, Du Bois's phenomenological pillar did not confine itself to the oppressed and colonized. Ever relational, his sociology also scrutinized the subjectivity of the dominant. He analyzed white subjectivity as shaped by the workings of the veil, which obscures the humanity and experiences of Black people and other colonized populations. Du Bois (1909) began this line of inquiry in his biography of the revolutionary abolitionist John Brown. He later extended it to the naturalized conceits and mythologies of whiteness, elaborated in *Darkwater* (Du Bois [1920] 1999), in the analysis of the psychological wage of whiteness in *Black Reconstruction*, and in *Dusk of Dawn*, where he inverted Plato's allegory of the cave to explain how whites do not see—and refuse to see—the humanity of Black people. This line of analysis also appears in *The World and Africa*, through his exploration of the subjectivity of the colonizer (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020).

Du Bois developed and practiced these four methodological pillars throughout his life as a thinker, researcher, and writer. They shaped the questions he posed and the ways he carried out his investigations. Each was indispensable to his sociology, a sociology that, like the scholar himself, was long denied. Today, these pillars provide a robust and generative alternative to dominant modes of sociological inquiry. Taken together,

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they offer a foundation for a Du Boisian methodology that engages the social world through the lens of racialized modernity.

Challenges, Limitations, and Opportunities for a Du Boisian Sociological Methodology

Du Bois left later generations with a wealth of methodological sensibilities and resources. Yet he developed his methodological innovations in a particular historical and intellectual context, one that is, to some extent, intellectually and politically distinct from our own. Today, his work has been taken up in a vast number of fields, each homing in on different aspects of his corpus. As a result, alongside a sociological Du Bois, there is a historian Du Bois, a humanities Du Bois, an American studies Du Bois, and a political theory Du Bois. But most centrally, there is a Black studies Du Bois—or, indeed, multiple Black studies Du Boises.

Our contemporary Du Boisian sociology benefits from these many interdisciplinary engagements and elaborations. Most importantly, the recent sociological return to Du Bois is indebted to the arduous intellectual labor of scholars in Black studies (e.g., Bogues 2015; Chandler 2023; Hartman 2019; Horne 1986; James 1996; Marable 2015; Myers 2022; Stewart 1984; Wynter 2006). Black studies has long centered Du Bois in its conception of the modern world and has, based on his works and those of many other Black intellectuals, long articulated a radical knowledge project. This history, along with the continued marginalization of Black studies within the universities in which we write, merits reflection on the project of a Du Boisian sociological methodology. Here, we want to consider the following question: How do we hedge the risk of disciplining a scholar who exceeded all disciplinary bounds?

In *Of Black Study*, Myers (2022) posed a critical challenge to the disciplinary incorporation of Du Bois into sociology. Myers sees this as a flawed enterprise. "The standard approach to the ubiquitous presence of conferences, edited volumes, tributes, and memorials is often framed around the capacity of Du Bois to redeem a particular discipline." Myers continues, "It is as if Du Bois's work was about seeking recognition or tenure from the leading figures in these disciplines" (2022, 18). Myers is right to voice suspicion of the contemporary embrace of Du Bois. In his own time, Du Bois never held a secure academic position in a historically white university, consistently battled the power of the state and funding bodies,

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and had his freedom of movement severely curtailed through the confiscation of his US passport late in life. Du Bois's scholarly efforts existed in antagonism to racist and colonial academic contexts.

Further, Myers points out—based on a reading of Du Bois's (2015) posthumously published "Sociology Hesitant"—that sociology's racist and colonial baggage may not be able to address Du Bois's sensitivity to the study of Black life. Du Bois, for Myers, thought beyond the narrow, positivistic empiricism that has defined much sociology. If positivist sociology had traditionally constrained itself to studying the world as it is, this was not the case for Du Bois. Du Bois's "dream of knowing" invites us to think "through and beyond that world" to imagine what could be (Myers 2022, 38). For good reason, Myers doubts that this is possible within sociology.

We agree. That is why we do not advocate for the incorporation of Du Bois into sociology as we know it. Instead, our task is to build a different sociology, one that harnesses Du Bois's own political, ethical, and methodological commitments. This book follows this desire. Perhaps one way of untethering the future of sociological knowledge production from our discipline's problematic past and present requires not only a Du Boisian theoretical revisioning and epistemic repositioning, but also a direct confrontation with the question of methodology and methods. The point is not to pigeonhole Du Bois in existing sociological methodologies but to articulate a Du Boisian methodology through which we can collectively imagine and enact an alternative sociology. In short, the ambition is to nurture an intellectual otherwise (Gordon 2008; McKittrick 2020).

To this point, one central advance of Black studies' engagement with Du Bois has been a deep appreciation of his investment in the speculative. Geographer Danielle Purifoy, for example, explains this intuition: "Du Bois's epistemic shift also required a connection to something beyond the 'real,' it mandated a deep engagement with the realm of the imagination. Knowledge production 'in the wake,' in this case, encompasses the speculative—an integration of 'what is' and 'what could be' despite it" (2023, 30). If Du Bois's project was to understand the racialized modernity and its violences, which he sought to capture with statistical, historical, or structural analysis, his intellectual project was also to preserve "Black lives and Black livingness" (30). These interventions urge us to make space for a poetic and affective register with which we can counter the bleak and detached gaze of the social scientist (see also McKittrick 2020).

Admittedly, these calls for the speculative may seem antithetical to the traditional conception of the social scientific enterprise; and as a result,

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the task of formulating a Du Boisian sociological methodology may inevitably seem restrictive, or indeed futile (Ferguson 2015). Nevertheless, Du Bois himself was adamant that he was a sociologist and a contributor to the burgeoning field of sociology, even as he challenged white sociology. For this reason, we follow Du Bois's footsteps in practicing a different sociology.

This sociology should not be limited to the most sociologically legible and digestible aspects of his work. Herein, we invite engagement with the breadth of Du Bois's work, which includes his attention to the poetic, speculative, and fictional, and more. Du Boisian sociology should mine all of Du Bois's methodological insights, habits, and commitments. In short, the point is not to discipline Du Bois into sociology but to embrace the Du Boisian movement to expand the methodological scope and normative orientation of what sociology can be.

This project also requires accounting for other powerful existing critiques of social scientific methodologies. As we have learned from our own disciplinary history as well as recent alternative knowledge projects, research methodologies are neither innocent nor neutral. They have histories and politics and often carry taken-for-granted assumptions. As the Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 1) interjected, "From the vantage point of the colonized . . . the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism," and research, as a result, is nothing more than a "dirty word." Indeed, as we begin our conversations on Du Boisian sociological methodologies, we are also guided by the insights of Indigenous, feminist, and queer scholars, who have often led the way in unearthing the colonial assumptions that inhere in our research methodologies, formulating alternative modes of knowledge production that serve communities (e.g., Smith 1999; Kukutai and Taylor 2016), and translating critical theoretical insights into concrete, reflexive research practices (e.g., Ahmed 2006; Collins 1990; Smith 2005).

These various strands of critical scholarship help us conceive of our contemporary Du Boisian sociological project. The shift from Du Bois to the Du Boisian thus opens room for scholars to address the silences and limitations of Du Bois's work, including his silence on Indigenous genocide and settler colonialism. Rather than reproducing this silence, the Du Boisian project in sociology today must engage with Indigenous perspectives in a way that Du Bois himself did not. Indigenous scholars have made clear the distinct challenges Indigenous people face the world over, that colonialism is not a uniform power structure but manifests itself differently

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across distinct geographic spaces, and perhaps most importantly, that it is far from confined to the past but shapes our contemporary world every day (Rocha Beardall 2022; Coulthard 2014; Nicholls 2021; Rodríguez-Lonebear 2021; Sabbagh-Khoury 2023). Furthermore, Du Bois himself replicated a set of patriarchal practices, including his individualizing self-fashioning as an intellectual, whose work nevertheless rested on the intellectual labor of Black women and emerged from larger communities and intellectual lineages (Green 2025; Vásquez 2024). Thus, a contemporary Du Boisian sociology must learn from Black feminist insights and formulate a collective and equitable knowledge project. A contemporary Du Boisian sociology should begin with an understanding of the present as shaped by historical yet contextually specific experiences of racism, colonialism, and patriarchy. We need to revise and update this view of the contemporary historical period—our ontology of modernity—as we research its various forms and engage with diverse perspectives among those who endure and resist its violences.

Du Boisian sociology, then, builds on Du Bois's own work and harnesses other critical projects to develop a distinct, more incisive, and historically grounded sociological project for understanding and transforming the modern world. We argue that this project not only supplies theories and concepts; it provides—or at least has the potential to provide—generative answers to difficult methodological questions about the politics and production of social knowledge.

Putting Du Boisian Methodology into Practice

Building on Du Bois's own scholarship as well as these productive disciplinary and interdisciplinary engagements, we now aim to translate Du Bois's methodological approach into a Du Boisian approach to sociological methods. This is a collective enterprise that requires shared reflection and dialogue among scholars and communities. In concert with other critical methodologies, a Du Boisian sociological methodology enables alternative ways to document, theorize, and critique structures of oppression, as well as engage with communities and emancipatory movements. In short, it portends an alternative sociology.

The proposed Du Boisian methodology has implications for both traditional and nontraditional sociological methods. This point is vital because if we confine the critique of sociology to the level of theory and

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epistemology, we overlook the most potent way in which the coloniality of the discipline is reproduced—through its everyday research practices and conventions (Smith 2005; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). If we collectively and individually want to elaborate a Du Boisian sociology, we must translate our methodological principles into concrete research practices, which is the domain of methods.

Our edited volume takes up this conversation. In the chapters ahead, the contributors reflect on how they have applied, refined, extended, or modified these Du Boisian methodological pillars through their research and use of sociological methods. In dialogue with their contributions, we propose some ideas for this conversation regarding a range of methods used by contemporary sociologists and others that are less commonly employed.

Community Studies

Du Bois was the founder of community studies in US sociology. He authored an unmatched investigation, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Du Bois [1899] 2014), and organized the Atlanta University studies (e.g., Du Bois 1897, 1898a, 1908), the first longitudinal, systematic study of communities (Wright 2016). His path-breaking approach involved the systematic collection and analysis of multiple sources of data, including survey, spatial, ethnographic, and statistical data. One difference between this approach and most contemporary mixed methods in sociology was the first of our methodological pillars: Du Bois grounded sociological analysis in history by examining the broad historical moment in which the object of research is embedded and by tracing the specific history of the place in question. Furthermore, Du Bois's community studies were substantively focused on the study of Black communities and the color line.

Sociology, however, did not follow Du Bois's approach to community studies. Instead, the discipline adopted the approach developed at the Chicago School of Sociology, which separated sociology from history. Focused mainly on immigrant communities, Chicago's community studies emphasized questions of social disorganization and convergence with the American mainstream rather than racism and the study of the color line (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Zorbaugh 1983). This emphasis on social disorganization and convergence was central to the development of sociology, particularly in the fields of urban sociology and the sociology

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of immigration. It also led the sociology of race and ethnicity through a decades-long, unproductive path in which sociology did not pay attention to how colonialism and the color line structure US society and the world at large, a path that it has only partially abandoned in the last two decades (Go 2018; Magubane 2016; McKee 1993; Meghji 2023; quisumbing king and White 2021; Steinberg 2007).

Over the last decade, scholars have returned to the tradition of Du Boisian community studies, including his emphasis on Black America (e.g., Brown 2018; Ewoodzie 2021; Hunter 2013). Brown's *Gone Home* and Hunter's *Black Citymakers* combine the Du Boisian focus on history and phenomenology. Brown (2018) described the formation, development, and dispersion of a Black mining community in Appalachia. In doing this, she tied the historical trajectory of the community and the subjectivity of its members to national and global political and economic processes. Hunter (2013) analyzed the historical experience of the Black community in Philadelphia, tracing how it shaped the city despite the limitations imposed by the color line. Both studies exemplify Du Bois's call to examine the historical interplay between law and chance in sociological research. Itzigsohn's (2009) analysis of the Dominican experience in Providence, Rhode Island, applied the Du Boisian approach to mixed methods and the centrality of the color line to the analysis of immigrant incorporation, thereby breaking with the long shadow of the Chicago School over the field of immigration studies.

The approach that contemporary Du Boisian community studies takes also differs from the usual "social problems" approach of sociology. Conventional studies typically take relations of power as their core element of analysis but fail to take questions and concepts from the lives of people and communities. Though it is important here not to reify communities, as communities are always internally stratified and fractured along different interests, Du Boisian sociologists tend to work with people and organizations in the communities they study. In this volume, Orly Clergé describes how *The Philadelphia Negro* inspired her book *The New Noir* (Clergé 2019), which analyzes the experiences of Black Caribbean immigrant communities in New York (chapter 1). She shares how she incorporated Du Bois's mixed methods into her own study. Yet Clergé also takes Du Bois beyond *The Philadelphia Negro*, for example, in the historical tracing of the global connections of the Caribbean diaspora and in bringing together Black histories that transcend borders.

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Anyone who has spent some time in the discipline has witnessed some version of the debate between the scientific character of quantitative methods and the depth of qualitative ones. On one side of the debate, sociologists sometimes posit qualitative methods, particularly ethnography, as the good method—a research technique attuned to people, rejecting the "scientific" detachment of quantitative methods. But qualitative methods have similarly reproduced colonial and racist orders. For example, the Chicago School's ethnographic studies, on the whole, directed a middle-class normative gaze at the lives of those who were not part of this population, resulting in an emphasis on deviance and social distance. These studies made ethnography and qualitative analysis the stand-alone methods that we know today, and strong currents in contemporary urban ethnography continue to focus on social disorganization, often overlooking the historical analysis of dominant social structures (e.g., Bourgois 2003; Goffman 2014; Venkatesh 2008).

There is, however, a growing number of ethnographies that focus on the structural dynamics responsible for social exclusion and incorporate the second sight of excluded populations (e.g., Duck 2015; Rios 2011; Young 2011). Many ethnographic studies are also deeply rooted in the analysis of macrohistorical processes (Hoang 2015; Matlon 2022; Clarno 2019). This attention to historical context enables an understanding of the relations of power, the forms of agency and meaning construction within the communities we study, and the possibilities people have to resist marginalization.

Three chapters explore a Du Boisian approach for qualitative and ethnographic methods. Building on the example of Du Bois's photographic exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition, Jordanna Matlon describes how she used visual ethnography to convey the experiences of Black masculinity in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (chapter 2). In Matlon's discerning hands, images help narrate a story of the construction of Black masculinity in the context of neoliberal racial capitalism. Matlon argues that images need to be read in the context of the global political economy. In this way, her approach aligns with our pillars of historicity, conjunctural explanation, and local-global relationality.

If Matlon emphasizes the importance of seeing, Laura Garbes highlights the importance of listening (chapter 3). She shows how the color line has a sonic dimension and, as such, demonstrates the need to rethink the relationship between the researcher and the people with whom they

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dialogue. Garbes highlights four strategies to guide the interview process, which involve deconstructing the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the subject of study. She describes how she implemented a form of deep listening that respects and accounts for the lived experience of variously racialized people. This deep listening is tied to a commitment to research that aims to undo the color line, including the sonic color line. Garbes's strategies highlight the methodological importance of engaging lived experience in Du Boisian scholarship.

In chapter 4, prabhdeep singh kehal takes on the question of reflexivity in qualitative and ethnographic research. Drawing inspiration from Du Bois's emphasis on the sociological significance of lived experience, as well as queer theorizing, kehal considers how conventional conceptions of scholarly reflexivity obscure the operation of structures of power in the research process. Against the habit of using static identity categories, kehal elaborates on how the researcher's identity affects the research encounter in a dynamic way, which involves the self-presentation of the researcher and interactions with people in the field. This move allows the researcher to appreciate and analyze how power structures have shaped the research encounter in a manner akin to Du Bois's use of reflexivity in *Dusk of Dawn*.

Quantitative Methods

Statistical analysis was an integral part of Du Bois's mixed-methods methodology. He emphasized the importance of gathering data at the community level to capture the heterogeneity of living conditions within the Black community, including accurate measures of family structure, occupations, income, and educational attainment. He warned that "general averages in so complicated a subject are apt to be dangerously misleading" (Du Bois 1898b, 19), but of course, multivariate statistical analysis and sampling techniques have developed by leaps and bounds since his day.

A Du Boisian sensitivity nonetheless calls on us to scrutinize multivariate quantitative analysis, which has become the primary quantitative method of the discipline, often considered the most scientific sociological method. Such analysis is frequently based on problematic assumptions that variables are independent and not correlated or related, and the idea that a variable such as race or gender can adequately capture complex forms of social inequality and relations. Merely constructing and isolating variables for social categories such as race or gender and looking for their effects transforms social relations of oppression into

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individual characteristics. From Du Boisian and other critical perspectives, we know that race, gender, or class are not personal traits but social relations of power and structural oppression. Multivariate quantitative analysis removes those variables from their historical and local contexts. Quantitative analysts often seek to control for contextual variables in the belief that doing so will capture the independent effect of variables. However, control variables are measures that attempt to isolate the impact of complex realities and interrelated processes. Without a thorough theoretical and empirical understanding of those processes, we do not know what we are controlling for. Similarly, while quantitative analysis can measure interactions between variables, this is quite different from understanding the complex historical embeddedness and conjunctural dynamics of social phenomena.

Regarding race, specifically, multivariate analyses are prone to treating race as a causal factor. As Zuberi (2001, 96) noted, "using race as a proxy for the causal effect of social processes introduces substantial bias depending on the researcher's preconceptions of racial difference." This practice is a commonplace instance of what Fields and Fields (2022) theorize as "racecraft." Here, race, rather than racism or racial domination, is attributed an explanatory power, a move that reifies race, even while scholars affirm it as socially constructed. A related outcome is the essentialist treatment of "racial populations" as actual "groups" rather than as statistical abstractions (Rodríguez-Muñiz 2021).

The problem lies in the decontextualized and ahistorical use of quantitative methods in the discipline (Zuberi 2001). Using them carefully can help illuminate the shape and depth of different forms of inequality (e.g., Massey 2007). Indeed, many scholars have considered how to utilize the analytical power of multivariate quantitative analysis while addressing the structures of inequality that create the variables we use. These efforts have led to the emergence of the QuantCrit approach that brings critical race theory to bear on quantitative methods (Garcia et al. 2018; López et al. 2017; Sablan 2019; Williams et al. 2024; Castillo and Strunk 2025). This interdisciplinary scholarship has sought to reflect on and correct racist biases in quantitative research. A growing source of inspiration is Du Bois's innovative approach to statistical graphs and the presentation of numerical information (Battle-Baptiste and Rusert 2018). Others have been working on incorporating historical dimensions into quantitative analysis, whether in studying historical processes of incarceration (Muller 2018) or assessing theories of nationalism or imperial expansion (Edwards and Go

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2019; Go and Watson 2019). Another set of works has become increasingly interested in the production and use of racial and ethnic statistics, such as census, health, and crime data (e.g., Clarno et al. 2024; Cruz 2024; Garrett and Decoteau 2023; Loveman 2014; Mora 2014; Muhammad 2019; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2019).

A Du Boisian approach to quantitative methodologies implies incorporating the methodological pillars described above. First, it requires an awareness that variables are not individual characteristics but capture social relations. When we use race, gender, class, or any variable, we are measuring social relations embedded in power differentials, which requires a theoretical understanding of how these power relations and their intersections work. Second, we must move to embed quantitative analysis in an understanding of the historical time and the history of the phenomena under study. The relationships between actors, institutions, and structures change in different locations and over time as they evolve. This too requires an analysis of processes in their local embeddedness: If we are interested in the effect of education on stratification, then we are interested in this effect in a specific location. That is, we are not looking for a universal generalizable effect but rather a concrete and contextualized one. In short, we need to understand the constellation of forces that work in this locality. It is thus necessary to account for heterogeneities in the phenomena we study. We cannot assume that any process works the same in large cities and rural areas, in middle-class and poor neighborhoods, and so on. Instead of constant generalizable effects of individual variables on outcomes, we are analyzing historical conjunctures of political and economic power.

In this volume, Jordan Conwell and Kevin Loughran explore Du Bois's use of quantitative methods and how it has influenced their own work (chapter 5). They assert that Du Bois used an inductive approach to quantitative analysis designed to illuminate and challenge the inequalities faced by marginalized populations. They also trace a parallel between Du Bois's quantitative approach and contemporary approaches, such as QuantCrit. Conwell notes how reflecting on Du Bois's work led him to value the importance of descriptive statistics, which are today undervalued in a discipline that favors sophisticated multivariate analysis. At the same time, Loughran points to how the focus on Du Bois's inductive logic provided him with insights into the relationship between racial capitalism and climate adaptation.

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Historical Sociology

Historical sociology in the Du Boisian vein roots its analysis in the understanding of racialized modernity and racial and colonial capitalism, which requires attending to the historicity of theoretical concepts and explanations. A Du Boisian historical sociology rejects the traditional comparative method, which treats units of analysis as independent of one another. Instead, it contrasts different historical conjunctures, examining in each case both the specificity of local processes and their embeddedness in, and connections to, broader regional, national, and global historical dynamics. For example, a Du Boisian historical sociology of empires does not aim to simply compare empires as governance structures across time. Instead, it pays attention to the way Euro-American power has been rooted in—and enacted through—different forms of empire. Non-Western empires may offer their own power dynamics but are nevertheless embedded in a world shaped by racialized modernity (Parvulescu and Boatcă 2022). A Du Boisian historical sociology is based on contrasts of different contexts within the shared historical frame of racial and colonial capitalism, and it poses questions that arise from the existential concerns of people on the margins of modernity (Hammer and Itzigsohn 2025). Further, a central part of Du Bois's historical sociology is a deep engagement with rethinking archives. This effort aligns with the ongoing work to question official and state archives as the ultimate repositories of objective facts, opening the path for alternative archives to re-create history from the margins (Mbembe 2002; Santos 2023; Skarpelis 2020; Stoler 2010; Trouillot 1995).

Two chapters in this book address the directions for a Du Boisian historical sociology. Cedric de Leon emphasizes the importance of recovering the history of Black people in the labor movement, noting that they have often been rendered invisible in the historiography (chapter 6). Like Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction in America*, de Leon argues that we cannot fully understand labor history and its emancipatory potential without recognizing the contributions of Black workers and independent Black labor organizations. His chapter challenges established comparative methods, offering a new approach that uncovers the histories of subaltern actors. Moreover, de Leon demonstrates that this process requires searching for alternative archives. His work turned to the archives of state intelligence agencies to narrate how Black workers and organizations have been—and should be—central to the history of interracial labor movements.

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Zophia Edwards tackles the question of how to analyze the historical and sociological experiences of regions considered insignificant or too small for sociological theorizing (chapter 7). This inquiry emerges from her work on the development trajectories of Trinidad and Tobago and Gabon (Edwards 2025). She draws inspiration from Du Bois's methodology in telling the history of the modern world from Africa's perspective in *The World and Africa*. In doing so, Du Bois relied on alternative archives and sources, demonstrating how the distinct local histories of African regions and peoples were always interconnected with global history. Edwards turns her attention to the study of the Caribbean, similarly, emphasizing the need to seek out new archives and listen to the voices of people from the region, even if they are not represented within academic scholarship.

Fictional Narrative

The above paragraphs explore the practical implications of rethinking oft-used sociological methods in the Du Boisian vein. But Du Bois also employed methods that are not commonly used in contemporary sociology but which we would benefit from, such as narrative fiction.

Du Bois was the author of numerous novels, including *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), *The Comet* (1920), *Dark Princess* (1928), and *The Black Flame* trilogy (1957, 1959, 1961). He also wrote several plays and was fond of writing poetry. As Farland (2025, 275) notes, "Du Bois's fiction is the product of thoughtful and strategic questions of literary form, genre, and narrative conventions, alongside the era's racialized hierarchies of taste." Fiction writing also served Du Bois's intellectual project, as a method to think through and work out complex theoretical or political questions. As such, fictional writing develops our sociological imagination and allows us creative approaches to imagine what could have been and what could be. Two chapters in this collection explore this possibility.

In chapter 8, Freeden Blume Oeur analyzes Du Bois's *Black Flame* trilogy. In these three novels, Du Bois addresses forms of racism and antiracist struggle, the possibility of agency, and the connection between the local and the global. Blume Oeur reminds us that Du Bois undertook this exercise while confronted with the lack of time and means to conduct field or historical studies. While he bemoaned these limitations, the fiction format allowed him the freedom to explore counterfactual possibilities and forms of subjectivity that formal research, as typically conducted, would

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not have permitted. Blume Oeur calls for the Du Boisian social scientist to embrace the possibilities of narrative fiction as a social science methodological tool, and at the very least as a creative approach to finding meaningful research questions. The chapter also invites greater engagement with psychoanalytic approaches, which Du Bois considered, but reminds us to go beyond Du Bois to incorporate the insights of Black feminism.

Embracing fictional narrative as critique is precisely what Quincy Stewart (2023), the author of the innovative sociological novel *Race in the Machine*, does in chapter 9. He uses fiction to deliver a critique of the positivist methods and analytical approaches that inform much sociological research on race and inequality. Stewart, who started his career as a quantitative scholar, takes a radical turn in invoking the possibilities of storytelling to illustrate the problematic dimensions of these methods. In a daring attempt to bring us into a fictional world of personified models, Stewart offers a critique of and an invitation to transcend sociological methodological fetishism. The chapter thus puts into practice Du Bois's sociological use of fiction.

Conclusion

All chapters in this book engage with, contest, and go beyond the four Du Boisian methodological pillars (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020). Many chapters raise new challenges for which we must account, though there are issues on which we all agree: Du Boisian sociology is an emancipatory social science. It is committed to the thorough and careful analysis of empirical data. Furthermore, it is committed to not harming subaltern communities and to utilizing empirical research to collaborate with communities in the service of dismantling the global color line and other forms of oppression. To contribute to this conversation, this introduction presents one articulation of Du Boisian sociological methodological principles and sensibilities, some of which fundamentally challenge conventional sociological research practices. It is a sociology that aims to expand the theoretical and methodological limits of the discipline. It is designed to open up new ways of theorizing, orienting, and conducting research.

Embracing Du Bois's work today means more than recognizing his historical role in the foundation of the discipline and incorporating his work into theory courses. It also means rethinking how we approach research and the methods we use. Students and young scholars are often

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encouraged to select a puzzle that they can tackle by applying specific theories and methods. This habit frequently goes hand in hand with a demand for particular kinds of causal arguments that have become the default mode of thinking. Mainstream sociology focuses on process tracing, counterfactual thinking, and differential outcomes—in short, it aims to ask the *why* question. This orientation takes the form of variables that affect outcomes and/or focus on causal mechanisms.

A Du Boisian methodology, on the other hand, guides us in tackling significant theoretical questions about the nature of our world and its inequalities and power asymmetries. In substantive terms, this means adopting the study of the structural forms of racial and colonial capitalism, as well as the lived experiences within racialized modernity, as the focus of our work. Within this overall goal, we can, of course, look for specific puzzles and middle-range theories. Still, the goal is not only to solve a particular puzzle or contribute to a specific sociological subfield. Instead, the objective is to interrogate racialized modernity and racial colonial capitalism in its many historical forms and embodied conditions.

We offer this volume because the development of a Du Boisian methodology is a collective task. It will rest on ongoing dialogue between different practitioners committed to changing the discipline by incorporating and developing elements of Du Bois's sociology. A contemporary Du Boisian sociology entails rethinking the relationship between sociology and history, and learning to embed sociological analysis within historical conditions and processes. It means learning to link the analysis of the local to the global processes that constitute it and in which the local exists. And it means rethinking the relationship between scholarly knowledge and political struggle, as well as the relationship between researchers and the researched. At heart, the Du Boisian sociological methodology seeks to practice an alternative, critical, and emancipatory approach to sociological research, theory, and knowledge making—a vision we wish to pursue in community.

Notes

1 Take, for example, the breadth and scope of Morris et al.'s (2024) *Oxford Handbook of W. E. B. Du Bois*.

2 Consider the debate at Valladolid between two religious intellectuals, Las Casas and Sepúlveda, which centered on whether the peoples of the

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Americas were human in the same way they were and, consequently, whether they could be legitimately conquered, enslaved, ruled, and dispossessed (Boatcă 2015; Wynter 2003; Quijano 2000; Trouillot 1995).

3 As Du Bois argued, the Dunning School—the conventional historiography at the time and for decades to come—misrepresented Reconstruction, attributing its demise to the "individualized failures" of freed people rather than the structural limitations and institutional problems of partial emancipation and white backlash.

4 Du Bois (1940, 1944, 1968) wrote extensively about his changing positions, so we can trace them through his writings. We also draw here on David Levering Lewis's (1994, 2000) biography.

5 As he would later recall, during this time, he deserted Weber and Schmoller and fell back on Royce and James, meaning that his sociological thinking relied much more on observation and interpretation than on the detached analysis of carefully gathered data (Du Bois 1944).

6 While working on this introduction, we further developed the pillars put forth by Itzigsohn and Brown (2020), reshaping contextualization into conjunctural explanation. Also, viewing the world from the margins—Itzigsohn and Brown's subaltern standpoint pillar—is foundational to the Du Boisian approach overall, but here we designate the fourth methodological pillar as phenomenology.

7 To its detriment, the discipline—outside spaces of Black sociology—has largely ignored this methodological masterpiece.

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