"SWARTHY SPECTRE AT THE NATION'S FEAST": W.E.B. DU BOIS AND AMERICAN HISTORICAL MEMORY

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> The greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths.
> William James, *What Pragmatism Means*, 1906
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> The mystery which haunts American experience... is the mystery of how we are many and yet one.
> Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, 1979

On February 23, 1968, the one hundredth anniversary of W.E.B. Du Bois's birth, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered one of the last major addresses of his life at Carnegie Hall in New York. It is interesting and fitting to note how King chose to best honor Du Bois's legacy. Above all of Du Bois's achievements, King stressed his role as historian. Du Bois's "singular greatness", argued King, was his "unique zeal" that "rescued for all of us a heritage whose loss would have profoundly impoverished us". Similarly, David Levering Lewis, in his remarkable new biography, convincingly shows how Du Bois's distinctive "signature" endures in his capacity, in several genres, to compress huge pieces of history into single essays, paragraphs, and images. King especially emphasized DuBois's work on Reconstruction, a period traditional historians had for three generations portrayed as a tragic mistake and a sordid interlude in American race relations. King was no professional historian, but his own prophetic sense of history enabled him to grasp the social implications of historical consciousness. With too much continuity, "the collective mind of America", declared King, "became poisoned with racism and stunted with myths". Traditional historians' treatment of the black experience, argued the civil rights leader, "was a conscious and deliberate manipulation of History and the *stakes* were high".[1] (italics mine) The question of the stakes involved in struggles over rival versions of history leads us not only to the political and social meanings of what historians do; it also provides an angle of understanding about the confluences of history and memory for intellectuals and for larger societies.

America is currently undergoing a deep cultural shift, an extended attempt to democratize its collective social memory; at the same time we struggle to understand new conceptions of a "whole" national history. This epochal curricular and cultural challenge will have no particular end to reach; it will likely have only turning points,

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Honoring Dr. Du Bois", speech delivered at celebration of Du Bois' 100th birthday, February 23, 1968, Carnegie Hall, New York, sponsored by *FreedomWays Magazine*, in Philip S, Foner, ed., *W.E.B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1890-1919*, New York, 1970, pp. 12-13, 15, 17; David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*, New York, 1993, p. 280.

peaks and valleys, nonsense and wisdom along the path, one can hope, to a sense of strength in multiplicity. It is also important, especially for young people in search of a compass, to know that debates over what we now loosely call "multiculturalism" are not new; the ship of diversity is not sailing in uncharted waters. Moreover, this question of the stakes involved in national and collective memories of all kinds is of profound importance in the larger world we live in – a global marketplace of warring identities and deadly ethnic memories. As any conversation about the United Nations' ability to respond to a bewildering array of conflicts will demonstrate, the parts are overwhelming even the best of efforts to envision a whole, both within nations and in the world. Collectively, the peoples of advanced and less advanced countries seem to be marching to two discordant tunes. One is the music that tugs us along, searching for moral clarity and lost certainties in an understandable obsession with commemoration, remembrance, and anniversaries of the World War II era. The other music is polyphonic, the fitful songs of groups, new nations, or tribes acting upon their sense of heritage, claiming their place and identities against those who have repressed them during the past generation, or five centuries ago. At the end of this, the most violent century in history, we are being taught anew the potential of group identities and narrow nationalisms, combined with economic deprivation, to compel people to kill for memory.[2] We need prior models through which to study this phenomenon; we need seriously to look at pluralistic approaches to history attempted long before our own era, as well as at how historical outsiders have claimed redefinitions of the center without denying a center's existence. The concern of this paper is to explore Du Bois's historical sensibilities and some of his historical works as a means of finding one such model.

Passion and violence often govern cultural conflict over memory. The historical memory of a people, a nation, or any aggregate evolves over time in relation to present emotional and social needs, and ever-changing contexts. As theorists and historians like Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbaum have demonstrated, the resilience of nationalism as a universal organizing value of political life in the world has served deep human needs, and ceaselessly compelled the construction of official histories wherever modern societies wish to declare themselves a unity.[3] Societies remember and use history as a source of coherence and identity, as a means of contending for power and place, and as a means of controlling whatever becomes

2. Many writers have stressed this dilemma. Among the most recent and interesting are the essays in John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, Princeton, 1994; and Charles S. Maier, "A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy, and Denial", *History and Memory*, vol. 5, no. 2, (fall/winter, 1993), pp. 136-51.

3. See Eric Hobsbaum and Terrence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Eng., 1983; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York, 1991. There are many theoretical works that discuss historical memory as a process. Among the best are Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Chicago, 1966; Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. by Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter, 1950, rpr., New York, 1980; Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Use and Abuse of History", in *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. by Adrian Collins, New York, 1949; Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. and ed. Donald F. Bourchard, Ithaca, 1977; Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory", in Thomas Butler, ed., *Memory: History, Culture, and the Mind*, London, 1989, pp. 97-113; David Thelen, ed., *Memory in American History*, Bloomington, 1991; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, New York, 1991, pp. 3-14; Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire", *Representations*, (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-25; and Barry Schwartz, "The Social Context of Commemoration" A Study in Collective Memory, *Social Forces*, (Dec.2,1982), pp. 374-402.

normative in society. For better or worse, and in spite of all that we have learned about how culture is invented, and how heritage is a social construct that defies fixed definition, people jealously seek to own their pasts. The public that consumes history is vast, and the marketplace turbulent. Like it or not, we live in an era where the impulse to teach the young to have an open sense of history is not enough; that sensibility will be challenged. The pragmatic, questioning sense of history will encounter multiple social memories – in the classroom, at the international negotiating table, at the movies, and in the streets. This dilemma desperately needs trained historians seeking evidence, demanding verification, offering reasoned explanations of events. But the truth is that historians, and their cousins in related disciplines, are only playing one part in this drama. Collective memories are that which the world's peoples somehow need to think more *about*, and less *with*.

Although his achievements were sometimes stunted by a legendary arrogance, his work contained some flawed research, and some of his sweeping arguments are certainly debatable, Du Bois was, nevertheless, a pioneer in illuminating the phenomenon of "official" and "alternative" histories in America, especially with reference to history and race. He spent much of his career as a scholar and an artist, trying to dislodge American history from its racist moorings. He became, if you will, a kind of self-appointed sounder, not only of America's peculiar "race concept", but of the full range of tragedy and possibility in American history. Such ambitions necessitated active confrontation with the traditional historiography about slavery and race, with scientific racism (though he himself took a long time to overcome a nineteenth century conception of "race"), with indifference, and with the mythology of the Lost Cause, which had swept much of American popular culture by the early twentieth century. In his essay, "The Propaganda of History", the final chapter of his most significant historical work, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), Du Bois declared himself "aghast" at what American historians had done to the fields of Reconstruction and African-American history.[4] The American historical community had not only subordinated the black experience, but had rendered it virtually unknown. The state of popular historical misunderstanding in the first third of the twentieth century is what Du Bois sought to overturn. Examples abound of his sheer contentiousness on this matter. For example, in 1908, Charles Francis Adams wrote an article on the "Negro Problem" and the "Solid South" for *Century Magazine*. Du Bois took such exception to the piece that he wrote to Adams:

> One of the most unfortunate things about the Negro problem is that persons who do not for a moment profess to be informed on the subject insist on informing others. This, for a person who apparently boasts of advanced scientific knowledge is most deplorable and I trust that before publishing further matter on the race problem, *you will study it. To this end I am sending you some literature.* (italics mine)

Whether directed at his colleagues and co-workers, or at fellow scholars in correspondence, "Du Boisian displeasure", as David Lewis has aptly put it, "was almost never like an explosion; it was a shard of ice down the back".[5]

4. W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, New York, 1935, p. 725.

5. Du Bois to Charles Francis Adams, Nov. 23, 1908, and Dec. 15,1908; and C.F. Adams to Du Bois, Nov. 28, 1908, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), reel 1; Lewis, *Du Bois*, p. 469.

In Du Bois's historical writing he was not merely crying foul at racist historians for leaving blacks out of the story of American history. He was surely partisan to the extent that he sought to restore, even exalt, his own people's history. At the same time, he believed, such a restoration could only enrich American history. He was very much interested in how multiple parts could make a new whole, how pluralism might be a new conceptual framework for American history. Long before he would actually write *Black Reconstruction*, he appealed for financial support and wider interest in the project. In 1909 he wrote to Richard Watson Gilder, editor of *Century Magazine*, requesting funding for a "careful authentic history of the part which the Negro played in the Reconstruction governments". Du Bois would eventually get some funding for that project, albeit not from *Century*. But he sent Gilder a straightforward statement of his intention. He seemed driven by the imperatives both of scholarship and of the construction of popular social memory. He said he wanted to tell the story from the perspective of the "black voter and office holder". "This history", he reminded Gilder, "so well worth saving, is passing away rapidly as the reconstruction Negroes die and I want especially to gather it and preserve it". Du Bois wanted to create and restore, provoke and explain. "Of course", he concluded his appeal to Gilder, "I should aim... to write unbiased history and not an apology for my side".[6] Such were the noble aims, and perhaps the impossible restraint, of a black history to be written in segregated America.

Eventually, Du Bois helped to spark a major historiographical turn in the study of Reconstruction and race among American historians. This turn, initiated for Du Bois at least as early as the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, took many years to bear fruit (with major historiographical consequences in the 1960s and 1970s). Du Bois appreciated the political and social stakes of historical debates; he understood the power of historical images and myths in shaping social policy and human interactions. In his historical writings, therefore, a tension developed between art, politics, and the pursuit of scientific truth. As Arnold Rampersad has shown, Du Bois made a gradual but persistent turn away from the scientific empiricism in which he was trained to the poetic sensibilities that characterized so much of his writing after he left Atlanta to edit the *Crisis* in 1910.[7] Du Bois's efforts to forge an alternative historical memory should be understood in the context of this turn in his work from social science toward social criticism and art.

Du Bois came of age and was trained during the era (1880s-90s) when history assumed the mantle of a "science". He was by any estimation a skilled social scientist who, at Harvard, studied philosophy with William James, Josiah Royce, and George Santayana, and history with Albert Bushnell Hart. "It was James with his pragmatism

6. Du Bois to Richard Watson Gilder, undated, but collected among 1909 letters, Du Bois Papers, (U-Mass.) reel 1.

7. Arnold Rampersad, "W.E.B. Du Bois as a Man of Literature", in William A. Andrews, ed., *Critical Essays on W.E.B Du Bois*, Boston, 1985, pp. 49-66; Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*, Cambridge, MA., 1976. Also see Arnold Rampersad, "Slavery and the Literary Imagination: Du Bois' The Souls of Black Folk", in Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds. *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, Selected Papers from the English Institute, Baltimore, 1989, pp. 104-24. On Du Bois' broader literary impact, see Herbert Aptheker, *The Literary Legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois*, White Plains, New York, 1989. Every student of Du Bois is indebted to Aptheker for his compilations, bibliographies, and re-publications of Du Bois' work. See especially *The Annotated Bibliography of the Published Writings of W.E.B Du Bois*, Millwood, New York, 1973.

and ... Hart with his research method", Du Bois wrote in his autobiography, "that turned me back from the lovely but sterile land of philosophic speculation, to the social sciences as the field for gathering and interpreting that body of fact which would apply to my program for the Negro". Du Bois understood himself to be an emerging historical sociologist, though Harvard did not yet recognize the field. Although Du Bois's rhetoric can be over-wrought, and his arguments self-righteous, he would always be, in his own way, committed to the sheer accumulation of the "body of fact" that might be thrust before an ignorant or contentious world. In an autobiographical piece, written for Rayford Logan's *What the Negro Wants* in 1944, Du Bois admitted that he had "rationalized" his personal story into a "coherent unity" that masked some of the "hesitancies" and "graspings" of his life. Indeed, as Lewis has shown, we would do well to use Du Bois's autobiographical writings with caution. In a variety of ways, his complicated family history may have prompted Du Bois, the incessant autobiographer, to write, as Lewis says, with "carefully calibrated amnesia". That can be said of virtually all important autobiographers. But Du Bois's self-assured claim that his early career had a singular aim rings true. "*History* and the other social sciences", he wrote, "were to be my *weapons*, to be sharpened and applied by research and writing".[8] (italics mine). So, always the trained historian in search of verifiable evidence: he also came to use history as a strategy to confront and overcome traditional, often white supremecist, versions of American history.

In his earliest writings one already finds the tensions between scientific truths and art, between data and politics, and between past and present.[9] In his commencement address at Harvard in 1890, "Jefferson Davis as a Representative of Civilization", the twenty-two year old DuBois offered up Davis, the recently deceased former president of the Confederacy, as an American "Teutonic hero". Boldly, he used Davis as a symbol of the "type of civilization" (national and not merely southern) which had advanced itself by "murdering Indians", had created a culture "whose principle is the rise of one race on the ruins of another...", and which was driven by an "overweening sense of the I and a consequent forgetting of the Thou". The veiled implication of Du Bois's speech was that America's quest for sectional reconciliation had led it not only to honor ex Confederate leaders, but to fashion a society where might made right, where unbridled individualism reigned, and where racism flourished. The "glamour of history", and therefore the rise of a nation, declared Du Bois, depended on strength and force. "The Anglo-Saxon loves a soldier", declared Du Bois, "Jefferson Davis was an Anglo-Saxon, Jefferson Davis was a soldier". In his few minutes of commencement glory Du Bois urged his Harvard audience to make way for the rise of the quieter, creative, "submissive" culture of blacks, "the race of whose rights Jefferson Davis had not heard". Implicit in Du Bois's message was the notion (or the hope) that the day of Anglo-Saxon hegemony had passed, and the rise of the black race had commenced. Moreover, the speech was an anguished cry for justice, for inclusion, and for a new "standard" by which to judge civilization. While there were elements of nineteenth century racialist thinking (claims of

8. *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, New York, 1968, 148; Lewis, *Du Bois*, 47; W.E.B. Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom", in Rayford Logan, ed., *What the Negro Wants*, Chapel Hill, 1944, p. 43.

9. See Rampersad, "Du Bois as a Man of Literature", p. 62.

distinguishable racial characteristics) in the young Du Bois's rhetoric, and he too would one day exhalt the soldier, at bottom, the address was a direct challenge to the historical memory and moral imagination of his audience (Harvard and America). "You whose nation was founded on the loftiest ideals", demanded Du Bois, "and who many times forget those ideals with a strange forgetfulness, have more than a sentimental interest, more than a sentimental duty. You owe a debt to humanity for this Ethiopia of Out-stretched Arm, who has made her beauty, patience, and her grandeur, law".[10] By addressing his audience so personally as You, Du Bois asserted that history had left a collective responsibility in America. Slavery and racism were everyone's legacy and everyone's problem. The link between Jefferson Davis, "civilization", and "You" was not only a remarkable stroke of irony for such a young orator, but a clear indication that Du Bois had launched his life-long quest to contend for the nature and meaning of America's historical memory.

Du Bois's early conception of history as contending memories is further illustrated in *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, (1896), his doctoral thesis and the first volume published in the Harvard Historical Monograph Series. Written after his return from two pivotal, even transforming, years at the University of Berlin, where he studied a good deal of economics, *Suppression* was primarily a legalistic analysis of the long effort to abolish the slave trade. But an ethical tone imforms the volume and pervades its concluding chapter. Du Bois's moralism was typical of American historiography during the 1890s.[11] Even under the new veneer of scientific analysis, most historians claimed the duty of teaching moral lessons; hence the final section of *Suppression* is entitled "The Lessons for Americans". But something deeper may have motivated Du Bois's language in the final passages of *Suppression*. He was fully aware that by the mid-1890s American society was in the midst of a near crusade of sectional reconciliation, the celebration of the mutual heroism of North and South in the Civil War, and the quest for a present and a future that allowed people to forget slavery and racial conflict, a position now championed by the popular historian James Ford Rhodes. Moreover, as aloof as the young Germanophile could be, Du Bois could hardly have been completely detached from the poverty and oppression he had already witnessed in the South, or the racism he had encountered at Harvard, when he wrote of the enrichment of the western world "in just such proportion as Americans stole Negroes and worked them to death" in the eighteenth and ninteenth centuries. His chastisement of the "moral apathy" of antebellum Americans, as one generation after another postponed the slavery problem, was spurred by the moral weakness of an era of lynching in the 1890s. As Du Bois's voice turns from description to

10. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Jefferson Davis as a Representative of Civilization", Commencement Address, Harvard University, 1890, in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, The Library of America Series, New York, 1986, pp. 811-14. On the commencement speech see Nathan I. Huggins, "W.E.B. Du Bois and Heroes", *Amerikastudien*, vol. 34, (1988), pp. 167-74. On Du Bois's race theory, and its rootedness in 19th century philosophy, see Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race", *Critical Inquiry*, 12, (Autumn, 1985), pp. 21-37; and Robert Gooding-Williams, "Philosophy of History and Social Critique in the Souls of Black Folk", *Social Science Information*, 26 (1987), pp. 99-114; and Joel Williamson, *Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation*, New York, pp. 1984, 399-413. It is also worth noting that, given his later stance about black participation in World War I, Du Bois himself also came to "love a soldier". Conversations with Wilson Moses were helpful on this point.

11. See Manning Marable, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat*, Boston 1986, pp. 22-23; and Aptheker, *Literary Legacy*, pp. 11-13. On the significance of the Berlin years, see Lewis, *Du Bois*, pp. 117-149.

moralizing in the final pages of *Suppression*, we see not only the Ph. D. candidate's attempt to attach an ethical conclusion onto his monograph. We begin to see as well the turn toward art and polemicism in Du Bois's work.[12]

In Du Bois' earliest formal work of history, one also finds an engagement with the oldest and most enduring conception of the American past: the providential view of America as a chosen nation, a people of progress who ultimately solve their problems, an omniscient society thriving above threat or conflict. Du Bois was one of the earliest historians, therefore, to challenge what many have called the "master narrative" of American history. Whether in the 1890s or the 1990s, the "aggravating persistence" of racism in American society makes "challenging demands on the past", wrote Nathan Huggins, "demands that cannot be comprehended through the sanitized and innocent master narrative". Anticipating much of the historiography of his own generation and of the modern "consensus" school of the 1940s and 1950s, Du Bois challenged his readers to reflect from the heart as well as the head and to acknowledge contradiction and paradox:

> No American can study the connection of slavery with United States history, and not devoutly pray that his country may never have a similar social problem to solve, until it shows more capacity for such work than it has shown in the past. It is neither profitable nor in accordance with scientific truth to consider that whatever the constitutional fathers did was right, or that slavery was a plague sent from God and fated to be eliminated in due time. We must face the fact that this problem arose principally from the cupidity and carelessness of our ancestors.

Du Bois's tone in this passage reflects his awareness that he lived in a nation still unwilling to believe that the "growing evil" of slavery had opened "the highway that led straight to the Civil War". Americans, he maintained, lacked historical consciousness and, therefore, "moral foresight". They congratulated themselves "more on getting rid of a problem than on solving it".[13] The young Du Bois illuminated America's struggle in the 1890s to contend with the memory of slavery, racism, and the Civil War. He also quietly announced one of the principal aims of all of his future historical work: to forge a social memory, through scholarship and popular journalism, that might help solve or trascend the race problem, rather than simply getting rid of it.

From his most scientific studies of black urban and rural life (*The Philadelphia Negro*, 1899; the Atlanta Univeristy Studies) to his essays, fiction, and poetry, a sense of history informs nearly everything Du Bois wrote. As a student of race, and therefore

12. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, (1896), in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, p. 193. See James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850*, 7 vols., New York, pp. 1893-1906. Du Bois, *Suppression*, in *Du Bois: Writings*, 194. See also Rampersad, *Art and Imagination*, pp. 68-90. On reconciliation and the rise of the Lost Cause mythology as well as resistance to it, see Paul S. Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900*, New York, 1937; Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South*, New York, 1987; Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920*, Athens, GA., 1980; and David W. Blight, "For Something Beyond the Battlefield: Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War", *Journal of American History*, (March,1989), pp. 1156-1178.

13. Nathan Irvin Huggins, "The Deforming Mirror of Truth", new introduction to *Black Odyssey: The African American Ordeal in Slavery*, New York, 1990, reissued edition, xiii. Du Bois, *Suppression*, in *Du Bois: Writings*, pp. 196-97.

of conflict, Du Bois's very subject matter placed him in an oppositional – and sometimes advantageous – position to comment on the struggle over memory in American society. Du Bois came to see himself as an historical "outsider" in America, but one who could use his American duality, the famous "double consciousness" about which he wrote in *Souls*, as a lens through which to observe and interrogate the nation's history. The almost hypnotic hold that Du Bois's construction of "twoness", of "two warring ideals" (the competing identities of being black and American) has had on students of African American culture is now widely critiqued and even dismissed by some as an idea bound by Du Bois's own personal experience and outlook. The double consciousness concept is not, and never has been, a static description of African American identity.[14] The range of claims made on either side of the divide between blackness and Americanness, between racial distinctiveness and universality, are as old as the antebellum generation of black leadership who faced choices of how best to negotiate the miserable reality of American racism. Throughout American history, many black leaders, like other ethnic, immigrant, or labor leaders, just got up in the morning and tried to change the conditions of their people. It is hard to imagine Harriet Tubman musing for long on such existential questions of identity.

Existential crises were reserved, perhaps, for a Hegelian writer like Du Bois, who tried to take the pulse of history, and find a new place in it for black people. As he would in various ways in several other works, in *Souls*, Du Bois asserted that the black experience stood at the center of national history, at least for those who cared to look at conflict rather than only continuity, at irony rather than pleasing myth. His image of the "swarthy spectre" sitting in its "accustomed seat at the nation's feast" frames his claim that "the nation has not yet found peace from its sins..." in the fortieth year since emancipation.[15] Spectres haunt, and American memory was haunted, Du Bois seemed to be saying; the country's collective memory awaited new voices, new scholars, and story-tellers who might peer into its contradictions, and make irony the lifeblood of the story rather than merely the unseen background. At the very least, such an approach might change the seating arrangement at the feast.

The novelist John Edgar Wideman declared that if he were allowed only one book with which to teach post-Civil War American history, it would be *Souls of Black Folk*. Such a comment attests to the function of *Souls* as a work of history. But Wideman also claimed that each time he teaches or reads the book, when he closes it, "beauty and pain linger". He finds himself transported to beautiful memories of the A.M.E. Zion church in which he was raised, a place of hope and sustenance; and then, he is also left with the message of pain, the "disquieting thought", the fear that "nothing has changed" about race in America through time. In Du Bois's own time many perceptive readers wondered about the somber tone of *Souls*. In 1906 William James wrote to Du Bois questioning the despair of the book. "You must not think I am

14. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, rpr, New York, 1969, p. 45. On Du Bois and blacks as historical "outsiders", see Clarence E. Walker, "The American Negro as Historical Outsider, 1836-1935", *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, (Summer, 1986), pp. 140-161. For the most critiques of "double consciousness" see the essays in Gerald Early, ed., *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimiliation*, New York, 1993.

15. Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 47.

personally wedded to the minor key", Du Bois answered. "On the contrary I am tuned to the most aggressive and unquenchable hopefulness. I wanted in this case simply to reveal fully the other side to the world". Although tinged with bravado, Du Bois's answer to James reveals his sense of writing about the tragic "other side" of American experience. This endless dialectic between the beauty and the pain, the progress and the regression, black invisibility and centrality, in American history is just what Du Bois sought to capture by bringing the black experience to the heart of the story. For many blacks, the penetrating psychological insights of *Souls* were like nothing else they had read. "I am glad, glad you wrote it", Jesse Fauset wrote to her close friend, "we have needed someone to voice the intricacies of the blind maze of thought and action along which the modern, educated colored man and woman struggles".[16] Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Du Bois's mastery of the essay form revealed the personal meanings in larger historical experience. Like Frederick Douglass, Mark Twain, and Charles Chesnutt before him, he converted duality into an analytical device rather than merely a burden.

Du Bois probably never gave up believing in an ethical basis for history even after he embraced a more materialist, economic analysis in the 1930s. But he eloquently warned about the problem of official domination in the construction of historical memory. "With sufficient general agreement among the dominant classes", he declared in 1935, "the truth of history may be utterly distorted and contradicted and changed to any convenient fairy tale that the masters of men wish".[17] Memories rise and fall from dominance, sometimes through the force of armies, and always. it seems, through the use of language. As intellectuals all over Eastern Europe, parts of the former Soviet Union, South Africa, or China are demonstrating in our own time, and as black writers have understood in America at least since the first slave narratives, the ownership of language – the liberation of words from debasement and control by the masters of plantations or states – can rescue the human spirit from totalitarian control. Words and, indeed, the images and myths they convey are the stuff of memory. They can be innovative or reactionary, liberating or destructive. Modes of power and persuasion keep any version of social memory dominant, and hence the danger and the inspiration of historical revisionism. "Only a horizon ringed with myths", warned Friedrich Nietzsche in 1874, "can unify a culture".[18] This bitter, resilient truth, for better or worse, abides in Du Bois's work.

16. John Edgar Wideman, "Introduction", *The Souls of Black Folk*, Vintage, Library of America edition, New York, 1990, xi, xv-xvi. Du Bois to William James, June 12, 1906, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, (U. Mass.), reel 2; Jessie R. Fauset to Du Bois, Ithaca, N.Y., December 26, 1903, in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *The Correspondence of W.E.B. Du Bois, Selections, 1877-1934*, vol. I, Amherst, 1973, p. 66. On the reception and reviews of *Souls* across a wide racial and political spectrum, both in the United States and internationally, see Aptheker, *Literary Legacy*, pp. 51-69; Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 481-84; and Lewis, *Du Bois*, pp. 265-96.

17. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, p. 726.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 18,4; Garden City, NY, 1956, p. 136. On memory in totalitarian societies, see Geoffrey A. Hosking, "Memory in a Totalitarian Society: The Case of the Soviet Union", in Butler, ed., *Memory*, pp. 115-30. On the importance of words in relation to power, see Vaclav Havel, "Words on Words", *New York Review of Books*, (Jan. 18,1990), pp. 5-8. On the significance of liberation through language in black writing from the slave narratives to the present, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial "Self"*, New York, 1987, pp. 14-24; Houston A. Baker, Jr., *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism*, Chicago, 1980, pp. 33-46; and Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, Urbana, 1979, pp. 16-26. The stakes in debates over social memories are, therefore, quite real: material resources, political power, and life chances. Language is not life; but it is one major component in how we contend for the meanings of and control over historical memories.

In *Time and Narrative*, (1984), Paul Ricoeur has demonstrated how we can only begin to understand and mark time with memory. Social memory becomes embedded through narratives we construct to give it collective meaning and substance. We need stories, the "poetic act of emplotment", argues Ricoeur, to render the bewilderment of time and experience intelligible. Deep understanding is usually derived from the deepest memories, those that have somehow engaged the "soul" and elicited lasting narratives. "It is *in* the soul, hence as an impression", says Ricoeur, "that expectation and memory possess extension". Passionate debates over the actual nature and meaning of the past – often involving claims of collective guilt or responsibility – are concerned, while they remain in the realm of reason at least, not with retribution but with anticipation, with present and future stakes. As Steven Knapp has argued, the "ethical relevance" of the past (any exercise of collective memory) derives from an "agent's imaginative relation to the future consequences of some contemplated action". In other words, we not only have art so that we will not die of reality; we have narratives as an authoritative means of negotiating between retribution and forgiveness, between ignorance and knowledge, between lies and enlightenment. In this context, I am reminded of Frederick Douglass's timeless definition of racism as a "diseased imagination".[19]

Certainly Du Bois understood how deeply embedded the problem of racism was in American historical narratives, as well as how much those narratives continued to shape the future. He said as much many times, notably in *The World and Africa*, (1947), where he charged that it is "the greatest indictment that can be brought against history as a science and against its teachers that we are usually indisposed to refer to history for the settlement of pressing problems". This was not merely another call for a usable history; it was a warning against selective, willfully narrow history, history that resulted from "certain suppressions in the historical record current in our day...", and from "the habit, long fostered, of forgetting and detracting from the thought and acts of the people of Africa". Du Bois also had future consequences in mind in his moralizing about national "duty" in the final pages of *Suppression of the African Slave Trade*. Moreover, he had present and future purposes in mind for the image of John Brown he constructed in his biography of the abolitionist in 1909. Du Bois's short historical synthesis of blacks throughout the African diaspora, *The Negro*, published in 1915, was intended in great part to historicize Africa in a world scrambling to colonize that continent's land and resources. And, finally, as Rampersad has argued, "duty" was itself the hero of Du Bois's essay on the Freedmen's Bureau, "Of the Dawn of Freedom", in *Souls*, a work filled with lessons for a turn-of-the-century world struggling with the problem of the color line.[20]

As for the problem of narratives that reflect deep memory, that engage the "soul", we need only look to the title and content of Du Bois's most famous book. Lewis characterizes the publication of *Souls* as "fireworks going off in a cemetery... sound

19. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. by Kathleen Mc Laughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago, 1984, pp. 21, 19; Steven Knapp, "Collective Memory and the Actual Past", *Representations*, special issue on memory and counter-memory, (Spring 1989), p. 140; Frederick Douglass, "The Races", speech reprinted in *Douglass Monthly*, (Aug., 1859).

20. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry Into the Part Which Africa has Played in World History*, New York, 1947, pp. 1-2; Du Bois, *Suppression*, in *Du Bois: Writings*,pp. 196-97; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Negro*, New York, 1915; and Rampersad, *Art and Imagination*, p. 235.

and light enlivening the inert and the despairing. It was an electrifying manifesto, mobilizing a people for bitter, prolonged struggle to win a place in history". In the "Forethought" of *Souls*, Du Bois addresses the "Gentle Reader" directly and invites him/her to see "buried" treasures, "things which if read with patience may show the meaning of being black" in America. In these essays and one short story, Du Bois used a poetic sensibility to make an offering to the souls of Americans. Du Bois's vexed, sometimes mystical attachments to "race" as a source of ideals and gifts, an outlook he expressed most fully at twenty-nine in the essay, "The Conservation of Races" (1897), also survives full-blown in portions of *Souls*.[21] But the book was like a gift of narratives – across the color line – that might help mediate America's treacherous journey between memory and expectation about race. It probed the past to comprehend what "progress" might mean in the America of the new century. The message was jeremiadic and idealistic, racial and national, personal and collective all at once.

Many scholars have stressed the importance of aesthetic appeal in the art of memory. The emotional power of an historical image or of an individual or collective memory is what renders it lasting. As Frances Yates has shown, unforgettable images that inspired awe and a sense of sacred space were what gave meaning to the memory "wheels", "theaters", and "palaces" of the Italian Renaissance. As Patrick Hutton has contended, even with the modern revolution that the printing press brought to the art of memory, the power of single, poetic images, events, or moments are what still gave substance to cultural memory. Even under the influence of highly individualized modern psychology, and the electronic media revolution, whether we believe in the collective unconscious or not, the memory palaces of our own time can be a single image conveyed in a novelist's metaphor, a scene in a movie, a song lyric, a photograph on the front page, or a even, we might hope, a historian's persuasive prose. We may be focussed, introspectively, on the printed page or more passively at the television screen, instead of listening to the ancient story-teller's voice, but the object is the same: to invoke the emotional threads of memory through aesthetic sensibilities.[22]

According to Rampersad, Du Bois's turn toward art came in 1897 after he first "experienced the goad of southern racism". That year the young scholar-teacher published the original version of "Of Our Spiritual Strivings", which became the first chapter of *Souls*. Throughout the rest of *Souls*, what prompts repeated imagery of "veils" and other metaphoric barriers are those moments when imagined freedom seems almost tangible, but just beyond reach. In the fictional story, "The Coming of John", (chapter 13 of *Souls*), "the veil that lay between him and the white world" is first revealed to a young black man as he becomes educated. Moreover, as John, full of zeal, returns to his sleepy southern hometown to help his people, he finds that he no longer speaks their language and that it was "so hard and strange to fit his old

21. Lewis, *Du Bois*, 277; Du Bois, *Souls*, xi. "The Conservation of Races" was first delivered for and published by The American Negro Academy, *Occasional Papers*, no. 2, Washington, D.C. American Negro Academy, 1897.

22. Yates, *Art of Memory*, p. 2-26,31-36, 129-59,199-230; Patrick H. Hutton, "The Art of Memory Reconceived: From Rhetoric to Psychoanalysis", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, (July-Sept., 1987), pp. 376-92. On the idea of memory palaces or theaters, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, NewYork, 1983, pp. 1-22.

surroundings again". Utterly out of step with his fellow blacks, and about to be lynched by whites, John's homecoming is a tragic "waste of double aims".[23] For Du Bois, education and bitter experience had revealed the "veil" to such a black Southerner as his character, John. Through some kind of dissenting imagination, therefore, (in history or fiction) he was searching for ways to peer through such barriers.

Although *Souls* is on the surface a collection of essays, it is also a selfconscious attempt to write an historical epic. Du Bois takes his reader on many journeys to sacred places of memory, similar, at least imaginatively, to what Pierre Nora has called *lieux de memoire*. In his ironic autobiographical tale, "Of the Meaning of Progress", (chapter 4 of *Souls*), Du Bois the schoolteacher ushers us, "once upon a time", to a remote, segregated hill town in eastern Tennessee, where a bright but povertyridden young black woman named Josie dreams of an education. Du Bois tries to engage the reader's senses – on as many emotional levels as possible – as we hear the music thunder from two black churches, enter a makeshift and "sad-colored schoolhouse", and listen to the "dark fatalism" of the freedmen and freedmen's sons and daughters. But this is not merely a romantic tale set amidst the humble poor and the blue Appalachians. It is a tragic narrative of human struggle, of crushed hope and death. It is also a historian's challenge to the theory of progress in America, told by a narrator who must ride a Jim Crow car in and out of this "little world" that Du Bois seeks to plant in American memory.[24]

Moreover, in "Of the Black Belt", (chapter 7 of *Souls*), Du Bois takes us, again by Jim Crow car, on a revealing journey to the "crimson soil of Georgia". With vivid imagery, he describes a "monotonous" quality of the landscape of the former Cotton Kingdom, yet he "did not nod, nor weary of the scene; for this is *historic ground*". (italics mine). Here is Du Bois the artist/scholar combining descriptions of nature with the social history of the legions of sharecroppers. Here is a more believable Georgia than that of Margaret Mitchell; here is a landscape and a society truly "gone with the wind", where only the "black tenant remains...", and the "shadow-hand of the master's grand nephew or cousin or creditor stretches out of the gray distance to collect the rack-rent remorselessly...". Remnants of the big houses, the "parks and palaces of the Cotton Kingdom", remain, but that merry past" now lies in "silence..., ashes, and tangled weeds". Here is even the beginning of a challenge to the Plantation School's depiction (in literature and history) of the benign world of masters and slaves living in harmonic balance. Du Bois portrays this "Egypt of the Confederacy" as a society built by the blood and toil of generations of blacks, and as a "cause lost long before 1861". On every level, Du Bois's journey through Georgia is an imaginative way to dissent from the traditional image and history of slavery and the South. He frequently invents the voices of freedmen themselves to tell the story. In a scene framed by the "bare ruin of some master's home", an old ex-slave says: "I've seen niggers drop dead in the furrow, but they were kicked aside, and the plow never stopped. Down in the guard house, there's where the blood ran". In "Of

23. Rampersad, "Du Bois as a Man of Literature", in Andrews, ed., *Critical Essays*, p. 62; W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Spiritual Strivings of the Negro People", *Atlantic Monthly*, (Aug.,1897), pp. 194-98; Du Bois, *Souls*, pp. 250, 258. On Du Boisls writing style generally, see Rampersad, *Art and Imagination*, pp. 33-41.

24. Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire", *Representations*, (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-25; Du Bois, *Souls*, 96, pp. 102-03.

the Black Belt" Du Bois combined the beauty and power of nature, the sweep of history in epic proportions, and the painful ruck of the freedmen's daily lives to forge an indelible memory, a memory that countered the romance of the Lost Cause and national reunion. There are no happy darkies in the Black Belt; race relations have not been better off left to the South's own devices And finally, he described a prison farm (a metaphor for the whole landscape and for the collective despair of black debtors) where the present is so full of the past that the tenses become blurred. "It is a depressing place", wrote DuBois, "bare, unshaded, with no charm of past association, only a memory of forced toil, – now, then, and before the war. They are not happy, these men whom we meet throughout this region." In effect, slavery has transcended time in Du Bois's imagery. Neoslavery had emerged by the turn of the century, and two generations of black tenants bore their burdens with a combination of hope and gloom.[25] For progressive Americans yearning for alternative conceptions of southern history, for a history that spoke of real conditions and legacies rather than nostalgia for lost simplicity, this was compelling stuff in 1903. Du Bois was trying to demonstrate that historical epic could mix the bitterly tragic with its sweeter draughts. Whatever his success or failure with realism, there are no resolutions or happy endings in his Black Belt.

Examples abound in *Souls* of Du Bois's attempt to revise history, both with evidence and with aesthetic appeal. In his essay on the Freedmen's Bureau, "Of the Dawn of Freedom" (chapter 2), he presents a logical case for viewing the agency in a more postitive historical light, rather than as a villian in the tragedy of Reconstruction. Du Bois offers a sympathetic portrayal of the "tremendous undertaking" that the Freedmen's Bureau represented in its all too short life: its charge to provide for refugees, create schools, administer abandoned lands, and extend political rights and justice to the freedpeople. He does not ignore the failings of the Bureau, nor of its agents. But this is an essay designed to create a new framework of history in which the plight of the freedpeople might be more easily understood. At bottom, the essay is a *fin de siècle* probing for legacies. It begins and ends with the same famous sentence: "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line". Du Bois provides ample imagery in which to see history anew. First, he urges the reader to cast his/her vision to the rear of the grim parade of history. He suggests three images in the procession of Sherman's march across Georgia: "The Conqueror, the Conquered, and the Negro". "Some see all significance in the grim front of the destroyer", writes Du Bois, "and some in the bitter sufferers of the Lost Cause. But to me neither soldier nor fugitive speaks with so deep a meaning as that dark human cloud that clung like remorse on the rear of those swift columns... In vain they were ordered back..., on they trudged and writhed and surged until they rolled into Savannah a starved and naked horde of tens of thousands".[26] Here is the epic of emancipation with the nameless freedmen, inexorably both liberated and self-liberated in a terrible war, given equal billing in this memory theater with the tragic planters and the awesome William Tecumseh Sherman.

Moreover, in a stunning passage about passion in the South after the war, Du

25. Du Bois, *Souls*, pp. 140, 146, 152, 156. The classic study of slavery at the turn of the century was Ulrich Bonnell Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, New York, 1906. On the idea of neoslavery, see Rampersad, "Slavery and the Literary Imagination", pp. 113-14. 121-23.

26. Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 59.

Bois suggested "two figures" that typified the era of Reconstruction and demonstrated the power of its legacy:

> the one a gray-haired gentleman, whose fathers had quit themselves like men, whose sons lay in nameless graves; who bowed to the evil of slavery because its abolition threatened untold ill to all; who stood at last, in the evening of life, a ... ruined form, with hate in his eyes; and the other a form hovering dark and mother-like, her awful face black with the mists of centuries, had aforetime quailed at that white master's command, had bent in love over the cradles of his sons and daughters, and closed in death the sunken eyes of his wife, — aye, too, at his behest had laid herself low to his lust, and borne a tawny manchild to the world, only to see her dark boy's limbs scattered to the winds by midnight marauders riding after "damned niggers". These were the saddest sights of that woeful day; and no man clasped the hands of these passing figures of the present-past; but hating, they went to their long home, and hating their children's children live today.[27]

Past and present met in this imagery with frightful intensity and authentic tragedy. Here were not the "forms" of old soldiers who had met in battle and could now clasp hands in mutual respect. Here were the veterans of an even deeper conflict, and perhaps a deeper tragedy. They were alternative veterans to those now exalted at national Blue-Gray reunions. Here was the image of an old male slaveholder, the broken symbol of power and sexual domination, and an old black woman, representing "Mammy", mother, and survivor. The heritage of slavery lived on in these "two passing figures of the present-past".

Or, in other words, the problem of slavery lived on in the problem of the freedmen, and the problem of the freedmen lived on in the problem of the color line. But more important still, no racial reconciliation could ever match the vaunted sectional reconciliation without a serious confrontation with the hostility rooted in sexual abuse, lynching, and racism. Du Bois used gender here to render his imagery all the more meaningful. An essay on the Freedmen's Bureau had been converted into a unforgettable statement about the most persistent evils of slavery and racism. Du Bois could have chosen no starker example than white male sexual abuse of black women. As he would later write in 1920, Du Bois could forgive the white South almost anything: "its slavery, for slavery is a world-old habit...; its fighting for a well-lost cause, and for remembering that struggle with tender tears...". But he would never forgive the "persistent insulting of black womanhood which it [the white South] sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust".[28] Deep memory, Du Bois had exhibited in his writing, was rooted in stark imagery and never easily reconciled. In this imagery, Du Bois illustrated that though the sections, North and South had reconciled, the races had not. Indeed, the message was that the issues of race and reunion were trapped in a tragic, mutual dependence.

27. *Ibid.* pp. 68-69. Du Bois' use of the phrase, "no man clasped the hands of these passing figures", is especially interesting because during the 1872 presidential campaign and for a long time thereafter, the slogan, "clasping hands across the bloody chasm", (referring to Union and Confederate veterans) became quite popular. So far as I can tell, it was first popularized by Horace Greeley and the Liberal Republicans in the election of 1872. See William Gillette, *Retreat From Reconstruction*, 1869-79, Baton Rouge, 1979, pp. 56-62.

28. Du Bois, "The Damnation of Women", orig. pub. in *Du Bois*, Darkwater, New York, 1920, in *DuBois: Writings*, p. 958.

These few examples may suffice to demonstrate some of the historical intentions and devices Du Bois employed in *Souls*. As a text, the book is often used for psychological purposes – for the pedagogical aims of understanding American racial identity formation. The book's historical uses and meanings are not as often or as readily grasped by young readers who may be eager to allow Du Bois to take them on a journey of racial memory, rather than a journey into alternative visions of American histories and futures (circa. 1903).

In *Black Reconstruction in America*, a project that was more than twenty years old when it came out in 1935, Du Bois assumes the posture of an empiricist. But in the preface he acknowledges the dual function of the historian: "to tell and interpret". It is especially interesting that in a one page preface Du Bois believed it necessary to "say frankly in advance" that his most basic assumption was that blacks were "ordinary human beings", that he sought to refute any theory of Negro inferiority, and that he understood that this might curtail his audience. The weight of traditional interpretations of slavery and the Civil War and Reconstruction inspired and haunted this long book. Du Bois admitted that he would not convert any diehard racists, but that he would no longer allow emancipation and black enfranchisement after the war to be so easily dismissed as "gestures against nature." *Black Reconstruction* would, therefore, be more than what we are accustomed to calling revisionist history, just another point of view or interpretation. It would be an effort to re-tell what Du Bois considered "the most dramatic episode in American history... the sudden move to free four million black slaves in an effort to stop a great civil war, to end forty years of bitter controversy, and to appease the moral sense of civilization". In 1930, in response to a correspondent eager to know how to interpret the Reconstruction era, Du Bois asserted that "the story of Reconstruction from the point of view of the Negro is yet to be written. When it is written, one may read its tragedy and get its truth". In 1932, Du Bois told another correspondent that he intended to "show that instead of Negro freedom and enfranchisement being an isolated matter that can be treated separately from the main current of history, that it is an integral part, and particularly a part of the economic history of the United States from 1860 to 1880". He had just finished reading Charles Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization*. he told Harry Laidler, and signaling some of the flawed Marxism that would characterize the book, announced himself determined to demonstrate the primacy of material conditions, economic motivations, and monied oligarchies in the story of Reconstruction. In 1934, in an attempt to obtain some final funding, ironically from the Carnegie Corporation, to complete the manuscript for *Black Reconstruction*. Du Bois wrote an apt description of the long-term value of his own book before it was published. "I think I have a book of unusual importance", he said. "Of course, it will not sell widely; it will not pay, but in the long run, it can never be ignored".[29]

29. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*. Edgar H. Webster to Du Bois, Nov.3. 1930; Du Bois to Webster, Nov. 10, 1930; Du Bois to Harry Laidler, June 10, 1932; Du Bois to F. P. Keppel, Carnegie Corp., Nov. 17, 1934, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, (U. Mass.) reels 34, 37, 41. Du Bois received a $5,000 grant from the Rosenwald Fund, $1,250 from the Carnegie Foundation, and $500 as an advance from Harcourt, Brace. On Du Bois as historian, I am indebted to Clarence E. Walker, "Black Reconstruction in America: W.E.B. Du Bois' Challenge to the Dark and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography", a copy in manuscript provided by the author. On the origins, publishing history, and long-term significance of *Black Reconstruction*, see Aptheker, *Literary Legacy*, pp. 211-56; and David Levering Lewis, "Introduction", *Black Reconstruction* (1992 edition). Also see Jessie P. Guzman, "W.E.B. Du Bois — The Historian", *Journal of Negro Education*, (Fall, 1961), pp. 27-46;

These private statements, prior to publication, indicate a good deal about Du Bois's desire to engage big questions, to subvert older interpretations, and to write a narrative about the whole of American history, and not just a peculiarly black part.

The first chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, "The Black Worker", is a meditation on the meaning of slavery in American history. Coupled with the final chapter, "The Propaganda of History"; these two essays independently can serve as a primer for the field of African American history as it has developed since the 1930s. Although Du Bois's tone was unquestionably polemical, he did strive for some balanced perspective. He acknowledged that slaveholders were not unremittingly evil people, and even that the institution of slavery was "not usually a deliberately cruel and oppressive system". He allowed that slaves may have been reasonably housed and fed. But looking back upon the historiography of slavery, as well as at popular attitudes toward the Old South as they stood in the 1930s, Du Bois declared inconceivable

> the idyllic picture of a patriarchal state with cultured and humane masters under whom slaves were as children, guided and trained in work and play, given each such mental training as was for their good...

Instead, he offered a piceure of a labor system bent on the "ultimate degredation of man", and the "psychological" disorientation of individuals. Ironically, such a picture anticipated the future work of Stanley Elkins and critiqued the former work of Ulrich B. Phillips at the same time.[30]

To Du Bois the broadest significance of slavery lay in its definition of the limits of American democracy. As long as labor, freedom, and Constitutional rights were defined in racial terms, he suggested, America's historical self-definition would always be stunted. Du Bois quoted at length from Frederick Douglass's famous Fourth of July oration in 1852 to underscore the fundamental irony and dishonesty at the core of American history. Du Bois called Douglass the voice of the exploited "black worker", vaguely setting up his subsequent class analysis of Reconstruction. But more importantly, he appropriated Douglass's scorching phrases to the long-term aim of an alternative history, one not characterized by "deception, impiety, and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes...". He used the former slave, in some of his angriest rhetoric, to expose that American history where the "ten thousand wrongs of the American slave" were kept in "the strictest silence", and where he who would reveal them was considered an "enemy of the nation" for daring to "make those wrongs the subject of public discourse". The heroes of the slavery era, Du Bois contended, were the fugitive slaves who constantly tested the power of slavery by their escapes and their witness. Indeed, fugitive slaves like Douglass not only

Ferrucio Gambino, "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Proletariat in Black Reconstruction", in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *American Labor and Immigration History 1877-1920s*, Urbana, 1983, pp. 43-60; Paul Richards, "W.E.B. DuBois and American Social History: The Evolution of a Marxist", *Radical History*, (1970), pp. 37-65; and Charles H. Wesley, "W.E.B. DuBois, Historian", *Freedomways*, (Winter, 1965), pp. 59-72. For a discussion of Du Bois as historian that stresses his scholarly "isolation", see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980*, Urbana, 1986, pp. 5-6, 70-71, 279-80.

30. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, pp. 9-11. See Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Intellectual and Institutional Life*, New York, 1959. For an interesting reading of the relationship between Du Bois and Phillips, see John David Smith, "Du Bois and Phillips – Symbolic Antagonists of the Progressive Era", *The Centennial Review* (Winter, 1980), pp. 88- 102.

provided leadership, but they furnished a "text for the abolition idealists".[31] Such "texts" (the slave narratives), as many historians and critics have argued in recent years, provided the foundation of African American literary and political history. Moreover, if the black worker, as Du Bois contended, was the "founding stone" of the antebellum economic system that tumbled into civil war, then the slave narrative – the entire abolitionist literature – was the "founding stone" of an alternative American history. Here was a use of history to fashion a new vision of the future, both analytical and, in a way, sacred.

Near the end of *Black Reconstruction* Du Bois returns to Douglass as he continues to explore the meaning of slavery. "No one can read that first thin autobiography of Frederick Douglass", Du Bois declares,

> and have left many illusions about slavery. And if truth is our object, no amount of flowery romance and personal reminiscences of its protected beneficiaries can keep the world from knowing that slavery was a cruel, dirty, costly, and inexcusable anachronism, which nearly ruined the world's greatest experiment in democracy.

Writing at the very time the W.P.A. slave narratives were being collected, and well before any serious rediscovery of Douglass or the other antebellum black writers, Du Bois made an important claim about black sources and history, even if he did romantcize it: some of the most important witnesses had never been asked, the very notion of a source needed redeflnition, and an entire history was yet to be told. In what may have been an ironic reference to Booker Washington, Du Bois insisted that black history did not begin with emancipation: "*up from this slavery* gradually climbed the Free Negro with clearer, modern expression and more definite aim long before the emancipation of 1863". (italics mine)[32] Such a conception of black history was not one blacks alone were to possess. Explicitly, Du Bois made it clear that in probing the meaning of slavery, Americans might better understand the nature of their republican experiment.

Du Bois's "The Propaganda of History" (the final chapter) is an indictment of American historiography and an incisive statement of the meaning of race in American historical memory. If the stakes in *Souls of Black Folk* were the spiritual and psychological well-being of blacks in the age of segregation – the creation of an alternative memory to that forged by white popular literature and reinforced by Booker Washington – then the stakes in *Black Reconstruction* were collective *national* memory, and the struggle over the nature of history itself. According to Du Bois (as of 1935) there were essentially five tragic flaws in Amencan historiography: first, most American historians, consciously or unconsciously, conspired in an avoidance of conflict especially on the issue of race; second, American historians spurned moral judgment or responsibility for the wrongs of the past; third, slavery, both as an institution and as a cause of the Civil War, had never forthrightly been confronted; fourth, the active role of blacks, as well as abolitionism broadly defined, in the achievment of freedom had been ignored or suppressed; and fifth, the highly-developed "hideous mistake" thesis about Reconstruction was rooted in false assumptions, mass production, and popular racism. This wall of historiography

31. Frederick Douglass, as quoted in Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, pp. 14-15.
32. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, pp. 13, 14, 15.

and popular culture could not easily be scaled. Its flaws were not sins, wrote Du Bois, of "mere omission and ...emphasis".[33] They had to be engaged with new research, aggressive arguments, and even with counter"propaganda". Du Bois's devastating critique of American historiography provides one of the most acute examples we have of the interdependence of history and society, of how deeply rooted collective historical memories are in social structure, popular beliefs, and professional academic interests. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* challenged more than historiography; it challenged the racism and the social theory through which most Americans gained any level of historical consciousness. The work is more important for these interpretive aims than any original research. Indeed, Du Bois made very little use of archival sources in universities and state repositories across the South in the early 1930s. He relied primarily upon government documents, published proceedings of state conventions, and monographs. Moreover, he largely ignored newspapers. These flaws in the research have always led some to simply dismiss the book. David Lewis has pointed to the limitations of such research, but reminds us that, as John Hope Franklin and others bitterly discovered. those southern archives were rigidly segregated in the twenties and thirties, as were the public facilities surrounding them.[34]

Apart from some of the legend that surrounds this book, *Black Reconstruction* should be seen for what Du Bois intended: a forceful reinterpretation, an assault on traditional conceptions of American history that would, in turn, serve the political ends of black people. He meant for this book to awaken historians, move readers, cause trouble; its style was often sermonic, prophetic. Nowhere is Du Bois's penchant for an Old Testament (Lewis calls it "Carlylean") prose style more apparent. Such a style still grates on the ears of many scholars and late twentieth century readers. But a favorite of my own comes at the end of chapter five as Du Bois, writing not for the graduate seminar, but as a black Isaiah in the marketplace of white supremacist historiography, describes emancipation:

> It was all foolish, bizarre, and tawdry. Gangs of dirty Negroes howling and dancing; poverty-stricken ignorant laborers mistaking war, destruction and revolution for the mystery of the free human soul; and yet to these black folk it was the Apocalypse. The magnificant trumpet tones of Hebrew scripture, transmuted and oddly changed, became a strange new gospel. All that is Beauty, all that was Love, all that was Truth, stood on the top of these mad mornings and sang with the stars. A great human sob shrieked in the wind, and tossed its tears upon the sea — free, free, free.[35]

Was this history – such passages that ended with descriptions of a "land fire drunk", and singing Schi11er's lyrics to the Ode to Joy? That is a debate left best to graduate seminars. What is certain is that it is now hard to imagine the great revision Reconstruction history has undergone without these trumpet tones that helped to launch it.

American historiography on race has come so far since the 1930s that the avoidance

33. *Ibid.*, pp.717,713.
34. Lewis, " Introduction", new edition of *Black Reconstruction*, (1992).
35. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, pp. 124, 126.

of conflict no longer seems as pressing a problem as it once did. Likewise, since the turbulent 1960s and 1970s the notion of history as moral discourse may seem to have returned to its proper place on the periphery of historians' concerns. But almost all debates over "new" histories and "old" histories, over events vs. social process, over the various ways to return to "narrative", or indeed, over the question of "multiculturalism", have hinged in great part not only on the proper subject matter of history but on the issues Du Bois identified in 1935: conflict/continuity, scholarly dispassion/moral judgment, and the inclusion of those still perceived as outsiders. The current challenge of multicultural studies in the academy, and in public policy, would benefit from the perspective of looking back at such prior models. Du Bois did not advocate a personal needs-based history; by and large he resisted the kind of ahistorical chauvinism that the Reagan era has brought us from both ends of the ideological spectrum. It is true that after his rather bloody break with the NAACP in the thirties, Du Bois advocated a kind of selective, separate institutional development for blacks. Aging, frustrated, and ever more alientated from Jim Crow America, Du Bois, right or wrong, saw legitimate ends in separate development. But whether one looks back at his writings in the twenties, or ahead to the forties, his work is full of what many would now call a multicultural vision of American history. In 1924, he declared that the United States should never see itself as merely a "continuation of English nationality". "America is conglomerate. This is at once her problem and her glory". In 1946, as the Cold War revved up, Du Bois concluded his book, *The World and Africa*, with the following cosmopolitan epilogue: "I dream a world of infinite and invaluable variety... in a realm of true freedom... in gift, aptitude, and genius – all possible manner of difference... each effort to stop this freedom of being is a blow at... real democracy...".[36] These visions all rest in their particular contexts, but it is clear that Du Bois saw pluralism as the source of a new American historical narrative, not its obstacle.

Du Bois's comments on the meaning of conflict and moral responsibility in American history have had many interesting echoes in the more than half a century since he wrote them. In the conclusion of *Black Reconstruction*, looking especially to the Civil War era, he warned against using history merely "for our pleasure and amusement, for inflating our national ego...". A meaningful black history might so controvert white supremecy that it was deemed "neither wise nor patriotic to speak of all the causes of strife and the terrible results to which sectional differences in the United States had led". There had to be a place for slavery, massive civil war, and post-war racial violence in the doctrine of American progress. Avoidance might be the only effective remedy, then, to sustain an historical memory rooted in the contradiction of white supremecy and progress. Du Bois chastized "reticent" historians who blinked or bowed in the face of an issue such as slavery. "Our histories tend to discuss American slavery so impartially", he wrote,

36. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America*, Boston, 1924, i-ii; Du Bois, *The World and Africa*, p. 261. Some of the most interesting recent writing about "multiculturalism" has been in *Contention: Debates in Society Culture, and Science*. See essays by David Hollinger, Gary B. Nash, Edward Berenson, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., A.E. Barnes, and Todd Gitlin, (Spring, 1992, fall, 1992, Winter, 1993). The ways in which Du Bois's work serves as a model for our current debates over multiculturalism is a theme I hope to develop more fully in later work.

that in the end nobody seems to have done wrong and everybody was right. Slavery appears to have been thrust upon unwilling helpless America, while the South was blameless in becoming its center. The difference of development, North and South, is explained as a sort of working out of cosmic social and economic law.

In this passage Du Bois captured the spirit and substance of much that had been written, inside and out of the academy, about the meaning of slavery and the Civil War in the seventy years since Appomattox. He was trying to advance a new set of *facts* into the historical equation at the same time he insisted that history was inherently a moral discourse. "War and especially civil strife leave terrible wounds", he contended. "It is the duty of humanity to heal them".[37]

One of the facts with which Du Bois was most concerned was the role of slavery in causing the Civil War. This question was, and still is pivotal in the broad development of American historical memory. Du Bois was incredulous toward interpretations of Civil War causation that ignored the slavery question. He considered it simply self-evident that the Confederary existed and fought for the perpetuation of slavery. No amount of stress on Unionism, state rights, or "differences in civilization" could, in his view, ever diminish the centrality of slavery as the moral and political cause of the war. He identified the stakes involved between contending memories when he pointed to a monument in North Carolina that had, in his view, achieved "the impossible by recording of Confederate soldiers: 'they died fighting for liberty!'"[38]

These sentiments toward the Confederate dead and toward the whole conception of the Civil War as a struggle between white men over southern independence or national union are strikingly similar to those Frederick Douglass expressed a generation earlier. Douglass had deeply resented monuments to Confederate leaders and soldiers, and he especially resisted the way sectional reconciliation had been forged through the mutual respect of white southern and northern veterans. Du Bois restated these resentments and demonstrated how the values of honor and valor and the concept of the good fight on both sides had helped usher the idea of black emancipation into the background of America's memory of the Civil War. To forget about slavery as a cause of the war was one of the surest ways to forget about the challenges of black freedom and equality during the age of Jim Crow. One could "search current American histories almost in vain", wrote Du Bois, "to find... even a faint recognition of" the thousands of black soldiers who fought in the Civil War, and of the fact that the freedpeople were not "inert recipients of freedom at the hands of philanthropists...".[39]

In this historiographic manifesto, Du Bois observed that the greatest obstacle to any development of a new American historical memory regarding race was the "chorus of agreement" about Reconstruction. In the academy, in popular culture, and in the schools, when Americans reflected upon their past by the 1930s they

37. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, pp. 713-14.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 715-16. Here Du Bois's historical polemicism is apparent. Indeed, it would be difficult for a black historian of his time to acknowledge the Confederate soldier's claim to be fighting for "liberty". But in their 1860s perspective, many southerners, of course, saw no contradiction between fighting to preserve a slave economy and for the principles of southern independence or self-determination. Memory is thus demonstrated to be a tricky and deeply political phenomenon.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 716-17.

tended to look to the "tragedy" of Reconstruction for lessons and meaning. The South had been "greviously... wounded", blacks had been "set back" by mistaken radical policies, and the nation as a whole was shamed and retarded in its growth to greatness. "There is scarce a child in the street", wrote Du Bois, "that cannot tell you that the whole effort was a hideous mistake...". Du Bois explained why this historiography, both popular and academic, was so "overwhelming".[40] It had been initiated and sustained by two great popularizers, James Ford Rhodes and Claude Bowers. Rhodes, an Ohio businessman, combined the techniques of mass production, an overriding thesis of Negro inferiority, and a conservative's contempt for democracy to "manufacture" (as Du Bois put it) his famous multi-volume *History of the United States From the Compromise of 1850* (the first volume published in 1903 and the final volumes of seven in 1906). Rhodes's wide popularity and influence over school textbooks and curriculums was matched in the 1920s by the journalist Bowers' best-selling *The Tragic Era*, (1929), a work that took the tragic legend of Reconstruction to its fullest development and largest audience yet. Du Bois's characterization of Bowers' work as a "classic example of historical propaganda of the cheaper sort" demonstrates not only his disgust, but his awareness that the popularization of historical memory is, in part, a struggle over power and social domination.[41]

Within the academy, according to Du Bois, the "frontal attack on Reconstruction" was most formidable of all. He surveyed the wide range of Reconstruction historiography produced in the first third of the Twentieth century, but centered his critique on John W. Burgess and William A. Dunning. Burgess, a southerner by birth, but ex-Union soldier who became an Amherst College graduate and a professor of political science at Columbia University, used a frank theory of white supremecy and an overt defense of authority to condemn Reconstruction as an attempt to overthrow the natural order. Readers of Burgess's work would not only witness the political mistakes of Reconstruction as well as the efforts to push history beyond its evolutionary limits, but they encountered a bold-faced, academic argument that black people had simply not risen above "barbarism", and had never "created any civilization of any kind". At the turn of the century Burgess, of course, voiced the prevailing racial ideology of the age; his perspective was not unique and his work appeared to be scholarly by all existing conventions. History, rooted in such sentiments, had convinced Du Bois that all struggles over historical memory would, therefore, have to be fought on both sides with some degree of "propaganda". Du Bois respected the more careful and scholarly Dunning (also of Columbia) as a "less dogmatic" historian.[42] But in many ways, the "Dunning school" of Reconstruction historiography, with its enormous influence on two generations of scholars, its dozen or more state-by-state monographs, and even with its few exceptions that did acknowledge blacks as part of the story, provided the greatest obstacle of all to an alternative memory. Most of the Dunning school works, however scholarly or scientific, had been written in the service of the tragic legend of Reconstruction and a theory of white supremacy.

40. *Ibid.*, p.717.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 717. See Rhodes, *The History of the United States*; and Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era*, Cambridge, Ma., 1929.

42. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, pp. 721, 718-19. See John W. Burgess, *Reconstruction and the Constitution, 1866-1876*, New York, 1902; and William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877*, New York, 1907.

What Du Bois illuminates in the final chapter of *Black Reconstruction* is the social organization of remembering and forgetting. Versions of historical memory – their sources and meaning – can be suppressed in the interest of social cohesion or dominance. Following the lead of Carter Woodson and a handful of less visible black and white historians, Du Bois helped to launch the long attempt to rescue black history in America from what many scholars have called a "structural amnesia". The United States during the early twentieth century was not in the strict sense a totalitarian state. There was no official state censor governing scholarship and ideas; no single authority could be said to have had the power of creation or erasure of official memories, as in totalitarian societies (with the exception of the World War I years). But it is not stretching the analogy too far to suggest that the age of Jim Crow, with its depths of scholarly and popular racism, approximated the totalitarian model for the construction of social memory. Geoffrey Hosking has argued that in totalitarian societies authority structures can only be sustained by a powerful guiding mythology - official histories or memories.[43] The case was not altogether different in America. The authority structure of white supremecy had been almost as well-served by the historiography on Reconstruction as it had been by Jim Crow laws, official acquiesence in lynching, or "coon songs" and black-face minstrel shows. Such was the aim, said, Du Bois, of those Reconstruction historians who ridiculed "the Negro" as the "impossible joke in the whole development...". Du Bois sadly described the results of this structural control of historical memory. "We have in fiftv years", he wrote, "by libel, innuendo, and silence, so completely misstated and obliterated the history of the Negro in America... that today it is almost unknown". History had been effectively used, he maintained, to teach Americans to "embrace and worship the color bar as social salvation...".[44]

Du Bois's critique of Reconstruction historiography led him, finally, to a meditation on the epistemology of history and on the proper role of the historian. By training and temperament he was interested in how historians create and convey knowledge. Du Bois never stopped referring to history as a "science", and he always remained committed at least to the ideal of finding historical, if not objective, "truth". By the 1930s he certainly was no longer a hard-boiled empiricist, but he could not easily relinquish the belief in history "either as a science or as an art using the results of science". But Du Bois appreciated and exploited the subjectivity of the historian's craft. In a 1937 memorandum about his proposed *Encyclopedia of the Negro*, he demonstrated that, though he was never indifferent about the pursuit of truth, he knew its limitations. "No scientific work done by living, feeling men and dealing with humanity", wrote Du Bois, "can be wholly impartial":

> Man must sympathize with misfortune, deplore evil, hope for good, recognize human fellowship. All that social science can do is so to limit natural human feeling by ascertained facts as to approach a fair statement of truth.[45]

43. Burke, "History as Social Memory", in Butler, ed., *Memory*, pp. 106-08; Hosking, "Memory in a Totalitarian Society", in Butler, ed. *Memory*, pp. 118-19.

44. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, p. 723.

45. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Confidential Memorandum Regarding the Significance of the Proposed Encyclopedia of the Negro", (1937), in Herbert Aptheker, ed., *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961*, by W.E.B. Du Bois, Amherst, 1985, p. 161.

Du Bois was a relativist, like most, with an evolving, sometimes clear, sometimes ambiguous, but often aggressive conception of right and wrong interpretations.

The restraint apparent in 1937 had seemed under great duress two years earlier when Du Bois finished *Black Reconstruction*. Because he wrote in a "field devastated by passion and belief", and because racism so infested the historiography of Reconstruction, Du Bois argued that of "sheer necessity" he had written an "arraignment of American historians and an indictment of their ideals". Although he vowed to "let no searing of the memory by intolerable insult" distract him from a search for facts, he acknowledged that the "one fact" driving his analysis was that most recent historians of Reconstruction "cannot conceive Negroes as men". Reconstruction historiography was understandable, Du Bois contended, as the result of intersectional attraction to a lost cause and a romantic South. But it rested on a bedrock of "propaganda against the Negro since emancipation... one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings, an effort involving universities, history, science, social life and religion".[46] Such propaganda demanded counter-propaganda in Du Bois's view, and hence the irony in the title of his final chapter.

The idealist in Du Bois prompted him to argue that Reconstruction historiography had "spoiled and misconceived the position of the historian". If history were to be the proper guide for a better future, historians had to distinguish between "fact and desire". In almost the same breath Du Bois made an objectivist demand for the "things that actually happened...", and a relativist appeal for the "philosopher and prophet... to interpret these facts". These "two functions" of the historian, as Du Bois described them, are precisely the same two he reserved for himself. Confronting a racist historical memory in America could not be accomplished by a mere separation of fact and desire. It demanded contextualism and relativism, the careful chronicler and the moral prophet. Du Bois tried to do both, but in the end, perhaps by necessity and temperament, he chose primarily the latter role.[47]

In the final pages of *Black Reconstruction* Du Bois turns aggressively to art to convey the stakes of contending historical memories. He portrayed the whole of black history from the slave trade through emancipation as a "magnificent drama" and a "tragedy that beggared the Greek". He likened this American epic to the upheavals of the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. Black people, he said, had "descended into Hell; and in the third century they arose from the dead, in the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen". This was a typical Du Boisian flight into hyperbole; but the resurrection imagery frames his angry disavowal of those American historians who had constructed the dominant memory of Reconstruction. So much had been missed; so much had been suppressed. The Civil War, black freedom, and the Reconstruction of the South, Du Bois seemed to be saying, ought to have been the epic of American democracy. "Yet we are blind", he declared, "and led by the blind". Du Bois would

46. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, p. 727

47. *Ibid.*, p. 722. On Du Bois as moral prophet, see Rampersad, *Art and Imagination*, pp. 91-115; and Marable, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, pp. 190-217. On historians' relativism, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge, Eng., 1988, pp. 164-67, 264-68, 282-91, 387-92; John Higham, with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert, *History: The Development of Historical Studies in the United States*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965, pp. 117-131; and Michael Kammen, *Selvages and Biases: The Fabric of History in American Culture*, Ithaca, 1987, pp. 3-62.

have agreed (albeit for different reasons) with Walt Whitman's famous caveat that "the real war will never get into the books". The art of constructing social memory, Du Bois understood, was not a benign process; it thrived on great contention, "with aspiration and art deliberately and elaborately distorted".[48]

The despairing tone of Du Bois's ending in *Black Reconstruction* probably reflects an honest sense of the obstacles this book, and any future revision of Reconstruction history, would face. It also represents Du Bois's felt need to confront and provoke his fellow historians. He was not writing in 1935 as a typical professor inside the academy; he could not simply take his work to the American Historical Association's annual meetings, which were ironically raging at that time with debates over relativism and objectivity. Du Bois had to contend for American historical memory – for a new vision of the meaning of race and Reconstruction – with the weapons of language. He felt "so futile", he said, in confronting this task. Du Bois viewed the "truer deeper facts of Reconstruction with a deep despair". To him, it seemed an era of great lost opportunity in its own context, and great misapprehension in the works of historians.[49] Du Bois waxed nostalgic for the heyday of radical Reconstruction: "those seven mystic years between Johnson's [President Andrew] 'swing around the circle' and the panic of 1873" when Americans allowed themselves to believe in and experiment with racial equality (a yearning, for better or worse, shared by later revisionists during the modern civil rights movement). Such a season of hope he then juxtaposes with the "crash of hell" that followed in the late nineteenth century, a period of racial repression and organized forgetting.

Du Bois ends the book with the image of a college teacher in an academic hall somewhere at the turn of the century. The teacher "looks into the upturned face of youth and in him youth sees the gowned shape of wisdom and hears the voice of God". "Cynically", the professor "sneers at 'chinks' and 'niggers'". Then Du Bois places the words of the historian John Burgess in the mouth of the teacher. The nation, announces the lecturer,

48. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, p. 727; Walt Whitman, "Specimen Days", in Floyd Stovall, ed., *Prose Works*, 1892; rpr., New York, 1963, *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, pp. I, 117.

49. The great irony of Du Bois's despair is that by the 1960s (the "Second Reconstruction" in America) the historiography of Reconstruction would come full circle to essentially Du Bois' vision. Inspired in part by Du Bois's work, the Revisionists produced an enormous outpouring of "new" history about the Reconstruction era. Led by Kenneth Stampp, Willie Lee Rose, John Hope Franklin, Richard Current, and others, the revisionists reversed virtually every tenet of the traditional, "hideous mistake" thesis. They tended to view the radicals as a complex lot who championed human rights, but did not brutalize the South. The revisionists persuasively rehabilitated the carpetbaggers, demonstrated the growth of independent black institutions (family, schools, and churches), illuminated the remarkable growth of black politics, and argued that Reconstruction as a whole was by no means a complete failure; and if it was, they were fond of quoting Du Bois' claim that it had been a "splendid failure" (*Black Reconstruction*, p. 708). Indeed, no field of American historiography became so active and explosive, and no traditional interpretation was so fundamentally overturned as that of Reconstruction. A half century after the publication of Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, Eric Foner has portrayed the aftermath of the Civil War as a "massive experiment in interracial democracy without precedent in the history of this or any other country that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century". Foner's recent monumental effort at a coherent synthesis of this complex era is boldly organized around the theme of "the centrality of the black experience". See Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, New York, 1988, pp. XXIV-XXV. For the most complete collection of revisionist writings, see Kenneth M. Stampp and Leon Litwack, eds, *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings*, Baton Rouge, 1969, a book dedicated in part to Du Bois. For two of the best among many historiographical essays on Reconstruction, see Bernard A. Weisberger, "The Dark and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography", *Journal of Southern History*, (Nov., 1959), pp. 427-47; and Eric Foner, "Reconstruction Revisited", *Reviews in American History*, (Dec.,1982), pp. 82-88.

> has changed its views in regard to the political relation of races and has at last virtually accepted the ideas of the South on this subject. The white men of the South need now have no further fear that the Republican party... will ever again give themselves over to the vain imagination of the political equality of man.[50]

In this metaphoric classroom, with the actual words of a leading Reconstruction historian, Du Bois demonstrated that the real tragedy of Reconstruction was not in the history but in the histories. In this classroom, as in textbooks, in popular culture, and in historiography itself, white supremecy in the present remained secure as long as historical memories were controlled or suppressed. The hope embedded in Du Bois's tragic ending of *Black Reconstruction* is that when the marketplace for the construction of social memories becomes as free and open as possible, while still firmly guided by the rules of scholarship, then the politics of remembering and forgetting might be, here and there, overcome. Whether that was a vain hope, or a realized ideal, remains the principal challenge of all those seriously interested in American historical consciousness. This is especially true now in a time when public forums, and visual and electronic media, are so susceptible to demogogic leaders who play fast and free with history.

50. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, pp. 726-28.