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The Race of Time: Du Bois and Reconstruction

Charles Lemert

Dedicated with love to my firstborn, Matthew (1970–2000), who chose to leave the time of this life in the midst of my mediations on the time of race.

Presentism is the fault of holding persons native to an earlier time accountable to the standards of a present time. Those blamed in the first place are usually dead, or otherwise indisposed. They cannot defend themselves. Yet they are accused. There are many instances. One could say, for example, that by today's standards, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was at best a feminist essentialist, at worst a racist. Or, it is possible to blame Anna Julia Cooper, one of her generation's most brilliantly timeless thinkers, for her failure to touch on sex. Even W. E. B. Du Bois, than whom none among those in his several time zones was more prescient, could be accused of insufficiency with regard to women. He was a feminist in his way, but by present standards he was not a good enough one.

The thing about presentism is that it turns complaint upon the complainer. The deficiency of the one held to standards not of his or her time is converted into a criticism of the critic for his own failure to keep histori-

cal time in order. Yet presentism is not an entirely silly complaint. People do have to watch out for mistakes made in respect to rules they could not possibly have understood. There is a vast body of civil and criminal law of which I know nothing whatever. Yet if caught in violation of some part of it, I could be held in contempt by the agents of enforcement. Take, for specific example, income taxes. Except for sleeping, eating, and perhaps reading, there are few duties of ordinary life that consume more of my time. I certainly spend more time dealing with tax-related duties than I do enjoying sex of all kinds. Still, I could not begin to know more than a few of the rules in the tax codes, the breaking of which could land me in trouble of some indefinite kind. Here, fortunately, there is a safeguard. When it comes to codes of this sort, I am able to pay experts—notably, lawyers and accountants—to watch the rules on my behalf. But when it comes to presentism, there is no expert who can perform such a service on my behalf (though this could be an excellent, and potentially profitable, sideline business for social theorists).

Presentism is not the only problem of this kind. There must be a fallacy associated with failures of a correlative but opposite kind. There ought to be one, if there isn't. Here's the logic of it: If presentism is the fault of holding the long, recently, or soon-to-be dead responsible for the manners of present company; then "X" is the error of failing to grant the real or virtually dead credit for having understood present manners better than present company. What could "X" be called? (Let's hope not "pastism.") The difference between "X" and presentism turns on an interesting prior distinction—one made with delicacy in the *Book of Common Prayer*—between sins of omission and those of commission. Presentism, thereby, is the sin of committing a faulty attribution of omission to the dead who, at the time they were living, could not have known the rules they failed to obey. By contrast, "X" would be an active neglect by the living of the achievements of the dead—a commission exercised upon the refusal to grant that others knew the rules before they did. Within full-bodied analytic culture, one might expect the "X" to be filled with something like "culpably feasible ignorance of the present-promise of past deeds." Since this won't do, let us call it "X."

As it turns out, "X" is quite a good term. It was the "X" in Jacques Derrida's early writings on erasure that may have started the argument in the first place. His idea was that all could never be said and done. This he derived from the erasing "X" that he drew through most of the sacred ideals of the modern West—the primacy of voice, the privileging of articulate consciousness, the presumption of present meaning, the moral authority of the Self, the principles of the Center, and so on. The most notorious "X" of Der-

rida's was in an essay that appeared in *Théorie d'ensemble*, the 1968 collective manifesto of the then new French social theory. There he explained his very squirrely concept *différance*, with the following remarkable statement: "Or si la différence est (je mets aussi le 'est' sous rature) ce qui rend possible la présentation de l'étant-présent, elle ne se présente jamais comme telle."¹ To make a long story short, Derrida meant to say that when we come upon certain crucial words like "is" (perhaps the most crucial and duplicitous of all words), we must think twice. To say "is" is to suggest that some or another (material or immaterial) subject "is" in the present time of the statement uttered. "Derrida is still alive." The man is present in the present time. Were "Derrida" to be a fictional character, as his detractors seem to suppose, the effect would be the same. The reader is asked to think of him, whomever he is, as present.

Unfortunately, the long story cannot be made all that short. Whenever "is" is uttered, there is a nest of problems. The first of which is with "Being" itself—chief among those words about which Derrida (borrowing here with reservations from Heidegger) thinks we must think twice. When we utter "is," we are committing an ontology of sorts. It is impossible to utter the word "is" without implying a judgment about Being. Derrida was saying, in effect: Always and ever, put such words "under erasure" (*sous rature*), because nothing is ever present as such. This is a loose translation, but looseness is the famous point of the concept *différance*. Everything we say and think is loose—open to suspicion. Even, and especially, speaking itself is at best loosely related to one's *vouloir-dire*—to whatever one "means to say," to meaning itself. When some one or some thing "is said to exist"—that is, is meant to be thought of as "present"—Derrida means for us to draw the implication that such ones or things are, in fact, never truly present at the moment of the saying. There is, in effect, no "being present."

Hence to say "Derrida is still alive" is to mean to say what truly cannot be said: that he is "present" in the current time. This, of course, is a foolish saying, because the "being-present" to me of any one, including Derrida (in whose presence I have never knowingly been, not once), is always at a distance. However thin or thick that distancing space is—whether passable in an instant or in the duration necessary to cross an ocean or more—the alleged presence of another is always, and necessarily, deferred. Hence,

1. Jacques Derrida, "La Différence," in *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil/Collection Tel Quel, 1968); reprinted in *Marges de la Philosophie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 6.

différance. It is impossible, thus, to speak of being-present without meaning to discuss the simultaneity of time's space. Even if "Derrida" is a fictional character, meant to be thought of as currently alive in the time of my reading about him, he cannot be, at any negotiable present, here with me. Hence, further, the irony that fictional characters stand a better, but still futile, chance of being-present.

Even if a nonfictional Derrida were, at the moment, "here" in the sense of "in my vicinity," he would not likely be present to or with me. Imagine, if you will, that he were "here" in the sense of being in my vicinity, perhaps "at" my home. Were he, he would not be here, where I "am." I am in my study, writing. He might be elsewhere in my vicinity, perhaps elsewhere chatting at the moment with my twenty-month-old daughter, who, at present, is in her room. They would have some important things to discuss. Both are exiles of a sort. In addition to which, Anna, at her not quite verbal stage, speaks somewhat in the loose manner that Derrida would respect. She is capable of uttering open-ended phrases without verbs. "Dad-dy, uhn up." This can mean any number of things. Its precise meaning is determined by accompanying gestures of various kinds (pointings, arm wavings, hand takings, and the like). She may mean, "I want to be up on your lap" (+arm waving). Or, "I want to be upstairs listening to music" (+hand taking). Or, "I want my tricycle to be up in the family room" (+pointing). "Dad-dy, uhn . . . up." (Or, sometimes: "uhnDad-dyup." Pronounced: "Aah . . . uhn . . . Daay-dee . . . uup.") You see how the omission of variants of the verb "to be" reflects a late primary-process suspicion of the fixedness of things in Being. She is putting an "X" through her "Is"es.

Anyhow, were Derrida "here," he might be chatting with Anna, since I am writing at the moment. He would be "here" only in a loose, even metaphorical sense. But suppose a friend (say, Patricia Clough) were to call. I, speaking loosely, would likely say: "Patricia, you won't believe it, but Derrida is here." This would not be accurate, since he would actually be only in the vicinity, not immediately here. Patricia might say, however, "If he is, let me speak to him." Since he is reputed to be a very obliging man, Derrida would surely come to the phone if told that Patricia wants to speak—that is, to "be"—with him. Still, she would have to wait some few minutes for him to come to the phone. (Anna does not readily allow people she likes to leave her presence.) When and if, in due time, Derrida came to my study to pick up the phone, he would still not be "present" to Patricia as they spoke. He would not even be literally present to me were he to hang up the phone and say, perhaps, "Alors, Charles, comment-ça vá?" Even that question, which

is intended to have the effect of putting the two of us in the same presence, does not achieve its purpose. No saying, no writing, no utterance can put us where we are meant to “be” when the intention is that of being-present. Even in speech between two currently living face-to-face characters, there is always a pause, even when the respondent has a reply at the ready.

I know. This is tedious. One must wait too long for its “meaning.” But what are we to do, if we are to talk about that which can never truly be spoken about in so many words? We must, in short, put an “X” through words we are forced to use. (If not “must,” then at least we “ought,” in the loose ethical sense of the word.) We ought, that is, speak as if we were writing. Writing (including, one supposes, Anna’s context-bound gestures) is the only form of utterance in which we can see the “X”s—or the silent *a* in *différance*—or the deferrals across space of the desire to be present with all those others, close and remote, with whom we can never be present.

What is not always acknowledged is that Derrida makes a reasonably Nietzschean commitment to writing philosophy with an eye to sociology. The famous “La *différance*” essay could not have appeared at a more poignant historical moment, 1968. This text was a short version of his earlier criticism of Edmund Husserl’s philosophy of the voice as present meaning, *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), which in turn followed Derrida’s two influential essays of 1966, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” and “Freud and the Scene of Writing.”² It was not by accident that the latter two turned on the problem of the unconscious in social life. “Structure, Sign, and Play” attacked the unifying ideals of modern culture, including the human sciences. This famous essay, said to be the beginning of deconstruction in America, displaced the modern world’s cultural Center by drawing an objection to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology. Structuralism, according to Derrida, reclined too easily on the hidden potency of the linguistic sign in order to fulfill the analytic ambitions

2. Jacques Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–94, was originally a lecture presented on 21 October 1966, at the International Colloquium on Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, 196–231, was originally a lecture presented at the Institut de Psychanalyse, Paris, whereafter it appeared first in France in *Tel Quel*, no. 26, 1966. See also *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David Allison (1967; reprint, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973); and also from these two years, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1967; reprint, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

of modern thought by reuniting nature and culture. "Freud and the Scene of Writing," with its astonishing recovery of Freud's metaphor of the child's magic writing pad, accounted for the absence of the unconscious itself in its tenuous presentations in dreams. Psychoanalysis deferred the meanings uncovered by the anthropological signifier.³ Still, in both—the absence of nature in culture and of the unconscious in conscious life—Derrida called attention to the slips and tricks whereby the modern West meant to organize the world in its presence. Across and between the lines of these writings is the visual darkness of the colonial world from which he came and of which he refuses to speak.⁴ The de-centering of Western thought is the deferred effect of the world's de-centering, wrought by the decolonizing movements that were at their most acute in 1968. Hence, the irony: Everything said in the de-mode is still meant to be a construction.

In short, deconstruction is reconstruction with a *différance*. It is not an analytic method so much as an attitude. It is a rewriting of the history of thought—and, by implication, of history itself—by the trick of using the language of thought to turn thinking—and history—on their sides, if not on their ears. Since, and before, those crucial essays and books of 1968, everything Derrida himself has done has been a relentless rewriting of Western thought from within its language. This is deconstruction, a word that has entered popular culture to odd, disturbing effect. I once heard a television announcer of an American football game say, "Let me deconstruct the New York Jets defense for you." What he was in fact saying when he used the word *deconstruct* was, "Let me tell you the meaning of what just happened on the field." That's what American football announcers do, accompanied by video playbacks. Hence he was actually offering not a deconstruction but a garden-variety reconstruction, a vain attempt to bring events back into the present. (Only those who know American football will know just how vain the offer.) Deconstruction would have been, "Let us figure out what did not go on the field and never could have and how this absence—these events that were not present, and never could have been—are the reason everything that did go on the field was as it was."⁵ Deconstruction is an aggres-

3. Derrida was not the only one to contemplate the odd, if different, juxtaposition of psychoanalysis. Foucault took a similar liberty in his concluding comments to *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

4. See Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 11–17.

5. In a strange footnote of reality upon text, the principal architect of the New York Jets' football team defense, Bill Belichick, resigned on 4 January 2000, the day after his mentor, Bill Parcells, resigned as head coach, in order, it seems, to give Belichick the job. Parcells

sion against any form of historical thinking, including all of history's selfish ontologizings—of its pretenses to make meanings present in order to organize the world in which they transpire. In the long course of modern culture, there are many versions of this deception, but the ideals of History, and of the progressive Subject, are as good as any for it.

Deconstruction, one might say, allows the meanings that would otherwise be said to remain in their naturally loose state of deferral, of being always at a remove from any attempt to capture and organize them, of being never present. Deconstruction thus acknowledges the race of time. The time of modern culture is historical time, in which everything depends on the possibility of running the past through the present in order to promise a "better" future than could ever "be." Modern time is, thus, time out of place. It refuses to account for the possibility that the present is nothing at all because all of its meanings are always somewhere else—waiting to be said, heard, written, acted on. The present races so fast as to be virtually always somewhere else. The question that could, therefore, be asked is, What does the race of time have to do with the time of race?

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There could be no better source for an answer to such a question than Du Bois. In the present, early millennium, Du Bois is being brought into the present with a vengeance. Yet many of those who attempt to make him present might be looking in the wrong place.⁶ *The Souls of Black Folk* is, unquestionably, a fine work of literature, as it is an excellent source of social theories of the double consciousness, of the talented tenth, of the

wanted, perhaps, to prevent Belichick from taking a job with another team whose owner tried, three years before, to prevent Parcells from leaving his team to coach the Jets. No one knows why Belichick resigned on his first day on the job. Some think it was so that he could get out from under the pressure of his mentor, Parcells. Others think it was to take the job Parcells had left with the other team. In any case, whatever was, in fact, going on on that particular field of dreams was never, and never could be, completely present and can only be supposed—which, it turns out, is the principal purpose of sports talk radio in the United States.

6. With rare exceptions, writings on Du Bois refer narrowly to *Souls*. For examples: Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9–44; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 111–45. Even the sweeping commentary of Du Bois's politics by Adolph L. Reed, *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), makes no reference to *Black Reconstruction*, while offering a detailed exposition of *Souls*.

Veil and the color line, and of race theory in general. As great as it may be, *Souls* is not Du Bois's most important work. That distinction must fall either to his earliest important book, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), or to the much later *Black Reconstruction* (1935). Where *Souls* inspires and suggests new ways of thinking, *Philadelphia Negro* works through the factual account of the turn-of-the-century urban Negro. Yet to the same degree as *Souls* was instantaneously famous, *Philadelphia Negro* was largely ignored (as it still is) by the sociologists for whom it stands, by more than a decade, as the first important example of urban ethnography in America. The trouble with great ethnographies is that it is difficult to go back to them when they describe neighborhoods in the long past.

Black Reconstruction, a work that offers both the literary pleasures of *Souls* and the scholarly detail of *Philadelphia Negro*, may well be Du Bois's greatest book. It thinks race through in more enduringly substantial ways than does the famous essay at the beginning of *Souls*, which is oddly indefinite on the nature and upbeat on the prospects of the doubly conscious American Negro. In addition, *Black Reconstruction's* evidence is global (hence, relatively timeless), whereas *Philadelphia Negro's* is local (hence, considerably time bound). Still, it is not *Black Reconstruction's* special literary and empirical effects that recommend it to readers in a new century. That distinction resolves upon its service as a meditation on the off-center time of race—of which Du Bois's book is surely the first and most important. Ever so cautiously, one might even describe *Black Reconstruction* as an early work in the prehistory of deconstruction. Between Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and Derrida's study of Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), few works come more quickly to mind for their reworking of the displacement of power upon so terrible an absence of human possibility. In any case, *Black Reconstruction* deserves very high regard because it, at least, approximates the work of sociological deconstruction that both Nietzsche and Derrida implied but never executed.⁷ *Black Reconstruc-*

7. I realize the extreme nature of this claim. Still, it bears consideration if only because Derrida's relation to Nietzsche bears importantly (if not exclusively) on the idea that the only positive science of social things is one that issues from a study of absences. Derrida's contribution to social thought thus turns on his discovery of a middle passage between Ferdinand de Saussure and Freud that makes Nietzsche's sociology of morals thinkable as a social theory, that allows language to serve at once as the medium and object of social studies. Curiously, save for Gilles Deleuze and of course Michel Foucault, so few others attempted anything like an explicitly sociological investigation. When they did, as in the famous case of Roland Barthes's early semiological researches, they took an ag-

tion moves the critique of modernity's double-edged presentism beyond philosophy (where it has been well served) into the empirical deferrals of social history—which itself has been struggling since Henry Adams to understand its own confusion with the absence of the present.⁸

By whatever name, *Black Reconstruction*, when sufficient attention is given to its stylistically peculiar engagement with the problems brought on by labor, capital, and race, is readily recognized to be about the inadequacy of a certain naïve historicism in addressing the thorny problem of race. In other words, Du Bois's investigation of that particular time of race—Reconstruction—proves to be the focal point, or principle, for a serious study of the race of time. Hence the impulse to read it as an exemplary response to the question with which we began: What does the race of time have to do with the time of race? To understand the book is to expose one's sense of historical time to the very uncertainty it is meant to overcome. Where the time of modern progress is meant to order, the time of Du Bois's thinking—and of his subject—in *Black Reconstruction* is the time of suspense, if not disorder.

From the first, one must wonder why this book, and why then? On the surface, the answer seems simple. The origins of the book may have been as early as 1929, when the *Encyclopedia Britannica* rejected Du Bois's invited essay on the American Negro. The encyclopedia editor recognized the excellence of the essay, but objected to one, seemingly temperate, statement of fact with respect to Reconstruction: "White historians have ascribed the faults and failures of Reconstruction to Negro ignorance and corruption. But the Negro insists that it was Negro loyalty and the Negro vote alone that restored the South to the Union; established the new democracy, both

gressively structuralist line, thus making them vulnerable to the criticism Derrida directed at Lévi-Strauss. Even Foucault suffered an odd sort of structuralist lapse in works such as *Les mots et les choses* (1966), which in a fashion broke the developing line from *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du regard médical* (1963) to *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (1975). In any case, the test of the claim lies not in the avowal of a philosophical affinity (Foucault was famous for his disavowals) but in the disavowal of a positive metaphysics, which certainly is what Du Bois did.

8. Henry Adams was himself repulsed by what was present at the end of the nineteenth century, which did not keep him from writing about the new industrial order with respect to what it was bringing into history in relation to what it was destroying. See, especially, Adams, "The Dynamo and the Virgin," in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1906; reprint, New York: Modern Library, 1931), 379–90. Adams's memoir was, in fact, a medium for his final, general social theory of history, which is stated explicitly in the book's concluding chapters.

for white and black, and instituted the public schools.”⁹ The refusal by the world’s most prestigious encyclopedia to print even so deliberate a remark reveals the extent to which racist dark thoughts pervade liberal culture. But the motivation for *Black Reconstruction* may have been the publication, also in 1929, of an overtly racist interpretation of Reconstruction. *The Tragic Era*, by Claude G. Bowers, was the book that prompted Anna Julia Cooper to urge Du Bois to answer.¹⁰ But Du Bois hardly needed urging. He had already, and some time before, staked out his claims against the prevailing (and white) scholarly and popular opinion that the failure of Reconstruction was due to the cultural and political insufficiencies of the freedman, not of the American system itself. As early as 1909, at the meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA), Du Bois had presented “Reconstruction and Its Benefits” before the establishment of American historians. His audience on that occasion included the leader of the one school of thought he and other reasonable scholars had most reason to fear.

William Archibald Dunning of Columbia University had not only published (in 1907) the most influential of liberal but still anti-Negro interpretations of Reconstruction (*Reconstruction, Political and Economic: 1865–1877*), but he was the leader of a school of historians who advanced the same old white Southern thesis—that it was the Negro who had failed Reconstruction, not the other way around.¹¹ The position of the Dunning school was, in short, that the white South was prepared, after the Civil War, to enter the work of rebuilding the South and its union with the North, but that the freed Negro’s lack of education and general unreadiness and unwillingness to assume worldly responsibilities caused its failure.¹² The line between the Columbia position and overt racism was as fine as the analytic scruple that caused the *Encyclopedia Britannica* editor to refuse Du Bois’s 1929 essay. But it was visible enough.

9. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1934; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1992), 713. Hereafter, subsequent references to *Black Reconstruction* are taken from this edition and are cited parenthetically as *BR*. On the background to the writing of this book, see David Levering Lewis’s “Introduction,” in Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, vii–xvii.

10. Anna Julia Cooper, letter of 31 December 1929 to Du Bois, in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including “A Voice from the South” and Other Important Essays, Papers, and Letters*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 336. Lewis’s “Introduction” reminds us that Cooper was one among many (notably, James Weldon Johnson) who urged Du Bois to respond (ix).

11. On the 1909 AHA paper, see Lewis, “Introduction,” vii.

12. For a summary of the Dunning position, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution: 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), xix–xx.

In 1910, in the published version of the AHA paper, Du Bois chose to emphasize just exactly those qualities the establishment felt were lacking among freed Negroes—thirst for learning, civic duty, political responsibility.¹³ Some (notably David Levering Lewis) see this article as the “germinal essay for what would become *Black Reconstruction*.”¹⁴ Certainly, the 1910 paper was written in the prodigiously documented style of the 1935 book. But the earlier paper lacked the theoretical lift of the later book. It was too much Du Bois, the social scientist, responding to an opposing thesis. It lacked just exactly what made the book so distinctive—scholarship turned to propagandizing ends.

Between 1910 and 1934, Du Bois had spent a near quarter century as editor of the *Crisis*, the foremost (if contested) organ of public communications for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1934, he left the organization he had helped found in 1910. He was fed up with those in the NAACP (and especially Walter F. White) who sought to trim his sails as the de facto spokesman for the movement and the association. Though Du Bois had returned to Atlanta University in 1934, which retreat gave him time to work on *Black Reconstruction*, it is hardly likely that Du Bois would have cast overboard the sustained political work of his mature life. In 1935, he was sixty-eight years old. He was, no doubt, glad to return to his scientific work. But the record of his life's work, before and after 1934, is clear. He would permit no silencing of his voice on behalf of the American Negro—at least not until he did so voluntarily by giving up, at the very end, on America herself.

If there was an early outline for *Black Reconstruction*, it was not the 1909–1910 paper but a still earlier work—the 1901 *Atlantic Monthly* essay “The Freedmen's Bureau” (which appeared as “Of the Dawn of Freedom” in *Souls* in 1903). A more beautifully composed and succinctly stated history of Reconstruction there could hardly be. Yet its high literary values make no exception to his already then theoretical conviction that the failure of Reconstruction turned on a systematic failure of the nation to extend civil and economic justice to the Negro.¹⁵ This essay, written at the turn of the century when Du Bois was barely thirty, lacked the bracing sense of economic and political reality of *Black Reconstruction*, written during the Great Depres-

13. “Reconstruction and Its Benefits,” in *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, vol. 2, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Limited, 1982), 6–22.

14. Lewis, “Introduction,” vii.

15. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint, New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 10–29 (esp. 28–29).

sion, when he was in his late sixties. Still, its broad conviction that cultural or moral failure is always also a fault of the political economy was already evident (as it was, to be sure, in the 1909–1910 reponse to Dunning).

Du Bois's 1935 book, thus, confounds attempts to understand Du Bois in his own time. There is no question that *Black Reconstruction* deserves its reputation as the earliest of his major works most obviously influenced by Marxism. Du Bois, like most others, changed his mind as time went by. Yet his basic ideas were evident from the beginning. Those who doubt that *Souls* was already a political economy of race in the making might submit their doubts to *Philadelphia Negro*. It is hard to say when and where he began to think as he thought in *Black Reconstruction*. It is not difficult at all to conclude that this was his most mature work—the coming out of ideas that were long abrewing, the coming together of his scientific and political work, the coming to fruition of what turned out to be his last major book written under the already attenuating sway of the nationalism central to the double consciousness of the American Negro.¹⁶

Du Bois was well aware of his place in history. He was, in this and other ways, self-conscious. Yet he seldom stood on ceremony. He was more than ready to take himself out of a present that ill served his own, sometimes out of place, sense of historical progress. This, precisely, is what he did in 1934 when he quit the NAACP after so many years. He quit on principle. But which principle and, again, why then? Some may be surprised to learn that the principle was whether or not there were situations in which the NAACP would tolerate racial segregation. Du Bois took the position that there were. Walter White, then in the early years of his own twenty-five years of service (as executive secretary) to the NAACP, claimed that the organization never did and never could condone it. White, an intellectual in his own right, should not have taken up the debate with Du Bois, who surely knew the facts better.¹⁷ But Du Bois did not enjoy White's support by the majority of the NAACP's board. From the beginning of the organization, those of more traditional values wanted Du Bois to tow the organizational line, whatever it was. The dispute over segregation philosophy in 1934 was the pretext for White's move against the editor of the *Crisis*, which led to Du Bois's resig-

16. I discuss this more thoroughly in my *Dark Thoughts: American Social Theory at the Ends of the Centuries* (forthcoming).

17. Walter F. White (1893–1955) graduated from Atlanta University in 1916. Two years later, he served as assistant to James Weldon Johnson, executive secretary to the NAACP. During the 1920s, he published two novels and won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1926, which supported research for a major study on lynching. He succeeded Johnson in 1931.

nation. Judging from his statements at the time, Du Bois was not fooled. Still, he joined the argument, if only to demonstrate his superior adherence to principle.

The board's position was that Du Bois was wrong to condone segregation even for strategic reason. At issue was his editorial "Segregation," which appeared in the *Crisis* in January 1934 and called for real politics. He began, "The thinking colored people of the United States must stop being stampeded by the word segregation."¹⁸ In effect, Du Bois's argument was the one that would reappear in *Black Reconstruction*. The American Negro must not allow an overdetermined race consciousness to blind him to the class consciousness necessary for "his economic emancipation through voluntary determined cooperative effort"—including, importantly, cooperative effort with sympathetic whites of the working class even when they demanded social segregation. This was 1934 (but think of what satisfaction the argument would have given Booker T. Washington, dead since 1915). White, representing the board's position, claimed that Du Bois had contradicted the NAACP's official position. They demanded his compliance. The board sought to vet all such statements by Du Bois before they were printed in the *Crisis*. You can imagine! They knew, of course, what he would say. They were forcing his hand. The dispute continued heatedly through the early summer until Du Bois insisted on his resignation effective 1 July. The outcome was never in doubt. Still, he relished the debate. Du Bois's initial reply was early that year in a letter to White dated 17 January 1934.¹⁹ He sneered that White hardly knew what he was talking about. The board had in fact "advocated and strongly advocated a segregated Negro officer's camp after we found that we were not allowed to enter the regular officer's camp during the war." The subtext of the sneer must have been that during the war, White was a young, recent graduate of Atlanta University where Du Bois had taught before joining the NAACP. (In later retorts, Du Bois gave other examples.) The January letter challenged White and the board to prove him wrong. But the defiance was mostly part of the game. Du Bois knew he was

18. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Segregation," *Crisis* 41 (January 1934); reprinted in *Writings in Periodicals Edited by W. E. B. Du Bois: Selections from THE CRISIS*, vol. 2, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson Limited, 1983), 727. Compare the editorial written in the midst of the crisis with the board, "Segregation," *Selections from THE CRISIS*, 755.

19. W. E. B. Du Bois, letter to Walter White, 17 January 1934, in *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, vol. 1, *Selections, 1877-1934*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 475-76. For the quotation that follows, see also Du Bois, letter to the Board of Directors of the NAACP, 21 May 1934, and to the board, 26 June 1934, in *Correspondence*, 478-80.

right. He knew what moves were being made against him. He was ready for the fight; even more, he was clear on the principle.

Du Bois concluded the 17 January letter with a telling distinction of principle, which may have everything to do with the different times along which he and the organization he helped found were traveling. Just after issuing the challenge that White prove him wrong (and knowing that it could not be done), Du Bois addressed the issue of principle: "Of course in my editorial and in your letter, it is manifest that we are not both speaking always of the same thing. I am using segregation in the broad sense of separate racial effort caused by outer social repulsions, whether those repulsions are a matter of law or custom or mere desire. You are using the word segregation simply as applying to compulsory separations."

Though it would seem to be at worst a fine theoretical distinction, or at best a choice of tactics (as it was), Du Bois's remark also calls attention to a difference in the racial times that, in 1934, segregated him from the organization to which he had devoted so much. In his final letter of resignation (26 June 1934), he described those differences—and they had everything to do with the economic crisis then at hand:

I firmly believe that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People faces the most grueling of tests which come to an old organization: founded in a day when a negative program of protest was imperative and effective; it succeeded so well that the program seemed perfect and unlimited. Suddenly, by World War and chaos, we are called to formulate a positive program of construction and inspiration. We have been thus far unable to comply.

Today this organization, which has been great and effective for nearly a quarter of a century, finds itself in a time of crisis and change, without a program, without effective organization, without executive officers who have either the ability or disposition to guide [it] in the right direction.

These are harsh and arresting charges. I make them deliberately, and after long thought, earnest effort, and with infinite writhing of the spirit. To the very best of my ability, and every ounce of my strength, I have since the beginning of the Great Depression, tried to work inside the organization for its realignment and readjustment to new duties. I have been almost completely unsuccessful.

Du Bois meant to say that his opponents in the NAACP were living in another time—and that the time the American Negro must live in is the time of

the Great Depression, in which positive programs of economic development must come first, before all else, even before stands against segregation that could put Negroes out of work, income, or housing.²⁰ The new time required a political economy of racial history, not a theory so much as a practice and a program.

What was the time of *Black Reconstruction*? Was it the biographical time of its author, who had come to the end of the line with NAACP integrationism? Or, more broadly, was it the time of the history of the American Negro, who, having moved from country to city, and having served in the Great War, then faced his own choice between racial and economic goals? Or, more broadly still, was it the global time of economic change and the political adjustments required by the rise of industrial capitalism?

In 1931, Du Bois received the first of the small grants that supported his research for *Black Reconstruction*. This was in the second year of the Great Depression. In 1932, he was at work on the book. His research began. This was the worst year of the depression.²¹ In the United States, eleven million people were unemployed—nearly 20 percent of the workforce. Industrial production was half of what it had been in 1929. National income fell by 38 percent in the same three years. The economic crisis was global. No corner was spared. Shipbuilding, coal production, and steel manufacture declined sickeningly. Farm prices collapsed. Industrial and farmworkers alike were out of work and income. Among industrial powers, the United States and Germany were the hardest hit. In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt became president of the United States, just weeks after Adolf Hitler became chancellor of the German Republic. The die was cast. A second World War would follow on the economic crisis, which in turn followed, in part, the economic and political uncertainties unresolved by the Great War. As already noted, in 1934, Du Bois had broken ties with the NAACP and was in Atlanta, working primarily on his book. By the time of its publication in 1935, nothing anyone did or thought, anywhere, was done out of the time of the Great Depression. The twenties were long gone. No more parties—not at Gatsby's at West Egg, nor at the Redfield's in Harlem.²²

20. The reprise of the January "Segregation" editorial in the May issue of the *Crisis* refers specifically to Du Bois's support of a government-funded but segregated housing project that would provide homes for five thousand Negroes.

21. The following facts are from J. M. Roberts, *Twentieth Century: The History of the World, 1901–2000* (New York: Viking, 1999), 339–345; and Martin Gilbert, *A History of the Twentieth Century, 1900–1933*, vol. 1 (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 808–28.

22. The references are to two of the greatest novels of the 1920s: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Nella Larsen's *Passing*. See my *Dark Thoughts*.

Still, why a book on Reconstruction in the American South, a story that had come to an end six decades before in 1877 when Du Bois was still a schoolboy in Massachusetts? Why at such a remove in time did Du Bois turn his attention to what became, by any measure, the most sustained, and demanding, scholarly work of his life²³—but on a topic seemingly so out of time with the Great Depression, which had crystallized his stern coming to odds with official NAACP principles?

The answer is clearer than meets the eye. Anyone thinking deeply about Black America during the Great Depression could hardly not have been led back, sooner or later, to the Long Depression that began in 1873. In Du Bois's case, it was sooner—and for good reason. The Long Depression began with the panic of 1873 and continued episodically for a quarter century until the recovery of 1896, which lent so much hope to the turn of the century.

For whites, the Long Depression meant, to use E. J. Hobsbawm's phrase, the bust of the boom that had driven the Age of Capital, the end of the longest period of economic expansion in the early history of industrial capitalism.²⁴ Between the run on the banks in 1873 and 1878, when ten thousand businesses failed, half the nation's iron producers also failed, as did half of its railroads, leading in turn to the collapse of industries and businesses that had risen with these heavy industrial enterprises.²⁵ It meant also an interruption of the migration of white labor from Europe, which would not recover until the 1880s. Everyone was caught up in the crisis. But Blacks suffered differently.

For Blacks freed after Emancipation in 1863, the Long Depression meant the end of Reconstruction. Though the end did not come until the compromise of 1877, it was foretold by the collapse of the Freedmen's Savings and Trust in 1874, brought on by the panic of the previous year. The ultimate collapse of Reconstruction as an effort to support the economic, political, and educational development of freed Blacks came as a direct political

23. The book is twice as long as *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899; reprint, New York: Schocken Books, 1967), which, in spite of its massive detail, was completed in half the time. The fourth of Du Bois's major scholarly works (as distinct from general histories, essays, collections, fictions, and memoirs) was his doctoral dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (1898; reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), which was broader in temporal scope but narrower in historical focus (and, still, shorter by a factor of three).

24. E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (New York: Mentor Books, 1979), 27–47. See also Foner, *Reconstruction*, 512–63.

25. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 512.

result of the economic crisis. Though the Republicans had wavered in their support of Reconstruction since Lincoln's assassination in 1865, they remained the party most friendly to Southern Blacks. But the economic crisis diverted the attention of Northern whites and led to the rise of the Southern Democrats. By a quirk of American electoral laws, in 1866, a Republican, Rutherford B. Hayes, eventually won the presidency after losing the popular vote. This famous compromise was the exchange of votes in the United States Congress required for certification of Hayes as president for the abandonment of Reconstruction in key Southern states. At that point, Reconstruction came to an end, to be replaced by the restoration of white dominance throughout the South.

The Civil War and Reconstruction have been called, by some, the Second American Revolution. Du Bois called Reconstruction the Second Civil War. North and South, Blacks and whites, suffered through the Long Depression, but the crisis and its consequences returned them to their separate historical times. Freed men and women in the South were thrown back to feudal conditions made more severe by the crippling effects of war on an agrarian system that had lost its most valuable commodity—enslaved labor. The white South was itself divided between the poor whites who were forced to compete with freedmen in an unstable labor market and the propertied class that rose from the ashes to reassert its domination. Hence the arrangement—described first by Du Bois and recently by David Roediger—of the racial wage. Poor whites were granted the racial privilege of their whiteness in compensation for their misery in the economic system.²⁶ The so-called Reconstruction of the American Republic, and of its war-ravaged South, always meant something different to whites than to Blacks. With the collapse of Reconstruction as a national goal, the principals in the Southern drama were returned, if not to the exact structural positions that prevailed before the war, at least to their respective historical times. It would be another full century—late in the 1970s—before the American South would significantly shed the vestiges of its feudal past. For the long duration of that century, the South remained more or less bound to the feudal conditions from which the planters profited, the white worker survived with the modest privilege of his racial status, and the Black worker suffered unspeakable human and economic misery.

Here was the reason, necessary and sufficient, for *Black Reconstruction*. The Long Depression of 1873 darkened the prospects of the first

26. David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991); and Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 700.

and second generation of freed people in the United States, just as the Great Depression of 1929 crushed the hopes of the third and fourth generations.²⁷ For Du Bois, the social historian of the American Negro, the reversion of times was utterly apparent—1929 brought back 1873, which in turn brought forward the burdens of the feudal past. For him it must also have brought up the bond in memory between his childhood among the first and second generations of post-Emancipation Blacks and his “new duties” (as he put it in his letter of resignation) to the third and fourth generations. For a man of his political and scientific sensibilities, writing in 1934, there could have been no more obvious way to reason.

Du Bois was, in effect, writing out of his time back into the displaced time of the Reconstruction in American history that was, for the American Negro, a deferral of Black hopes that turned out to be a deferral of national hopes, even global ones. No event in American history, and few in global history, more starkly uncovered the dark thoughts veiled by the bright promises of modernity, capitalism, and democracy. Slavery is evil. Reversion to its time, however displaced, is the darkest thought imaginable. By 1934, the darkness loomed again, a darkness familiar to Blacks, surprising but still familiar to poor whites, and terrifying to the white propertied class. And this, precisely, is the point Du Bois makes at the beginning of *Black Reconstruction*.

Here is the real modern labor problem. Here is the kernel of the problem of Religion and Democracy, of Humanity. Words and futile gestures avail nothing. Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts which, cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal. The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that majority of workers who are yellow, brown and black. (*BR*, 16)

The labor problem is inseparably a racial problem—and both are a global problem.

The disjointed times of colored peoples and white ones always had curved uncertainly toward each other, coming together in times of economic crisis, coming apart in better times. The crisis of the Great Depression was worldwide. Du Bois meant to address it by reverting to the crisis of the Long

27. The connection is drawn with wonderful precision by Jeffrey Kerr-Ritchie, *Freedpeople in the Tobacco South: Virginia, 1860–1990* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 248.

Depression of the previous century, where the times, once again, stood still, reverted, and took up their segregated paths. *Black Reconstruction* both was and was not a book on a specific period in American history. It was every bit as much a working out of the loose uncertainties of modernity. Behind the page upon page of thick description in the book, this principle breathes life into the sad truth of historical fact.

• • • •

Black Reconstruction is the story of three characters of the Old South. They can neither abide nor escape each other. In the end, they survive, each broken or otherwise cut off from his desires. Evil invites sympathy. Good stirs the higher spirits. None, however, can outrun his times. The tale cuts quickly to its tragic chase. No elaborate prologue or introduction. It begins with the story's lead character, the Black worker who, though local to the American South, stands at the heart of world civilization. "Easily the most dramatic episode in American history was 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" (*BR*, 3). The slave is introduced with dignity for what he was, a worker. Du Bois does not waste words on sentiment for the victim. The Black worker is the soul of the South, the energy of progress, and the soul of civilization. Du Bois does not waver on this. It is his answer to Bowers and to the Dunning school, to all of ignorant hostility. But he holds back his theory across some seven hundred pages until the final chapter, the epilogue, titled "The Propaganda of History" (*BR*, 711–29). The writer keeps to the story.

The second most sympathetic character is introduced next in chapter 2, "The White Worker." The white worker is in the middle. He is offered the privilege of racial status, which proves, in the end, utterly devoid of fungibility. Against the greed of the Southern aristocrats, the planters who eventually restore themselves to power, white power runs downward only, against the Black worker. The white worker has little but his hatred to soften the economic deprivations.

Were this a local story of one nation's backward region, the third actor (chapter 3) would be evil incarnate—the Simon Legree of the tale. But the time of this story is closer to Faulkner than to Stowe. The Planter seeks to restore his position lost in the war. But "with the Civil War, the planters died as a class" (*BR*, 54). Still, the aristocracy returned to political, if not economic, power after the Northern armies and the Freedmen's Bureau left the South. Then they engaged their sordid compromise with the white

worker to use race hatred and violence to gain the upper hand. "It is this that explains so many characteristics of the post-war South: its lynching and mob law, its murders and cruelty, its insensibility to the finer things of civilization" (*BR*, 54).

The book's first three chapters are detailed play notes that describe the tale's dramatic characters—of which the Black worker is written into the role of the Greek figure of Nemesis (*BR*, 237). Then the tale begins in earnest with the Civil War. One of the book's finer literary qualities is that, just as it holds back on heavy-handed theory, it resists phony sentiments. This quality may be one of the reasons *Black Reconstruction* has not been read, as it should be. It is designed to stir without pandering, but not to pander to the easy feeling or thought. Thus neither the North nor Father Abraham is portrayed as the saving hero. This is plain in the book's controversial fourth chapter, "The General Strike." Du Bois uses the language of labor, which encourages the facile idea that the book is an exercise in Marxist theory. It is anything but that, even in this chapter. The general strike is the slow, dawning realization by both the Southern aristocrats and the Northerners, including Lincoln, that neither understood the Black worker. During the war, the Southerners counted on him not to rebel. The Northerners, notwithstanding their many liberal abolitionists, thought little of him, very often sharing the white South's loathing without any direct knowledge of the Negro's labor power. He was to them "a curiosity, a subhuman minstrel" (*BR*, 56). Hence one of the book's minor, but powerful, themes. Even Lincoln had to be drawn toward the Emancipation Proclamation. It is, of course, well known that Lincoln resisted the move as long as he could. But Du Bois makes him out to be more passive and dawdling than even his heroic image allows. When it came to the Black worker, the majority of the leaders of the North were in their way as naïve as the Southern planters: "When Northern armies entered the South they became armies of emancipation. It was the last thing they planned to be. The North did not propose to attack property. It did not propose to free slaves. This was to be a white man's war to preserve the Union, and the Union must be preserved" (*BR*, 55). They had to face reality, and the reality was that there were 4,000,000 slaves and 250,000 free Blacks in the South. They were a formidable force. And they would, and did, rebel once war began.

Not only did Lincoln himself come to realize that he could not win the war without Negro troops but Northerners generally came to realize what the South had always known: The Black worker, especially in such numbers, was "a valuable asset" and the "key" to the war (*BR*, 66, 63). Thus the North

and Lincoln had little choice. Whatever humanity they possessed, it was the general strike, as Du Bois chose to call it, of the Black worker that was basic. When the war began, the plantation system stalled. Black workers readily gave their labor power to the North, even before the Emancipation Proclamation on 1 January 1863. The North also came to realize that its lofty ideal of preserving the Union meant nothing before the disgust of Europeans for American slavery. Nevertheless, Europe was more than ready (and Great Britain even eager)²⁸ to recognize the Confederacy as a sovereign nation, which would have reopened its ports to international trade and provided the Southern armies with an industrial lifeline. Only emancipation could forestall a diplomatic turn that might have cost the war. Du Bois, trained in Berlin and at Harvard as an economic historian, was nothing if not a political realist—and a very sober one at that. But not so sober as to leave his story's dramatic tension unrealized.

The story itself comes to an early climax in the four chapters that follow chapter 4 on the general strike. At first, chapters 5 through 8 seem strangely out of kilter. They are, it turns out, central to the unfolding drama of Reconstruction. "The Coming of the Lord" (chapter 5) is not what it would seem. It does indeed play on the popular sentiment of Abe Lincoln as Father Abraham, the sacred force of emancipation. But it plays with a bare, almost sarcastic truth. Though Lincoln spoke principally of saving the Union, he admitted four months before he acted that the Emancipation "would help in Europe," that "slavery was the root of the rebellion," and that loss of Black labor would "weaken" the South (*BR*, 85).

But Father Abraham had no particular faith in Blacks, fearing that "if we were to arm them within a few weeks the arms would be in the hands of the rebels."²⁹ Though he would soften over the fewer than three years that remained of his life, Lincoln's confidence in the Black worker's political capabilities, as distinct from his labor power, was virtually nil. As late as early April 1865, just before he was shot, Lincoln said, "I can hardly believe that the North and South can live in peace unless we get rid of the Negroes" (*BR*, 149). "The Coming of the Lord" tells the truth about Lincoln in order, it seems, to suit the terms of Du Bois's now well-described drama. There are no saviors in the story, yet there is salvation. Emancipation is a miracle of God: "To most of the four million black folk emancipated by the civil war, God

28. Adams, *Education of Henry Adams*, 110–79; compare *Black Reconstruction*, 88.

29. Du Bois quotes remarks Lincoln made in September 1962—just one of many instances of this book's largely unappreciated value as a source of primary materials from the drama.

was real. They knew him. They had met Him personally in many a wild orgy of religious frenzy, or in the black stillness of night. His plan for them was clear; they were to suffer and be degraded, and then afterwards by Divine edict, raised to manhood and power; and so on January 1, 1863, He made them free" (*BR*, 124). Here Du Bois suspends, for a moment, his sometimes harsh attitude toward Negro religion in order to affirm the larger ideal. He grants the ordinary folk their due, and even tips his hat, but with a sneer (*BR*, 125), to Father Abraham.

The final few pages of "The Coming of the Lord" achieve the same high lyrical quality of the best passages in *Souls*.³⁰ Du Bois in a sense gives himself over not so much to crude feeling as to the higher truth of Emancipation as, at long last, a justification for democracy. "And yet emancipation came not just to black folk in 1863; to white Americans came slowly a new vision and new uplift, a sudden freeing of hateful mental shadows" (*BR*, 125).

Though Du Bois's story turns on historical figures—the Black and white workers, the planters, Father Abraham—no individual character is given the stage, not even Lincoln. Each plays within the limitations of character and circumstance. The alert reader begins to sense that Du Bois's retort to Bowers and Dunning, ever understated, rests on the refusal to overstate any one historical actor in the drama. He refuses to glorify either the Black worker or the good Northerner against the evil Southern white. All of Du Bois's characters are—in the phrase of Max Weber, whom Du Bois first met in Berlin—ideal types; that is, historical individuals who are not really individuals. *Black Reconstruction*, as I say, is a book not about Reconstruction but about the perverse nature of historical time and its effects on the democratic ideal and the future of civilization.

Du Bois's restraint—his refusal to vilify—is most striking in the book's longest chapter (and longest by far), "Transubstantiation of a Poor White" (chapter 8). The apparent subject of this chapter, like the apparent subject of "The Coming of the Lord," is an individual. Andrew Johnson, who assumed the presidency upon Lincoln's assassination, plays the historical individual in this chapter as Lincoln had in the earlier one. Du Bois understands Johnson and to some extent sympathizes with him. Johnson had been born to poverty. He earned a modest living as a tailor. By hard work,

30. From *Souls*, Du Bois also replicates the device of juxtaposing text (or, in this case, statements of his own) from the circumstances of "Black folk" to a high literary text from European civilization. "The Coming of the Lord," for example, ends with Schiller's own hymn of joy, "Freude, schoener Goetterfunken," left in the German.

he rose from local political office in Tennessee to the United States Senate, then to the nation's penultimate office. Lincoln had selected Johnson as his running mate in the 1864 election for some of the same reasons John F. Kennedy selected Lyndon Johnson nearly a century later in 1960. Though from Tennessee, Andrew Johnson's hatred of the Southern aristocrats was strong among the reasons he opposed the Confederacy. As a poor white, he had feared Negroes. Still, Lincoln respected Johnson's service on behalf of the Union and saw his political value in the election and beyond the war, when his administration would have to deal with the South.

Thus on 15 April 1865, the poor white working man who hated the planters even more than he feared the Black worker became president of the United States. Johnson came to power by the accident of war politics. He was driven by forces he could not control. Du Bois means to say that the white worker, though no hero, was powerless, even in the deflated prestige derived from race hatred. The white worker, typified by Johnson, was more the pawn than the Black worker, who had moral right on his side. And he was less free of blame than the white planter, who, after the war, did his evil in a vain attempt to restore a once glorious way of life—the long-deferred end of which was already sealed by defeat at the hand of Northern industrial power. The feudal way, with all of its nasty entanglements and impossible dreams, was, thus, at the heart of Reconstruction every bit as much as it had been the reason for the war itself.

"The Transubstantiation of a Poor White," along with the earlier chapter "The Coming of the Lord," sets Johnson in analogue to Lincoln. For Du Bois, Lincoln's virtues come clearer by the contrast to Johnson. "Lincoln came to know Negroes personally. He came to recognize their manhood. He praised them generously as soldiers, and suggested that they be admitted to the ballot. Johnson, on the contrary, could never regard Negroes as men" (*BR*, 248).

So it happened that the fate of Reconstruction in the feudal South, and of the Negro freedpeople in the renewed Union, fell to a man of the weakest possible position in the drama. Johnson's hatred of the white aristocrats led to his position of power. His ignorance of the Black worker led to his failure to use it well. Johnson's impeachment in 1868, his final year in office, was the result of a belligerence bred of these impossibilities. He tried to evade the requirements of constitutional amendments, congressional legislation, and the will of the majority. The bill of impeachment came upon his defiance of Congress's Reconstruction Acts of 1867. Congress had ordered a reorganization of the military administration of Reconstruction in

the South that expressly allowed for voting rights for all adult males. Johnson could not abide the Negro vote. He responded by removing military officers sympathetic to the congressional order and replacing them with those who would frustrate Reconstruction. He was, therefore, ruined by a well-structured incapacity to embrace the Negro's full freedom. Hence the ironic fate of the poor white man who hated the planter aristocracy.

The transubstantiation of Johnson was complete. He had begun as the champion of the poor laborer, demanding that the land monopoly of the Southern oligarchy be broken up, so as to give access to the soil, South and West, to the free laborer. He had demanded the punishment of those Southerners who, by slavery and war, had made such an economic program impossible. Suddenly thrust into the presidency, he retreated from this attitude. He not only gave up extravagant ideas of punishment but dropped his demand for dividing up the plantations when he realized that Negroes would largely be the beneficiaries. Because he could not conceive of Negroes as men, he refused to advocate universal democracy, of which, in his young manhood, he had been the fiercest advocate, and made a strong alliance with those who would restore slavery under another name (*BR*, 322).

But the story of this poor white man—this emblem of a drama spun out of control—plays out on a much larger and global stage. And this is where the time of Reconstruction loops back to the time of the Great Depression to justify its own displacement.

It is important to bear in mind when following this loop that *Black Reconstruction* is a book of near perfect narrative balance set amid such a wealth of facts and sources that its surface order tends to bury the story. After its telling of the moral limitations on the poor white man, the book comes to its summary point in "The Price of Disaster" (chapter 9). Reconstruction was doomed by forces superior to its better intentions. The white worker, powerless before these forces, nonetheless was the one who promoted, almost unwittingly, Reconstruction's failure and the second civil war of race-based hatred that ensued. Again, the book's action is driven, not directed. After the war, the planter needed the Black worker more desperately than before. The freedpeople needed the work, land, and opportunity that, even with the Northern military administrators, were still mostly in the hands of the planters. This "rekindled" the "old enmity and jealousy of the poor whites against any combination of the white employer and the black laborer which would again exclude the poor white" (*BR*, 351). The planter, caught by his need of labor, nonetheless had to withhold "sympathy and cooperation with the black laborer" (*BR*, 351). The war had weakened both his

social and his economic position, forcing him back into an unholy alliance with the white worker. The Black worker, even while he had the support of the Freedman's Bureau and the North, was left in the Southern lurch, his labor bound over in due course to a new system of economic slavery.

But here is where the plot thickens. Not even the poor white who applies the violence on behalf of the new masters of economic oppression in the South acts on his own. Johnson was thus the perfect emblem of the poor whites from whom he sprang, on whom he turned. He was the dark spot—the abiding lack—at the core of the American system: “Johnson thus illustrated the Blindspot of American political and social development and made logical argument almost impossible. The only power to curtail the rising empire of finance in the United States was industrial democracy—votes and intelligence in the hands of the laboring class, black and white, North and South” (*BR*, 377). Here, then, is the temporal shifter that structures and unsettles *Black Reconstruction*. The industrial worker who was most threatened by the Great Depression was projected back into the Long Depression as the hope for American democracy, as the unifier of the races, the nation, and the classes.

An earlier chapter—one of two that Du Bois lodged disconcertingly between “The Coming of the Lord” and “The Transubstantiation of a Poor White”—begins with a touching allusion to the social affinities that linked poor laborers of both races and regions: “A printer and a carpenter, a rail-splitter and a tailor—Garrison, Christ, Lincoln and Johnson, were the tools of the greatest moral awakening America ever knew, chosen to challenge capital invested in the bodies of men and annul the private profit of slavery” (*BR*, 182). Lincoln and Johnson—and both in the company of Christ and the radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. The moral deferrals of Lincoln and the deficits of Johnson are washed away before the moral awakening of industrial democracy, of the working people. The passage begins the seventh chapter, “Looking Forward,” which comes just before the long agony of the poor white man and stands with the sixth chapter, “Looking Backward,” which also reverses its orientation in time.

Is it by some coincidence of language that Du Bois chose to give these two intervening chapters matched but reversed titles—“Looking Backward” (chapter 6) and “Looking Forward” (chapter 7)—referring to Reconstruction as a great temporal divide? The question occurs upon the interruption of the time of the story. Du Bois's story unfolds easily up to the point of these two chapters: the Black worker (chapter 1); the white worker (chapter 2); the planter (chapter 3); the Black worker strikes, his labor power

is recognized as key to the war (chapter 4); the Coming of the Lord, the war ends, the Black worker is freed (chapter 5). Then, one would expect either "Looking Forward" (the story of progress, perhaps) or "The Transubstantiation of the Poor Man" (the story of the poor white who yields to the planter aristocrat) to follow. Neither does. There is a pause—or, again, a deferral. On what level Du Bois understood what he was doing here probably will never be known. What is known is that he always thought against expectations. He had begun the work on this book at odds with the times of the NAACP, as he had long been at variance with the varieties of white progress. He understood very well the time of the American Negro in which the Civil War, even Emancipation, was anything but a second American Revolution, and he understood it particularly well writing in the depths of the Great Depression. He had framed this story as the story of labor power, Black and white, but not because of some sudden discovery of Marxist theory. Du Bois was a superior and subtle thinker. But his theory usually served his politics. A political view of history required that the story tell the facts, indeed; but it must also tell the truth of history. That truth of *Black Reconstruction* in the United States in the 1860s was bitter. No matter how wonderful the Lord who comes to free, freedom is always deferred for those who seek it the most. What Du Bois understood is precisely what the white historians of his day, and a good number in ours as well, could never understand. He knew what no one who had not lived the time of those who sought emancipation could fully know.

A story told by one engaged with the time of the world's colored people, and told from the time of the Great Depression, is a story of the failures of the time of liberal progress and its promises. The good liberal, in the broad Euro-American sense of liberal, looks about at History for its next good step. Those who for the right reason are suspicious of promises and cautious about Progress look at history differently. They would never, figuratively or literally, capitalize its *H*. Du Bois knew this time and lived it. Hence the interruption of the developing line of *Black Reconstruction*, which turns out to be not a mistake in literary judgment any more than it is a confusion of historical fact. Du Bois understood that the story of *Black Reconstruction* was the story of emancipation and progress to be sure. He was no fool. But, even deeper, it was the story of a time out of place. It was the story of progress deferred to such an extent that the concept of progress, if used at all, had to be used with caution. One might even say that the odd, interrupting chapter, "Looking Backward," is the erasure put upon liberal ideals of historical progress.

“Looking Backward” is the other side of the emancipation epiphany. The coming of freedom for the Black worker spelled trouble. “The very joy in the shout of emancipated Negroes was a threat” (*BR*, 132). In the face of a labor system in disarray in 1865 (*BR*, 134), the “planters, having lost the war for slavery, sought to begin again where they left off in 1860, merely substituting for the individual ownership of slaves, a new state of serfdom of black folks” (*BR*, 128). This may not surprise. But the story of the “Lord” incarnate, Lincoln, might. This chapter is also about the North’s, and Lincoln’s, deferral of responsibility in the early years of Reconstruction (which began not with the end of the war but as early as 1861 with the Port Royal experiment and in 1862 in Louisiana).³¹ Lincoln’s first Reconstruction plan (late 1863) was exceptionally lenient (perhaps because the victory was far from assured). He required the express loyalty of a mere 10 percent of voters for the South’s readmission to the Union. Even as time went by, he was unwilling to impose the franchise for Blacks. In his letter congratulating the first appointed governor of freed Louisiana (13 March 1864), Lincoln wrote, “Now that you are about to have a convention, which, among other things, will probably define the elective franchise, I barely suggest, for your private consideration, whether some of the colored people may not be let in, as, for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks” (*BR*, 157).

“Barely suggest,” indeed. Lincoln bore impossible burdens as the leader of a nation at war with itself. In so many things, including the Emancipation Proclamation, his judgment was sure and pure. But as regards the Negro, he was a white man. His bare suggestion in 1864 for the enfranchisement of Blacks meant, in effect, that it would be another full century before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 would begin to secure that franchise. Even when Congress sought to correct him, Lincoln deferred—notably in his pocket veto of the 1864 Wade-Davis Bill, which would have greatly strengthened the rights of Negroes and the requirements for readmission to the Union. It was not that Lincoln was a racist of any particular kind but that he could not find the way to full, unqualified social justice. Lincoln’s generosity of spirit worked with his white caution to play into the hands of the planters.

31. With superior naval power, the North won the islands off South Carolina early in the war. The land left by the fleeing plantation owners was turned over to the ten thousand freed slaves under loose administration of the occupying Union military. In 1862, when the Union won back Louisiana, even more concerted experiments with reconstruction were begun.

In effect, Lincoln reverted to the vexed uncertainty of Washington and Jefferson (*BR*, 131–32), the Southern planters among the founding fathers. The story that “Looking Backward” tells is of the restoration of planters to power, led not by the vexed but by the crass. Hence the rise of violence, the Black codes, the Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow, and all the rest that arose from hatred bred of fear born of economic greed:

The white planter endeavored to keep the Negro at work for his profit on terms that amounted to slavery and which were hardly distinguishable from it. This was the plain voice of the slave codes. On the other hand, the only conceivable ambition of a poor white was to become a planter. Meantime the poor white did not want the Negro put to profitable work. He wanted the Negro beneath the feet of the white worker. (*BR*, 130–31)

In the time of white history, Reconstruction was an interregnum of rule by ignorant, undisciplined Blacks who destroyed their own chances. This was the view Du Bois was countering. But he countered it not so much by the sort of direct challenge he had put to Walter White in 1934 but by telling the story as it was. That story was not one of an interregnum so much as of a continuation of civil war in the South that began upon the deferrals of the good North and began almost as soon as the first had ended. In the story Du Bois tells, the Black worker must face continued abuse at the hands of the white worker and the planter who, in the short run of the next full century, won out over the confused generousities of even the better white folk of the North.

The time of Reconstruction was not forward, but backward. Even so, Du Bois was not without hope as he wrote in the depths of the Great Depression looking back. Chapter 7, “Looking Forward,” is the part of the story that becomes visible only by looking backward from the time of the Great Depression, when the crisis of labor was more at the heart of world democracy than at any time before or since. The difference, in the end, between Lincoln and the planters—even Washington and Jefferson—was that he was not a planter. Hence “Looking Forward” begins with a line linking Lincoln with Christ, and Garrison and even Johnson (*BR*, 182). These were all working men. Du Bois surely understood that the white worker, even the white worker of the industrial North, saw the time of progress differently from the Black worker. In many ways, that is his point. Johnson, the white worker who became the lackey of the planters he hated, was different, but not utterly different, from Lincoln, the white worker who became the moral

leader who could not put an end to planter greed. Du Bois did not forgive them, but he understood them sympathetically. And because he did, he was able even when writing backward to the failures of Reconstruction to draw from its story what threads of hope there were. What is so astonishing about Du Bois, the often arrogant and ultimately disdainful critic of American ways, is that he had held out such determined hope, even as the innocence of the time of *Souls* gave way to the realities of the time of the 1930s and after. “Looking Forward,” like “Looking Backward,” is written in Black time. Just as the “backward” was the constant time of violence and slavery, the “forward” time was not the defeat of progress. Black time is the reverse of white time. What progress there was—and there was progress—was displaced not upon near promise but upon things to come that were already growing. And this is where Du Bois’s book comes full bloom as a story in global history.

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The 1860s were the high watermark of early industrial capitalism. In the United States, as in Europe, the capital benefits of the world colonial system were sunk deep into heavy industry. Coal, steel, and railroads were the foundations of the factory system of which Marx wrote in *Capital*, the first translation of which appeared in 1867 just as the American Reconstruction was beginning its downward slide into economic greed. Coal, steel, and the railroads were also precisely those industries that, along with banks and small businesses, had begun their sickening long decline in 1873. Still, Du Bois understood that the future of the Black and white worker lay with industrial democracy—as he was to put it later in his final word on Johnson and the Blindspot in America: “The only power to curtail the rising empire of finance in the United States was industrial democracy—votes and intelligence in the hands of the laboring class, black and white, North and South” (*BR*, 377).

So it is that “Looking Forward” is the chapter that unites the underlying themes of Du Bois’s story. *Black Reconstruction* is told from 1934 back to 1873; hence from the time of full-blown industrial crisis back to the first great crisis of industrial capitalism. Another reason one might even dare to think of Du Bois as Derridian before the fact is that he realized that industrial democracy had no precise origin. He realized that its beginnings in the 1860s were really a play on the structuring work of the nearly four centuries of world building of the European Diaspora and its foundational colonial sys-

tem. And he realized that this system, in turn, was a displacement of the West's dark pretenses of progress out of the primitive and colored past. How could he not have? But Du Bois also understood, most clearly in *Black Reconstruction*, that this color line was ever and always a long attenuated line that cut through the laboring class as well as between the labor class and the propertied. The racial wage that bought off the white worker was not just another exchange within the capitalist system of surplus values; it was the exchange on which everything else depended.

It is a bit clearer now, following this reading of *Black Reconstruction*, how, for Du Bois, the race of progressive time was the time of race. There was, in his mind, no being-present when it comes to a system based on capital and exploitation. But there was exploitation—whether that of capital applied directly to human laborers in the feudal slave system or the more analytic capital affixed to abstract human labor power in the factory system. Du Bois used Marx's ideas to be sure, as in *Souls* he used William James, perhaps, to reinvent the double consciousness. No matter, he always used the thoughts of others to his own unique—arrogant, if you prefer—intellectual and political purposes. *Black Reconstruction* may be Marxist, in the sense that anyone writing in the 1930s with a genuine interest in industrial democracy would have written with Marx in mind. Still, Du Bois's book is not Marxism. Marx framed the continuities between the modes of production along the historical line of ownership of production's means. The transubstantiation of the feudal serf, or slave, was for Marx a change in the structure of ownership, from which came the transformation in the mode of production. Ownership, however, even when Marx discussed it in his early manuscripts such as *The German Ideology* and those of 1844, is an analytic concept borrowed from political economists, from the ideology of modern, liberal thought. Du Bois borrowed, too, and surely his borrowing included Marx as well as other liberals; but Du Bois came to very different conclusions, conclusions that in their way were those for which Marx was striving but never quite achieved.

Du Bois made no effort to iron out the history of labor's exploitation onto the flat plane of purposive history. He was the historian who disavowed History. The path between the backward and forward of the story in *Black Reconstruction* was not of a common, or even parallel, relation of ownership to labor. It was that, true; but more. The path was rather that through the worker himself—the Black and white workers, on whose backs both the system of feudal agriculture and modern industry depended. Marx valued the worker, for whom everything that mattered mattered. But Marx's worker

was, from the first of his explicit writings on the elementary labor process, never truly in history. His disavowal of the early modern method of projecting history back to an origin prior to history was more a rhetorical move than an accomplishment. For Marx, History was the history of the fall of free labor before the varieties of ownership, for which the proof was in the dream of the classless society as the redemption of History.

Du Bois thought about History and history in very different terms. He dreamed of no final utopia. He never gave the least thought to History with an Origin in Paradise. For Du Bois there was no History. Only histories—narrative accounts of hopes wrought against the record of oppression of the worker. Hope was founded, therefore, on the prospects of industrial democracy. In 1934, near the worst of the Great Depression, he could not have held this hope all too firmly. But he held it—and not as a matter of principle (his principles led to action) but as a matter of hard-won experience with the reality of work that was always racial. Marx, we might say, never more fully revealed his debt to the very liberal culture he claimed to abjure than in his famous inability to see the darkness of labor. Both the Black and the white worker were bound in the subaltern system that industrial capitalism had, in the 1860s, perfected to its own ends. Neither truly saw the vision of paradise regained, because both, in their segregated ways, understood that the working class will forever be pushed, to the extent that workers permit, back into the darkness. Liberal History claims there is only progressively more light. Du Bois's history, with its tenacious readiness to see the reversals—the forwards and backwards—of historical time, was always a story of the play of darkness on light.

This, then, is the story of *Black Reconstruction*—clear and compelling, yet remarkably ignored save for specialists in the field of American history. When a great book is so avidly not read by those who need it most, this must be because it tells a truth they do not want to hear, least of all understand. This was the kind of truth Du Bois told near the end of his story (but just a third of the way through the book itself) when he wrote “Looking Forward.” The forward of the new class of working men, white and Black, was the forward of the struggle that was so salient in the 1930s but already dawning as the Civil War ended—and as the Long Depression put a global pinch on industrial capitalism itself. It was the struggle between the possible decency of industrial democracy and the “American Assumption,” the assumption of industrial capitalism that “wealth is mainly the result of its owner's effort and that any average worker can by thrift become a capitalist” (*BR*, 183).

The three tragic characters of Reconstruction were trapped in a futility of massive proportions. The Civil War, though a dramatic event in the American Republic, was ultimately but a salient variation on a global struggle. Though in the 1860s the European Diaspora held its exploitative grip on the colored people of its colonies from whom it stole its resources and labor power, by the time of the 1930s that grip began to slip, in part because of the Great War, in part because of economic distractions, and in part because of the uncertain rise of labor as a fellow sufferer in what progress there was to be had.³² Still, Du Bois realized that the key to what reconstruction there might have been was the same as the key to the Civil War—the Black and white worker. Not the planter, not the great Liberator himself, not the liberal North, but the worker. The tragedy fell upon them all because, even as early as 1864, when Reconstruction was first taking its fatal shape, and certainly by the crisis of 1873, it was plain for all who could see its history that the action would never be solely in the hands of the worker—Black or white, Southern or Northern, African or Asian, or those in the European Diaspora of the global North.

Read from here, “Looking Forward” is the story of dying old men of the North who were better, in their ways, than even Lincoln. Thaddeus Stevens of Vermont in the House of Representatives and Charles Sumner of Massachusetts in the Senate carried forth the radical Republican vision of Reconstruction. But neither lived to see even the first fruits of their righteous demands. Stevens died in 1868, just before Sumner fell out of favor (and died in 1874). The vision they inspired won some gains of no minor importance. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution established basic rights and protections for the freedpeople of the South. Even though the South, with its Black codes and political leverage on the North, managed to outrun the rule of law, these protections eventually caught up with justice itself. It took a full century for even these fundamentals of justice to become the true law of the land. None of the best Northerners saw this day. Lincoln could not even imagine it. Stevens and Sumner died long before, their gains wiped out by Johnson and the others who sided with the planters for one final century more. Du Bois saw this history clearly, which is why he vested what hope he had—then as in the 1930s—in the worker.

32. On the slip, if not decline, of Empire in the 1930s, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 194–222; compare Roberts, *Twentieth Century*, 271–338.

The problem in reading *Black Reconstruction* is not its length and heft nor its varieties of parts but its defiance of our usual ideals of History—hence of our orientations in time.³³ The time of race is, as Du Bois thought, the time of truths that are never present, even though they, in their absence, are always there. It is possible that the most widely known line ever written by Du Bois is his remark at the beginning of *Souls*: “The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.” The appeal of the figure of the color line rests on its defiance of progress. As years, or decades, in the century now over have passed on their way, the color line remains as it was at the century’s start, giving the figure an ever growing force. The color line remains in fact, if not in form, as it was in 1903. The reason for this cannot be found in *Souls*, but it can be teased from *Black Reconstruction*.

Even at the dawn of the twenty-first century—when the industrial system has fallen away, when work itself is transformed, when labor is put

33. *Black Reconstruction* tells its story in less than half its heft. If Du Bois erred in composition, he erred as a man late in his seventh decade might. (Not even he could foresee the three full decades left to him.) He wrote the book quickly, revising to the end. Under such deadlines as he imposed on himself, he probably could not step back to see that *Black Reconstruction* was really two books, if not three, at once. After chapter 9, “The Price of Disaster,” which ends on page 381 of a book of 737 pages (just shy of one-half), Du Bois offers five detailed chapters on the nature of the successes and failures of Reconstruction in the various regions of the South and the Border. These are, in themselves, brilliant for their historical nuance. He analyzes the different times and fates of Reconstruction according to the social and economic differences of the states. The Black majority in South Carolina suffered a different outcome from the Black majorities in Mississippi and Louisiana, who suffered a different outcome from the Black minorities in the rest of the South and the Border States. These accounts are worth reading in themselves. They extend by fine detail the narrative of the first nine chapters. But they could have stood on their own, at least for those whose primary interest is the question with which I began: Why this book, and why then?

Similarly the final four chapters (14 through 17) could very well have been a second, smaller book. These are the crux of Du Bois’s response to Dunning and all the others. His revision of Reconstruction history is the work of the first half of the book. These concluding chapters are the ones that bring the point home in so many words. “Founding the Public School” (chapter 15) documents, for example, the deep commitment of the freedpeople to learning and how they learned in spite of the limitations of their schools, which were the model for public education nationwide. This was his reply to those who wanted to throw the freed Blacks into the mystified stew of scalawags and carpetbaggers—thus to displace the greed from the planters and the capitalists. *Black Reconstruction* concludes, straightforwardly enough, with “Back Toward Slavery” (chapter 16)—his summary account of the renewal of civil war on the doom of Reconstruction—and “The Propaganda of History” (chapter 17)—his direct reply to the establishment of Reconstruction historians.

more on the margins of economic life—the twisted logic of racial time remains. The passing over into a new millennium, the passing away of an older economic system, the passing into public view of new (including racial) assertions of what were once Weak-We peoples—these are the marks of the new time in which the question ought to be asked: Can the world be understood under the intoxicating sign of History's Progress? Or must we think of it, and live in it, under the sober sign of time that races by only to revert, reverse, and revise itself?