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Double Consciousness

The Phenomenology of Racialized Subjectivity

Double consciousness is the pillar of Du Bois's analysis of subjectivity, that is, the culturally and historically situated understandings of self and other, and the meanings that construct the world in which we live. The best-known articulation of double consciousness is found in the first essay in *Souls*, titled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," although Du Bois initially introduced the concept in an essay titled "Strivings of Negro People," published in 1897 in the *Atlantic*. In these essays Du Bois poses the question that animates his exploration of the lived experience of Black people: "How does it feel to be a problem?" In answering this question Du Bois develops a phenomenological analysis of Black subjectivity; that is, he sets out to describe how Black people experience the world and themselves in everyday life.¹ The sociological importance of the theory of double consciousness is barely acknowledged.² Yet Charles Lemert, one of the few sociologists who recognizes its importance, asserts, "Du Bois's double-self concept deserved a prominent place in the lineage of self theorists which, from James and Baldwin through Cooley to Mead to the symbolic interactionists, has been one of sociology's proudest traditions."³

But the theory of double consciousness does not simply deserve a place in a lineage of the early sociology of the self. The theory is central to the analysis of subjectivity under racialized modernity, and it addresses an important "ontological myopia" in the work of other classical theorists of the self and subjectivity.⁴ The theory points to something that other theorists of the self and identity who were Du Bois's contemporaries, such as William James, Charles Horton Cooley, and George Herbert Mead, did not comprehend: the significance of the color line as the central social structure organizing lived experiences under racialized modernity. As a result of his personal encounter with the color

line, Du Bois is able to analyze racialized subjectivity in ways that his contemporaries, and many of our contemporaries, cannot. The theory of double consciousness points to the epistemological importance of lived experience for social theory.

Double Consciousness

Double consciousness describes the subjectivity of racialized subjects. In one of his most famous and often cited passages, Du Bois asserts that Black people in America are

a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.⁵

In this short but significant paragraph, Du Bois introduces the three elements of the theory of double consciousness: the veil, twoness, and second sight. The veil—i.e., the color line—structures the subjectivity of racialized modernity. The social world is seen and experienced differently on either side of the color line. The veil works as a one-way mirror: Whites project their own constructions of Blacks onto the veil and see their projections reflected on it. They have the power to define themselves and others, and for them, the racialized subject is invisible. On the other hand, the projections of whites onto the veil become realities that Black subjects have to contend with in their self-formation.

The internal processing of the external gaze gives rise to the second element of Du Bois's theory: the sense of twoness. Twoness means that in the process of self-formation, the racialized subject must account for the views of two different social worlds—the Black world, constructed behind the veil, and the white world, which dehumanizes Blacks through lack of recognition of their humanity. The third element of the theory of double consciousness is second sight. A world in which the racialized

can “only see himself through the revelation of the other world” forces Black people to wrestle with constant dehumanization but, on the other hand, allows them to glance into the white world. This may in some cases neutralize the mirroring effects of the veil. And indeed, Du Bois relied on his second sight to develop an analysis of white subjectivity and lived experience.⁶

Du Bois’s phenomenological account of racialized subjectivity is present throughout his work, but it is most developed in *The Souls of Black Folk* and in *Dusk of Dawn*.⁷ *Souls* is a text that most sociologists do not embrace.⁸ Few are aware that Max Weber wanted to get the work translated and published in German. Charles Lemert suggests that *Souls* is a canonical work in the discipline, and views its rejection as an example of how work that comes from behind the veil is rendered invisible.⁹ We agree that *Souls* should be read and discussed as a classical text in the discipline, a text that inaugurates the phenomenological study of Black subjectivity, that is, the analysis of the basic structures of Black consciousness and experiences.

Du Bois’s analysis of double consciousness is rooted in his reflections on the life of African Americans, particularly in the South, and in his own lived experience. Autobiographical reflections are at the core of his theorizing. In “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” the first essay of *The Souls of Black Folk*, he tells of a moment in which he understands that he is different. It is a moment in his boyhood when a girl refuses his card while playing a group childhood game. Du Bois does not return to this particular moment in *Dusk of Dawn* or in his posthumous *Autobiography*, but those texts make it clear that when he was growing up in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, a predominantly white community of middle- and working-class families, he understood the difference the color line makes. And in *Souls* he asserts that this difference is built on what he describes as “a thousand and one little actions.” Still, if it is in his growing up in New England that Du Bois learns that he is different, it is only when he goes south to study at Fisk that he fully comprehends the exclusionary work of the color line.

His experiences studying at Fisk and later on teaching in Atlanta are front and center in the essays in *Souls*. Some of the essays, including “Of the Black Belt” and “Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece,” are descriptions of the social and economic structure of the South and the place and pre-

dicament of African Americans within it. Sociologists should recognize these as early examples of community studies. Other essays in the book, such as “Of the Meaning of Progress” and “Of the Coming of John,” are analyses of the lived experience and subjectivity of Blacks in the South around the turn of the twentieth century. We should pay close attention to these essays, which focus on Du Bois’s analysis of the lifeworld of Black people. In the first one, “Of the Meaning of Progress,” he recalls his experience teaching school in rural Tennessee, describes the hopes of the people he teaches, and shows how those hopes were crushed by the color line. In “Of the Coming of John,” Du Bois returns to the question of the lifeworld inhabited by rural Blacks in the South, to the hopes and attempts related to leaving it behind, and to the disciplinary forms and effects of the color line.

One essay in particular reflects the development of Du Bois’s thought and political activism at the turn of the twentieth century: his essay titled “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others.” In this essay, he airs his political differences with Booker T. Washington, who was the most influential power broker between the white elite class and the Black serving institutions of the time.¹⁰ Du Bois’s disagreement with Washington was central to his development as an intellectual and political leader. In particular, his differences with Washington regarding the importance of accessing higher liberal education and demanding political rights led Du Bois to become a founder of the Niagara Movement, and later the NAACP.

Whereas few sociologists embrace *Souls*, *Dusk of Dawn* is almost entirely ignored by the discipline. Upon the republication of *Souls* on its fiftieth anniversary, Du Bois stated that he thought about updating the book but decided not to so do because the work reflected his thoughts in 1903 and he hoped that other works would reflect his evolving thought. This is indeed what *Dusk* accomplishes.

While neither *Souls* nor *Dusk* was intended as a scholarly text, these two books’ analysis of racialization and self-formation makes them key texts for sociological theory. *Dusk* is organized as an autobiography, but Du Bois explains that his life “is a digressive illustration and exemplification of what race has meant in the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” adding that the “peculiar racial situations and problems could best be explained in the life and history of one who has

lived them. My living gains its importance from the problems and not the problems from me.”¹¹

In *Dusk* Du Bois takes us through his life and tells us how his understanding of what race is and how it works changed as a result of his encounters with the color line as a scholar and as an organizer. Even more than *Souls*, *Dusk* underscores the centrality of lived experience in Du Bois’s analytical approach. There we learn how his time in Germany led him to understand race as a global phenomenon, not just an American one, and to attend to the presence of local differences within the global construction of the color line. As he explains, when he was young he thought that the color line was particular to the United States, but his years studying in Germany led him to realize that racialization was a global phenomenon and that “the majority of mankind has struggled through this inner spiritual slavery.”¹² Already at the beginning of the second essay in *Souls*, titled “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” he states, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”¹³ As sociologist Katrina Quisumbing King shows, many people are aware of the first part of the phrase—the color line as the central problem of the twentieth century—but not of its continuation—that is to say, Du Bois’s understanding of the color line as a global phenomenon. Du Bois was the first sociologist to develop a historical and social constructionist understanding of race.¹⁴

Du Bois’s autobiographical reflections in *Dusk* help him to develop a phenomenological analysis of the lived experience of racialized people, and to link lived experiences to a broader analysis of the intersections of class, race, and colonialism. His aim in this book and others was not so much to give an account of his life and worldviews relating to the color line as to theorize from his own experience as a Black person living behind the veil. He introduces the book thusly:

My life had its significance and its only deep significance because it was part of a Problem; but that problem was, as I continue to think, the central problem of the greatest of the world’s democracies and so the Problem of the future world. The problem of the future world is the charting, by means of intelligent reason, of a path not simply through the resis-

tances of physical force, but through the vaster and far more intricate jungle of ideas conditioned on unconscious and subconscious reflexes of living things; on blind unreason and often irresistible urges of sensitive matter; of which the concept of race is today one of the most unyielding and threatening. I seem to see a way of elucidating the inner meaning and significance of that race problem by explaining it in terms of the one human life that I know best.¹⁵

This focus on lived experience and its link to global structures of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion is a central element of Du Bois's sociology and something that differentiates it from the sociologies of his, and our, contemporaries.

Du Bois relies on his second sight to develop an analysis of the lived experience of whiteness. The phenomenology of whiteness, an inquiry into the meaning and experience of being socially constructed as white, was a subject of Du Bois's analyses throughout his life. He first explored this in his biography of John Brown, and further developed it in "The Souls of White Folk" and "The Hands of Ethiopia," two essays in *Dark-water*. He also dedicates a full chapter to this topic in *Dusk*, and returns to it, in a global context, in his analysis of the subjectivity of the colonialist in *The World and Africa*.

For Du Bois, whiteness confers material privilege as the result of the exploitation of workers of color and the appropriation of colonial resources, and it also grants social and symbolic privilege, as a result of the power to define the social world and the many little and large forms of social recognition attached to this power in everyday life. In *Black Reconstruction* Du Bois refers to these forms of privilege as the psychological wage of whiteness. The power of whites to impose a definition of who they and others are is the basis for racialization and double consciousness.¹⁶

To better understand the uniqueness and importance of Du Bois's theory of double consciousness, it is useful to contrast it with the work of his contemporaries who were theorizing about subjectivity and the self. Classical as well as contemporary theorists affirm that subjectivity and the self are constructed and reconstructed through continuing social interaction. At the core of social interaction are the acts of communication and mutual recognition between individuals in society.

William James, Du Bois's mentor and friend at Harvard, was one of the first American theorists of the self and subjectivity. James was a professor of philosophy and psychology and one of the founders of the philosophical approach known as pragmatism. In his book *The Principles of Psychology*, James divided the self between the "I" (the self as knower) and the empirical self, or "me" (the self as known, the accumulated experiences that constitute the self).¹⁷ He further divided the "me" into four components: the material self (our material existence, our bodies, our families, our possessions), the spiritual self (our states of consciousness and feelings), the pure ego, and, most important in this context, the social self. The social self emerges through interaction and mutual recognition between people and from the internalization of the images that others have of us.

As mutual recognition is central to the formation of the self, lack thereof has a devastating impact on the formation of the self. Of this condition James wrote,

No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke or minded what we did, but if every person we met "cut us dead" and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily tortures would be a relief; for those would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all.¹⁸

Recognition is so crucial to one's own subjective understanding that we may develop as many social selves as there are individuals that recognize us.¹⁹ In James's formulation, this splitting divides us into several selves, which may at times adopt group positions that are misaligned with one another. Du Bois reformulates this splitting of the selves into the concept of "twoness."

Although James's work was highly influential in theorizing the self as a social construct, the most important classical sociological theorist of the self is George Herbert Mead. Mead and Du Bois had parallel careers. Both studied at Harvard and in Germany. Both were influenced

by James's pragmatism and his emphasis on the creative possibilities of human action. But they came to understand these possibilities in very different terms. Mead, like James, was a pragmatist who believed in the possibilities of progress through human creativity and adaptation. In their opinion, social interaction and communication in the solving of social problems was the way in which progress took place.

For Mead, what characterizes the self is that "it is an object to itself."²⁰ That is, the self emerges through the process of social interaction as a result of the ability of individuals to reflect on themselves and their actions by taking the position of other individuals or the community as a whole. In other words, the self develops from internalizing the view that others have of us. This is a two-stage process. First, children internalize the viewpoints of specific individuals who are close to them, such as their parents. As they grow up, they learn to take in the views of larger groups, and finally they are able to internalize the views of society in general, which Mead describes as the "general other."

Mead uses the metaphor of "the game" to describe this process. We learn to play a game by internalizing its rules. Once we do that, we can fulfill any role in the game because we know what is expected from us. In internalizing the positions of one's community toward different aspects of cooperation and interaction, the self "reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole."²¹ According to Mead, only when a person "takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs . . . does he develop a complete self."²² He emphasizes the mind's ability to symbolize, that is, to attach shared meanings to signs beyond the specific situation in which they are found. This ability to symbolize characterizes human communication and allows individuals to understand the viewpoints and take the position of their community.

Furthermore, Mead, like James, realized that lack of recognition can hamper the development of the self. If a person is denied recognition, Mead wrote, "if others could not take his attitude in some sense, he could not have appreciation in emotional terms, he could not be the very self he is trying to be."²³ This, he asserts, is especially the case in caste societies, in which the lack of communication and the absence of common attitudes "cut down the possibility of the full development of the self."²⁴ In discussing caste society, Mead makes brief references to India and to

Europe's Middle Ages, yet he does not extend this thinking to explore how the American racialized social system affects self-formation.

For Mead, communication allows individuals to recognize and come to understand new people they encounter, and in this way allows individuals to expand the boundaries of the society in which they live. Communication and recognition are also the base for democracy, as those elements allow people to acknowledge the rights of others. Pragmatist thinkers such as James and Mead believed in perfecting democracy in America through interaction, creativity, and adaptation. Yet the veil prevented them from seeing those who were excluded from recognition and were precluded from full participation in the broad processes of societal communication and therefore from American democracy. In contrast, Du Bois's encounter with the color line allowed him to see and understand the limits to recognition, communication, and democratic participation. Du Bois's social position and lived experience as a Black man allowed him to build on the pragmatist tradition and to transcend it in his theorizing and analysis, which we examine in the coming sections of this chapter.

Charles Horton Cooley was another early theorist of subjectivity. A sociology professor at the University of Michigan in the early twentieth century, he is mostly remembered for his concept of the "looking-glass self," which theorizes that individuals learn who they are by viewing themselves through the imagined eyes of others.²⁵ Cooley's work on the self does not figure as centrally in sociology as Mead's, but it is relevant here because he intuits the effects of lack of recognition on racialized subjects. Only through communication and recognition can people imagine how they are seen by others. Like James, Cooley emphasized that recognition is a human need. He argued that people need "fellowship and that appreciation by others which gives his self social corroboration and support."²⁶ But Cooley realized that such support was not universally received. Reflecting on the predicament of Black people and immigrants in early twentieth-century America, he asserted, "The immigrant has for the most part been treated purely as a source of labor, with little or no regard to the fact that he is a human being, with a self like the rest of us. . . . The negro question includes a similar situation. There is no understanding it without realizing the kind of self-feeling a

race must have who, in a land where men are supposed to be equal, find themselves marked with indelible inferiority.”²⁷ Unfortunately, while Cooley intuits the effect of lack of recognition on the self-formation of racially excluded people, he does not develop this point.

The work of Alfred Schutz also contributes to our understanding of the effects of lack of communication and interaction in the construction of intersubjectivity. Schutz was an Austrian refugee from Nazism who taught philosophy and sociology at the New School for Social Research in New York City, where he also worked in finance. Schutz’s contribution was to adapt the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl to develop a sociological phenomenology of subjectivity and consciousness. In his phenomenological description of the social world, Schutz distinguishes between consociates, those with whom we share a common social space and with whom we interact, and contemporaries, those who live in our times but, because they are distant, we do not encounter in everyday life.²⁸ We become familiar with our consociates and test our ideas about them through interaction. Yet as we distance ourselves from our everyday experiences, the world becomes more opaque to us.

One can find in Schutz’s analysis of contemporaries a parallel with relationships, or lack thereof, across the veil. Schutz argued that we have no communication or interaction with our distant contemporaries. We come to understand our contemporaries only through ideas about them that we are exposed to in our everyday life. In the same way, those who live behind the veil are invisible to whites, who can think of them only within the rubric of their existing ideas. Schutz’s analysis of consociates and contemporaries, however, does not address power relations and exclusionary dynamics such as those involved in racialization. The world behind the veil is not the distant world of contemporaries; it is an adjacent world that whites do not see. As the sociologist Anne Rawls points out, “While Black and White appear to occupy the same world geographically, they rarely occupy the same interactional space.”²⁹ The presence of the veil explains why, despite living in adjacent social worlds, whites think about Blacks only through their racialized preconceptions about them.

The theory of double consciousness illuminates the blind spot in the early theorists of subjectivity: their lack of attention to the limits

to communication and mutual recognition under racialized modernity. The classical theorists of the self were aware of the negative effects of lack of recognition but devoted little attention to the millions of Black Americans who lived under this condition. James and Mead wrote eloquently about the predicament of people who do not receive social recognition, but they did not explore what this might have meant in the lives of Black people living near them, and how that experience affects their theories. Cooley acknowledged the consequences of racial exclusion for self-formation, but this issue was a minor point in his large body of work. Schutz, who understood the effects of lack of interaction on our understanding of the world, was also blind to the presence of the veil.

The theory of double consciousness brings the lack of recognition for the racially excluded subject to the fore, and posits that the veil creates different subjectivities on different sides of the color line. The key to the lived experience of the Black subject is double consciousness. The key to the lived experience of the white subject is ignorance of the humanity of those who live behind the veil. Furthermore, Du Bois argued that white subjects fiercely defended their ignorance when challenged about their role in creating and maintaining racial classifications and racial inequality.

Du Bois's ability to theorize these different subjectivities emerged from his own encounter with racialization. In *Dusk*, he states, "Had it not been for the race problem early thrust upon me and enveloping me, I should have probably been an unquestioning worshiper at the shrine of the social order and economic development into which I was born."³⁰ It was the concrete and everyday experience of racialization, from the awkward silences that his sheer presence often generated to blatant acts of exclusion, discrimination, and racial violence that he encountered in various public and professional spaces, that led Du Bois to critique racialized modernity. His experiences as a racialized subject and as an activist and organizer against racism allowed him to understand the relationship among power relations, exclusionary dynamics, and the formation of racialized subjectivities and identities. Theorizing from experience and linking the micro analysis of subjectivity and the macro analysis of racial and colonial capitalism are distinct characteristics of Du Bois's sociology.

The Phenomenology of Black Subjectivity

Du Bois's phenomenology posits three elements as structuring the understanding of the self and the world of racialized subjects. The first is the presence of the veil. Du Bois uses the metaphor of the veil to describe how the color line appears in the everyday experience of racialized people in racialized modernity. The effect of the veil in the racialized subject's consciousness is a feeling of twoness on the one hand and the emergence of second sight on the other. Du Bois uses different analytical and narrative strategies—quasi-ethnographic analysis of Black lives, auto-ethnography, and fiction—to illustrate the work of double consciousness.

Of the Veil

The main point of the theory of double consciousness is that the presence of the veil prevents the full recognition of the humanity of racially excluded groups. The veil structures the everyday experiences, self-formation, and perception of the world for people living on both sides of it. The invisibility of those who live behind the veil means that there is no process of mutual recognition or true communication between the racializing and the racialized subjects.

In *Dusk*, Du Bois shows that no matter how clearly, articulately, or sincerely the people living behind the veil present themselves, the white world either does not hear or completely misrecognizes what they try to convey. Invoking Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, Du Bois describes life behind the veil as being cut off from the dominant world of whites:

It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world. One talks on evenly and logically in this way, but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually

penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing by do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world.³¹

At the heart of the matter, Du Bois is preoccupied with how the veil distorts Black subjects to the extent that their humanity becomes unrecognizable to others. Confronted with the systematic ignorance on the part of the world outside the cave, “the people within may become hysterical. They scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum and unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in.”³² This excerpt highlights how lack of recognition affects the lives of Black people. This state of despair, however, is a symptom of living in the racist American society, not an ontological state of being. As Shawn Michelle Smith argues, Du Bois “describes the struggle of a healthy mind forced to confront and inhabit a perverse world; pathology finally resides not in an African American brain but in the American social body.”³³

The analysis of double consciousness in both *Souls* and *Dusk* emphasizes the oppressive character of the racialized world and its consequences for people living behind the veil and simultaneously highlights how Black subjects strive to shape their world. Du Bois’s depiction of the racialized world is one characterized by oppression and suffering but also by dignity, self-assertion, and creativity.

Of Twoness

Du Bois introduces the concept of twoness as the feeling of being both American and Black. In *Souls*, he describes this as a person having “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” Racialized subjects do not have the option, as Mead would suggest, of taking the position of the whole community; instead, subjectivity and self-formation are affected by the two conflicting worlds to which they belong: on the one hand the world of the dominant group that denies their humanity and on the other their own community, which is a source of support and a space of agency. Between these two worlds is a constant tension between the oppressiveness of the veil and

the agency and creative practices of the racialized population. In *Dusk*, Du Bois describes the world behind the veil as an overbearing one:

I lived in an environment which I came to call the White world. I was not an American; I was not a man; I was by long education and continual compulsion and daily reminder, a colored man to a White world; and that White world often existed primarily, so far as I was concerned, to see with sleepless vigilance that I was kept within bounds. All this made me limited in physical movement and provincial in thought and dream. I could not stir, I could not act, I could not live, without taking into careful account the reaction of my White enviroing world.³⁴

Yet, although seemingly all-consuming, the white world does not fully determine the lived experience of the racialized subject. Du Bois also reminds us that the “Negro American has for his environment not only the surrounding white world but also, and touching him usually more completely and compellingly, is the environment furnished by his own colored group.”³⁵ In *Souls*, Du Bois identifies religion and the church as the primary sites of such world building.³⁶ In the essay “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” he asserts that the Black church is “the social center of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character.”³⁷ The church is identified as the hub of Black communities: “Various organizations meet here—the church proper, the Sunday-school, two or three insurance societies, women’s societies, secret societies, and mass meetings of various kinds. Entertainments, suppers, and lectures are held beside the five or six regular weekly religious services.”³⁸ Du Bois also emphasizes the centrality of music in the everyday experience of Black subjects: “The Music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil. Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it was adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people’s sorrow, despair, and hope.”³⁹ These passages reveal a rich cultural and social world behind the veil, a world invisible to the dominant world.

For Du Bois, twoness characterizes self-formation and subjectivity behind the veil, but he recognizes that twoness can lead to different responses to the veil. He articulates this point in his essay on Booker T. Washington in *Souls*. In a short paragraph in that essay, Du Bois proposes a typology of three modes in which racialized groups typically manage living behind the veil. As he states, “But when to earth and brute is added an environment of men and ideas, then the attitude of the imprisoned group may take three main forms, a feeling of revolt and revenge, an attempt to adjust all thought and action to the will of the greater groups or finally a determined effort at self-realization and self-development despite environing opinion.”⁴⁰

One response to the veil is self-assertion despite the oppressive context. Du Bois cites the example of the establishment of the Black Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and New York as examples of this. Du Bois’s thoughts and actions aligned most with this choice, and during his life he advocated various ways to travel this path: from his early belief in science and the Talented Tenth during his Atlanta years through his activism for civil rights during his time with the NAACP to his advocacy of Black self-organization during his second term as a faculty member at Atlanta University to Pan-African socialism at the end of his life. Nonetheless, he realized that there were other responses to the veil, including rebellion (such as the Haitian Revolution) and attempts at assimilation. It is clear from his scathing critique that he believed that Booker T. Washington had unabashedly adopted the third path. For Du Bois, embarking upon a project of assimilation without full recognition was a losing proposition for Black people because such an approach denied them the possibility of full acceptance and self-consciousness from the start.

Du Bois returned to considerations of responses to the veil in *Dusk*, where he analyzes the ways in which educated young Blacks deal with twoness. He argues that the responses range between two poles. Those who “avoid every appearance of segregation” eschew contact with Black organizations and try to join the world of whites in an attempt at assimilation.⁴¹ At the other pole is a group that “prides himself on living with ‘his people’” and seeks to distance themselves from whites whenever possible.⁴²

For Du Bois, each response has a cost. The first group must deal with rejection from the white world because the “thick plate glass” of

the veil keeps them from truly assimilating into mainstream society.⁴³ The second group lives in an isolated cultural world. Du Bois argues that neither group ultimately obtains recognition or participates in the communication process to define social reality across the veil. Between these two extremes are “all sorts of interracial patterns, and all of them theoretically follow the idea that Blacks must only submit to segregation ‘when forced.’”⁴⁴ The result, he says, is a “crystallization of the culture elements among colored people into their own groups for social and cultural contact.”⁴⁵

In *Dusk* Du Bois also returns to the topic of Black self-assertion and the possibilities of agency in the world behind the veil. There he discusses different cultural, social, and political initiatives, in addition to the church, that take place beyond the veil. He points to movements to advance literature and art, he describes demands for improved health-care for Blacks, and he proposes establishing consumer cooperatives to put the purchasing power of the Black population at the service of community economic development. These initiatives embody the constant striving of African Americans for recognition and for shaping their selves and their world—in other words, for full emancipation and equality.

Of Second Sight

Second sight is the potential ability of the racially excluded to see the world beyond the veil. In *Souls*, Du Bois describes the experience of living behind the veil as living in “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other.”⁴⁶ For Du Bois, second sight emerges in Black people’s consciousness as the awareness of their invisibility, and the world beyond the veil gradually becomes apparent to Black subjects. What is important is not only the abject condition of invisibility but also the “gift” of awareness that is granted through this second sight. Thus the veil has a doubling effect. It creates a barrier of recognition between the Black and white worlds, and it leads the Black person to misrecognize his or her own self. Yet, turning the screw on Plato’s allegory, while the prisoners in the cave have a distorted view of themselves, they also have the possibility of glimpsing the world beyond the veil.

The racially excluded have no choice but to see themselves through the eyes of the dominant subjects. This situation allows them to, at least partially, suspend the optics of the veil and see other possibilities of organizing the world. In his analysis of Black subjectivity, Du Bois points to different ways in which this ability may emerge and develop. We can see this process in the essay “Of the Meaning of Progress,” in *Souls*, in which Du Bois describes his experience teaching in a poor rural Black community in Tennessee during one of the summers at Fisk. He describes the community in which he taught as having a “half awakened common consciousness.” Specifically, he writes,

There was among us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief, at burial, birth, or wedding; from a common hardship in poverty, poor land, and low wages; and, above all, from the sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity. All this caused us to think some thoughts together; but these, when ripe for speech, were spoken in various languages.

Those whose eyes twenty-five and more years before had seen “the glory of the coming of the Lord,” saw in every present hindrance or help a dark fatalism bound to bring all things right in His own good time. The mass of those to whom slavery was a dim recollection of childhood found the world a puzzling thing: it asked little of them, and they answered with little, and yet it ridiculed their offering. Such a paradox they could not understand, and therefore sank into listless indifference, or shiftlessness, or reckless bravado.

There were, however, some—such as Josie, Jim, and Ben—to whom War, Hell, and Slavery were but childhood tales, whose young appetites had been whetted to an edge by school and story and half-awakened thought. Ill could they be content, born without and beyond the World. And their weak wings beat against their barriers,—barriers of caste, of youth, of life; at last, in dangerous moments, against everything that opposed even a whim.⁴⁷

The distortions of the veil lead to different degrees of awakening of second sight. The veil distorts everybody’s view of the world and the self, but it does so in different ways, “as spoken in various languages” in Du Bois’s compelling description. Josie, Jim, and Ben had ambitions to

transcend their predicament. Others expected little from the world. But in all cases, the veil stands between the people whom Du Bois is writing about, including Du Bois himself, and the world of opportunity that they are able to glimpse, though in different ways.

The analysis of the emergence of second sight is most developed in "Of the Coming of John." Telling the story from the perspective of a faculty member at a fictional college, Du Bois poetically depicts the changes in John's second sight through the use of narrative fiction. Growing up as a young man in the Jim Crow South, Black John is completely uncritical of his condition and unaware of his place in the world. The white people in his town viewed him as "good natured," but were dismayed when his mother decided to send young Black John away to college. White John was off to Princeton at the same time. Although Black John and White John grew up together and were even playmates, they were seldom thought of in the same mind. As Du Bois writes, "And yet it was singular that few thought of two Johns,—for the black folk thought of one John, and he was black; and the white folk thought of another John, and he was white. And neither world thought on the other world's thought save with a vague unrest."⁴⁸

Black John goes to college, but his lackadaisical attitude and indifferent performance lead the faculty to suspend him for a term. The suspension produces in him a grave seriousness, and he returns to college with a new vision of the world. Upon his return, he receives the "gift" of second sight: "He had left his queer thought-world and come back to a world of motion and men. He looked now for the first time sharply about him, and wondered how he had seen so little before. He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before."⁴⁹ Black John's access to education and his encounter with the white world prompt the emergence of second sight—a startling yet gradual revelation that allows him to see the structures of his racialized environment and the ways in which he is situated and constrained in and around the veil.

Later in the essay Black John and white John encounter each other at an opera house in New York City, an encounter in which Black John is made to give up his seat at the behest of white John. This enrages Black John and makes him attend to his "destiny," which is to go back and up-

lift the Negro in his home town of Altamaha, Georgia, after seven long years of being away. The ride home is unpleasant because, as always, he has to sit in the Jim Crow car, but this time, thanks to his second sight, he is acutely aware of the situation.

The return home portrays the transformation of Black John's understanding of the world. Yet Du Bois explains that with this new second sight, Black John is disoriented and finds it difficult to navigate comfortably within the white and Black worlds. Upon his return, Blacks thought that he was aloof, and whites thought that he was uppity. The mayor warned Black John about infecting his Black pupils with his notions of equality and making them discontented and unhappy.

Both essays end in tragedy, demonstrating the unique dilemma of racialized subjectivity. Running through them is both the faint likelihood that things will be different and the overwhelming presence of the veil. Although second sight gives the Black subject the possibility of understanding the world constructed around the veil, it does not change their subordinate position.

In *Souls*, second sight emerged only in those who possessed an internal desire to learn—in going away to college for Black John and through learning in his small classroom for select students in “Of the Meaning of Progress.” While Du Bois always held higher education and the role of people with higher education in high esteem, over time he developed a more nuanced understanding of the role of knowledge.

Initially he thought that addressing the veil was merely a matter of scientific inquiry and evidence: “The Negro problem was in my mind a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent understanding. The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know.”⁵⁰ But the practice of academic science helped Du Bois understand that this was not the answer to racialization and racism, an awareness articulated in powerful language: “Two considerations thereafter broke in upon my work and eventually disrupted it: first, one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved; and secondly, there was no such definite demand for a scientific work of the sort that I was doing.”⁵¹

Although he conveyed his ideas using the language of scientific inquiry, which enjoyed considerable legitimacy, the power of the veil to hide and distort was stronger than the clearest voices coming from be-

hind it. This led Du Bois down the path of political activism, first at the Niagara Movement, the NAACP, and the directorship of the *Crisis*, and then through tireless advocacy of organizations that focused on self-development, self-preservation, and the struggle for equality. Whereas in *Souls* second sight emerges as a result of access to education, in *Dusk* Du Bois describes how his encounters with the daily practices of racialization, from little slights on the playground when he was but a young child to living through the 1905 Atlanta race riots, made him question the world around him and how resisting the veil expanded his second sight.

The Phenomenology of White Subjectivity

Second sight provides a sober look at the racialized world. Whereas the racially excluded are invisible to the dominant group, the former can develop an understanding of the latter. Encountering the veil allows for the development of a critical perspective on the white world. Du Bois used this ability to see life on the other side of the veil to pioneer the study of whiteness and develop a critique of white subjectivity. Du Bois argues that whites have the power to define the social world and, in this way, they are able to deny the humanity of the racialized and reproduce their own privilege in all its forms: material, social, and symbolic.

In *Dusk*, Du Bois devotes an entire chapter to the study of the natural attitude of whites through conversations with two imaginary white friends, a vivid example of his use of fictional narrative for sociological theorizing and analysis. In these imagined conversations, Du Bois makes two points. The first concerns the relationship of whites to Blacks. Here Du Bois notes the tension between the power of whites to define social reality and their inability to see the social world in its entirety. In his first imaginary dialogue, Du Bois emphasizes the purposeful ignorance of white people and their inability to fully recognize the humanity of other people. In explaining the white subject's basic understanding of the world, Du Bois writes, "His thesis is simple: the world is composed of Race superimposed on Race; classes superimposed on classes."⁵² White people presuppose themselves to be superior and do not acknowledge that they are active participants in domination or oppression. This allows white people to rationalize the racial order of society, as they see it, and take pity on (or show contempt for) Blacks.

As we have seen, Mead notes that caste systems prevent individuals from internalizing the full social processes in which they participate. This is the situation Du Bois describes. Whites cannot take the position of the whole community because they do not see or recognize the humanity of part of the community in which they live. As a result, the racializing subjects do not see their own position as oppressors within the system of racialization. The white subjects can understand their place in the racialized world and their role in maintaining racial inequality only if they transcend their positionality as socially white. If the corollary of the veil for the racialized is the devastating anguish of not being recognized, for the racializing it is living in constant and persistent denial. As Judith Blau and Eric Brown put it in their 2008 essay “Du Bois and Diasporic Identity,” “Blacks bear the burden of Twoness but whites are deluded by how they position themselves in their invented hierarchy.”⁵³

The second point Du Bois makes in his analysis of white subjectivity involves the relationship of white subjects to their own ideas of justice. Du Bois points to the tension between white people’s ideals of justice and their blindness to their own position in relation to the veil. For this part of the analysis, Du Bois launches into another dialogue with an imaginary white friend: “He represents the way in which my enviroing white group distorts and frustrates itself even as it strives toward Justice and all because of me. In other words, because of the Negro problem.”⁵⁴ Du Bois argues that the white subject lives with a perpetual contradiction between aspirations for justice and a good society and the need to justify the unjust order of white supremacy. He describes the different cultural codes that inform the world of whiteness, cultural codes that emphasize contradictory norms. He points to a Christian cultural code that emphasizes peace, goodwill, and especially the golden rule—“do unto others as you would have others do unto you”—but this contrasts with a coexisting “White Man” cultural code built on war, hate, suspicion, exploitation, and empire (Du Bois also defines “Gentleman” and “American” cultural codes). These codes are internally coherent, but they contradict one another. The contradiction is based on the fact of race. White subjects cannot live up to their ideals of justice because of their role in perpetuating a racialized world. When this contradiction must be resolved, the white subject almost invariably forgets the golden rule and chooses racial oppression, justifying it as the defense

of civilization. This is how a nation that rests upon a foundation of land theft, genocide, slavery, and segregation can take pride in its ideals of freedom, liberty, and equality. Du Bois argued that those occupying the subject position of whiteness had to rely not on science, truth, and rational action but instead on acrobatic logics and irrational sleights of hand to reconcile the fundamental contradictions between their ideals and their actions.

The blindness of whites to their role in maintaining racial oppression leads them to renege on their stated ideals of justice and defend racial exclusion and inequality. In his dialogues in *Dusk*, Du Bois argues that the carefully cultivated ignorance produced by the veil is the result of white positionality. But he argues that when their ignorance is challenged, whites mobilize all their cognitive resources to defend it. When Du Bois confronts his friends with facts that contradict their views of the racialized world, they reject them and actively defend their ignorance, a point that Du Bois develops further in his analysis of the subjectivity of the colonizer. The white subject strives for justice, but abandons this striving as soon as a connection is made between injustice and the positionality of the white subject.

Du Bois explains the blindness and self-justification of whites in terms of both economic interest and habitus. Whites have economic interests to defend. Du Bois argues that colonialism and the exploitation of racialized people worldwide are central to the construction of the white natural attitude. But economic interest does not fully explain racialized modernity. As Du Bois writes, “The present attitude and action of the white world is not based solely upon rational, deliberate intent. It is a matter of conditioned reflexes, of long followed habits, customs and folkways, of subconscious trains of reasoning and unconscious nervous reflexes.”⁵⁵ The defense of ignorance is rooted in what sociologists Eduardo Bonilla Silva, Carla Goar, and David Embrick call a white habitus, that is, the constructed and deeply internalized racialized views, tastes, and emotions of white people.⁵⁶ The defense of ignorance is in part the defense of material privilege, but it is also the defense of social and symbolic privilege, that is, of the habits and customs of social recognition that white subjects derive from their power to define the social world. Du Bois argues in *Black Reconstruction* that whites engage in the defense of the psychological privilege they derive from their social position in

the racial order. Subjectivity constructs social structure as much as social structure constructs subjectivity.

Yet just as Du Bois allowed for a diversity of Black forms of subjectivity—that is, for different responses to the predicament of double consciousness—he also recognized the possibility of alternative forms of subjectivity within whiteness. His first treatment of white subjectivity, in his 1909 biography *John Brown*, elaborates this point. Nahum Chandler argues that Du Bois looks at John Brown from the perspective of the experience of African Americans, that is, the experience of double consciousness, arguing that it was John Brown's second sight that allowed him to pierce the veil and see the humanity of enslaved Black people.⁵⁷ In his analysis of John Brown's subjectivity, Du Bois is probing the possibility for transcending whiteness, for being what today we would describe as a race traitor.

Du Bois documents how John Brown's views evolved from merely opposing slavery to dedicating his life to its abolition. Du Bois roots John Brown's ability to transcend the blindness of his positionality and see the humanity of Black people—the life behind the veil that is typically inaccessible to the dominant group—in his understanding of religious scripture. It was John Brown's attachment to the golden rule that led him first to Kansas to fight against the expansion of slavery and then to the raid on Harpers Ferry that cost him his life.⁵⁸

A key point of *John Brown* is the presence of an alternative white subjectivity, one that rejects racialization and the social order that originates and sustains it. In 1909, when he wrote *John Brown*, Du Bois thought that this form of alternative white subjectivity was becoming widespread in the late nineteenth century but was pushed aside by the rise of an erroneous interpretation of Darwin's theories. The racist understanding of humanity derived from the dominant interpretation of Social Darwinism, which displaced other constructions of white subjectivity that advocated for equality. Du Bois would later change his mind about the possibility of an alternative white subjectivity. By the mid-1930s, when he wrote *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois was highly skeptical of the possibility of dissident whiteness.

Indeed, in his analysis of white labor and the labor movements in the second chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois describes white abolitionism as a small and not very effective fringe movement. This is the

point at which he advocates self-segregation and the construction of a cooperative economy for the survival of the Black community until the day in which the racist social order could be undone. Yet in his posthumously published autobiography, written at the end of his life, Du Bois puts forward the possibility of common action across racial lines based on embracing socialism and anticolonial solidarity.⁵⁹ In *John Brown* and in his late autobiography, Du Bois points to the possibilities of whites transcending their own positionality, but he emphasizes that this possibility is conditioned on whites choosing their ideals over their race and rebelling against the social order that sustains their privilege.

The Hypothesis of Law and the Assumption of Chance

Du Bois's phenomenology analyzes the basic elements of the modes of perception, understanding, and feeling—to paraphrase Sherry Ortner's definition of subjectivity—of racialized and racializing subjects. Du Bois points out that these modes of seeing and situating oneself in the world are conditioned by the veil. At the same time, Du Bois always emphasized the possibility of human agency. The question of agency, the possibilities open to humans to take action to shape their lives and their world, was central to Du Bois's work. In "Sociology Hesitant," an unpublished essay written in late 1904 or early 1905, Du Bois argues that sociology's goal was to determine the scope of law and chance in human action. He asks why sociologists do not openly "state the Hypothesis of Law and the Assumption of Chance, and seek to determine by study and measurement the limits of each."⁶⁰ In defining sociology in this way, Du Bois argued against dominant approaches of his time, approaches, such as Comte's, that regarded sociology as the study of an abstractly conceived society, or others, such as Spencer's, that took a deterministic position in the study of human action.⁶¹

For Du Bois chance refers to the ability of people to make undetermined choices. As he writes, "Behind Chance we place free human wills capable of undetermined choices, frankly acknowledging that in both these cases we front the humanly inexplicable."⁶² Du Bois borrowed the language of chance from William James.⁶³ For James, and the pragmatists, individuals acted within established social constraints but retained the ability to make choices and generate social alternatives. This was the

point of James's critique of determinism. Similarly, Du Bois affirmed that Black people have the agency to make choices and shape the reality in which they live.

While Du Bois asserts that there is a space for free will in human action, he is mindful of the constraints that people encounter. For him law refers to the historical and structural limits to the ability of individuals to make meaningful choices. He finds the constraints to agency "in the rhythm in birth and death rates and the distribution by sex; it is found further in human customs and laws, the form of government, the laws of trade, and even in charity and ethics."⁶⁴ Birth and death rates he likens to physical law, external to human action, but customs, laws, and government he regards as the result of the crystallization of historical human agency. For Du Bois, the multiple forms of individual and collective action of the racialized had the potential to challenge the color line. The ability of the racialized and the colonized to imagine change is rooted in their second sight, the element of double consciousness that allows them to see beyond their dehumanizing present.

Dusk is in part a narrative about the emergence and evolution of Du Bois's second sight and his changing understanding of race and racism. It also describes Du Bois's experience of organizing and working to achieve large-scale social change. In Du Bois's life this effort was expressed in his activism and organizing in support of civil and political rights at the NAACP in the early twentieth century, in his advocacy of an autonomous Black cooperative community economy in the 1930s and 1940s, and in his participation in the Pan-African movement and anticolonial advocacy throughout his life. It was also expressed in his writings and academic activities, which were never separated from his efforts to seek emancipation and equality. Du Bois always emphasized the importance of building community institutions for asserting agency behind the veil. This is expressed in his analyses of the role of Black organizations in building and sustaining communities in *Souls*, *Dusk*, and other of his writings.

But Du Bois's experience also taught him that the agency of the racialized had an additional dimension: the relentless fight for dignity and the assertion of humanity even under the most adverse conditions. Du Bois rooted this struggle for the recognition of the humanity of the racialized in the cultural resilience and creativity of people of color. He did

so early in his life in the final chapter of *Souls*, where he links the assertion of Black humanity to the sorrow songs, the music created by Black enslaved people that is a testament to their ability to endure and affirm their humanity under the most horrifying conditions. And late in his life, in a 1957 letter to Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana, he argued that the newly independent African countries should build political and social structures based on African communitarian traditions rather than on Western modernity.⁶⁵ For Du Bois, subjectivity is where people find the energy and the ideas to assert their humanity. For Du Bois, agency refers to the possibility of macro social change but also to the world-making and self-affirming actions of racialized communities.

Human agency, however, is not solely the action of the oppressed, and is expressed not only for the sake of change. As our discussion of Du Bois's analysis of whiteness reveals, white people mobilize to defend their privilege. Some of the constraints to the agency of the oppressed are the historical crystallizations of their oppressors' actions. For Du Bois, the color line, the main constraining social structure of racialized modernity, was the result of white agency, and it was maintained through the construction of white subjectivity. Indeed, in *Dusk* Du Bois argues that the goal of science is "to explore and measure the scope of chance and unreason in human action, which does not yield to argument but changes slowly and with difficulty after long study and careful development."⁶⁶ That is, chance—human free will—is not only emancipatory. Chance is also at the root of colonialism and racism, which are historical structural forces but also very much the product of human action.

The theme of sociology being the science that aims to determine the scope of law and chance is recurrent in Du Bois's work. He recasts this question in his 1947 book, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History*, in the context of exploring what the future economic order will bring: the tensions between the technical and managerial constraints imposed by industrial production on the one hand and democratic decision making over economic priorities on the other. And the tension between law and chance is also explored in his posthumous *Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*. In that book, in which he laments the failure to restart his empirical research program during his second tenure at Atlanta in the late 1930s and early

1940s, he stated, “The opportunity was surrendered and the whole science of sociology has suffered. I even had projected a path of scientific approach: I was going to plot out beside the world of physical law, a science of sociology which measured the limits of chance in human action. If this field proved narrow or non-existent, world law was proven. If not, the resultant ‘chance’ was what men had always regarded as ‘free will.’”⁶⁷ The tension between human free will as a force for change and the historical social structures that constrain human agency stood at the center of Du Bois’s sociology. And Du Bois refused to offer an a priori solution to this tension. His sociology was one that left this question open, to be answered through empirical research.

Du Bois asks us to be hesitant when analyzing concrete forms of human action.⁶⁸ He calls upon us to consider specific situations from both the perspective of chance and the perspective of law before proposing an explanation. And while he asserted his belief in the potential of human agency, he argued that the relationship between law and chance varied in different historical periods and different geographic locations and that the analyst must examine the options available to specific actors in specific times and places.

To understand the uniqueness of Du Bois’s approach to human agency, it is useful to contrast that approach, much as we did with his theory of double consciousness, to the work of other theorists who have addressed these questions. One such theorist was sociologist Erving Goffman, who was a graduate of the University of Chicago and was in some ways influenced by the work of Mead and symbolic interactionism. Goffman was a theorist of the micro interactional order. In his works he discusses how people act to present themselves to others and establish who they are in their social milieus.

In his first book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman analyzes how people manage the external impressions they make in their encounters with others.⁶⁹ In *Asylums*, he describes how total institutions, that is, institutions that have total control over the subject, affect the construction of self of the people who are confined in them.⁷⁰ And in *Stigma*, Goffman analyzes how people manage identities that carry negative social connotations.⁷¹ One might find in Goffman’s works, particularly in *Asylums* and *Stigma*, another take on Du Bois’s opening question in *Souls*: “How does it feel to be a problem?” Goffman shows

how individuals deal with oppressive institutions or with labels that stigmatize them, and how they have a measure of agency to present who they are vis-à-vis others.

Yet the works of Du Bois and Goffman, despite their shared interest in the experiences of people who suffer from a negative social definition of their selves, are very different from each other. For one thing, Goffman, unlike Du Bois, is interested not in phenomenology—the analysis of the basic structures of experience and perception—but rather in the strategies individuals use to manage their self and identity when they encounter stigma or institutions that deny their autonomy. In this there is a parallel with Du Bois's analysis in *Dusk*, or in the *Souls* essay on Booker T. Washington, of the strategies Black people use to deal with a racist world. But whereas Goffman presents an analysis of how individuals who are thrown into dehumanizing institutions deal with them—an analysis that perhaps more sociologists should take on—Goffman does not analyze the historical and global structures of oppression that created those institutions. On the other hand, for Du Bois “the problem” he alludes to is a historically concrete one of unequal power relations that result in the systemic oppression of Black people. In addition, Goffman offers no analysis of agency, either for macro social change or for the assertion of humanity, beyond his analysis of the strategies individuals use to manage their identities.

A second important contrast is with the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, which has had enormous influence on contemporary social theory and sociological analysis. Bourdieu's theory of practice asserts that society is remade through the actions of people who internalize their social position into their understandings and social practices—“habitus,” in Bourdieu's language.⁷² Individuals internalize cultural expectations and dispositions related to their social position into what Bourdieu calls a class habitus that guides their everyday actions and interactions. According to Bourdieu, people in their everyday lives engage in different fields that constitute different areas of social action. Each field has its own rules, currencies, and rewards. Although individuals have the ability to act strategically to improve their position within those fields, Bourdieu's emphasis on the power of habitus leads him to see human action as reproducing the structures of fields. People

may act to change or assert their position within social fields but not to change the fields themselves.

Subjectivity for Bourdieu is determined by the internalization of social position and symbolic violence. This is the imposition on subordinates of the dominant ideas about who they are and their social positions. There is a parallel here with Du Bois's analysis of action within the veil, but the self-asserting and meaning-making agency that Du Bois sees behind the veil is absent in Bourdieu's theorization. Bourdieu's theory of agency is focused mostly on social reproduction. Change, to the extent that it happens, results from tensions between different fields of action. In Du Bois's analysis, on the other hand, the reproduction of racialized modernity was to a large extent the result of the purposeful actions of the powerful, and the response was the organized action of the oppressed.

Like Bourdieu, although at an earlier time, Du Bois shows the importance of habits and customs in reproducing the social system. He also showed how marginalized individuals can buy into the system's ideology. But there is in Du Bois an emphasis on the possibilities of agency, both for macro change and for asserting humanity, that is absent in Bourdieu. This emphasis comes from the fact that Du Bois theorized from his own experience as a Black person asserting his humanity in his everyday life, something common to the Black Radical Tradition that mainstream theorists do not share.

The third contrast we propose is with the work of William Sewell Jr. Sewell is a historian and an emeritus professor of history and political science at the University of Chicago. But his work, particularly his book *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, has been very influential in social theory debates across the social sciences.⁷³ Sewell proposes an understanding of agency that is closer to that of Du Bois.

Sewell postulates that "a capacity for agency—for desiring, for forming intentions, and for acting creatively—is inherent in all humans."⁷⁴ But this general capacity for agency is exercised within specific historical contexts. These contexts determine the prevailing cultural schemas that people use to make sense of their experiences. They also determine differential access to resources for different groups of people. For Sewell, historically specific forms of agency are produced by the prevailing cul-

tural discourses, the available resources, and the varying access that different social groups have to these resources.

But Sewell cautions us not to take too structural a vision of agency. He affirms the fact that different societies are comprised of different social structures in which different resources and cultural schemas can be exported or transposed across settings. In this he is not different from Bourdieu. But Sewell argues that different cultural schemas can help people articulate different visions of the social order and that there is always a measure of unpredictability in the accumulation of resources. The tensions produced by the intersection of different social structures, the possibility of articulating new cultural schemas, and the window of opportunity to redistribute the accumulation of resources generate opportunities for agency and change.

Sewell proposes a vision of agency that is rooted in historical structures but is much more open to change and less determined by those structures than Bourdieu's theory allows. For Sewell structure is limiting, but it also enables new possibilities. Sewell, like Du Bois, emphasizes the inherent ability of humans for agency and to see and articulate new ways to organize social life. Where they differ is that Du Bois applies his understanding of agency to the analysis of a particular historical system—racial and colonial capitalism—and puts the question of recognition and humanity at the center of his understanding of agency. Sewell's general theorizing of agency does not preclude considering these issues, but he does not emphasize them.

Du Bois formulated an understanding of agency that is unique in its emphasis on the human capacity for action and in its focus on both macro change and the demand of recognition across the color line. Du Bois's assertion of the possibility of agency is in part a result of his roots in pragmatism and its emphasis on the human ability to shape the social world. Pragmatism provided Du Bois with a language to speak about his concerns. And if he was attracted to the pragmatists' assertion of free will and the indeterminacy of action, it was because that understanding related to his own experience.

But his experience was also the root of the main differences between Du Bois's analysis of agency and pragmatism. Du Bois's emphasis on agency is rooted in his theorizing from his own experience as a Black subject in America and in the world struggling to assert humanity and

identity, to achieve political and social rights, and to fight racism and colonialism. He was born just three years after the end of the United States Civil War. Although he was born into freedom, he was nonetheless born into a world shaped by racial caste, prejudice, discrimination, and racial violence. During his long life he experienced major events that reshaped the global color line, including two world wars and the various independence movements across Africa and Asia. As a result, he saw agency as taking place in a historically concrete social system—racial and colonial capitalism—that has very specific dynamics of exclusion that were central to Du Bois's life and analysis but that pragmatists were oblivious to.⁷⁵ Theorizing from personal experience and from political praxis and emphasizing the struggle to assert humanity and dignity in everyday life, even when major change seems unachievable, are characteristic of Du Bois's sociology and his understanding of agency.

A Contemporary Du Boisian Sociology of Racialized Subjectivity

To complete our discussion of racialized subjectivity and agency, it is necessary to address the methodological and analytical challenges these concepts pose to the contemporary practice of sociology. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness and his hesitant sociology emerge from his reflections on his own experiences. His articulation of double consciousness in *Souls* starts with a moment in which he understands that he is different—the well-known story in which a girl, a newcomer to the local school, rejects his visiting card—the moment when Du Bois tells us he first experienced the color line. The development of this point in *Dusk* is based on autobiographical reflections. He does not return to the visiting-card story. But he tells us how his experience studying and living in the South allowed him to truly see and understand the predicament of Black people in the United States. He states, “The three years at Fisk were years of growth and development. I learned new things about the world. My knowledge of the race problem became more definite. I saw discrimination in ways of which I had never dreamed . . . [T]he public disdain and even insult in race contact on the street continually took my breath; I came in contact for the first time with a sort of violence that I had never realized in New England.”⁷⁶ And he explains how studying in Germany taught him that the color line is a global structure and

that racialization works differently in different places. Du Bois's autobiographical reflections consistently link his life to the larger historical events in which it unfolded.

Dusk portrays Du Bois's exploration of the scope of law and chance in his own life, through his ever-evolving program for freedom and equality for all people of color—spanning from a belief that science and truth alone would dismantle the color line to organizing various multiracial and Black-only organizations and coalitions. In that book, Du Bois discusses his own efforts and struggles in challenging the color line, among them his participation in the foundation of the Niagara Movement and the NAACP, his organizing of Pan-African conferences, and his advocacy for a Black cooperative economy. Frequently these efforts did not achieve their goals, but they nonetheless involved building community and affecting the larger society in which Du Bois lived. Thus the first two methodological aspects of a Du Boisian analysis of subjectivity and agency are the centrality of theorizing from lived experience and the continuous linking between subjectivity and the larger context of racialized modernity.

Du Bois also draws his analysis of subjectivity and agency from his observations of his encounters with Black communities. His recollections of his time as a schoolteacher in rural Tennessee, reflected in “The Meaning of Progress,” are as close as Du Bois ever comes to contemporary ethnography. However, the goal of Du Bois's phenomenology is different from that of most contemporary urban and community ethnography. The latter focuses on the behavior and choices of poor and marginalized populations. Often these ethnographies try to explain why the poor, particularly poor people of color, engage in behaviors that do not correspond to the norms of the white middle class. By contrast, critical ethnographies often try to humanize the poor and contextualize their behavior within their institutional and structural constraints. Du Bois was perhaps the first to take this approach: Several chapters in *The Philadelphia Negro* are devoted to the social problems of the Black community, including the chapters “The Negro Criminal” and “Alcoholism and Pauperism.” Du Bois understands that poverty and exclusion may lead to self-destructive behavior. For example, in “The Meaning of Progress,” he describes some young people as lacking ambition and sinking into what he describes as “listless indifference, or shiftlessness,

or reckless bravado.”⁷⁷ But he clearly attributes the social problems of the Black community to racism and racial exclusion, as will become clear in our discussion of his urban and community studies, a facet of Du Bois’s sociology that we address at length in chapter 3.

The goal of Du Bois’s phenomenology, however, is different. It is to analyze subjectivity and identity under racialized modernity.⁷⁸ His analysis of double consciousness asks his audience not to explain the social problems of the poor but rather to reflect on the experience of dealing with racism, or living under the color line, or, as Du Bois puts it, “*How does it feel to be a problem?*” Du Bois makes it clear that a person cannot escape this question through social mobility. Josie, in “The Meaning of Progress,” aspired to go beyond the limits of her rural world, and John, in “The Coming of John,” succeeded in graduating from college. Yet for both of them the encounter with the veil was tragic. The veil weighs on both those without ambition and those with ambition, on those who accept their circumstances and those who try to change them. This was also the case with Du Bois himself, who was constrained by the veil throughout his life. Education and social mobility are not enough to enable a Black person to escape the veil as long as the racist system is in place. The analysis of racial subjectivity is intended to describe the lived experience of exclusion and to construct a critique of the social order that perpetuates the color line.

The discussion as to the place of lived experience in sociological analysis refers us to the question of the standpoint from which Du Bois thinks, writes, and acts. Throughout this book, we argue that Du Boisian sociology takes the standpoint of the racially oppressed. Du Bois asserted, “Only the man himself can speak for himself. We say: Put yourself in his place; but after all we know that no human soul can thus change itself. The voice of the oppressed alone can tell the real meaning of oppression and, though the voice be tremulous, excited and even incoherent, it must be listened to if the world would learn and know.”⁷⁹

Du Bois tells us that the oppressed can speak, and although their voice may not be loud or clear, we need to make the effort to listen and understand it. But as he shows in his essay on Booker T. Washington in *Souls* and in his discussion of the responses of the Black elites to the veil in *Dusk*, the oppressed do not necessarily share a common outlook on the world. Furthermore, as intersectional analysis shows, subjectivities

develop in complex and contradictory social positions. People living behind the veil understand their predicament in different ways.⁸⁰

And yet, as Du Bois's own trajectory shows, the experience of racial exclusion was central for the development of his critical perspective on racialized modernity. Taking the standpoint of the racially excluded means starting our reflections from their historical predicament and experience, rather than approaching the subject from a position of abstract and universal neutrality. It means accounting for experiences of exclusion and the encounters with the specific historical structures that generate those experiences. Taking the standpoint of the racialized and the colonized allows Du Bois to see and reflect on experiences and structures that are not perceived from the perspective of abstract universalism. Abstract universalism is, in fact, the standpoint of the dominant, and as Du Bois argues, this standpoint is characterized by a carefully cultivated ignorance toward the humanity and life on the other side of the veil.

It is tempting to think about double consciousness and the veil as universal and generalizable concepts that apply to other situations of oppression and exclusion. Thus, we can think of the world as divided by multiple veils, with people located on different sides of different veils. This approach would argue that individuals occupy different positionalities according to the different social categories to which they belong and that each of these social positions could be affected by the dynamics of different veils.

We argue against using concepts in such an ahistorical way. Du Bois develops the analysis of the veil in the context of the experience of Black people in the South in the early twentieth century, and he applies it to the experience of African Americans in the United States in general. Later, in *Dusk* (and, as we will show, in *The World and Africa*), he links the idea of double consciousness to the analysis of colonial subjectivity and the idea of empire. There are also powerful parallels between Du Bois's and Frantz Fanon's analysis of Black subjectivity that point to how the analysis of the veil applies to colonial situations.⁸¹ But double consciousness and the veil are not automatically generalizable concepts. In applying them, we need to take into account concrete historical forms of domination.

A key point of a Du Boisian methodology, then, is the historical embeddedness of sociological analysis. Du Bois offers us concepts and

theories that are situated in concrete historical and social contexts, i.e., racial slavery, white supremacy, forced segregation and exclusion, and institutionalized inequality. Those concepts and theories are generalizable only through an examination of whether and how they fit other historically situated social contexts and may have to be readapted to apply to different situations. As we will show, this is a major difference between Du Boisian sociology and the mainstream approach that originated in Chicago. A contemporary Du Boisian sociology will explore and contrast how different forms of racialization are experienced in concrete historical situations.

Du Bois's phenomenology is central to a contemporary Du Boisian sociology. It provides an analytical approach for conducting analyses of the lived experiences of people on both sides of the veil without unduly pathologizing individual groups or proposing essentializing cultural explanations. It also provides an analytical framework that allows for the examination of subjectivity and agency within the broader contexts of racialized modernity. In that sense, a Du Boisian phenomenology entails a particular kind of research method, one in which the researcher invites people to reflect upon and describe how their lived experience was constructed through their encounters with racialization.⁸²

But a present-day Du Boisian sociology should go beyond Du Bois's analysis by embracing an intersectional perspective on the study of subjectivity and agency, looking at how different intersections of race, coloniality, gender, sexuality, and class affect the construction of self and agency. A contemporary Du Boisian sociology must pay attention to local and intersectional differences in lived experience but also reflect on the possibilities of bridging those differences to build coalitions and alliances to struggle to undo all forms of exclusion and oppression—always keeping in mind that for Du Bois the goal of knowledge was to undo the color line. This expansion of Du Boisian analysis beyond the work of Du Bois is consistent with his practice of self-reflexivity and his constant incorporation of new ideas and practices when confronting new situations or the limits of his previous understandings.