

Introduction

On Double Consciousness as the Failure of Cross-Caste Romance: Du Bois's Nationalism Re- and De-formed

We wanted national fulfillment as much as we wanted to “be” in love, hardly stopping to worry that the wanting was greater than any possible fulfillment.

—Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*

“Between me and the other world, there is ever an unasked question,” opines Du Bois in the opening lines of the opening chapter of his 1903 masterpiece *The Souls of Black Folk*. The inhabitants of this “other world,” who, as Du Bois explains, are separated from him by what he perceptively and poetically deems a “veil” demarcating the line between white and Black persons, “approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem?, they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?” ([1903] 2007, 7). As my students routinely remark, such statements constitute a series of what we term, in contemporary parlance, “microaggressions.” Du Bois’s response to such instances of perlocutionary violence was to deploy a variety of strategies designed to mitigate their impact—sometimes by forcing a “smile,” sometimes by evincing a modicum of “interest” in their content, and sometimes by “reducing the boiling [of annoyance or even, outrage] to a simmer” (7). Just as Du Bois was not truly seen by those who addressed him, who projected upon him what Claudia Rankine

describes in *Citizen: An American Lyric* as the phantasmagoric projections of “white” persons—based more on their fears, desires, and misperceptions than on any experiential notion of reality (see Rankine 2014), so too did the fullness and sincerity of Du Bois’s responses to such remain foreclosed. As he professed, to the outrageous intrusion of such missives, he “answer [ed] seldom a word” (7).

Du Bois’s adult ruminations about the force and impact of the micro-aggressions to which he was routinely subjected in the presence of putatively “liberal” white Americans occasioned his recall of a parallel moment of racist oppression from his childhood. Reciting a narrative prelude to the philosophic explanation of his famed theory of double consciousness, which he defines summarily as the “peculiar sensation” of “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” Du Bois recounts in *Souls* a story of having his affections in the form of a “gorgeous” visiting card exchanged between boys and girls during a schoolhouse game, rebuffed by a white female classmate who, apparently outraged by her judgment of his racial difference, refused his gesture of intimacy (Du Bois [1903] 2007, 8):

I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or, like mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. (7–8)

In this passage, Du Bois suggests that the occasion of having his visiting card, which served as a metonymic marker for himself, rejected by his white peer, marked his very indoctrination into the American system of anti-Black exclusion and thus precipitated the onset of his double consciousness. Indeed, a number of critics have commented upon the centrality of Du Bois’s relayed experience of rejection in what I term, in recognition of Du Bois’s poetic rendering of his personal experience, “The Tale of the Visiting Card,” to the formation of his racial consciousness. Eugene Wolfenstein, for example, employs a Freudian lens to assess Du Bois’s reaction to the young white girl’s act of anti-Black exclusion as a prolonged defense mechanism, one predicated upon “renouncing . . . the desire to be at home in the world

of ordinary human intercourse and sympathy” (22) and more pointedly, the inclination to pursue white companionship (31). (This is a point to which I will return.) George Yancy also interprets the white girl’s rejection of Du Bois’s visiting card as a “callous” instance of social exclusion (2017, 76) in which a Euro-centered glance leveraged its power to metaphorically “confiscate” a Black body, reducing it, falsely, to “a burden and a curse” (79) and curtailing thereby the expansiveness of a Black soul.

Few critics, however, have substantively plumbed the implications of the fact that this moment of rejection was not just one of failed interracial camaraderie but specifically an instance of failed interracial *romance*, since Du Bois’s offering was arguably a token of affection and even unrequited ardor. The perceptibly “gorgeous” quality of the bounty being offered, the fact that the exchange was deliberately facilitated as cross-gendered, and the intensity of Du Bois’s hurt feelings upon being so disregarded—a mixture of scorn, anger, and ultimately, as I will detail, a sense of psychic estrangement that would simultaneously be transcended and transmogrified—all compel me to read this moment as exemplary of an anticipated and unrequited romance. As Hazel Carby characterizes Du Bois’s offering to his white female classmate as an expression of “courtly, nineteenth-century advances” (2007, 255), her reading of the stakes involved in Du Bois’s framing of his youthful memory accords most closely with my own. Yet, while Carby focuses her analysis on Du Bois’s revelation of the potential of women to become the instruments “through which the nation-state oppresse[s] black men” (255), I probe the overarching implications of Du Bois’s intimation that Black alienation is the result of failed intercultural intimacy, meditating on how attempts to leverage romance to forge political conciliation are inevitably poised both to circumvent and to reanimate the hierarchies of racial caste.

Revisiting the significance of Du Bois’s recitation of “The Tale of the Visiting Card” and extending thereby the scope of his theory of double consciousness, *Tales from Du Bois: The Queer Intimacy of Cross-Caste Romance* argues that Du Bois’s explicit framing of his theory of double consciousness through a narrative of failed interracial romance emphatically links the emergence of Black subjectivity to the fracturing dispensations of misbegotten intimacy initiated across caste difference. In naming the unsuccessful encounter between Du Bois and his young white classmate a “romance,” in particular, I do not rely only upon the traditional definition of romance as a reciprocal exchange of affection or consummated expression of eros but also conceptualize romance as something that need not become patently loving, sexual, or even viable in order to resonate as a significant social relation. I

analyze the relation between Du Bois and the white girl whose attention he sought as a foreclosed *romance* because it was still a discernible instance of intimacy, even if a “minor” one in Lauren Berlant’s terms, since, as an initiation of cross-racial contact, it was neither sanctioned by nor accommodated within the public spaces of mainstream society (Berlant 1998, 285). As Berlant further explains, while there are some kinds of intimacy that are supported by “normative ideologies” like family, church, or the state, there are other modes of intimacy that remain “discredited” or even “neglected” within the realm of hegemonic institutions. Such intimacies may “emerge from [. . .] mobile [and I would add, unstable,] processes of attachment”; reflect the presence of “contradictory desires”; and transmit subtle affective expressions including “glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations and fantasies” (284–85). Although Du Bois’s attempt at romance would yield only an impoverished, hamstrung expression of intimacy, it posed nevertheless a considerable threat to the racial caste system by which Black boys and white girls were neither permitted to freely exchange gifts nor to nourish the interplays of affection betokened therein.

Indeed, my reading of Du Bois’s youthful anecdote as a “romance” is emboldened by my analysis of an alternate version of the story that he offers in his 1968 autobiography, through which it becomes clear that this incident occurred not when he was a child but rather when he was a high-school student: more of a young man with adult feelings and intentions than the innocent schoolboy of his literary figuration (1968, 94). As Du Bois explains, tracing the developmental trajectory by which a paradisiacal experience of Great Barrington yielded to a more sobering discernment of the town’s casteist politics, by the time he had entered high school “there came some rather puzzling distinctions which I can see now were social and racial [. . .]. I have written elsewhere of the case of our exchanging visiting cards when one girl, a newcomer, did not seem to want mine, to my vast surprise” (94). Although I deem it likely that Du Bois may have exaggerated somewhat the scope of his “surprise,” as he no doubt anticipated the sting of racism (even if only subconsciously), the rejection he endured was clearly dispiriting to him, and the circumstances of this rejection were evidently controversial. In effect, the tale that Du Bois told of his childhood rebuff in *Souls* was of the *tall* variety, for it presented readers with a vision of a Black *child* whose friendship was refused by a white one rather than that of a young Black *man* whose romantic—and perhaps even erotic—interest was refused by a young white *woman*. Du Bois’s fictive recasting of the story’s details, and in particular his reduction of a potentially adult

interracial romance to an expression of mere “puppy love,” speaks both to the intensity of his encounter and to the entrenchment of the American taboo against miscegenation, which Du Bois strove to deemphasize in his creative retelling of the incident. Indeed, from the audacity of such a romance’s reach and from its almost inevitable failure, one gleans not just the blight of interpersonal loss but pointedly the global catastrophe of interracial fracture. For a successful romance between Du Bois and the young woman of his childhood acquaintance would have marked not only the permeability of racial boundaries but also the flouting of a key element of the American racial caste system (and indeed, of caste systems in general): the interdiction against miscegenation and with it, the exigency of racialist and racist separatism.¹

Before going on to detail the way Du Bois mined his personal narrative of having sustained a misbegotten form of interracial romance in order to produce and proliferate a compelling literary trope, I must note that my use of the term *caste*, often associated with and deemed exclusively germane to South Asian history and geopolitics, is quite deliberate and not a misapplication of terminology. In so doing, I follow a long tradition of scholars and chroniclers of African American history, critical race studies, and caste who have done so including Du Bois himself and more recently, Michelle Alexander, Isabel Wilkerson, Arundhati Roy, Yogita Goyal, and Suraj Yengde. Yengde trenchantly declares that “caste is not a foreign, old, traditional Indian problem; it is as American as white supremacy. The policing of the conduct and biopower of marginalized bodies. A fixated, theoretical, and pervasive system that reproduces for new eras the same channels of oppression upon which this society was developed” (Yengde 2021).² As various scholars and writers exploring the structure and legacy of casteism acknowledge, casteism is sustained by an insistence on the superiority of some categories of human beings over others, a preference for endogamous practice (to reify such ontological categorization), a policed and strategic deployment of exogamous practice, and a politics of hereditary apartheid: all principles and practices that resonate within the international history of anti-Black racism both in the United States and beyond. Indeed, in unpacking the cultural history of the visiting (or calling) card, one finds that it was itself a missive specifically intended to navigate and circumvent barriers of class and caste, offering a unique and uniquely aesthetical mechanism for forging sociopolitical intercourse across starkly drawn lines of social and cultural difference.³ Thus, Du Bois’s offering of an attractive calling card to a young white woman cannot simply be read as a benign expression of affection but

also as a deliberate and nascent step to deploy assimilation as a method of mitigating racist violence and discrimination—one that becomes most clearly so in the process of being first forestalled and ultimately disavowed.

Upon being rejected, not just as a potential friend but also as a potential suitor, by a young white woman, Du Bois has the epiphany, which only expands as he moves further into adulthood, that although he may resemble (at bottom) his white peers “in heart and life and longing,” he is nevertheless excluded from fully participating in the world they would exclusively claim by the imposition of the “vast veil” of racial caste ([1903] 2007, 8). Although Du Bois insists to his readers that it was only those unspecified cadres of “other” Black boys who, in their inability to vanquish their experience of profound racial alienation, opined, “Why did God make me an *outcast and a stranger* in mine own house?,” it was arguably the very knowledge that such a seemingly benign instance of interpersonal rejection could render him an outcast in his own country that so troubled, politicized, and even radicalized Du Bois. For as he no doubt gleaned, even in his youth, being barred not simply from fully accessing the various spaces and places of American social and civic engagement but also from expressing the full range of one’s affiliations, affections, and desires was both the cause and the consequence of America’s racial caste system. Thus, the feeling of being outcast, as provoked by the sociopolitical failure to obtain full citizenship, yet as often experienced as an interpersonal and psychically felt form of loss, may prove by turns productive and alienating.

This book’s second central claim is that Du Bois’s dramatization of the visiting card incident in the opening chapter of *Souls*, through which he frames double consciousness as the result of a failed interracial romance, is an inaugural instance of his frequent deployment of a trope that I term the “cross-caste romance.” An interplay of heightened awareness of and desire for another effected across stark lines of purportedly immutable yet socially constructed difference-rendered-as-status, the cross-caste romance marks the overdetermined yet precarious quality of intimacy between persons whose identities are differentiated by delimited segmentations of culture and status. Such exchanges of awareness, intimacy, and desire, as Eve Sedgwick has noted, may be constituted as much by repulsion or ambivalence as by attraction, and they underscore the power dynamics of racialized, intersubjective relations and place into relief the sociopolitical implications of affect and intimacy. Influenced by Sedgwick’s claims about “desire,” which she differentiates from the related category of “love” in order to emphasize that “desire” is a structure and not simply an emotion, I claim that the romance

proves an “affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship” (Sedgwick 1985, “Homosocial Desire.”). Sedgwick wonders to what degree such a force might become specifically sexual, and I follow suit by suggesting that the force of romance need not be patently sexual or even concretized in order to resonate as a significant social relation.

And yet, as Sharon P. Holland reminds us, intersubjective relations shaped by race, racialism, and racism ineluctably encode the erotic if not the sexual *per se*. Explaining what she calls “the admittedly tenuous although nonetheless compelling connection between the erotic and racism” (2012, 43), Holland contends that “the psychic life of racism [. . .] ha[s] its erotic, desiring components” (43). Arguably, the young girl’s rejection of Du Bois already marks her implicit acknowledgment of the intimate, though not exclusively erotic, possibilities of a taboo, interracial romance between them. Her rejection, effected by a “peremptory glance,” marks her awareness of and aversive reaction to Du Bois—however ambivalent—and bespeaks an affective charge that belongs as much to the category of “romance” as do affection and connection.

As I see it, the cross-caste romance, which encodes hegemonic configurations of racial and sexual difference, functions not only as a frame for Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness but also as a model for his subsequent and frequent reanimation of such in his more patently literary texts. In deploying the trope of cross-caste romance, Du Bois was riffing on a well-worn discursive and literary tradition by which the nation is often explicitly gendered as female and through which heteronormative romance is positioned as a potential mechanism to bridge the gaps of caste difference (including ethnicity and class) and thereby to ward off the violence ensuing from a national politics based on exclusion. Indeed, the causal link that Du Bois’s expository narrative establishes between a failed attempt to forge cross-caste intimacy and the subsequent onset of the ontological alienation that is double consciousness, is exemplary of a transnational continuum of late nineteenth-century “romantic nationalism,” well documented by Doris Sommer and Lisa Moore respectively, in which novels or “romances,” as they are called, stage intimate affairs between persons separated by differential statuses regarding race, ethnicity, region, and class (all the building blocks of caste) in order to meditate on the possibilities and limitations of pluralist nationalism. Such “romances,” which Doris Sommer, in her analysis of early modern Latin American fiction, defines as a genre that is “a cross between our contemporary use of the word as a love story and a nineteenth-century

use that distinguished the genre as more boldly allegorical than the novel” (Sommer 1991, Part I), deploy an affective and erotic politics, whether failed or successful, enervating or fulfilling, both to symbolize the fractures threatening the collective unity of the nation-state and to hypothesize their potential resolution.

As I demonstrate throughout this book, the vexed possibility of an affective and variously eroticized and deeroticized nationalist politics that Du Bois stages in his fictionalized account of double consciousness is subsequently posited and contested in numerous examples from his literary corpus, especially those that are judiciously periodized under the capacious term *romanticism*. Literary romanticism is an apt designation, not only for those texts that privilege romantic sentiment, love, or eros but also for those texts that exist in contemporaneous dialogue with or, alternatively, bear the imprint of, the continental philosophies, cultural movements, and literary discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As I define literary romanticism as part of the “long nineteenth century,” extending from the Enlightenment to the beginnings of the twentieth century, I read it as both a harbinger and an iteration of the continuum of modernism that is inclusive of the New Negro and Harlem Renaissance movements. Recognizing Du Bois’s participation in and innovation within literary and cultural romanticisms, I have chosen as my focus a diverse yet representative selection of those literary works (some well known and others less so) that Du Bois produced between the early to mid-twentieth century (from 1903 to 1928) that especially embody the poetics and preoccupations of romanticism, including the sole short story from *The Souls of Black Folk*, “Of the Coming of John”; two little-known detective stories from *Horizon* magazine, “The Case” and “The Shaven Lady” (1907); an allegorical folktale from *Darkwater*, “The Princess of the Hither Isles” (1920), and the novel *Dark Princess: A Romance* (1928). In so doing, I suggest that Du Bois’s works of literary fiction, the various “tales” that he spun during the first half of the twentieth century, justifiably earn him the title of *neo-romanticist*—one who plied the literary and cultural conventions of romanticism to evoke as well as revoke its idealized, hegemonic constructions of selfhood, love, and national belonging.

By reading Du Bois as an erstwhile romanticist, I concur with a number of scholars who have (implicitly or explicitly) done so including Robert Gooding-Williams, K. Anthony Appiah, Claudia Tate, Alys Weinbaum, and Brent Edwards. Moreover, in foregrounding the romanticist elements of Du Bois’s fictional writings, in particular, I am also influenced by Toni

Morrison's groundbreaking work of criticism *Playing in the Dark*, in which she characterizes Euro-American romanticism in particular as "an exploration of anxiety imported from the shadows of European culture" (1992, 36). Morrison proceeds to historicize American romanticist literature as what offered European Americans a vehicle for "the imaginative entertainment of violence, sublime incredibility, and terror—and terror's most significant overweening ingredient: darkness, with all the connotative value it awakened" (36). Morrison concludes that no Euro-American literary romance is free of "the power of blackness" and observes further that the white imagination played upon the Black population to work out its fears and anxieties in prose as well as in life. I submit that this characterization of American romance illuminates both Du Bois's depiction of his white classmate's erotically tinged fear and the subsequent romanticist tales that he penned in the wake of this personal misalliance. In reprising his personal tale of failed interpersonal connection across racial caste, Du Bois reanimated and recast the discursive rhetoric of American romanticism (and undoubtedly, other forms of literary romanticism, as well) that established a lamentable linkage among Blackness, abjection, and aversive desire. He thereby recuperated the power of Blackness to signify delight and pleasure and to remediate the US body politic, effectively inverting American romanticism's abject portrayals of Black America and, accordingly, elucidating the violence, sublimity, and ignominy of Euro-American modes of thought and practice. The connection that Morrison draws between the aesthetics of romanticism and its ideological investment in anti-Blackness provides a useful lens through which to consider Du Bois's innovations within the genre of romance. For I submit that he tendered such romantic tales, in all of their generic variety and stylistic complexity, to equally disaggregate and rebut the misrepresentation of Black persons as objects of derision, placing into sharp relief the vexed process of forging intimacy across cultural difference and caste-based hierarchy.

In the essay "Acts of Union, Sexuality and Nationalism, Romance and Realism in the Irish National Tale," Lisa L. Moore analyzes the trope of cross-caste love as it functions in the nineteenth-century Irish novels of Maria Edgeworth and Sydney Owenson, which were oriented around vexed questions of nationalist belonging. Moore is interested in the way "cross-caste"—or as she also terms it, "star-crossed"—love plays a role in imagining and perhaps even shaping the fabric of a nation, chiefly by signaling what she recognizes as the "transgressive charge" of intimacy, which must first be invoked and ultimately overcome within pluralist projects of "romantic nationalism" (2000, 116).⁴ I submit that Du Bois's literary proj-

ects are oriented around the same vexed questions of nationalism present in the Anglo-Irish literary romance of the nineteenth century that debated the possibilities of and parameters for reintegrating and revaluing its ethnic others. At stake for Du Bois was nothing less than the establishment of Black American citizenry within an American body politic determined to cast out those whose affective as well as material acts of labor were persistently and violently annexed to establish the nation.

Influenced by Moore's analysis of Owenson and Edgeworth and adopting and extending Moore's romanticist lexicon, I identify the cross-caste romance that structures Du Bois's literary repertoire as his chosen vehicle for considering the limits and possibilities of romantic nationalism and for placing into relief the idea that love for one's country can be rendered by what Moore deems a "passionately personal relationship" that allows a protagonist, whose journey toward citizenship is embattled, to "fall in love with a nation by falling in love with a woman who embodies that nation" and thereby earn the status of "proto-citizen" (Moore 2000, 118).⁵ Indeed, with his literary figuration of double consciousness, Du Bois proffers an account of romantic nationalism that is highly contested and undercuts, even as it imagines, the possibility of a nation's seamless and conciliatory integration of its ethnic "others." For if the young white girl's potential acceptance of Du Bois's gesture of affection (and perhaps her return of such a gesture in kind) signaled the possibility of Black integration, and with it the granting of fuller citizenship to the collective of Black Americans for whom Du Bois was synecdochic, then so too did the white girl's refusal of Du Bois signal the failure of the potentially unifying and leveling capabilities of affect, intimacy, and indeed, "romance," to facilitate such nationalist conciliation, thereby stitching together the disparate threads of the nation.

As I will go on to demonstrate, this contested account of romantic nationalism is repeatedly proliferated in Du Bois's literary texts, in which he stages implicit or explicit debates about the efficacy and desirability of romantic nationalism's dependence upon heteronormative forms of exchange and in which he proves loath to resolve states of intersubjective or intranational fragmentation via recourse to the purportedly unifying tenets of romantic intimacy. As Alys Weinbaum has observed, Du Bois's literary configurations of romance are profligate yet also inclined to be "indefinitely attenuated" (2007, 100). For Du Bois recognized that the promises of "love" and intimacy, if premised upon the narrow confines of heteronormative reproduction and subsequently poised to enable the hegemonic absorption of Black persons by certain representatives of white America, would be inadequate and unde-

sirable even if possible. In fact, Du Bois, by illustratively rendering his own failed cross-caste romance and offering it as the framework through which to explicate the theory of double consciousness, illuminated the central paradox that interracial intimacy between Black and white persons was not so much “foreclosed” by the caste system’s taboo against miscegenation but paradoxically forbidden and foretold.

Recalling the work of Lauren Berlant, I assess such fraught relations as examples of “minor intimacy” insofar as they are taboo and marginalized. On the other hand, I aver that the misbegotten intimacy between Black and white persons, one presupposed by ardor in the form of overvaluation, was de rigueur within the white supremacist and anti-Black politics of the United States. In fact, Du Bois’s decision to offer a token of affection to the teenaged white girl who was his classmate was no doubt already a preemptive attempt at racial reconciliation. It was a gesture undertaken to ward off the imposition of racialized hate with a performance of what I will term compulsory *Europhilia*: a love of whiteness and white persons that, although potentially sincere, was likely, even if on a subterranean level, a defensive reaction to the predominant overvaluation of whiteness in the form of Eurocentrism.

In reflecting further about the ambivalence undergirding Du Bois’s illustration of failed interracial intimacy and its implications regarding the vexed possibility of nationalist and pluralist conciliation, it is again instructive to consult *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois* (1968). For Du Bois muses therein about the scope of his loyalty to the only country he has ever known, framing the question of his nationalist belonging in the specific language of misbegotten love. Recalling his time as a young graduate student observing a German military parade and wondering why such jingoistic jubilation had failed ever to arouse him in his own homeland, Du Bois asks: “How far can love for my oppressed race accord with love for the oppressing country? And when these loyalties diverge, where shall my soul find refuge?” (1968, 169). Although Du Bois described the state of double consciousness as one rooted in clashing loyalties presupposed by divided loves, in retelling the onset of his own split consciousness, he also offered evidence of a mature capacity for a self-love (as Black love) that was both a partial resolution to and a utilization of the state of double consciousness, which would ultimately prove to be both burden and boon. In essence, Du Bois’s response to being rejected by the young white woman, to having sustained and expressed his “love” for his oppressive country with a token of affection offered to a synecdochic representation of his country, was not only to despair but also

to reject that misplaced love (and thereby, its presumed object). In fact, Du Bois's proposed answer to the failure of a program of romantic nationalism, which was premised upon conscripting an ethnic other into a hegemonic order via affective structures of monolithic and unequal proportions, was not simply to abandon it as something ineluctably out of reach but rather to reject it as something undesirable and even (often) inauspicious.

In other words, in the grip of his alienated state of consciousness, Du Bois was compelled to reorient the trajectory of his desires, and by extension, to proscribe a parallel reorientation on the part of his Black brethren, away from the implicit demand to love (and overvalue) whiteness as a mechanism of assimilation and towards a praxis of Black love via the twin acts of self-regard and cultural reclamation. As I will go on to detail, such acts of self- and cultural love as forms of repossession, which recur with marked consistency and complexity throughout Du Bois's fictional works, constitute queer alternatives to the normative and reactionary dictates of Eurocentrism and US assimilation.

Du Bois, in the wake of expressing hurt, outrage, and indignation at his repudiation by the young white woman, describes in poignant detail the manner in which he began to absent himself altogether from the exigency of her negative desire. Du Bois notes that he had no will then to "tear down" or "break through" the "veil" that was his metonym for the barrier of racial caste but rather to "dwell above" it: "I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows" ([1903] 2007, 8). Distancing himself from both the imprint of her repudiation and the very spatial confines of his failed initiation of cross-caste romance, Du Bois sought to exist in a world beyond it all, anticipating Fred Moten's adumbration of a Black "fugitivity" that might evade some of the overdeterminations of anti-Black racist politics (2018, 15). In addition, when Du Bois returned to earthly matters, his prior attempt to love and honor whiteness was rather quickly converted into an expression of animus, which even bordered on violence: "That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads" ([1903] 2007, 15). Du Bois's reaction to white repudiation seems to have been designed to recuperate his disparaged masculinity, as Hazel Carby has incisively observed (2007, 253–56). However, such displays of misanthropy might also be attributed to the subtle shifting of his desires vis-à-vis whiteness: from a mode of compulsory adoration as overvaluation to a corrective one of remote disinterest and then disdain, which, as I will go on to detail, signaled the subsequent emergence of his interest in and

affection for Blackness. Du Bois thus offered a two-pronged approach for navigating white rejection and the resultant experiences of double consciousness: holding oneself “above” putatively white spaces and places while simultaneously attempting to best white persons at the games to which they would claim exclusive dominion. Although Du Bois depicted himself as existing at a remove from the mainstream, he clearly derived a perverse pleasure from being able “to beat” those white persons who would abnegate him, whether via scholastics, athletics, or even—without euphemism—physical combat. This is not to say that Du Bois was easily comforted by the shifting of his desires or by the insight through which he was disabused of an idealistic belief that white supremacy and its inherent anti-Blackness might be speedily overcome by displays of generosity and affection. In truth, the shifting of his desires, along with his growing epiphany regarding the consequences of racialism and racism, did little to relieve the material realities of his position as an “outcast.” Nevertheless, I wish to underscore that with the initiation of Du Bois’s feelings of “contempt” for white ways, however much he insisted that such negative feelings must eventually “fade,” Du Bois began the process of internally shaking off the urge to love the oppressor. He traded in the compulsory Europhilia, which was paradoxically forbidden and required in the US landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for a practice of Black reclamation that he implicitly recommended for all his Black compatriots. Indeed, Du Bois ultimately concludes that although he would not wholly Africanize America, neither would he “bleach his soul in a flood of White Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world” (9). In seeking a way to be “both a Negro and an American,” without losing material opportunities or benefits but also, importantly, without ceding one’s right to the pleasures and protections of self-loyalty and self-love, Du Bois sought a manner to mediate if not resolve the fragmentation that was both psychic and social in quality, as it marked both a paucity of social opportunity and connection for him (and by extension, for all Black Americans) and a potentially diminished capacity to attain personal cohesion and fulfillment—a comfort with and within one’s own skin.

In probing further the scope and significance of Du Bois’s account of double consciousness and his strategy for mitigating its negative effects, I follow the tradition of many critics who have brought a psychoanalytic approach to Du Bois’s characterization of double consciousness including Dickson Bruce, whose research into the source material for Du Bois’s theory reveals a framework by which double consciousness might be understood as

a kind of subjective fragmentation, akin to or approximating a personality disorder (1999, 241–42), or what Du Bois describes as the phenomenon by which “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; [and] two warring ideals” compete within one person who must struggle to keep from being “torn asunder” ([1903] 2007, 8). I submit that Du Bois’s capacity, not only to sustain a psychic and affective division of love and loyalty but also to partially resolve such in a way that proved productive, is fruitfully unpacked by being analogized to another, more routine form of psychological alienation: what Judith Butler terms the “queer melancholy” to which all persons developing under the spell of compulsory heterophily in and as heterosexuality are forced to submit in order to achieve subject-hood. Bearing in mind Butler’s analysis, one comes to understand how compulsory heterosexuality marks a process of gendering by which a young subject is ushered into his or her gendered position by submitting to a prohibition that bars his/her own mirror image as an appropriate object of desire, consenting thereby to love, value, and identify chiefly with those persons of the opposing gender and thus in opposition to themselves. Ultimately, the subject preserves the lost or “barred” sexual object as part of their own ego through a process of a presumably “melancholic” identification that proves productive even as it is steeped in loss. For example, the young girl first ceases to identify with the mother whose position most resembles hers, who is then barred as her primary object of love but later, reincorporated through the mechanism of melancholic reidentification. Following this logic, the developing Black subject could be said to be beholden to a compulsory Europhilia that bids them to identify not with themselves and their own but with the white subject whose regard they must seek without any expectation of reciprocity.

Within Butler’s schemata, the young person may come to reject such compulsory heterophily, returning to reclaim the heretofore forbidden object of their affection. As Butler explains further, “If one is a girl to the extent that one does not want a girl, then wanting a girl will bring being a girl into question; within this matrix, homosexual desire thus panics gender” (1995, 169). Applying this framework to the experience of young Du Bois, an experience that he attributes to all those of African American descent, I submit that to become “Black” in America is to be importuned, and even required, not to desire, value, or sympathize with Blackness but rather to nurture a forced intimacy in the form of high regard and affection for whiteness—one that is doomed to remain unrequited or otherwise misbegotten. Just as being oriented toward the other sex, thus forcibly enamored of and beholden to your embodied opposite, is the price of becoming gendered

as male or female, so too under a white supremacist system is being Black disposed as a matter of loving counter to one's own interest, with one's affections, values, and affiliations forcibly directed outside the bounds of oneself. By extension it follows, as I restate with a difference Judith Butler's phrasing above, that "if one is Black or becomes Black to the extent that one does not want a Black, then wanting a Black will bring being Black into question." Within this matrix, homophilic (as pro-Black) desire thus panics race and racialism and by extension, the abject misapprehension of Blackness).

Extrapolating from Butler, I argue that the pull of compulsory white supremacy is as endemic to the process of becoming a US citizen as compulsory heterosexuality is to the process of becoming gendered (a process that is also imbricated within nationalist and capitalist imperatives for reproduction). Du Bois, by describing how he responded to his rejection by the young white woman—not by wholly despairing but rather by rejecting in turn his former juvenile desires and thus effectively reconfiguring the orientation of his desire and the parameters of his loyalty away from the dominating other and toward his own "kind"—thereby queers his earlier account of romantic nationalism. Du Bois eschews the exigent dictum of Europhilia in favor of a burgeoning self-love and an attendant commitment to honor his beloved Black community via the reclamation of both himself and an undervalued Africanity. Thus, Du Bois's recuperation of Blackness via the history and iconography of Africa is not only homologous to Butler's account of recuperative homophilic melancholy but also an instantiation of it. For, as I will go on to detail, in recovering a concept of Blackness that exists prior to and is thus irreducible to chattel slavery's abject characterization of it, Du Bois essayed to revalue not simply a derogatory sense of Blackness but also a homophilic and homoerotic regard for the Black subject in the guise of the Black man, to whom his narration turns in order to secure a lost African patrimony.⁶

While Du Bois's mitigation of the loss of double consciousness with a program of Black-as-African reclamation might well be said to "panic" heterophily in the form of compulsory Europhilia and white supremacy, such a praxis of Black homophily may also be said to "panic" the compulsory heteronormativity to which, as Mason Stokes instructs us in *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy*, whiteness and the overvaluation of white persons have been historically and philosophically tied (2001, 13).⁷ For, as I will now detail, Du Bois's fraught recovery of Africa, from which he and his Black compatriots have

all been estranged and whose body politic he can only reclaim through a willful act of imagination, constitutes both a rejection of compulsory white supremacy and a resistance to the compulsory heteronormativity to which it has been historically wedded. In essence, the outgrowth of Du Bois's doubled consciousness was his implicit contestation of two discrete yet interconnected hegemonic structures: racialism—including its outgrowth, racism—and heteronormativity.

African Reclamation as Queer Kinship

Du Bois's response to the general sense of alienation produced by double consciousness and in particular, to the knowledge that he and his Black brethren have been forced to withhold their love from themselves, all the while remaining unrewarded for doing so, was to seek to have Blackness reborn through the cradle of a reconstituted Africa. As Fred Moten contends, much of Du Bois's foundational work reflects his goal to reclaim a narrative of Blackness that exists "before the binary that has been said to define our [its] existence" (2018, 35), a binary that, as I have underscored, is presupposed not only by a cross-caste equation of Black as opposed to white but also by binary, cross-gendered formulations. And yet, Du Bois was significantly challenged to find a firmly delineated source for Blackness, one that would secure for it an indisputable lineage, as well as a discernible ontology that might mitigate the ambivalence of a divided sense of self that proved both alienating and productive. For in Du Bois's attempt to recover a lost Black kinship, he was compelled to grapple with and attempt to transcend the binary between Black and white, to continuously confront the scene of his melancholic estrangement from his Black identity, and to mitigate the loss precipitated by the Middle Passage, which had so viciously ruptured the possibilities of African kinship by, in Fred Moten's estimation, "advancing the black reconstruction [. . .] by way of the black deconstruction of the natal" (35). Observe the following passage from the first chapter of *Souls*, in which Du Bois suggests that the (partial) resolution of double consciousness lies in the formation of a Pan-African and queer alternative to the ineluctably vexed project of interracial romantic nationalism:

This, then, is the end of ["the Negro's"] striving: to be a coworker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These

powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten. . . . Throughout history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness. ([1903] 2007, 9)

Desiring to assert a prideful place at the table of American democracy—"to be a co-worker" and not a handmaiden in the "kingdom of culture," to escape both death and isolation, [and] to husband his best powers and latent genius"—the Black subject of African descent finds that *his* "powers" of both body and mind have been, as a consequence of the violence and chaos of the Middle Passage and, subsequently, the years of racial slavery and casteist oppression, "strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten" (or perhaps more accurately, denied) (9). Du Bois's return to Africa appears to center the masculine in its figuration of the prototypical Black subject within a revised account of African history. Yet, in so doing, Du Bois paints a picture of a dissipated and indiscernible Black genius through the metaphoric imagery of spilled semen, a homoerotic conceit conjured by his image of the "powers of single black men" "flashing" and "falling" like stars and evoking, thereby, a continuum of (phallic) tumescence and detumescence. Thus, by recovering Black genius and spirit in his rhetorical and poetic configurations, Du Bois not only privileges the masculine and the male bodied by foregrounding Black men and excluding Black women but also reroutes the pre-American, antebellum origins of Black subjectivity outside the realm of the maternal, excavating a displaced patrimony that one might read, paradoxically, as both a manifestation and a refutation of the Black man's necessary confrontation with what Hortense Spillers has famously described as his internalized female counterpart.

In *Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*, Hortense Spillers theorizes the historic and metaphysical entanglement between Black identity and the maternal, invoking the antebellum law by which any enslaved person was purportedly to follow the condition of the mother, thereby inculcating the passing on of caste servitude through generations. As Spillers explains, this antebellum legislation, which secured the continued survival of the racial caste system, occasioned a phenomenon by which *all* Black Americans, including men, were compelled to emphatically root their identities in both the literal and figurative bodies of their mothers, coming to understand such female bodies as both the cause and the inextricable fulcrum of their own identities. As Spillers concludes: "It is the heritage of *the*

mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of ‘yes’ to the ‘female’ within” (quoted in Snorton 2017, 146). Yet she also allows that, under the system of enslavement, no Black mother could be said truly to “claim” her own offspring—certainly not in any legal sense (quoted in Snorton 142; see also Spillers 1987, 80).

Bearing in mind Spillers’s insights, I reprise with a difference my earlier claim that Du Bois’s strategic response to the alienation of double consciousness was to initiate a melancholic reincorporation of the lost mirror image of his own Blackness. For while Du Bois’s melancholic recuperation of Blackness-as-Africanity is indeed analogous to that of the young *girl* of Butler’s schemata, whose entrance into her female identity is premised not only upon a process of heterophily, loving the other and not the same, but also upon conceding that her gendered position is inferior to that of the male, Du Bois’s reclamation is not forged either by seamlessly identifying with any “mother within” nor by wholly accepting the putative derogation of his identity. For, in rejecting the myth of Black inferiority, Du Bois recurs (with some measure of irony) to the putatively superior position of masculinity. As such, Du Bois’s melancholic experience accords most directly with that of the young *boy*, for he sought to premise his recovery of an African ancestry that would obviate the “problem” of being Black under the racial caste system of American slavery upon a heretofore foreclosed patrimony, which might be recovered by invoking a noble and rather phallogocentric portrait of Africanity. Anticipating in complex ways Spillers’s idea of a Black American identity necessarily produced through maternal identification, Du Bois conjures an Africa stitched together from the remains of a thwarted patrimony constituted by a series of Black men whose potential to sire Black generations has flashed and fallen like the stars. This rhetorical move of Du Bois’s doubly bespeaks Butler’s queer melancholy, for in recovering and redeeming his Blackness, Du Bois expresses a latent love for his lost African father that is not simply homophilic (as pro-Black) but homoerotic (as pro-male). Moreover, as Judith Butler allows, such processes of queer mourning and recuperation may surpass altogether the realm of the individual and become both sociocultural and collective in quality, constituting a “re-articulation of kinship” that might serve both to mitigate and to publicly memorialize the melancholic loss of autoerotic and homophilic love and valuation (1995, 178). As she explains: “The emergence of collective institutions for grieving is thus crucial to [cultural] survival, to the reassembling of community, the re-articulation of kinship, the reweaving of sustaining relations” (178). Recalling Fred Moten’s analysis of how reconstructing Black subjectivity depends on deconstructing the natal, one might argue

that Du Bois displaces an account of Black maternity under the shadows of slavery and concubinage in favor of an African patrilineage that is queer in its delineation of failed heteronormativity and idealized homophily and, moreover, salvific in its aspirational, intergenerational reach.

Moreover, Du Bois's reconstitution of Black patrimony further unseats the primacy of his symbolic figuration of the young white woman from the "Tale of the Visiting Card," who exemplified the unwelcoming stance of those white Americans whose racism forestalled not just an equitable valuation of Blackness but also a novel and fruitful ethnogenesis for the nation. Effectively, both America in the form of "Lady Liberty" and Africa embodied as a motherland are rendered equally insufficient candidates for the ideal cradle of Black subjectivity. In this sense, Du Bois's reimagined scene of African nativity evokes what Nathaniel Mackey describes as the Africanist phenomenon of "wounded kinship," which Fred Moten underscores as a "thwarted romance of the sexes [implicitly heteronormative in quality]" (quoted in Moten 2003, 15). By displacing the matrilineal in favor of a *queer* account of patrilineage, Du Bois invalidates heteronormative reproduction, not just as a prerequisite for interracial assimilation but also as a foundation for a desired praxis of endogamous, *intracaste* African filiation. Unable to reroute Black subjectivity through a means of reproduction that would prove both inviolable and propitious, Du Bois would recommend for the Black subject a kind of autogenesis, one in which the Black subject (represented as the Black man) would rebirth himself, "turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving," navigating the seeming "contradiction" of duality, and distilling the "soul-beauty of [the Black] race" that seems to defy translation ([1903] 2007, 9).

While this developmental struggle of the Black subject, whom Du Bois importantly frames as an "artist," may appear to signal the Black subject's "waning strength" ([1903] 2007, 9) and thus, an attenuated account of Black subjectivity, it actually bespeaks the Black subject's capacity to become chiefly by embracing liminality and contradiction. As Nahum Chandler avows: "Having no strictly delimitable scene of origin or presumptively final sense of habitus, the African American subject is quite often 'both/and,' as well as 'neither/nor'" (Chandler 2013, 37). For Du Bois, routing his mediation of the crisis of double consciousness through an incomplete yet regenerative trajectory of African reclamation shows us that Black Americans must acknowledge and navigate their estrangement, not only from white America but also from their own lost African heritage. With Du Bois's figurations of a liminal African space, poised between a sense of loss and a sense of expansion—and only partly accessible to the Black American subject due

to the vicissitudes of time, space, and history—he indexes the gaps and asymmetries between opposing states of being and rebuts the historical segmentation of cultures, communities, and identities to which proponents of caste systems (which are paradoxically undergirded and destabilized by binary configurations of race, class, and nation) stubbornly and disingenuously commit. Having marked the interstice between Europe and Africa, the Black subject is, in Du Bois’s imaginary, poised to metaphorically travel back to America, endowed with a new sense of self and, with it, a new strategy for accommodating oneself to a hostile nation: one replete with liminality and energized by the praxis of *crossing caste*, understood both as oscillating between ideological positions and as challenging the mythologies of those narrowly delineated ontological categories (e.g., race, gender, and class) presumably affixed to them (Du Bois [1903] 2007, 11).

Thus, double consciousness is not meant to be fully overcome but rather to be mitigated and suspended: mined, thereby, for its productive tension and facilitating what Paget Henry calls the boon of “potentiated second sight” and a newfound perception of one’s misrecognition by white persons. It is a novel opportunity to rebut actively one’s repudiation by drawing further inward, reclaiming a sense of self, and reassessing the putative limitations of Black being (2006, 37). Riffing on his earlier claim that having double consciousness is to be gifted with superlative vision, Du Bois moves to conclude his mediation on the “souls” of Black persons by proffering an account of Black subjectivity paradoxically derived from the limits of legibility: “In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,—darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission” (Du Bois [1903] 2007, 11). As I will go on to show, inter- and intrasubjective intimacy, as it functions in Du Bois’s fiction, registers not just the possibility of by turns fruitful and fraught instances of what Nancy Yousef describes as the phenomena of “sharing” and “entanglement” on social and political registers but also the potential for the Black subject to practice a form of what Yousef also deems intimacy’s tendency to enable acts of protective self-enclosure (Yousef 2013, 1).

Romantic Nationalism Deformed: The Queer Poetics of Crossing Caste

With a profound yet pliable sense of identity, the Black subject as depicted by Du Bois might reenter—or perhaps reassert—their place in the domain