



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

---

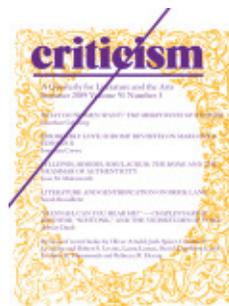
## Of Exorbitance: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought

Nahum D. Chandler

Criticism, Volume 50, Number 3, Summer 2008, pp. 345-410 (Article)

Published by Wayne State University Press

DOI: 10.1353/crt.0.0071



 For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/crt/summary/v050/50.3.chandler.html>

# OF EXORBITANCE: THE PROBLEM OF THE NEGRO AS A PROBLEM FOR THOUGHT

Nahum D. Chandler

*For Jacques Derrida, in memoriam*<sup>1</sup>

*In a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn [renverser] the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning [phase de renversement] is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of the opposition. Therefore one might proceed too quickly to a neutralization that in practice would leave the previous field untouched, leaving one no hold on the previous opposition, thereby preventing any means of intervening in the field effectively. We know what always have been the practical (particularly political) effects of immediately jumping beyond oppositions, and of protests in the simple form of neither this nor that. When I say that this phase is necessary, the word phase is perhaps not the most rigorous one. It is not a question of a chronological phase, a given moment, or a page that one day simply will be turned, in order to go on to other things. The necessity of this phase is structural; it is the necessity of an interminable analysis: the hierarchy of dual oppositions always reestablishes itself. . . . [O]n the other hand—to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system. By means of this double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging, writing, we must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and*

*the irruptive emergence of a new "concept," a concept that can no longer be and never could be, included in the previous regime. If this interval, this biface or biphase, can be inscribed only in a bifurcated writing . . . then it can only be marked in what I would call a grouped textual field: in the last analysis it is impossible to point it out, for a unilinear text, or a punctual position, an operation signed by a single author, are all by definition incapable of practicing this interval.<sup>2</sup>*

### Problematization

When speaking of the question of the situation of the Negro American as a matter of thought, we must begin by recognizing the historical problem, or the historical form of the problematization of existence, the kind of problematic, that has organized its emergence and rendered both its necessity and its possibility.<sup>3</sup> That problematization is, in a word, since the sixteenth century, the double and reciprocal articulation of the institution of modern slavery and its aftermath, including colonialism, in continental Africa, in the Americas, and in the Caribbean, on the one hand, and the emergence of a global practice of distinction among humans that has come to be placed under the heading of an idea, or concept, of race, on the other.

As much as or more than almost any other social configuration or grouping of peoples in the modern era, this historical situation has posed for Africans, especially of the so-called Diaspora, an exposed or explicit question about the forms of historical existence and the grounds of reflexive identification.

Inheriting or confronting, in any case inhabiting, this situation, African American or Diasporic intellectuals of the United States from Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Banneker, or Olaudah Equiano of the eighteenth century, including David Walker, Maria Stewart, Frederick Douglass, Frances Harper, or Alexander Crummell of the nineteenth, to W. E. B. Du Bois and Anna Julia Cooper of the turn to the twentieth, for example, elaborated an ensemblic discourse that in each case proposed (albeit in heterogeneous ways, often in the same discourse) the production of a subjectivity, subject position, or profile in discourse that they or later intellectuals, through readings of their work, have marked as Africanist. This question was raised for them not only in terms of their own practices and their own sense of identity or identification, but in terms of the question of the relationship of existence, essence, and identity in general. In the originary passage of

the founding of their mundane inhabitation as a problem to the problematization of their own itinerary of existence, this figuration or configuration, perhaps in terms of social and historical practice in general, but certainly in discourse, enacted or enabled the elaboration of a fundamental questioning of the possible character and order of social and historical being in general. For, indeed, although it is rather typically assumed, too simplistically, that the grounds of historical and social existence and identification were placed in question for “Africans,” or “Negroes,” or “Blacks,” configured in this vortex, what is not so typically remarked is the way in which a fundamental questioning of the roots of identification and forms of historical existence for “Europeans” or “Whites” was also set loose at the core of this historical problematization. Indeed these very terms perhaps can be thought as pertinent only in the devolution of the rhythmic turns of this vortex. The profound character of this interrogation and its full implication remain to be elaborated. For, indeed, even though it has remained an exorbitance for traditional forms of thought in Europe and America, this questioning can certainly be thought of as concerned with the most fundamental questions that have been gathered in the modern era under the heading of ontology, and it can also be understood to pose the questions concerning the possibility of truth that the history of metaphysics in the modern era, whether as philosophy or as theology, has called its own. Indeed, it may yet remain the very historical cusp of the announcements of such so-called general considerations.

For much of the past two decades, it has been a rather perennial fashion to register a certain kind of critique of the enunciations that I have described as “Africanist.” This critique has been directed especially at the work of African Diasporic intellectuals from the United States. Over the course of its devolution, a privileged object of such critique remained the work of Du Bois. Further, such critique was almost always placed as the opening or clearing epistemological and political operation for the staging, or setup, of a self-proclaimed new project in the study of African Americans in the United States, the African Diaspora in general, or now a domain placed under the loosely conceptualized umbrella term “Africana.” These critical pronouncements of the past two decades are, finally, always placed under the heading of a de-essentializing critique of (African American or Diasporic) conceptualizations of identity and of practices of identification. As such, these critiques as they have been announced since the mid-1980s remain in one entire sense simply part of a broad and diverse contemporary configuration that has made thematic the heterogeneous structure of identification and social practice.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, it remains that however much one affirms the questioning of the idea of a simple essence as the ground of supposed identity, identification,

and historical existence, across the heterogeneity of its enunciation, this perennial critique is in turn questionable in one entire and fundamental aspect of its elaboration. It naively implies that a nonessentialist discourse or position can be produced. As such, it presupposes an oppositional theoretical architecture at its core, in the supposed and self-serving distinction between a discourse or position that does not operate on the basis of an essence and those that do. It thus all the more emphatically presupposes a simple essence as the ground of its discourse, in both conceptual and practical, that is, political, terms.

Yet, no practice in general, no practice as thought, in a sense that we can still refer in a certain way to a *radical order* of question, can simply mark or absolutely delimit its own inhabitation of the presumption of essence.<sup>5</sup>

It is thus that in the presupposition of such a replete position, this critique seems unable to recognize in the *historical situation* of the African American the most mundane of circumstances: that there is not now nor has there ever been a free zone or quiet place from which the discourse of so-called Africanist figures, intellectuals, writers, thinkers, or scholars, might issue. And this can be shown to be the case in general. Such discourse always emerges in a context and is both a response and a call. In this specific instance, it emerges in a cacophony of enunciation that marks the inception of discourses of the “African” and the “Negro” in the modern period in the sixteenth century.<sup>6</sup> At the center of this cacophony was a question about what we now often call identity and forms of identification. On the surface, its proclaimed face, it was a discourse about the status of a putative Negro subject: political, legal, moral, philosophical, literary, theological, and so on. On its other, and hidden, face, was a question about the status of a putative European subject (subsequently understood as an omnibus figure of the “White”), the presumptive answer to which served as ground, organizing in a hierarchy the schema of this discourse, and determining the historically supraordinate elaboration of this general question. This hidden surface, as ground and reference of identification, along with the exposed surface that showed forth as a question about “Negro” identity, must be continually desedimented, scrutinized, and refigured in their relation. It is the status of the identity that takes its stand in the shadows, or the system that it supposedly inaugurates, that is so often assumed in the de-essentializing projects that remain perennially afoot in African American and African Diasporic studies. Or, if this “European” or “European American,” or later “White,” subject (presumptively understood as a simple whole despite its remarkable “internal” heterogeneity), or the system presumed to originate with it, is not simply assumed, the necessity, rigor, patience, and fecundity of antecedent Africanist discourses, as they have negotiated a certain *economy*, one within

which such discourses (antecedent and contemporary, Diasporic and continental) function, is too easily diminished, if not outright denied, in the perennial de-essentializing critique of the immediately past and present generation.<sup>7</sup>

The economy at work in Africanist problematics, as they articulate the problem of principle or ground, especially as the interwoven questions of tradition or forms of social existence and practices of distinction according to a mark or concept of race, can be stated quite simply. In the face of a distinction, a judgment of value, a recognition of a difference in any sense whatsoever, even or especially if the mark is understood to indicate or name an absence or a putative “nothing,” one cannot bring that distinction or mark into question by the postulation of a simple denial of the integrity or ground of the distinction and difference that has been proclaimed; that is, by counterposing either the fullness of a directly oppositional claim, or a measure of neutrality, to the distinction in question. Not only does the apparent direct denial of a distinction, or an apparent refusal of acknowledgment thereof, do so in the very statement or practice of such a gesture, but the force of that implicit and buried recognition will function all the more powerfully in defining the terrain and organizing the field in which the critical discourse operates, limiting and specifying its critique, because such a denial has in fact not overturned existing hierarchies (conceptual and political) of power and authority. It will, in an essential sense, leave the status quo intact.<sup>8</sup>

Such is the paradoxical *aeconomy* that takes shape for any practice as the announcement of form, the mark, the sign, or the *phaenomenon*, regardless of the premise of the ostensible ground of such as the real or the imaginary.

Thus, if one’s practice would operate on the order of fundamental thought and be general in its practical theoretical implication, it is necessary in articulating oneself in the historical space in which discourses of the Negro emerge and resound to produce a double and redoubled discourse. The enunciation of Africanist figures in discourses of the Negro emerges in a hierarchically ordered field in which the question of the status of the so-called Negro is quite indissolubly linked to a presupposition of the homogeneity and purity of the so-called European or its derivatives. Their discourse is historically coextensive and interwoven with the inception of what philosopher Kevin Thomas Miles once proposed in a felicitous phrase during an interlocution on the question, one might call the “*project*” of (white) purity in the modern era.<sup>9</sup> This situation, or more precisely problematization, yields for African American thinkers what I call the *problem* of purity, or the problem of pure being. To inhabit such a discursive formation, perhaps in a structurally contestatory fashion, one cannot, under the premise of the

ultimate incoherence of such a presupposition or proclamation of purity, of the (im)possibility of the pure, simply declare in turn the status (as prior, for example) of a neutral space or position.<sup>10</sup> One must displace or attempt to displace the distinction in question. This necessity is perhaps all the more stringent when the distinction in question is a claim for a pure origin, a pure identity, an ultimate ground of identification. Such a displacement can be made general or decisive only *through* the movement of the productive elaboration of difference—as articulation—perhaps even according to necessity as the performative announcement of a differential figure. Such a production makes possible a delimitation of the claim of purity and prepares the ground for an elaboration of its lability. In the historical situation of the African or Negro American, as has been said in many ways, but to take W. E. B. Du Bois's formulation from the "Forethought" of the *Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, one has to establish, despite all its paradoxes and risks, in the domains of sociality and political inhabitation, for example, the character of an origin of "world."<sup>11</sup>

Or, as I prefer to put it, one might speak of an originary scene of possibility. This necessity can be understood to establish its claim in an order that is as radical, or more so, as all that has been called transcendental in philosophy since the eighteenth century. And its enigmas demand that one find a traversal that moves otherwise and perhaps beyond the limits of that tradition of questioning. It can thus be said that to fail to undertake this differential elaboration would leave the critical position enclosed in the horizon of the declarations of the same or the simple. Yet, especially in the case of the question of the subject, of subjectivation and the movements of identification (individual and collective), in the practical theoretical horizon of the question of "world," one must elaborate not just a negative difference, identity, or identification, which is always recuperable to an ultimate claim of an absolute, of pure being or concept, by way of something like a movement of speculation such as that proposed in the thought of G. W. F. Hegel, in particular all that he placed under the heading of his neologism *Aufhebung*. A thought of the negative in this sense might still remain a simple stage in the consolidation of an original or destined being as a subject that would proclaim itself as absolute. What is at stake then is situated at a level somewhat more radical than the negative in general. Nor is it a matter of establishing a predicate of some kind. The originary that one must remark in the situation of an Africanist problematic since the sixteenth century can emerge for thought only within an approach that attends to that within historicity and existence that would distend form in general, distantiate presence or its derivatives, disseminate any presumptive sense of being. As a practical theoretical operation, it must be elaborated in, or along the track of, the

movements of the opening of the general possibility of difference, possibility thought as the remark of both sides of the limit, of limit as the form of the appearance of possibility, of possibility as the announcement of the limit of limit, and perhaps the passage beyond such. There is no absolute origin here, no absolute beginning, no final difference. The modifier general, here, should suggest a formulation in which difference is understood as nothing in and of itself. Yet, it is radical that one must begin with the constituted. Difference named under the heading of such “world” or “worldhood,” then, must be elaborated simultaneously as a question of the radical possibility of difference, of the general possibility of the otherwise, and, yet, it should also be understood as remarking the “fact” that there is difference (maintaining thereby a critical inhabitation of a situation, historical, at once temporal and spatial). And of course the pertinence of the sameness of time, of punctual temporality, would thereby be displaced from its traditional privilege in modern thought in Europe and the Americas. Originarity here would be understood in such a way that the movement of difference, passage, in every sense, is the very possibility of marking any inside or outside and before and after.<sup>12</sup> Such movement is the very form of the organization of the inside of the inside and the outside of the outside. Its temporality will always have been only that which will have been. Such difference, or movement of difference, not only proposes the possibility of a desedimentation of the presumption of purity, or pure being, inhabited as a problem and problematic by Africanist thinkers, but it would also remark the most fundamental dimension of the configured possibility of that which could, perhaps, be considered new in the world in general and in any sense. In this passage, the sovereign gesture of becoming would remain always at stake in that which is not yet born, in that which always arrives on the threshold of historicity too late or after the fact: the new would be this interminable process of becoming such. The new would always only arrive by way of a second time or even an apparently secondary time. The implication of such a practical theoretical thought addresses itself to the most general contemporary proclamations of idea, of system, of the whole. As such, it announces itself on an order of the political that would exceed all existing senses of horizon.

Such is the outline of the always “doubled” or enfolded character of the gesture required in a critical or desedimentative “Africanist” inhabitation of this problematic. (1) Such gesture would affirm an always nominal subject *position*, never an empty form; that is to say, never simply a form and never a simple transcendental. (2) It would go by way of an elaboration of the latter’s always already differential condition of possibility. What I have proposed to call a “redoubling” would be not only (a) this further elaboration of the ways that this “identity” or identification that one has adduced to contest



the discourses of purity is itself heterogeneous, elaborating the differential production of the proclaimed identity (or difference), but also (b) the way in which the movement of this problematic in general arises and takes its organization only through an *agonistic* mode of irruption.) This interminable passage through the *agon*, this redoubled inhabitation of the middle passage or a certain maintenance of ambivalence (both of which remain radically otherwise than the neutral), is a theoretical passage that is at once a politics and the practice of an art. This agonistic movement would thus attend to the general order of question in this apparently quite parochial problematic.

In this essay, I propose the opening of Du Bois's discourse to such an elaboration.

Yet, the practice of Du Bois should be understood as only a certain kind of example or even as a counterexample to the aforementioned perennial premise, which if understood in a certain manner might assist us in reopening the impasses of contemporary thought.

Now, this further elaboration would be the work of critical thought as participation in a tradition. Certainly such critical, or desedimentative, practice would require recognition of the necessity inscribed in antecedent practices of thought. This inhabitation of a nominal critical tradition should be specified further. It must (1) maintain a recognition of the necessity of this double gesture and (2) elaborate this necessity as both the possibility and condition of its own practice, in that it always emerges on the scene late and by way of its other, in all senses, and that it cannot accede to the fullness of its own voice, its own declared or willful position within knowledge and power. More sympathetically, we might index this redoubled enunciation as displaced in relation to both (a) its recollection of antecedent practices and (b) its possibility of setting loose a thought whose fullness is always yet to come. This "yet to come" is the spacing or timing of the operation of a nominal critical, or desedimentative, practice, of its possibility and its devolution. This is the order of a paleonymic problematic encoded in the task of theoretical labor in our time.

These formulations propose a strategic intervention enunciated here in an idiom of thought that we might call epistemological, conceptual, and theoretical, which is yet, and more fundamentally, also on the horizon of an ontological problematization of existence, in discussions of the question of the Negro or Negro American as a problem for thought, certainly of discourse and knowledge, but also of historical existence in general. They seek to help expose or bring more into relief a path or better, paths, of interwoven tracks for retracing and reformulating the question through the operation of a kind of desedimentation and paleonymic practice in thought. In the matter of the problem of the Negro in the Americas, or perhaps in

general, as a problem for thought, one movement of tracks or traces would direct us in a certain descension along the discursive levels of a project of purity. Another movement of traces would solicit an inhabitation of the impress that remains of the rhythm or step of certain figural movements within a discursive field, not so much by removing them from the soil of their embeddedness or ground and bringing them back to life, but by a kind of labor of desedimentation that would mobilize—that is, disturb—the lability of the shifts and fault lines that configure the ground that surrounds them. In this latter practice, while working across and into such a field of heavily eroded yet impacted terrain, in the duration of a breaking up and resifting of worked-over and apparently exhausted deposits, it might be that there arises a kind of sliding and shifting, a certain dynamis, a certain conjunction of movement and weight, yielding a destabilization of ground, field, or domain, a movement that could expose sediment that had been deeply locked and fixed in place, or set into relief new lines of possible concatenation, or turn up old ground into new configurations of its elements. Such a practice, that is, might turn up new soil on old ground. In the following considerations, I pursue each track or movement of traces respectively, if not simply in separation.

### Conceptual Notes on the Discourses of the Project of Purity

Although we are generally well aware of the extent, shape, and force of the discourses that sought to propose (that is, to find or establish as actual and existing and, further, to proclaim the superiority or supremacy of ) a social subject understood as “White” or “(White) European” as they were articulated in the early nineteenth century, and we even know something of the moorings of such discourses in eighteenth-century social, political, and economic developments, the *infrastructural organization* of that discursive formation, its organization according to certain presuppositions, often and especially as premises, which are fundamental to an entire metaphysics, in which and according to which, the dominant positions in the discourse of the question of the Negro in the Americas has unfolded since the sixteenth century, is not so well recognized and is far less often thought. Once we concern ourselves with following the track of the interwoven character of these enunciations—that is, the irruption of a discourse concerned with the status of a European and, later, “White,” historical subject, along with that concerned with the African or Negro—the metaphysical infrastructure of the discourse comes into view, and we can begin to think it from within the possibility of its own commitments. At that juncture, as well, contemporary

criticism of the strategies of critical response by antecedent Africanist thinkers in discourses of the Negro to projects of “White” superiority becomes questionable.

Although almost no discursive positions were rigorously systematic and fully elaborated in the eighteenth century, certain key themes and questions that marked out the terrain on which the discourses of the Negro later took shape in the Americas in the nineteenth century were already spelled out in Europe and the New World colonies by the time of the American Revolution.<sup>13</sup> With roots in a configuration of discourses in both Europe and the Americas that took a distinctive shape from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards concerning the differences of peoples from around the globe in general, and concerning the specific character of Africans and African American slaves (in a hemispheric sense) in particular, there emerged during the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century a distinctive discourse in the United States concerning the Negro:<sup>14</sup> (1) At its infrastructural core, the eighteenth-century discourse was organized around one titular question: are Negroes human, and, if so, are they “fully” human? On the basis of what criteria should their status in relation to (other) humans be judged? And, is that relation one of fundamental, or relative, sameness or difference? And, of course, the question, what is human? (or, what is man?) is always and everywhere at issue, even if only implicitly. This question was especially articulated as a discourse concerning the humanity of Negro slaves. A privileged heading or topic through which this discourse was played out—which in the sense of the project of philosophy was not one among others—was the question of Negro ability or capacity, especially moral and intellectual.<sup>15</sup> (2) The practical and operative question, which presumed Negro inferiority in body and mind, was quite specific: is their inferior status the effect of their (social) condition or an effect of their (physical) nature? This practical thematic yielded, further, a sheaf of types of reflections upon the general practical question “What should be done if the Negro slave is emancipated?” (3) Yet, hidden within both of these questions, and essentially the corollary of the question concerning the humanity of the Negro, even as it is in all truth not less fundamental, was a question about the status of a putative European American or “White” identity. Seldom stated explicitly and in those terms, this latter form of the question acquired its legible organization in conjunction with a stricture against the intermixing of the “races.” It is with regard to this latter question that the metaphysical appurtenance of this discourse comes into view. For, at its root, the implied question of this discourse, the hidden question about a European American or “White” identity or identification, brings into view the fact that the adjudication of the status of the Negro implies a

prior determination of the grounds for deciding any identity or position as one thing or another; for example, by way of a distinction or heading that has come to be called “race.” The question is an ontological one (even if it is not radical or rigorously fundamental): on what basis and in what manner can one decide a being, and its character of existence, as one kind or another? What emerges as decisive at the limit and in the conceptual and propositional sense is the problem of grounding, in some fashion that would be absolute, a socially observable hierarchy that one might wish to affirm. At this juncture, I can begin to name the philosophical appurtenance of the distinction in question, for the only manner in which such a claim could be made was to assume, in the ontological sense, that a distinction was absolute, oppositional, or pure, that in an analytical sense it could be understood as categorical.<sup>16</sup> On that basis then, one could insist upon the categorical difference of the “Negro” (or African) and the European (or “White”).

In each of its three aspects, this discourse rests on two interlocked premises: On the one hand, it presupposes the possibility of an infrastructural organization of an oppositional distinction of thought, that of producing an ontological distinction, in this case both between humans and an other and among humans, determining any so-called human being as one kind of thing or another. Hence, it also presupposes the social practice of such a distinction (by which I mean the specific character of the deployment and operation of such a distinction in constituting the effective operation in any actual circumstance or event of the basic terms in play. With regard to human groups, these would be terms such as “Negro,” “European,” “Indian,” or “Chinese,” and the logically nonsymmetrical character of any list of examples is part of the discursive problem at hand). Further, on the other hand, it presupposes the status of a European, Euro-American or “White” identity, subject, or mode of identification as coherent, as homogeneous, as a pure term. On that basis, this latter term can be figured as the norm or orientation—that is, as *origin or telos*—of the devolution of historical subject position or production of social identity, prescribed as such by general operations of power, authority, and law.

According to these premises, even if by a multitudinous and contradictory movement of logic, even if considered human, the Negro is produced as an exorbitance for thought: an instance outside of all forms of being that truly matter. That is to say, if something called the Negro is understood as approachable or nameable from within the architectonic of reason as nonetheless privative and withdrawn in the telic unfolding that is recognized as the claim of reason—that is, in the movement of the economy of *ratio*—it announces an exorbitance that cannot be reduced therein, as it is in Immanuel Kant’s disregard or necessarily contradictory inhabitation, in the

context of the question of the Negro, of his own critical project.<sup>17</sup> Or, the Negro is ambivalently positioned as outside of transcendental historicity, circumscribed within a privative nature, as in G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy of history.<sup>18</sup> Or, the Negro slave is proposed as outside, or without standing within, the democratic bequest of the commonweal, as in Thomas Jefferson's ruminations on the state of the Virginia Commonwealth following the American Revolution.<sup>19</sup>

This ensemble of questions, especially the commitments and the premises that make them possible as questions, but also the formal concepts that acquire their organization within these terms, despite the later development of a certain coherence in their discursive elaboration and some specification of themes, map out a general organization of an essential part of a discursive formation regarding the Negro in the long American eighteenth century. They comprise an essential discursive organization of the principal questions that make possible a certain horizon of thought for all nineteenth-century discourses of the Negro, even if they are not exhaustive or absolutely determining in every instance and if they remain at times deeply sedimented.<sup>20</sup>

A brief reading of a sheaf of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, where his discourse explicitly addresses the question of the Negro, along the track that I have proposed, might well allow me to specify a little more the general character of the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought.<sup>21</sup>

Although the theme of slavery runs throughout the book *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Negro American slaves are discussed directly in only two sections: Query VI, titled "Productions Mineral, Vegetable and Animal," and Query XIV, titled "Laws," with the principal discussion in the latter section. Situated in a discussion of prospective legislation that would ostensibly be taken up by the Virginia Assembly, and specifically by way of producing a discourse on a proposal to amend state law to the effect that when a general revision of the common law inherited from England was completed, "all slaves born after [its] passing" would be emancipated, Jefferson develops a question concerning the capacities of Negroes and their status in the commonwealth. Jefferson's discourse on the Negro is a discussion of the merits of such a provision, although in fact neither the law nor the amendment were ever formally addressed in the form discussed by him. We can schematize the key questions that took shape in Jefferson's discourse on this provision. They could be said to exhibit the organization of some basic themes that function in general discourses on the Negro. What makes Jefferson's discourse exemplary here is less his propositional declaration of belief in Negro inferiority in relation to "Whites" or Europeans, for in terms of the eighteenth century he was rather unique in his more or less fully

elaborated enunciation of such a view.<sup>22</sup> Thus he is not representative in the manner of a typification. Rather, he is exemplary of a problem for thought in that the questions that organize his discourse show the way in which an ontological problematic is situated at the heart of the discourses of European or “White” superiority as, and in their enunciations with regard to the problem of, the “Negro.”

The first question, concerning the general grounds for deciding the humanity of Negroes, especially Negro slaves, is never directly posed in its bare form as such; for example, under the heading of the suggestion that Negroes are not physiologically, or “biologically,” human. However, this border is broached occasionally, yet persistently, in Jefferson’s text by the description of the Negro as slave and then specifically as chattel, the juxtaposition (even if “favorable”) of the Negro American slave to an animal (such as the “Oranootan” [*Writings*, 265]), or the privilege of physical attribute in posing the question of the character of the being of the Negro (265–66). Rather, the burden of Jefferson’s discourse *presupposes* a Euro-American norm of what it means to be human. This premise is never interrogated in and of itself here. With this ground enabling a judgment, Jefferson systematically scores Negro American slaves for not measuring up. The most important censure on his part is his judgment that the supposed Negro inferiority (supposedly evident in empirical circumstances) “is not the effect merely of their condition of life” (267), their social conditions, for example the conditions of enslavement, but is due to their “nature.” Whereas, for example, the supposed poor status of North American Indians is due to their social conditions and not due to their nature (266–75, 183–92).

In the second instance, Jefferson’s text poses the question “What is to be done if the Negro slave is emancipated?” Would they be capable of being, or should they be, considered part of the Virginia Commonwealth or the new American republic? Writing of an eventual colonization scheme that would have followed in the wake of emancipation according to the original proposal to change the inherited English common law, Jefferson affirms this provision, maintaining that Negroes were not or would not be assimilable to the commonwealth, which is perhaps best understood in this context as both a legal institution, a “state,” and as the putative horizon of a “nation.” He argued essentially that there were too many differences between Euro-Americans and Negroes to allow a common ground of inhabitation. Describing them as “political” differences, he suggested that there were too many “prejudices” and “memories,” bad history, so to speak, on the one hand, and too many “natural distinctions,” on the other, to allow peaceful coexistence of these two groups. He then went on to outline what he called “physical and moral” differences that he believed would be an obstacle to

the “incorporation” of Negroes. In this discussion, Jefferson lays out his greatest catalog of supposed Negro inferiorities. The physical differences that he emphasizes are color, body form, and body texture (e.g., hair), for example, while providing a rambling list of others (*Writings*, 264–66). The key motif here is that European bodies are the model, the norm, the telos of physical type or attribute.<sup>23</sup> The “moral” differences, as Jefferson calls them, might just as well be called intellectual. What is rhetorically striking about this discussion is the unmitigated authority for peremptory judgment that is assumed by Jefferson. Comparing the Negro unfavorably to the North American Indian, he dismisses a range of Negro intellectual activity as beneath the most fundamental level of mental and moral ability or capacity.<sup>24</sup>

Jefferson’s extensive dismissal of Negro intellectual capacity essentially maintains that the Negro does not merit membership in the commonwealth and, by extension, in the nation or even the “state” as a whole. The Negro has no standing in the commonwealth.

A third question, what is the status of a European, European American, or “White” subject or identity? (and likewise the question of the grounds for deciding a racial subject or identity as one thing or another) is both hidden and exposed, in Jefferson’s writing, under a certain stricture: no intermixing of the races. And this question is also situated within both of the prior questions, functioning essentially as the corollary of the question concerning the humanity of the Negro. A concept of the purity of identity as a fixed, natural (physically or “biologically” given), even metaphysical, character is operative here. Jefferson seems unable to pose the question of the relative status of “social condition” or “nature” with regard to whites. Again and again, he juxtaposes Greek or Roman slaves with Negro American slaves, suggesting that great intellectual accomplishments were made by the former despite horrible treatment, whereas the latter in his judgment have failed to produce any lasting contribution to civilization despite comparatively better treatment. He concludes such juxtapositions with a persistent refrain. His explanation for the contributions of the Greek and Roman slaves is in the logical form of a syllogism. Yet, the conditional form of the syllogism, often marked by the conjunction “if,” is set aside here for a declaration. As such, the conditional premise is claimed as an analytical *precondition*, and hence is presupposed (and not open to the question of its justification), for any meaningful utterance on the topic, rather than as a *condition*, a term in the analysis, which would require some account of its status. Jefferson writes of these ancient slaves, by way of explanation, “But they were of the race of whites. It is not their condition then, but their nature, which has produced the distinction” (*Writings*, 268). Jefferson has to presuppose analytically, and not only presume, a ground in nature, given a certain concept of the

natural, in order to establish and maintain the hierarchy he wants to affirm. The ambivalence that some commentators have long accentuated in Jefferson's discourse can be understood as motivated by an uneasiness with the impossibility of grounding this assumption (that is, validating his presupposition, his implicit but nonetheless committed premise) about nature, specifically the nature of white folks, only on empirical evidence.<sup>25</sup> For this evidence could be faulty. Jefferson would have preferred some proof that would be absolute, that one could claim was absolute law, in that, as one might construe it, such evidence would be logical or ontological. Yet nature (and even God) reveals itself (himself) only through signs. Hence, Jefferson could not claim absolute proof. Thus, the hesitation and ambivalence recorded in the following passage:

To justify a general conclusion requires many observations, even where the subject may be submitted to the Anatomical knife, to Optical glasses, to analysis by fire, or by solvents. How much more then where it is a faculty, not a substance, we are examining; where it eludes the research of all the senses; where the conditions of its existence are various and variously combined; where the effects of those which are present or absent bid defiance to calculation; let me add too as a circumstance of tenderness, where our conclusion would degrade a whole race of men from the rank in the scale of beings which their Creator may perhaps have given them. . . . I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to whites in the endowments of both body and mind. (*Writings*, 269–70)

What should be emphasized here is that his ambivalence is ultimately organized by the status he can or cannot claim for a presupposed white identity, not (ultimately), as is usually supposed, by what he can or cannot claim for Negro identity. Jefferson's worry about the truth of the socially existing hierarchy, in colonial Virginia for example, in the system of slavery, is also immediately a worry about the moral status of the practices that are the social performance of this hierarchy. The presupposition of moral superiority of the European or Euro-American *vis-à-vis* the Negro or African American that is maintained in almost all European positions in the discourses of the Negro of this time is thus legible. To the extent that the *truth* of this hierarchy is questionable, the premise of the supposed superior moral status of the European, or later White, is unstable, as well. This moral insecurity can

be tracked by way of these oscillations of Jefferson's enunciations on the Negro—that is to say, the track or trail of a profound insecurity about his own moral status—which is thus resolutely presumed or declared again and again, perhaps as a way of forestalling an open consideration of the question. In Query XVIII, this sedimented motif comes to the fore and affirms the orientation of our reading. Although these two passages come from different overall discussions—the first embedded in a discussion of Negro ability or capacity and the latter in one about the institution of slavery—the theological reference connects these passages and specifies their root conceptual premises as concerned with human faculty and hence ontological status. Jefferson writes,

And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situations, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference!  
(*Writings*, 289)

Jefferson's questions, in light of the history of the devolution of monarchial authority afoot in his time and in light of the question of the universality of Christian salvic dispensation so profoundly posed in his time, might be well gathered in the singular question, what is the relation of "our" people to a sovereign authority, be it ecclesiastical (political or scientific) or divine? Thus, the question of the enslavement of Africans and their descendants in the Americas poses the question of the ultimate authority that would support "the nation" or "the people" as one committed to such an institution. This, then, is the question of the relation of sovereignty to enslavement.<sup>26</sup> And that question broaches the question of metaphysics at the heart of the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought. Jefferson's rhetorical and discursive disposition here, however, forecloses a critical inhabitation of this question. His deepest commitment, even in the latter passage quoted, is to the resolution of the status of "our people," those Americans who would be otherwise than African or Negro, particularly those who in part by way of the very historical process of which Jefferson's discourse is a part come to be called "White." Thus, all of the logical aporias that circulate in the concept of origin and the ensemble of concepts surrounding it are not, and cannot,

be thought as questions by Jefferson's discourse. And it is ultimately this putative white identity that Jefferson is most concerned to affirm.<sup>27</sup> Hence, it is no wonder that, although it is only obliquely stated, Jefferson's entire discourse is organized by the telos of preventing, or justifying the preclusion of, the mixture or intermixture of any kind among the races.<sup>28</sup>

The so-called Negro question announced as exorbitant to the true concerns of Jefferson's discourse in one sense passes through the barriers that would be presumed to quarantine and contain it and, in a manner not unlike that common process known in cuisines throughout the Mediterranean region in which an aromatic liquid that is slowly but integrally absorbed into a grain, is not only itself transformed into something quite other than its original form but also transforms all that surrounds it. Within Jefferson's discourse, it is such a movement that announces another kind of exorbitance, one that remains irreducible within his discourse. It is at this juncture of the reflective and rhetorical displacement of one question of exorbitance by another that the futile intransigence of Jefferson's practice in thought here can be discerned.

In the face of the primordial ambivalence of the appearance of the phenomenon, of the sign in general, the discourse proposed by Jefferson, and any discourse such as his, must always presuppose its ground and not just presume it; not only does it inhabit the precomprehension of ground, it declares it as a telos. The only premise by which such a claim or insistence upon categorical difference could ostensibly or formally be sustained would be to assume, in the metaphysical sense, that in general a distinction could be made absolute, oppositional, or pure.<sup>29</sup> Only on such a basis, then, could one hope to secure the social and historical claim of the categorical difference of the "Negro" or African and the "White" or Euro-American. The stricture upon the intermixing of the races that we have adduced in Jefferson's thought, and this would maintain its pertinence in all later discourses predicated upon such an oppositional distinction among humans in its most sedimented traditional form, even if not insisting upon this stricture explicitly, thus maintains within itself a fundamentally philosophical—that is, essentially metaphysical—question. The discourse advanced in Jefferson's text cannot open itself to a true or fundamental questioning of its own premises. It is a dogmatism in the midst of the Enlightenment.

It is important perhaps to underscore that this dogmatic position is not the *foundation* for an Africanist discourse in the discourses of the Negro. The incipit of this dogmatic discourse in the project of purity is already a solicitation: the problem of the African or Negro slave. It is a solicitation that sets loose a trembling in the inaugural enunciations of this discourse in the scene of North America of the sixteenth through eighteenth

centuries. The inaugural enunciations of this position are already a response. As such, this position in discourse certainly *should not be hypostatized, in and of itself, as the founding* discursive movement or formulation of an Africanist discourse or the project of an African American or African Diasporic studies. While it is certainly an instituting condition for the emergence of an Africanist discourse, it is a part of the violent play of the whole problem of the Negro, not its foundation.<sup>30</sup>

### The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought

In the face of such a dogmatism, one cannot assume the position of contemplation and neutrality as the first or final gesture. At the level of metaphysics and the most fundamental claims about existence, any ostensible interlocutor positioned as the object of such a discourse is always already engaged in an antagonistic encounter and relation of positions. (The conditions of actual dialogue would perhaps not be met by this situation.) As such, to set afoot a claim in this situation or encounter, an enunciation that would address the opening and telic projection of such a dogmatic position is necessary; that is, the very terms of the encounter, in a discursive sense, would have to be subjected to a certain kind of questioning. Such a questioning can unfold only by way of a double gesture: not only must the ground of the dogmatic claim, the assertion of a certain hierarchy (here among certain groups of humans), be brought into question, but the possibility of another kind, or order, of distinction must be posed and the dispersed figurations that become articulable by way of it given their elaboration.

This situational requirement of a double gesture on the part of any discursive figure or figuration that would or must engage the discourses of the project of purity, as exemplified in the texts of Thomas Jefferson, names the deeply conflictual and constitutively conjoined relation of knowledge and power that stands at both the historical and conceptual juncture of any project that would purport to elucidate something like a Negro or African American or African Diasporic figure as an object of knowledge and understanding. In the sense of its announcement as position or ensemble of positions within such an antagonistic field of a discourse, something like an African American studies or an African Diasporic studies or, as I prefer to call it, the discourse of the “problem of the Negro” as a “problem of thought,” must always have something at stake. Whether it is the case of the trembling of ontological edifices that it makes possible or the encrusted instituted formation that it cannot dislodge, by way of examples, there are always real and effective positions and consequences in play in the movement of its discourse.

*The Configuration of the Practice of W. E. B. Du Bois*

I believe that I can further specify the character of this problematic by way of some recourse to the example of W. E. B. Du Bois.

At the level of the irruption of discourse and social practice in general, the work of Du Bois might be situated among (even if as an original production) various configurations of the generations of figures in discourses of the Negro.<sup>31</sup> In this regard, Du Bois's discursive itinerary might be understood as exemplary (but not as a telos, in the final instance) of the problematic that attends any such discursive inhabitation.

Yet, at the level of the formalization and epistemologization of discourses of the Negro, the resonance or pertinence of Du Bois's practice for contemporary questions in African American and African Diasporic studies remains singular. This singularity has, quite simply, to do with his principled conceptualization of the Negro, the African American for example, as an object of thought the horizon of possibility and becoming of which would be illimitable. The principled elaboration of this conceptualization led Du Bois to formulate a complex and differential program for the study of the Negro. It is distinguished epistemologically by the combination of the micrological infrastructure of his conceptualization of the problem of African American and Africanist identities in general, which simultaneously names the Negro or Negro American as a heading for knowledge and disarticulates the premise that such a heading is a simple essence, in conjunction with the macrological, indeed global, breadth and historical scope of his conceptualization of the field of Africanist studies (especially of the Diaspora), which formulates the way in which the structural character of modern systems as such only come into formation by way of the historical trajectories in which an Africanist situation is dispersed throughout its interstices. That is to say, both the object and the field, in Du Bois's terms, are essentially differential in terms of conditions of possibility and comparative in terms of an horizon of realized understanding or knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

On both of the levels named, of discursive possibility and of epistemological project, respectively, even if in differing ways, Du Bois remains an exemplary example by which to suggest the interest of the different and differential positioning that I propose for future elaborations of African American or African Diasporic studies, or interventions with regard to this heading, in the United States as they seek to engage or transform discourses of the Negro.

My reference to Du Bois here is intended to have a distinct contemporary bearing. To the extent that every generation since the 1960s, including the generation of that pivotal decade, has sought to reinvent or "rebirth" the

field of African American and African Diasporic studies, I wish to redirect attention in contemporary discussion, in a certain way, to the generosity and resourcefulness of antecedent practices of thought and Africanist figures in discourses of the Negro.<sup>33</sup> I propose to refer our recollection to not only the 1960s or the 1940s or the 1920s or even to Du Bois's thought in general, but in particular to that work acquiring its orientation in the late 1890s, to the initial stages of the itinerary and work of Du Bois.

In the late 1890s, Du Bois undertook his first systematic attempts to think the question of the Negro as a whole. We can trace the movement of this attempt in three essays written and published in 1897. That year was pivotal in Du Bois's itinerary, for in that year he first systematically formulated the essential presuppositions of his own reflexive inhabitation of the "Negro Problem." In one sense, I am simply placing in configuration three essays from that year: "The Conservation of Races," probably written in the early spring; "Strivings of the Negro People," written most likely later in the spring and subsequently revised and republished as the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, and "The Study of the Negro Problems," probably written during the late summer and early fall.<sup>34</sup> Across these three essays, Du Bois's practice outlines a double movement. We can trace the movement of this double gesture within the conceptual organization, and under the rhetorical umbrella, of the "The Conservation of Races."

I. On the one hand, when Du Bois attempts to think the question of the Negro, especially the ontological question concerning the ground of the being called the Negro, he initially proceeds according to the logic of opposition that dominated the discourses of the Negro during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was a quite traditional ontology, moreover an exceedingly overdetermined one; that is, the discourse of scientific evolutionism as it pertains to the so-called human and the concept of race operative at the core of this conjunction. In this movement of his thought, as he follows traditional logic, the entire question becomes confounded. The question of the Negro is confounded with the concept of race, as the Negro, an entity that Du Bois describes as historical through and through, is nonetheless placed by him under the analytical heading of a certain thought of the *ideal*, a telos, as if realizable on the basis of a given destiny, which gives it the appearance of an absolute and predetermined entity. The question of race, organized around a concept of the pure or the simple, about which Du Bois has already named profound and telling hesitations due to the impossibility of validating its supposed ideal properties by any empirical measure, is construed by Du Bois as always, in practice a question of mixtures, and changeable, malleable, historically specified, properties (CR, 3–5).

Yet, as a putative origin of a world or worldhood, as the figurative scene of originary ideals, even if they are yet to come, the Negro past appears in the present as a retrospective justification for itself. The heading for that retrospection, in this essay, is the concept-metaphor *race*.

In this movement of his thought, although deeply critical of the concept of race, Du Bois is unable to displace the order of its pertinence and must use it to distinguish the historicity that he wishes to bring into view. Hence, his questioning of the concept of race, although precisely solicitous of the concept of race at the level of its specific statements, is also unable to categorically dispense with its nominal promise, and thus appears indecisive with regard to its place in the architecture of his conceptualization of the Negro question as a whole. And, even this apparition is not so simple. Further, although yielding an account that is more or less accurate at the level of its actual description of the contemporary conditions of the Negro, there is a logical aporia that marks the opening of his discourse (indeed, any discourse) and obscures the intense questioning and inquiry (and hesitation concerning the most apparent possible answers) into the grounds of a so-called Negro identity and, hence, identity as such. That conundrum is simply the logical aporia that requires that he speak *as if* that which he wishes to bring under one coherent analytical frame already exists as such an epistemological (or reflective) entity. He cannot open any question whatsoever concerning the Negro without speaking as if the Negro as such is a given and presumably a singular identity. In one entire movement of his discourse, Du Bois *seems* to presume what in fact he is seeking to question. Perhaps this is the price of criticism.

II. On the other hand, Du Bois persistently and systematically described, and dramatized, the actual *character* of the lives of Negroes, both in terms of their experience and in terms of their inscription within certain social systems, in such a way that its excessiveness to this given or inherited ontology (or logic) is made thematic.

In part, we might say that this was due to his critical response to the *practice of racial distinction*, and this would be more in the form of a provocation and solicitation than an instituting foundation. For we must recall that although compelled in the "The Conservation of Races" to set the stage for a statement of the Negro problem with traditional concepts, Du Bois in this address continually resists subordinating the historical and social situation of Negro lives to them. Above all, in this essay, and in others of the period and throughout his life, Du Bois privileged the theme of Negro *capacity*, the way in which an infinite horizon of possible forms of becoming opens within their own *existence*; a position construed such that it is radically excessive to any idea of a fixed or given essence in any simple sense. It was,

perhaps, this critical response that led him to interrogate the concept of race in the opening stages of this essay even as he felt compelled to use it.

In another sense, we can say that Du Bois's reckoning of the excessiveness of the lives of Negroes to traditional ontology, which would be oriented by a commitment to determine the Negro as one thing purely and simply (Socrates' question "what is . . . ?" construed dogmatically), was due to the fidelity of his attention to the *historical experience*, the historical character of the sense of being of Negroes (and not just their systemic inscription): that the originary sense of their being is that of the necessity of making a way, of finding a way, an inhabitation that is always, through and through, historical—one that *must* be made, or always, originally, remade, anew. This would be the threshold by which their sense of the world could be announced, if such will ever have been possible, however differentially or heterogeneously. And, this historical form of origin would be the very opening of exorbitance within their sense of being: of an ineluctable and threshold displacement of the origin *and* of the always renewed opening to that which is beyond any given form of being.

This would be a sense that could be approached, if at all, only by way of understanding and interpretation, a mode of inquiry that should be distinguishable from an account that would be primarily description. Instead, it is an approach akin to something that was called *Verstehen* by his immediate predecessors such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel or his contemporaries such as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim.<sup>35</sup> Finding such an approach was, perhaps more than any other preoccupation, Du Bois's principal or most fundamental concern as a scholar, a practitioner of the still nascent human sciences, in the opening stages of his career: to outline the contours of an historical coming into being; that is, to render legible the sedimented layers of an African American inhabitation of the world.

To situate such an historical existence, he proposed many methods, many ways of accomplishing this goal, of developing access to this experience, directly or indirectly. These included historical research, sociological fieldwork, statistical description, physical and anatomical analysis, and photographic and other forms of visual documentation, among others. He called for and practiced many modes of literary production, including the short story, the travelogue, poetry, drama, the novel or long fiction, the essay and autobiography, to name several. The essay, in general, remained perhaps his favored form. One of these practices, autobiography, remains the site of some of Du Bois's most poignant interventions. He turns to the autobiographical at decisive moments in the "The Conservation of Races." It opens and sets the stage for *The Souls of Black Folk*. Indeed, this register of reference or tone dominates the book, which itself was a collection of essays.

Ultimately, all of this was construed—that is, gathered under a critical reflection—that Du Bois called a kind of “interpretation” (TSNP, 48–50). And such practice would in turn be otherwise than simply a response to a given object of attention, whether understood as material or ideal; it would also entail the possibility and necessity of a certain production or performance that would itself be a form of such an inhabitation, of such a sense of world, that would itself exemplify such a possibility.

Along these lines, a concern with the historical or existential order of Negro life, Du Bois systematically came upon the *sense of being* of the Negro as not just one thing or another, but as richly and fundamentally double. I recall the famous passages:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, the Negro is 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, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.<sup>36</sup>

Although critical of the indecisiveness and incoherence that this sense produced in Negro political and social life, private and public, and deeply

responsive to the *violence* of the *sense* of this double heading of existence, the actual experience of this sense, Du Bois never ceased to affirm this heterogeneity as *also* a good, a resource, in general.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in “The Conservation of Races,” Du Bois’s vision of this double reference of the Negro, as American and Negro, is cautiously but quite assertively hopeful (CR, 5–6). Moreover, when he announces this theme in “Strivings of the Negro People” (which became the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*) in the paragraphs just cited, Du Bois marks the structure of possibility of subjectivation that arises with this sense, which he calls “double-consciousness” at the level of the subject and “second-sight” at the level of the socius in general, with both a positive and a negative sign. It manifests not only as a kind of loss, a disarticulation of ostensible purpose, but also as a kind of “gift,” a distantiation of ostensible horizon as a limit. Thus, it is finally, and quite radically, the movements of displacement and the forms of kinetic coherence that can be mapped along the passageways of the irruption of a kind of “double-consciousness” that enable, as both a freedom and a responsibility, a certain powerful *historial* sense, a “second-sight into this American world,” and perhaps beyond it to another world, beyond the possible as a given horizon.<sup>38</sup>

This sense makes possible the complex point of view and reflection elaborated as the narrative of “Strivings of the Negro People” and later *The Souls of Black Folk* as a whole. This sense, and the reflection that it invites, enabled, perhaps, the desedimentation of the (violent and destructive) conditions of its own possibility, and perhaps their ultimate displacement at the level of finality or effects, by way of a distantiation of the topical pertinence of their ostensible bearing. That is to say, in Du Bois’s discourse the movement of the production of “double-consciousness” also makes possible the opening for a powerful critical reflection upon the scene of its own historical production, which can be named precisely under the heading of a kind of “second-sight.” The sense of being a Negro at the turn of the century in the United States for Du Bois is anything but some pure or simple habitation in the world.

This thematic, followed in all its difficulty, nonetheless displaces the pertinence of traditional ontology. A simple yes/no or either/or question will simply not suffice to situate this identity or determine the sense of identification of this being. The undecidable status of such a sense not only contradicts the conservative understanding of the law of identity formulated in the Aristotelian principle of noncontradiction, which is a formal statement of the kind of presupposition that remains the deepest formal or logical—that is, ideal—resource of the discourses of purity, of pure being, and hence of the *concept* of race, but accounting for the alogical logic that organizes the structure of appearance of such a being, perhaps, displaces the ultimate pertinence of

that principle. It marks the scene of a certain exorbitance. Having no strictly delimitable site of origin or fixed sense of habitus, the African American subject is quite often “both/and,” as well as “neither/nor.”<sup>39</sup> Remaining faithful to the problem of understanding the actual lives of Negro people, in particular his own—that is to say, approaching that life in terms of its historicity, its opening toward a future that is otherwise than simply the past in the future—Du Bois was not only led to produce a description of an original sense of being in the world, but to elaborate a sense of being that in itself could not be reduced to some simple essence, of either the past or of a future.

Yet having begun to elucidate that the Negro was not some absolute and pure entity, grounded in some pure or primordial origin or organized in relation to some fixed or simply given telos, yet working in the face of the dominant positions in the discourses concerning the Negro at the turn to the twentieth century, those that projected the evacuation of the Negro in fact or concept, Du Bois could not simply leave the field unmarked. To have taken the declaration that the concept of race is incoherent and that races do not exist, thus that all concern to produce the conceptual, political, and historical figure of the Negro American on the scene is “racialist” in turn, would only have left the existing hierarchies firmly in place; this, in an era that has been described by Rayford Logan as the “nadir” of African American history.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, it is no accident that in the third essay from this momentous year in Du Bois’s itinerary, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” Du Bois puts forth a comprehensive plan calling for an exhaustive study of the Negro in the United States. He formulates this project more systematically, comprehensively and, with regard to a concept of truth, more rigorously than had been done up to that time. This is the site of a fundamental innovation in discourses called scientific or academic concerning the Negro—one of Du Bois’s central contributions—not acknowledged widely enough. I consider this text the founding programmatic text of African American Studies in the United States.<sup>41</sup> Du Bois outlines a twofold epistemological frame in which the Negro people would be studied in terms of their historical situation or environment, the “social” environment, an order that I call *historial* (or systemic, historicities in a general sense),<sup>42</sup> and in terms of their internal development, an order that I call *existential* (or experiential historicities in a specific sense). In this latter concern, Du Bois describes the object of analysis as the *sense of world* for Negroes, what he calls “a distinct social mind” (TSNP, 50), what his German contemporaries called a *Weltanschauung*.<sup>43</sup> He writes that this aspect of such a project

should aim to study those finer manifestations of social life which history can but mention and which statistics can not

count, such as the expression of Negro life as found in their hundred newspapers, their considerable literature, their music and folklore, and their germ of aesthetic life—in fine, in all the movements and customs among them that manifest the existence of a distinct social mind. (TSNP, 50)

This was an original appeal. It was not until the 1960s that Du Bois's call would begin to be answered comprehensively. When such a view arrived in historiographical scholarship, for example, it produced a major re-orientation of both African American and American history.<sup>44</sup> Du Bois had rightly suggested that this shift in epistemological frame could propose something new for how we conceptualize sociality and historicity in general, but especially with regard to that epistemological entity called "America."

What should be emphasized here is that in each moment of Du Bois's movement or itinerary, his inhabitation of what I have called the problem of purity, or pure being, his understanding of the grounds of the Negro is first and foremost historical. Despite his proclamation of the need for those understood socially to be Negro to bond together for political, legal, and economic empowerment, he never defines the Negro as first or only one thing. Du Bois, thus, even in his use of it, explicitly resituates the status of the concept of race, even as his committed generosity and the limitations of the concept of *istoria* (historicity or culture) do not allow him to make the displacement radical. (As I suggest further later in this essay, these concepts, like all concepts, can be understood to refer to an essence.) Du Bois thus criticizes the grounds of the concept of race, suggesting that it be understood as nonphysical, otherwise than natural in the simple and given sense of a fixed essence, and as historical (that "races" change is indeed the most embedded reference of the concept in this text):

Certainly we must recognize that physical differences play a great part . . . yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences—the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. [Du Bois uses alternately the terms "races" and "nations".] The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences—undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them. (CR, 3)

At no point is Du Bois's understanding of the *essence* of the Negro an idea of a *simple* or *pure* essence. I recall here that in the middle stages of

the “The Conservation of Races,” as he outlines the different “races,” which he defines as historical entities, Du Bois describes the Negro in the United States as “the most indefinite of all” (CR, 3).<sup>45</sup>

*The Delimitation of the Situation of W. E. B. Du Bois*

What we are left to meditate upon then is this conundrum: Du Bois’s intervention was not de facto decisive at one opening of a new century, yet perhaps it remains that his practice may function de jure as such at another. And this pertinence would, precisely, obtain by way of the paradoxical and only apparitional indecisiveness of the movements of his itinerary.

For his accomplishment could not have been in fact decisive. First, the concept of *istoria* as such is always recuperable to an essentialist commitment. While the attribution of context may in the strict sense remain ultimately illimitable, the concept of *istoria* can organize itself only if an horizon is understood as given or determinable, present in general. Thus, this concept poses for thought a necessary and unavoidable complication. Secondly, with regard to contemporary thought, all of the formalizations of a concept of the phenomenon, sign, or symbol that underpin our current conceptualizations of historicity or identity were in a certain enunciative stage of their articulation or elaboration at the time of Du Bois’s first writing during the late 1890s. And, even so, these developments are too often understood to have broken free of the paradoxes that attend the concept of essence. If one thinks of the work of Edmund Husserl, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Franz Boas, these elaborations were nowhere construed at, say, 1895 to the extent that they were just a decade and a half later.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, it remains an open critical question of the extent to which the infrastructural developments of the conceptualizations of the concept of the phenomenon, of the sign, or the social, so essential to each were construed in such a way even after the turn of the century as to enable such a radicalization.<sup>47</sup> In the work of Franz Boas, this rethinking was not decisive until near the end of the first decade of the century. And even then one can trace a certain indecision and hesitation by Boas around the question of the Negro, or the question posed for thought under its heading.<sup>48</sup> And the same can be said of others.

At any rate, Du Bois is certainly an original figure in a configuration of thinkers problematizing and rethinking an inherited conceptualization of essence, or the sign, and all of its dispositions or its dispersal as matters of historicity, sociality, intentionality, or psychic activity.

We can remark this originality paradoxically; that is, by suggesting the extent to which Du Bois’s situation was both embedded within the

situation of post-Enlightenment thought in general and yet conforms to an enigmatic economy, the specificity of which bears no simple translation into another itinerary of thought, particularly within this turn-of-the-century configuration.

Although the decisive questions that concerned figures such as Husserl, Weber, Freud, Durkheim, de Saussure, or Boas had their roots in the devolution of science that followed in the wake of the revolutions for thought produced in the work of Descartes and Kant—that is, in the idea of thought as science or the idea of practical reason—the dissolution of all previous understandings of unity can well be understood as the problem of the maintenance of the other on the horizon of a putative infinite understanding. An elucidation of this problem in the middle of the nineteenth century necessarily entailed the production and clarification of the structure of existence, of being in general, as not reducible to a simple anteriority. In the provenance of the question of the Negro, we should underscore that this would withhold especially any supposed absolutely determining or final ground in physical or natural existence. It was in the space of this problem for thought that a theory of the displacement of the origin in general became decisive. For the nonreducibility of the structure of existence, in all its possible modalities or hierarchies, to the simple, demanded, then, that the ground of the presentation of being be rethought.

It is this general problematic for thought that decisively marks the practice of this configuration of turn-of-the-century thinkers. It is in this context that the commonness of the concern with the phenomenon, with the status of the sign, or the status of the symbolic, in the movement of the socius in the work of Weber, Boas, Durkheim, or de Saussure can be situated. Each turned away from the reference of the symbol or the sign to a simple or given anteriority, proposing thereby and instead the thought of its productivity. Likewise, it is in this context that one can recognize the problematic that Husserl and Freud, as examples, share in common with this configuration and with each other: each moved away from an a priori determination, given by their respective formations, of that within consciousness that opens toward its other, a biologicistic referral in Freud's case and a psychologistic one in Husserl's, to attempt to think the horizon of consciousness as otherwise than simply given. In this sense, one can say that a general displacement of the presumption of historicity or consciousness as a unitary structure was set in motion by the turning that is registered here and that the thought of a certain dynamism of this heterogeneity was projected toward a new, or another, elaboration.

On the surface, Du Bois's problematic appears far more specific than those of his contemporaries, seeming at first glance almost parochial.

I. Hence, to the extent that the transformation that I have just recalled would be understood as general, pertaining to the social, consciousness, or being as such, Du Bois's thought would appear as derivative at best. It would be subsumed on two levels, certainly by way of the formal or logical subordination of the general to the particular, but also by way of the relative parochiality of the Negro or African American example in the face of the universalism of thought as science as such. Such subsumption is both legitimate and welcome to the extent that the Negro or African American example is recognized and situated as part of the problem of thinking historicity in general and as such. Indeed, Du Bois often appealed to his contemporaries for such subsumption as an *inclusion* of the question of the Negro as a problem and primary scene for what he called sociological thought; that is to say, for a science of the social or the human in general.

II. Yet, on another level, and to the extent that the problem of the Negro maintains sedimented within in it a question about the grounds of that entity, its possibility, and its becoming, the answer to which cannot be decided or given simply by thought under the heading of science or knowledge—that is, in the horizon of the demand for truth—to the extent that the question at issue broaches the matter of the very possibility of such an entity (that is, to ask, for example, how something like the Negro or African American is possible, or what after all could be or become the possible destiny of such a being, or to pose the thought that perhaps it is nothing, or could not exist at all), a patient meditation upon the conundrum of its emergence as a problem for thought, here by tracking the movements of the itinerary of Du Bois, exposes another layer, other layers, within the bedrock of thought as knowledge, of philosophy as science. That layer (or layers) is exposed or brought into relief in a certain way—that is, opens in a certain way—*within* this quite specific question. It is the question “What is (the) human?” This question is not asked here with the presumption that there can be a simple or final answer, for it only arises in the domain of the question of the Negro when that domain has been dislodged from its presumed ground. To the extent that neither a natural (putatively simple) nor an historical *essence* can situate this entity, the very concepts of the same and of difference as they are construed to situate the human as such, at an ontological level, seem almost incoherent when formulated to account for it. This incoherence of thought is registered all the more strongly at the epistemological level of generality. If being under the heading of the Negro is not and, perhaps, cannot be fully given—that is, rendered available for thought as science or philosophy—then perhaps the ultimate pertinence of such a project, or at least its founding and final aim, which would be the naming of the truth of being, is secure or at risk in something like the problem of the Negro as a problem for

thought. A tracking of the problem of the Negro for thought exposes, then, the fault lines within the layers of sedimentations that have gradually gathered as the very historicity of modern thought. These fault lines, and the shiftings that they both register and make possible, direct us toward an instability in the architectonics of any thought, or thought as practice, that would simply declare its position with regard to the question of essence (especially, for example, as the question of the status of the sign or under the heading of another term such as the symbolic), whether it be of origin or end, or of the universal or of the particular.

Thus, Du Bois's situation with regard to this configuration cannot be simply configured as a derivative one. This matter can be outlined according to both its similarity and its difference.

A. It holds a fortiori that all of the questions at stake in the work of his contemporaries in this turn-of-the-century ensemble, for example, are also at stake in the question given to him as his problematic and is open, more or less, within his own discourse. I have given some brief indication of such a motif earlier, especially with regard to the question of understanding or *Verstehen*.<sup>49</sup> And, Du Bois recognized himself as part of, and as participating within, the open horizon of science in his time. His affirmation, rather than negation, of the transformations of thought afoot in this configuration should be presumptively understood as general.<sup>50</sup> Operating without the benefit of an ultimately definable ground or apparently stable object of inquiry, Du Bois proposed no grand theoretical summa. His thought is marked by a certain nominalism, but one that operates within definitive commitments and nonetheless practices a profound sense of a whole, in a certain way. At this juncture, we will simply name the latter possibility. If there is a certain methodological necessity to his practice, the demand for which is not simply subsumable to a project of science or truth, it remains that such nominalism may yet be understood according to another horizon, of thought in general, in which the general epistemological bearing of his practice should nonetheless be legible or open for an elaboration of a certain kind.<sup>51</sup>

B. While it remains without emphasis under the heading of science in the apparently philosophically naive and derivative question of the Negro as it appears in Du Bois's discourse, all of the questions of the ground of existence and being encountered by this configuration are posed in a fundamentally distinctive manner. This distinctiveness, this profound and paradoxical originality, is twofold: the way in which the problem that is the site and scene of Du Bois's work is given to him for thinking, and the way in which he inhabits this problematization in his practice.

1. The specific theme of Du Bois's problematic concerns the status of African Americans in the United States and hence in the historical frame of

what has been called modernity. It is this question that he is given to think. When one begins to unpack this question, one discovers a series of embedded paradoxes that govern and shape the task of Du Bois's thinking. These paradoxes have to do with the very shape of the itinerary of the question of essence in his discourse. In the itineraries of his contemporaries, the question of essence arrives not just as an unacknowledged presumption but appears as a presupposition.

a. That is to say, it was presupposed, in the traditional discourse given to each, that an essence could be found; that, in an essential way, the object of inquiry was marked by the possibility of recognizing it in the fundament of the simple or the pure (for example, as it was in the psychological discourse, specifically neuropathology, of the end of the nineteenth century for Freud).

b. In Du Bois's situation, no such presupposition was possible with regard to the object of his thought, the condition or ground of the Negro. Or, at least, such a presupposition could not be easily maintained. Indeed, in Du Bois's case, his problematic arose precisely because the given or dominant presupposition was that such an essence could not be found. Or at least so it seemed. For in another register, embedded or buried within the first, concerning the Negro as inessential subject, was another presupposition, operating as a form of prejudice, in which it was precisely a supposed absolute and primordial bond of essence to nature, to physical being especially, in the case of the Negro, that is found to govern discourse, reflection, and thought.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, it can be said that, in a general way, Du Bois's situation and discourse assumes a certain shape when placed in the context of this configuration: it is marked by an ensemble of specific paradoxes that requires an ensemble of ironic critical gestures and is generally paradoxical and ironic with regard to the situation and forms of discourse and critique common to this turn-of-the-century configuration.

2. This motif of the paradoxical and its ironic play can be formally elaborated with regard to the terms of enunciation or discursive premises and critical practice more common to the problematic of these other thinkers and with regard to those specific to the problematic of Du Bois.

a. Traditional forms of problematization, or the most usual forms of a problematic in this configuration of thinkers, entail a certain mode of existence or practice in which the coincidence of an essence of some kind and that which is understood to re-present it is presumed. Then as this mode of existence or social practice encounters certain difficulties and becomes a problem for thought, this presumption of coincidence enters a devolution and is brought into question. This traditional movement of problematization is itself paradoxical. This is so for at least two reasons. First, any form of

routinization of existence is always founded on the basis of a crisis. This is what one might call a founding violence or violence of the origin. Secondly, a given form of problematization of such a routinization reproduces this disjunction, to use de Saussure's terms, as a disjunction of signifier and signified, re-marking, thus, the routine as a certain practice of crisis or as in practice a devolution of essence. The presumption of an essential ground, then, covers over precisely the noncoincidence of the essence and its sign. Thus, in the forms of discourse and problematization generally common to this configuration of thinkers, and perhaps in the horizon or historicity of post-Enlightenment thought in general, the task posed by the problematic is to bring into question a given presumed or supposed relation between an essence and that which ostensibly represents it. This is the movement of thought and critical discourse that I have remarked earlier by recalling the various breaks with an inherited conception of their respective principal objects of study by various thinkers of this configuration. The linkage that they were each led to question was a supposedly absolute or an ultimately determining one between a sign, or a symbol, or the phenomenon, and its ostensible ground in an essence.<sup>53</sup>

b. Du Bois's problem, the form of problematization that situated his enunciation(s), can be understood in this common or traditional manner in one aspect of his path of inquiry. However, because there is a certain originality or distinctiveness in the character of the specific problematic given to him, he had to also move in another direction, apparently opposite, *in the same movement of his thought*, and here the philosopheme "same" is confounded. This is because, in Du Bois's problematization, a crisis of meaning, or the noncoincidence of essence and telos, is the given presupposition, the presumption of the mode of existence by which his problem of thought is given to him. In this way his problematic differs from the traditional pattern or the one most common to this configuration. It is thus the latter's ironic double, once brought into critical relief as I am seeking to do here; to speak of one is to imply the other.

(1) This *general form of irony*, with regard to Du Bois's discourse or practice in relation to the practice(s) of others of this configuration, is produced through a *structure of irony that is specific* to Du Bois's discourse (even if we cannot say that it holds only for his in the final instance). At its root, Du Bois's problem entails two interwoven forms of routinization, or social practice, whose references to the concept of essence are the double of each other. It is the status and character of these interwoven forms of social practice that Du Bois must rethink. (a) One form of social practice, the practice or experience of being a Negro, whatever might be such, takes its most original root in the disjunction or displacement of such practice from a (supposed) simple

ground in essence. (b) The other, a certain practice toward (those understood as being representative of) the Negro, takes its most original ground in the ordering of practice in a supposed absolute or primordial essence. The interwoven character of these forms of social practice mark this problem as precisely social and historical, rather than only ideal (in this sense, what Kant spoke of as matters of “pure reason”) and especially not only formal (concerning, for example, a conundrum of logic or rhetoric). This situation cannot be resolved through an analysis or an analytics. And this interwoven character, situated rhetorically in the movement of the double genitive (for example, *of*, whose referential structure means both from and about something), specifies this question as one about the production of historical or social subjects. This doubling at the core of Du Bois’s discourse means that the traditional form of enunciation, or strategy of critical thought, would be incommensurate with the economy (in a sense that is at once conceptual, theoretical, practical, or political; that is, the laws or necessities that must be confronted in thinking about the object or matter of concern) of Du Bois’s problematic. This incommensuration would arise because a simple affirmation or negation of the ground of either practice, being a Negro or being toward a Negro—that is, a declaration of a simple truth with regard to either practice—has the paradoxical effect of reproducing as a presupposition of thought precisely what one is seeking to question. There is no safe or pure position to be taken within this problematic. It is an economy.

As a matter of style, or the rhetoric of the forms of enunciation, irony with its constitutive risks would be the mode of discourse by which one might inhabit this difficulty, at best and at worst, for always both are possible.<sup>54</sup>

(2) We can further formulate this paradoxical economy as it pertains to any critical decision or response, on two levels, and then summarize its implication for thought in this domain. (a) First, we can notice it with regard to the experience of being Negro. (Perhaps in this specific rhetorical space, it is useful to recall that, fictional or not, it is a lived sense.) If, on the one hand, Du Bois simply affirms the stated and presumed disjunction between the Negro and some supposed original and primordial ground, his discourse will have the ironic effect of affirming the supposed vacuity of the Negro as social being. It would affirm all those varieties of discourse that would evacuate the Negro in fact or concept. If, on the other hand, Du Bois only questions this proclaimed disjunction of the Negro and some ground as a thetic alternative, a declaration of opposition to a given thesis, he would simply presume the Negro as a primordial being. His discourse would, then, be simply the specular opposite of the thesis of the Negro without an essence or ground, producing no displacement of either its logic or the status of its

postulation with regard to ontological ground. (b) Secondly, we can recognize this economy with regard to certain practice(s) toward the Negro, those practices taking their epistemological reference (however indirectly or passively) from the concept of race, the practices of racial distinction in general. If, on the one hand, Du Bois only questions this practice of identification, proclaiming the nonexistence or nonessential status of the distinction operated in this practice, insisting on its absence of ground or fundament, then he is left with a certain incapacity to disturb the existing practice (which, as a necessarily semiotic process, operating in the domain of the symbol, the sign, or the phenomenon, will function regardless of one's adjudication of its truth as a question of ground), to overturn the hierarchies that are nonetheless maintained in the name of this material fiction. If, on the other hand, Du Bois only affirms the Negro as the unity of a natural, or physical, essence with an essence of idea, spirit, or sense, under the heading of the concept of race, his discourse will reproduce not only this concept, but thereby implicitly affirm the violence of the practices carried out in its name. (c) Thus, third, and finally, we can recognize that the necessity of a certain strategy of thought, moving simultaneously in two apparently contradictory directions, means that Du Bois must acknowledge in a certain way his participation in the game he wishes to overthrow, his complicity with some of the most embedded premises of the systemic structure (in every sense) that he seeks to make the object of a radical critique. Du Bois's discourse is thus doubly inscribed. In the problematization that his discourse traverses, the question of the Negro is positioned within the problem of essence or sameness, of difference or truth, as the paradoxical double of each, and vice versa. This double position (if it can still be called one) is the originary difficulty of Du Bois's early thought. Thus, a certain nominalism in Du Bois's practice cannot be discounted too quickly. Du Bois had to move beyond absolute declarations even as he had to make them or appear to make them. Du Bois, then, was engaged in an extremely powerful and entrenched economy. It is the labial structure, or dispersed traces, or sedimented remains, of this difficulty that I have sought to begin to track and outline here. This paradoxical structure is the economy of the discourses of the Negro.

Certainly, then, with reference to Du Bois, we can say that not only did the itinerary of the historically current construal of the problem of the phenomenon or concept of the sign have its bearing on his practice, but that more generally and fundamentally the problem of the concept of essence was at stake in his situation in such a way as to issue as an acute and aporetic question of critical strategy. It brought into relief, thereby, in this domain and in a certain way, an aporia that is general to thought or practice as such: the critical operation always returns one to a location within the terrain of

the field that has been engaged. (The further question, of course, is whether such return is simply in the order of the same or whether there is a way in which a kind of a reinscription can enfold the possible passage of the differend. That is to say, in a certain discourse, the question is whether the return or repetition effects a new relief of the marks that inscribe such a field, thereby giving another exposure, a rearticulation, of their impress for thought and practice.) This seems obvious in the conceptual sense when one thinks of the “The Conservation of Races,” for example; and, I have also suggested here, thus far, the extent to which it was a difficulty general to Du Bois’s early thought and not just to that essay. Perhaps elaboration can remark the possibility for the irruption of a thought otherwise than the simply given in Du Bois’s inhabitation of this difficulty.

The historical pertinence of the difficulty here is more than just the persisting implication of a conceptual conundrum in any practice that has now become recognizable by way of a certain critical thought. This problematic also has bearing in another sense of historicity, the worldly sense of a mundane temporality; that is, in strategic institutional political practice. To displace the determination, or determinative effects, of a hegemonic institution, one can carry out the full displacement of such only by crossing the threshold from open criticism to a declaration of authority. Without assuming power according to, or by way of, some existing institution within the status quo, a project of criticism cannot attain its mark. If it does not attain such a position, its very maintenance is always open to a quite worldly and unkind intervention. Such an intervention, of the unkind sort, for example, intruded upon Du Bois’s project in the early stages of his itinerary in a major way—precisely at the peak of his first activity in the academy. Surely Du Bois had certain institutional supports during this period, from 1896 to 1910, to carry out his projects, a faculty position at Atlanta University and prominent publishers for his articles and books, for example. Yet, as he would claim during the later years of his life, especially, he was targeted in this early moment, from 1903 onwards, by Booker T. Washington’s “Tuskegee Machine,” an attack that led to the withdrawal of funding for his home institution, Atlanta University, and for his academic work, and that eventually forced him to leave the academy in 1910 (and we have a substantial archival basis for confirming this judgment; and, more or less, it is now recognized that a similar scene was replayed in the 1930s).<sup>55</sup>

For reasons that were both essential and historical, Du Bois’s intervention could not *in fact* have been ultimate or final. We can specify the status of this *de facto* limit just a bit further. Not only was he limited, on the one hand, in the mundane sense by both the concepts, and their possible construal, available to him *and* by the strategic opportunities for overthrowing the

dominant institutionalized positions in the interpretation of the Negro question, but, more fundamentally, his practice could only be radical by remaining open, unfinished, unresolved in its engagement with the paradoxical announcement of the problem of difference, or sameness, of being as essence, in matters pertaining to the Negro as a problem.

It must be emphasized that it is for this principal reason, the sense of the open inscribed in his texts, that there remain major passages of Du Bois's discourse wherein there are further interventions whose full force remains to be elaborated.<sup>56</sup>

However, according to another temporality, that of the concept and practice of thought as a posing of the illimitable within existence as a problem, authority that would affirm Du Bois's practice *de jure* remains yet to come. In this double inscription that I have sought to decipher, if it is thought with regard to the depth structure of the questions legible within its frame, the itinerary of Du Bois's discourse tracks a rift that opens within any philosophical premise on the question of essence. All cannot be thought at one go, in one gesture; one can never be certain, or sure, of a final move. This condition or difficulty of thought, here, in this domain, points toward, or leads one in a descension toward, a general question of the possibility and ground of being: first, of something like a "Negro"; but then, also, of something like a "human," and all the borders that seem to appear under that heading (of the "animal," for example, or of sexual difference or even of "gender"), and, perhaps beyond, to the question of a certain exorbitance that is announced on the order of being. Such is the manner according to which an apparently quite parochial question can lead one in the direction of a desedimentation of a generalized and radicalized question of existence or possibility and difference and sameness. Set in motion by way of a form of historical problematization of existence in which an ontological question announces itself at the heart of the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought, a certain sliding and shifting of metaphysical bedrock can be registered. Critical discourse or practice, such as that of Du Bois or that of antecedent Africanist figures, inhabits this lability, is possible only by way of it, and can maintain itself, if at all, only by moving along these borders or ridges or fault lines. The sedimentation configuring what remains of such passage can be traced and disturbed by a practice that follows these fault lines, these fractures, within existence and historical being. And, this lability is not and cannot be contained within the border, or frame, in which it was announced. Thinking this situation, Du Bois's, of the Negro as a problem for thought, delimits his discourse and the question of the Negro in general.

If by way of a certain labor of thought, then, we fold Du Bois's discourse back across the textuality of this configuration of thinkers from the turn to

the previous century, it produces a series of shuddering, decryptic, effects. It makes it possible to gather each of the principal interventions of those thinkers, accede to the radicality of their thought, to think with them to the limit (a certain infinitization) with regard to science and knowledge, and then ask another question: what, after all, are humans, *if there is such*, as “Negro” or “Negro American?” This small question, by way of its double and reciprocal interrogation, of the “human” (or “Man”) or of the “Negro,” which Du Bois poses, for example, in the afterword to *The Philadelphia Negro*, re-inaugurates thought (that is, thought in general, as exemplified in this configuration of thinkers) in or as this domain of the Negro as a problem for thought. For, the thought of “the dream-work,” of “intentional structure,” of “signification,” of “social fact,” of the problem of “motivation,” or of webs of “meaning,” all confront the paradoxes that arise in this domain wherein origin and telos, habitus and being, are in ceaseless and irremedial withdrawal. All such forms of knowledge, even as a transcendental exploration, when they must address the question of the Negro, are distended by way of an infrastructural movement in which being as existence, and telos as origin, cannot be brought to a punctuality. That something like a Negro or African American, or African Diasporic subject, cannot and should not be the final object of a project of science or knowledge, guaranteeing such a project by way of its givenness as an object, its coherence serving as the fundament of a science, is not an unwelcome limit. Rather, it is the very movement of freedom.

This confounding of all attempts to make of the problem of the Negro or African American a determinate field of science or secure object of any science directs us to rethink such efforts. And the necessity of this rethinking would hold a fortiori for any science in general in which something like the Negro as a problem would be at stake; that is to say, a certain exorbitance for thought announces itself. It directs us in two ways: (a) First, it directs us to reconsider the way in which the problems of thought, in particular as science or knowledge, are *historial* in their becoming and, as historicity, the scene of an ontological problematization of existence. Du Bois formulated the study of the Negro as “study of the Negro *problems*” (my emphasis). Such a rethinking might connect with a rethinking of the history of science or knowledge and a displacement of it in the direction of a history of thought, in which the latter would be the ways in which an irruption within the fabric of existence, or rather an agonistic irruption as existence, renders such being at issue. All that Du Bois places under the heading of the problem of the sense of being of the Negro, for example, under the heading of “double-consciousness” or “second-sight,” would find renewed pertinence there: now, not so much as the scene of a parochial interiority but as part of

a renewed thinking of the historicity of systems of subjectivation. But, not only as a heading for a thematized problem of inquiry, but also as a thematizing concept metaphor, making possible a question about the very possibility of our own inquiry, the thought of our time, that would seek to understand forms of problematization as such.<sup>57</sup> Likewise the problem of the color line as it is announced in Du Bois's thought might become not so much the determinate object of a science, such as the sociology of race relations or a history of racialized behaviors, but an historicizing conceptualization of the posing of a fundamental, even if historical, question of forms of existence in which hitherto unknown systems of sameness and difference emerged. It should go without saying that all of our critical projects would also be thematized by this concept metaphor, the "problem of the color-line." Thinking it might require inquiry to readdress some fundamental concepts by which historicity has been thought thus far, such as authority, power, and economy, and to question anew the conditions of thought; that is, not only the conditions of historical research by way of the critical investigation of disposition or memory or the informative or archive in general, but the conditions of thought in general. The problematic of the "problem of the color line" might well reveal itself as a paradoxically exemplary root, at once particular and general, determined and determining, of the transcendental illusions that reason sets afoot in the movements of its itinerary. Thinking such might well lead us to rethink the still contemporary horizon bequeathed to us as the advent of critical thought itself—that is, to think the historicity of the thought of the transcendental, to pose not simply the thought of a transcendental historicity but to elaborate a thought of the historicity of the transcendental as discourse and tradition. (b) Secondly, this situation directs us to that within this problematization that poses the ontological question at the root of knowledge of existence, at the root of knowledge of the social or historical. In this latter aspect, it directs us to that within the problem of the Negro which poses a question beyond historicity or sociality as given. As such, it poses the question of the possibility of something like historicity in general and opens toward a thinking on the border, or beyond, of truth as science or knowledge. This question would address, for example, what Du Bois so often placed under the heading of *ideals*, but not as a matter that is simply mundane or one that is a debate among positions, rather as a matter that is more along the lines of his thought about *chance* (in the context of knowledge, of truth or science, especially as logic) or *freedom* (in the context of ethics and morals, of human will, and this would be the most crucial problem for him).<sup>58</sup> It directs us to that generative sense of exorbitance as possibility. It could turn our attention from within this domain of the Negro as a problem for thought to that which is other than a relation of

knowledge, other than concept or category. Thinking this problematic, this situation, in a certain way, helps to resituate science and knowledge, as thought as such, by redirecting them or sending them again toward a reinhabitation of their instituting borders and, perhaps, a thinking beyond them.

I have proposed Du Bois's itinerary as exemplary in a paradoxically epistemically singular fashion of the paradoxes attendant to any thought that would inhabit the problem of essence as an explicit form of problematization, underscoring specifically the originary complications that mark every strategic gesture, that encode every decision of method or style. Thereby I have affirmed Du Bois's acceptance of the *question* of the Negro, in a certain way, and his irreverent inhabitation of it. And, I have suggested that by way of this paradoxical and ironic exemplarity perhaps entire strata within Du Bois's thought remain to be sifted or traced. While my ultimate concern is certainly not to simply reconstitute Du Bois as some final or ultimate paternal figure, it is still the case even in our own time that his features as a thinker, or an intellectual, and the rhythm and step of his practice remain poorly understood. This is in part due to the very discursive formation that he was so concerned to question. Thus, I have had in part to adduce and name in a different way the figure of Du Bois as a titular guide for thought, among other possible examples.<sup>59</sup> However, my deeper concern, proposed by way of this tracing or tracking, is to expose and disturb some of the en-crustated layers of presuppositions that restrict our recognition in the practice of thought of the possible places wherein new soil can be turned up on old ground. Disturbing the layers of sedimentation that hold the figure of Du Bois in his accustomed place in the history of thought might set loose new soil that can be used not only for preparing the way for a new thinking of the problem of the Negro but also for another kind of inhabitation of the problem of thought as such in our time, one that would be resolutely recognized as differential in both its origin and becoming.

### Delimitation

The aporias that arise at the movement of enunciation for Africanist figures (in truth, for anyone who would participate in the discourses of the Negro) are not simply historical. They arise at another level of existence. They should be understood as part of the conditions of existence, of thought, as such. Or they mark, perhaps, the unconditional conditions of the operations of thought. That is to say, thought is always an inhabitation of the problem of essence. But, specifically, in the situation of "the Negro" in the Americas, this problem as a self-reflexive question of identity or

identification (in all its dispersed forms), with all its paradoxes, is announced not only as the condition of thought but as its very object or theme. Thought, existence, is always already thematized as a problem for this figure; historical existence is always already this thematized problem of existence of being in thought. The difficulties that attend such inhabitation cannot be resolved by way of declaration any more than to ask a question about the possibility of question can avoid presupposing that very possibility in the asking. It is in this sense, of thought as inhabiting its own premises in such a way that it cannot simply leap outside of them to some other ground, that I have proposed the concept-metaphor *economy* to account for a problem or problematic for those who would think the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought.<sup>60</sup> In the formal sense, and unavoidably in our time, I have in mind those aspects of this concept-metaphor that draw on Greek conceptuality in which this term combines the sense of *nomos* (as rule or law) and *oikos* (of hearth, domesticity, of the circular or diurnal) to name a kind of ordering and systematicity. The systematic character of the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought is what I have tried to address with this formalization. In another sense, a sense that I will place under the heading of historical, I have in mind with my formalization of this term an ultimately inadequate analogy, catachresis if you will, of the kind of force or, better, violence, that is in play in the domain of this problem—the violence by which the historical conditions of the emergence of the Negro or African American as such make the very historical emergence of this entity the scene of an ontological question. The conditions of the historical emergence of this entity and the ontological question of possibility, as an unconditioned condition of thought, are folded one inside the other, each displacing the other, as conditional moments in the history of the Negro as a problem for thought. The remains of this historical genealogy of violence in the problem of the Negro show forth each time one would respond to such violence and seek to limit or overturn its bearing. In each gesture of practice as thought, in the historical field of the Negro or African American, or the African Diaspora, the ontological paradox of the problem of essence that arises carries within its bearing the lineaments of this historical violence. Thinking this question, then, means that one cannot move under the heading of innocence or neutrality. I have proposed, by way of the itinerary of W. E. B. Du Bois, that one must engage this situation by responding *simultaneously* to its premise and its conclusion: (a) one must respond to the unavoidable premise of essence by thinking beyond such, and (b) one must also think short of the conclusion that essence is not given by affirming the possibility of a difference, not just difference in principle, but *this difference, this one, here, now.* This possibility at stake in this present. This complicated situation is an economy, a system of the same, or

of difference, of origin or end. And yet one must think otherwise than its absolute givenness.

The discourse of antecedent Africanist figures in the discourses of the Negro, for example, heterogeneous and multiple, both within each enunciation and across the whole taken as an ensemble, can yet be understood as announcing and elaborating this situation or problem for thought (of *habitus*, of the historically given in every sense and of *eidos*, of project, of futural possibility, in every sense). Thus, their work should not so much be understood first or ultimately as the hypostatization of some final or fully given entity. One thinks, for example of the question as it comes from Phillis Wheatley's marvelous pen: "That from a father seiz'd his babe below'd: / Such, such my case. And can I then but pray / Others may never feel tyrannic sway?"<sup>61</sup> Or, one thinks of Sojourner Truth's question to Frederick Douglass within the century following Wheatley's: "Frederick, is God dead?"<sup>62</sup> The discourse incipits here by way of that *long* middle passage, a passage that is historical but in such a way that it can never resolve itself as such, not only for the Negro or African American, but taken as the orientation to a problem, for a common historicity and thereby for thought as such. This discourse, of antecedent figures, such as Walker or Stewart, for example, in the heart of the antebellum period, elaborates a dispersion of markings, an ensemble of traces, that can be understood as a certain tracking of the irruption of the problematization of existence that is the very historicity of all that we might call our own—the "our" here exceeding all the borders or boundaries that we might wish to draw, and the "own" here as confounded by the opening of this question. Thus, Du Bois can say in the "Forethought" of *The Souls of Black Folk*, when writing of ". . . the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century," that "this meaning is not without interest to you Gentle Reader. . . ." We see here this double gesture that moves according to a certain necessity, a simultaneous configuration (or gathering) and delimitation of an Africanist problematic, which by way of this double inhabitation or inhabitation of the double moves from and remarks, or makes possible a remarking, of a certain exorbitance.

To think this "strange" situation certainly requires thinking its incipit according to a kind of nominalism ("fate" as instituting rather than determining) and a thinking of its devolution by way of the tracking of its immanence.

The study of the Negro or African American, or the African Diaspora, must begin with the problems announced for thought within its own historicity. This would be the fundamental epistemological bearing of Du Bois's felicitous definition of the field of African American studies as the

“study of the Negro problems,” as in the title of his 1897 programmatic essay. That is, it cannot and should not presuppose the object of its concern, the object given to it, as a simple transcendental entity, whether hypostatized as an object of a discipline of knowledge (such as society or culture) or as a discrete social entity (such as a racial or ethnic or cultural group or a “national identity” or some derivative thereof).<sup>63</sup> Rather than attempt to name the African American as acceding to some status of the pure, “something like” a “racial” group or a “cultural” group or an “ethnic” group or a stable sub-“national” identity, it demands that we rethink the premises of all concepts of historicity and sociality by which such entities are demarcated. Relation must be thought under the (non)heading of passage, “between,” the agonistic movement of the *apeiron*. Further, rather than attempt to name African Americans as relatively unperturbed or undetermined by the great systems of modernity (and the impulse here remains strong to defend those understood as African American from the great denigrations of social science as pathological figures, and in a certain sense this practice cannot and should not be voided),<sup>64</sup> this situation requires that we rethink the idea of system such that structurality appears under the heading of dissemination. This must be a thought of the nonlinear concatenation of the movements of force. That is, we must rethink problems of power and authority anew. At that juncture, then, we can begin to reinscribe the devolution of system under the figure of the so-called minor term, “Negro” for example, as a kind of hyperbolic proposition.<sup>65</sup> Along this track, for instance, Du Bois’s elaboration of the colloquial term of the “color line” can be understood as a kind of theoretical practice, whether or not it is named as such by him. Reinscribing his thought in such a manner might make it possible to resituate the way we narrate the history of capital or the devolution of modern systems of authority. Accordingly, this reinscription might radicalize the thought that not only is system only possible in and through its limit, but the limit, the outside, would appear within system. To think the possibility of system would require, in a certain way, that one think both sides of the limit as other than the hypostatization of a possible present, otherwise than as “structure” or “idea” susceptible to figuration as a future present, other than a logic of the pure analogy. Something like the figure of the double in the situation of the African American would or could maintain another kind of attention, if not something wholly new, in thinking of the problem of relation, system, totality, structure, or idea. System, for example, might be understood to find its pertinence (which may also be a nonpertinence) only at the level of subject and subjectivation in and through the movement of dispersal and dissemination (in which spacing or another temporality sets afoot something otherwise and perhaps new) that is at stake in

something like a Negro or African American as the heading of a general problem.

This exploration has also necessarily formulated a problem of strategy, of practice, of methodology in general. I have summarized it under the heading of *double gesture* and, in the explicitly theoretical sense, of the *redoubled gesture*. In the first instance, I mean the thematizing of the figure of the double at the root of the problem of the Negro American; that is, the necessity to both mark or name a difference while simultaneously inhabiting the necessity of elaborating an understanding of this difference as otherwise than pure or simple. In this sense, Du Bois's naming of the African American as a figure of double identification, "an American," "a Negro," neither of which one disavows, both of which one maintains, in a certain way, can be understood (to the extent that it is never simply or only double, if the double could ever mean that) to name the heterogeneous gathering that attends any formation or postulation of identity or figure of sameness. Du Bois's formulation would be an example of the double gesture. In the second instance, such a thematizing act would recognize the necessity of the African American *both to be and not to be*. One thinks of the preacher in the prologue to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "Now black is . . . I said black is . . . an' black ain't. . . ."66 However, the pivotal aspect is that one then inhabits this recognition as a theoretical practice. Such practice can take its measure, if at all, only as part of a grouped or ensemblic textual field or scene of discourse dispersed across numerous strata. It would be the work of a kind of elaboration. This latter kind of gesture or practice, a theoretical path, can only come on the scene late, always too late, after a decision will have already been made. Or, it will always be too soon, before the arrival of a another horizon of freedom, in which the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought is no more one.

In practice, this would require a certain tactical nominalism. And, although this formulation necessarily crosses the threshold of judgment from practice to critical reflexivity, it should not simply be lifted out of the specific labor of this essay, or any discourse such as this one, and deposited into a realm of pure speculative anticipation or deduction. It should not be simply appropriated to a theoretical disposition or vocative position that one might hypothesize as pure or situated at the level of a transcendental or of science in the broad sense of thought in general. One must begin from where one is situated. One cannot, in fact, be commensurate with one's protocols, either at the inception of one's gesture or in the realization of an intervention. This circumstance, however, does not lessen the claim of a certain unlimited responsibility in the face of the unbearable demands that it poses for thought and practice. One cannot *simply* choose, even if one *must* choose, make a

decision. The problems given to thought, of being as a problem for thought, maintain within the movement of their formation and devolution a freedom that would exceed all decision or action or judgment, as such. Yet, one cannot not choose. Practice then is a certain inhabitation of necessity in the space or spacing given of freedom. For, in the interval, the space or spacing that opens between tactic and end, arises the possibility of something other than what has been, something other than the simple repetition of the past in the future. It would be in such an interval that the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought becomes something other than simply or only the problem of the Negro, if there is such.

The Negro or African American as a problem for thought is both *from* an exorbitance, otherwise than according to the classical determinations of metaphysics, and *about* an exorbitance, as a problem within metaphysics as it tries to situate the Negro as within knowledge, according to philosophy as science. In this way or along this track, we see the *general* pertinence, certainly for all that we call “America,” or that which has been called “Europe,” and for what has been called the modern epoch, or modernity, or its aftermath (including the historicities that have been called the stages of the history of capital), of a consideration of the problematization of existence that opened the scene and space of the work of antecedent Africanist thinkers in the discourses of the Negro. The African, the Negro, or African American, or the African Diaspora in general, the Africanist figure in the Americas, as a problem for thought is *of* exorbitance.

—Tama University (Tokyo, Japan) and  
University of California, Berkeley

## NOTES

An early, much shorter, version of this essay was presented at the conference “The Academy and Race: Toward a Philosophy of Political Action,” sponsored jointly by the Department of Philosophy and the Department of Africana Studies at Villanova University, Philadelphia, 8–10 March 1996, and subsequently published (Nahum D. Chandler, “The Economy of Desedimentation: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Discourses of the Negro,” *Callaloo* 19, no. 1 [1996]: 78–93). That important conference was organized by Kevin Thomas Miles, who remains for me a principal interlocutor on these matters. Several diverse configurations of thought, position, and intellectual generation were gathered for the first time at that conference, and the impact of the interlocutions inaugurated there remain widely distributed, even if not always explicitly so, across the disciplines of philosophy, literature (comparative, as well as English), and the social sciences in the United States. It thus remains a signal moment for my own intellectual generation. See note 58 for further references on this matter. I also thank Mae G. Henderson and Julie Elizabeth Byrne for conversations related to the development of the earlier version of this essay. The second half of the essay was initially

brought to full formulation during my year as a member of the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey. While there, I was supported by fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and from the Ford Foundation, for which I remain grateful, and received the support of the faculty, staff, and other members of the School of Social Science during the 1998–99 academic year. I thank especially the faculty of the School, Professors Joan Scott, Michael Walzer, Albert O. Hirschman, along with the late Clifford Geertz, for their intellectual generosity and hospitality during that time. Above all, the interlocution of Professors Charles Sheperdson, Thomas Flynn, Nancy Hirschman, and Kamran Ali, for which I am deeply thankful, often led me to think further on these matters than I had yet thought possible.

1. I acknowledge here the customary generosity of the late Jacques Derrida. During the spring of 1996, upon receiving a copy of the much shorter published version of an earlier form of this essay (which has now been enfolded into the present one), he telephoned across the Atlantic to offer his thanks and express simple and kind words of appreciation. As his death occurred during the time of the revision and elaboration of that earlier text into the present one (including the work of restoring original sections that were not previously published but that pertain in particular to its philosophical provenance), and since the theoretical gesture announced in the essay at hand proposes, among other things, an interlocution and, thus, to the extent that his example as an interlocutor in contemporary *philosophical* thought remains unsurpassed for me, I place this double affirmation, a certain form of appreciation, at the head of this essay. This dedication is then a simple acknowledgment, among others perhaps yet to come, for an example and a friend from afar whose departure remains both so old and yet still so new.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, interviewers Henri Ronse et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41–42 (emphasis in the original). Certainly one must look at the whole summary development of the thought of *différance* that Derrida offers in the paragraphs extended before and after the quotation placed here as an epigraph. For example, preceding the passage quoted, Derrida introduces the problematic:

What interested me then, that I am attempting to pursue along other lines now, was, at the same time as a “general economy,” a kind of *general strategy of deconstruction*. The latter is to avoid both simply *neutralizing* the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply *residing* within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it. We must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself divided, a redoubled writing [*une écriture dédoublée*], that is, a writing that is in and of itself multiple, what I called in “The Double Session” a *double science* [*une double science*]: on the one hand, traversing a phase of *overturning* [*renversement*]. I insist much and without ceasing on the necessity of this phase of overturning [*renversement*], which one perhaps too quickly attempts to discredit. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a *classical philosophical opposition* . . . That being said—and on the other hand—to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system.

This entire summary development schematizes what Derrida here calls “a kind of *general strategy of deconstruction*” in the inhabitation of metaphysics. He offers a more elaborate and complicated formulation of such a “general strategy,” *which is not a method* as such, in “Hors Livre: Outwork, Hors d’oeuvre, Extratext, Foreplay, Bookend, Facing, Prefacing,” in *Dissemination* (trans. Barbara Johnson [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], 3–59), and in a key footnote in the passage from *Positions* just quoted, he refers to an ensemble of his principal essays from 1967 to 1969 that elaborate the developments

summarized here, especially the thought of a “general economy.” The strategies of a practice inhabiting the movement of deconstruction would attempt to produce in a certain way a discourse operating simultaneously in multiple dimensions. Derrida and others have sometimes outlined this as a twofold movement. Here, I will remark it as fourfold. It is (1) a methodical “solicitation.” In his essay “Force and Signification,” Derrida used this term in its Latinate sense to suggest a radical questioning of the whole, a critical interpretive engagement that is more than simply either a critique or an interpretation. In terms of a philosophical hierarchy, this gesture would question the “ground” upon which the dominant term is given its authority:

One perceives structure in the instance of *menace*, at the moment when imminent danger concentrates our vision on the keystone of an institution, the stone which encapsulates both the possibility and the fragility of its existence. Structure then can be *methodically* threatened [*menacer*] in order to be comprehended more clearly and to reveal not only its supports but also that secret place in which it is neither construction nor ruin but lability [*n'est ni érection ni ruine mais labilité*]. This operation is called (from the Latin) *soliciting* [*soucier ou solliciter*]. In other words, *shaking* in a way related to the *whole* [*ébranler d'un ébranlement qui a rapport au tout*] (from *sollus*, in archaic Latin “the whole,” and from *citare*, “to put in motion”). (Jacques Derrida, “Force and Signification,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 3–30, quotation at 6 [emphasis in the original])

Following Martin Heidegger, in Derrida’s formulation at the mid-1960s, the most powerful institution of this ground was the determination of being as presence, most systematically elaborated in the tradition of Greek metaphysics, especially as inherited in European discourses. It is this “whole” that must be shaken. It is also (2) a process of “overturning” the systematic and axiological conceptual hierarchies of metaphysics (philosophy). One could say that the emperor must be shown to have no clothes. This would entail an elaboration of the devolution of the classical figure of the sovereign. It takes the disassembling of the presupposition of the simple unity of being as an opening, a *spacing* if you will, by which to locate the determinations of metaphysics as determined aspects of a more general question. Derrida considers this overturning absolutely necessary. The attempt to simply remark the instability of being as ground or essence in the domain of the subordinate, or the work that one does to prepare such an elaboration, if not accompanied by a simultaneous elaboration of the distantiating of the hegemon, can function principally to resituate tradition, or the given, as hegemon or authority. This is the locus of considerable ambivalence and limit in contemporary critical thought. The opening stage of this essay proposes this necessity on its own terms. What takes place or can take place in the movement of deconstruction or a strategy of deconstruction would also undertake or involve (3) a systematic “reinscription” (sometimes referred to by the phrase “placing under erasure,” *sous rature*) of certain titular concepts that work according to the exigencies of the metaphysics of presence. That is to say, the practice of a certain kind of *paleonomy*, inhabitation of old thought in a new way, is necessary. Even if one cannot simply leap beyond certain premises of thought, not all inhabitation of such a limit is the same. The necessary nominalism here is not a simple empiricism. Rather, it is the very scene of engagement, theoretical and political, which one cannot simply choose by a philosophical—that is, scientific—anticipation. Thus, finally, a certain movement of deconstruction would also (4) mark or remark that “interval” between all the “moments” of deconstruction marked in those three ways (“solicitation,” “overturning,” “reinscription”) and the “irruptive emergence” of a “new thought,” a new way of thinking, of a new “concept” or an “aconceptual concept.” This new “thinking” would acknowledge its

- dependence on metaphysics but would radically challenge metaphysics itself (displacing the recuperative operation of metaphysics, such as it functions in the Hegelian system of the *Aufhebung*). For example, see the entire 1971 interview cited above.
3. On the question of problematizations, of problems for thought, and of problematics, especially with regard to the question of “the problem of the Negro,” please see my considerations on this matter in the volume from which this essay is excerpted (Nahum D. Chandler, “The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought,” unpublished manuscript).
  4. To take only a few examples from the early wave, see Kwame Anthony Appiah’s “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 21–37, which was slightly revised and reprinted as “Illusions of Race,” in *In My Father’s House: Africa and the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 28–46, 173–80; Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Conservation of ‘Race,’” *Black American Literature Forum* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 37–60; Adolph L. Reed, “The ‘Black Revolution’ and the Reconstitution of Domination,” in *Race, Politics, and Culture: Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960s*, ed. Adolph L. Reed, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 61–95; Adolph L. Reed, “Du Bois’s ‘Double Consciousness’: Race and Gender in Progressive Era American Thought,” *Studies in American Political Thought* 6 (Spring 1992): 93–139, subsequently included as chapter 7 in his book *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 93–126; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 111–45; and Kenneth Warren, “Appeals for (Mis)recognition: Theorizing the Diaspora,” in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, New Americanists (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 392–406.
  5. Martin Heidegger, for example, formulates the necessity of what he calls the precomprehension of being in language in the opening sections of *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), and in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, Yale Nota Bene (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000). Jacques Derrida elaborates this problematic in the structure of Georges Bataille’s relationship to the discourse of G. W. F. Hegel in “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve” and of Emmanuel Levinas’s relation to Heidegger, Husserl, and Hegel in “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference* (see note 2) (251–77, 79–153), and returns to it throughout his itinerary, even or especially in the last years, for example, in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), both essays of which were written during the summer of 2002. Gayatri C. Spivak has succinctly stated the politics of such a limit in thought:

[I]t is not possible, within discourse, to escape essentializing somewhere. The moment of essentialism or essentialization is irreducible. In deconstructive ethical practice, you have to be aware that you are going to essentialize anyway. So then strategically you can look at essentialism, not as descriptions of the way things are, but as something one must adapt to produce a critique of anything. (See the Gayatri Spivak, “Interview with Gayatri Spivak,” by Walter Adamson, in *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, William Olander, Marcia Tucker, and Karin Fiss, Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art, vol. 3 [New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art/MIT Press, 1990], 105–12, quotation at 106.)

In the move to gather oneself to question the logic of essence, one finds that one has already presupposed essence. This genealogy of an unconditional condition that is a complication for thought is perhaps announced in this form in European discourses in what Immanuel Kant formulated as a necessary transcendental illusion that reason produces by way of its speculative “interests” in his elaboration of a transcendental dialectic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Yet, I have resisted here such nominalizations as transcendental, ontological, grammatical, etc., for the sake of the rhetorical force of the claim of the radical in this context alone.

6. For the North American context, see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1580–1812* (New York: Norton, 1977).
7. For example, see the closing chapter of Appiah’s *In My Father’s House* (173–80). There he is compelled to affirm *by way of* Du Bois the possibility of a “non-racialist pan-Africanism.” It is a position for Appiah that should have led to a deep hesitation in the stringent and headline denigration of the positions of Du Bois that is proposed at length in the opening of the book. It is thus only a surprise of circumstances to this practitioner that in its eventuality Appiah has now been led some two decades later to praise Du Bois as perhaps an exemplary “rooted cosmopolitan.” Moreover, one reflects with caution on certain aspects of Manthia Diawara’s thoughtful call during the early 1990s for a new discourse on “a black good life society,” a call that has been well heeded over the past decade and a half in the exponential projection of a “black cultural studies” in the North American context. On the one hand, I would doubly affirm, along with Diawara’s initial statement, the necessity of the critique of essentialism, while also underlining his reclamation of the 1980s critique by the London-based cultural studies practitioners of the perhaps too easy displacement of the question of a Black identity in the Birmingham configuration of the 1970s, and acknowledge, thus, for example, Paul Gilroy’s marvelous *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, Black Literature and Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). On the other hand, it seemed almost as if for Diawara that in terms of popular culture, at least, the revolution had arrived. In this, his position maintained a certain neutralism about which I hesitate (cf. Diawara, “Cultural Studies/Black Studies,” in *Borders, Boundaries, and Frames: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies*, ed. Mae Henderson, Essays from the English Institute [New York: Routledge, 1995], 202–11). What Diawara there called “oppression studies” had already called from its inception for a study of “performance,” of the creativity of Blacks and the originality of their vision of the world, precisely under conditions of oppression. W. E. B. Du Bois, in *The Philadelphia Negro*, prepared from the autumn of 1896 through early 1899, consistently affirmed this dimension of African American practice even as he documented the oppressive conditions of their situation and the negative effects on their habitations at that time. And then, in his pioneering and foundational essay from 1897, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” he made the study of the *existential* (or *experiential*) order of African American life, one of the two epistemological frames under which African Americans should be studied (the other frame might be described as general *historical or systemic* order) (cf. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, in *The Complete Published Works of W. E. B. Du Bois* [Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1973]; and Du Bois, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” in *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others, Vol. 1: 1891–1909*, in *The Complete Published Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois*, comp. and ed. Herbert Aptheker [Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1982], 40–52; or Du Bois, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11, no. 1 [January 1898]: 1–23, hereafter cited in text as TSNP. See further discussion of this essay below). I trace the originality of this vision in “The Philadelphia Negro Project: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Program for a Study of the African American in the United States,”

- unpublished manuscript; and note Werner J. Lange's "W. E. B. Du Bois and the First Scientific Study of Afro-America," *Phylon* 44, no. 2 (June 1983): 135–46.
8. See related formulations from Jacques Derrida quoted in the epigraph to this essay and cited in note 1 and also consider Gayatri C. Spivak, "In a Word," *Differences* 1 (Summer 1989): 124–56.
  9. From an ongoing conversation on the history of modern philosophy, April 1993 and February 1995; the emphasis was given in his formulation.
  10. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 21–50. While Foucault of the late 1960s and early 1970s might have insisted upon the nonpresent materiality of a discursive formation, he resolutely sought the movements of irruption and freedom even at that juncture in his itinerary, and certainly thematized this question in his later work. My thought is that the levels of the "archaeological" and what we might call the epistemological (which arrives on the scene as the domain of contestatory claims) in the terms that he elaborates in this text are not so easily rendered even analytically distinct in the case of the discourses of the Negro. To enunciate at all, to gather oneself into the position of one who could speak, perhaps we might say at zero-degree enunciation, sets shimmers afoot along the fault lines of this discourse, even as the forces in play could promulgate a domination that would have to devolve and could not be divested in any immediate sense. We wonder here, perhaps, about a Phillis Wheatley as in her remarkable poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," in *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. John C. Shields, Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 18.
  11. I would even insist that it must still name in our time the character of an originary "spiritual world" in the domain of the Negro as a problem for thought (see W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* [Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903]). Or we might also cite Eugen Fink when he clarifies the import of his mentor Edmund Husserl's project as recognizing and elucidating that every consciousness proposes a "transcendental" and not just empirical "origin of the world," in "Husserl's Philosophy and Contemporary Criticism" (in *The Phenomenology of Husserl*, ed. R. O. Elveton [Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970], 73–147). And, on one side, it would miss the boat to reject the radicalness of this "worldhood" under the heading of a commitment to the empirical or the material, for it is the very organization or bearing of the empirical that is at stake in the "worldhood" in question. Further, on the other side, the thought of "spirit" and the "spiritual" in Du Bois, as in his formulation "of our spiritual strivings," should not be too simply or readily understood as an already accomplished fact. While the enigmatic status of the major and decisive theme of "spirit" in Du Bois's discourse can only be named as a heading here, awaiting further elaboration elsewhere, it can be recognized that for him it is not a question of the Negro as the ultimate or final exemplar of the becoming of "spirit" in either the Hegelian or Heideggerian senses. On the latter, see Jacques Derrida's *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); perhaps especially apposite and on point here are sections 5 and 6.
  12. One thinks here of Cecil Taylor's practice and his critical meditation on something that can be only circumstantially placed under the heading of an old Greek name, *anacrusis* ("Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture," in *Unit Structures*, liner notes, Bluenote Records, CDP 7842372, 1966). And, of course, here, perhaps inhabited in a certain relation to Thelonious Monk, it acquires a radically other construal than that given in the hegemonic traditions.
  13. Building on the work of others, including the interpretive work of both Ronald A. T. Judy, *(Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular*

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), but also the bibliographic and scholarly contributions of Robert Bernasconi in “Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race” (in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, Blackwell Readings in Continental Philosophy [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001], 11–36), I would propose Immanuel Kant as the singular exception during the eighteenth century with regard to systematicity, the concept of race, and the question of the Negro as a problem for thought. Yet, my approach, proceeding by way of Du Bois and so forth, moves according to a different bias than those previous figures. In this regard, in a general sense, I propose that due to the relation of the architectonic character of his conception of reason to the projection of philosophy and science, in particular philosophy as science, especially the status of teleology therein, and the transformative impact of this conception for post-Enlightenment thought, including thought in our contemporary scene, this singularity of Kant is other than simply an exception.

14. For example, see David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 446–82; and Jordan, *White Over Black*, 269–311. Although privileging the Caribbean and South America in their formulations, Roger Abrahams and John Szwed have proposed a broad outline of different phases of writing on the African Diaspora in the Americas from the 1600s through the 1960s. Following their schema and adumbrating it somewhat, we can mark out three different formations of a discourse concerning the Negro in the Americas from the middle decades of the sixteenth century through the end of the nineteenth. From the latter part of the sixteenth century through the early eighteenth, we can outline a discourse dominated by travelers’ accounts and slavers’ journals. The central question that strikes one from these accounts is whether slaves were human and, hence, whether their enslavement was justifiable. From the early eighteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth, a missionary and abolitionist discourse (often these were the same persons) developed that was principally concerned with the question of converting the slaves to Christianity. A corollary question concerning the possible social effects of emancipation also developed. Would the slaves remain in the New World or go somewhere else? Whereas the slavers’ and many travelers’ journals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reflect a doubt as to whether slaves could be “civilized” or changed to accord with supposed “European” behavior, the eighteenth-century discourse often maintained that slaves were not savage, but rather should be considered as infantile or childlike and, hence, capable of being taught. From the early years of the nineteenth century through its last years and into the early twentieth century, a variegated discourse developed. Abrahams and Szwed outline two discourses: that of ex-slaveholders and their children, committed to the idea that Negro slaves needed white tutelage, and that of a “native” middle class, which attempted to agree with some elements of the ex-slaveholders’ discourse but also sought to claim “creative accomplishments” by Negroes. The principal discursive positions in this debate were a range of degenerationist (or retrogressionist) arguments, on the one hand, and arguments for the recognition of Negro capacity, on the other. See Roger D. Abrahams and John F. Szwed, introduction to *Discovering Afro-America*, ed. Roger D. Abrahams and John F. Szwed, *International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1975), 2–3; and their volume for a selection from these discourses: *After Africa: Extracts from British Travel Accounts and Journals of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries concerning the Slaves, Their Manners, and Customs in the British West Indies*, ed. Roger D. Abrahams and John F. Szwed (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).
15. A generation ago, Henry Louis Gates Jr. proposed the argument that the eighteenth-century African American response to this discourse was to demonstrate proof of their

mental ability or capacity and hence their humanity through developing literacy, especially by way of the skill of writing (*Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1987]). However, the question of ability or capacity should be ultimately understood as determined on the basis of metaphysical commitments—that is, speculative premises—rooted in the presupposition of a teleological basis for a final adjudication of the question.

16. Aristotle formulates this principle perhaps most fully at 1005b11–34 of his *Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, IA: Peripatetic Press, 1966):

So that he who is to have such knowledge of being qua being . . . must be able to state the most certain of principles of all things. This is the philosopher, and the most certain principle of all is that about which it is impossible to think falsely; for such a principle must be known (for all men may be mistaken about things which they do not know) and be also non-hypothetical. For a principle which one must have if he is to understand anything is not an hypothesis; and that which one must know if he is to know anything must be in his possession for every occasion. Clearly, then, such a principle is the most certain of all; and what this principle is we proceed to state. It is: "The same thing cannot at the same time both belong and not belong to the same object and in the same respect"; and all other specifications that might be made, let them be added to meet logical objections. Indeed, this is the most certain of all principles; for it has the specification stated above. For it is impossible for anyone to believe the same thing to be and not to be, as some think Heraclitus says; for one does not necessarily believe what he says. If, then, contraries cannot at the same time belong to the same subject (and let the usual specifications be added also to this premise), and if the contrary of an opinion is the negation of that opinion, it is evident that the same person cannot at the same time believe the same object to be and not to be; for in being mistaken concerning this he would have contrary opinions. It is because of this that all those who carry out demonstrations make reference to this as an ultimate doctrine. This is by nature a principle also of all the other axioms. (58–59)

One should also note what is said of "being and unity" at 1003b20–1004a9 of the *Metaphysics*. While one can elaborate a thought of the limit as the unnameable itself, here I wish to recognize the pertinence of the principle that Aristotle formulates as formalizing a telic structure that would inhabit all practices of racial distinction at their limit, in the putative fullness of their realization, no matter their partiality in fact.

17. See Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feelings of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), the appendix to the discussion of transcendental reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and his 1788 essay formulation of the problem of teleology (Kant, *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy* [1788], trans. Jon Mark Mikkelsen, in *Race* [see note 13], 37–56; and Kant, "Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Prinzipien in der Philosophie," in *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Naturphilosophie: Texte und Kommentar*, vol. 1, ed. Manfred Frank and Veronique Zanetti, Suhrkamp Tassenbüch Wissenschaft [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001], 381–414). On the concept of teleology and the concept of race, see Judy, *(Dis)forming the American Canon* (105–55), and Robert Bernasconi, "Who Invented."
18. See the remarks in the appendix to G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet, Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975),

- 152–209. Hegel concludes his discussion of Africa in the section on “The Natural Context or the Geographical Basis of World History” with this statement: “What we understand as Africa proper is that unhistorical and undeveloped land which is still enmeshed in the natural spirit, and which had to be mentioned here before we cross the threshold of world history itself” (190). Jeremy Pope exposes a fundamental ambivalence in Hegel’s actual enunciation, an ambivalence that points to the contradictions of a teleological thought that must simultaneously proclaim and disavow its outside, especially as beginning (“*Ägypten und Aufhebung*”: G. W. F. Hegel, W. E. B. Du Bois, and the African Orient,” in “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Question of Another World,” ed. Nahum D. Chandler, special issue, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 3 [Winter 2006]: 149–92). Along this latter track specifically, Hans Saussy’s formulations of Hegel’s account of China would also be pertinent (*The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993]).
19. See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, Library of America 17 (New York: Library of America, 1984), esp. 182–88, 260–70, 288–89, hereafter cited in text as *Writings*; but also see a widely cited earlier edition of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Harwood Peden (New York: Norton, 1972), 58–63, 134–43, 162–63. I will take up this text presently. And, I leave aside here any elaboration of this problematic with regard to two other key passages of thought: the removal of the question of slavery from the American Declaration of Independence and the infamous three-fifths clause of Article 1, Section 2, of the United States Constitution (Joyce Oldham Appleby and Terence Ball, eds., *Thomas Jefferson: Political Writings*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 96–105]).
  20. Even though the profound philosophical organization of the discourses that he follows seems at best on the periphery of his concerns, see the early work of George M. Fredrickson (for example, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* [Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987]).
  21. While it is the case that at this *specific* juncture in the approach that I am outlining, I move along the same trajectory as that proposed and demonstrated by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), and thus it should be clear that her project is one that I profoundly affirm—that is, her tracking of the effects of figures of “Blackness” within texts by “White” writers—in the larger horizon of the approach I am suggesting, I would situate a gesture such as this one as only one moment and in no way a titular one. Indeed, if a titular heading is assumed at all, and there are still principled epistemological and political reasons for assuming one, then such a heading must be the originally complicated movements of the formation of the Negro American, or an African Diasporic figure, as a differential production within the historical situation of modernity and the Americas.
  22. Jordan, *White Over Black*, 429–81.
  23. See Cornel West, “A Genealogy of Modern Racism,” in *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 47–65; and Nahum D. Chandler, “Writing Absence: On Some Assumptions of Africanist Discourse in the West” (1988), unpublished manuscript.
  24. Note Jefferson’s comment in *Writings*:  
 But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted

than whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch. Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved. Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. —Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrus of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. . . . His [the eighteenth-century writer Ignatius Sancho's] imagination is wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste, and, in the course of its vagaries, leaves a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric, as is the course of a meteor through the sky. His subjects should often have led him to a process of sober reasoning; yet we find him always substituting sentiment for demonstration. Upon the whole, though we admit him to the first place among those of his own colour who have presented themselves to public judgment, yet when we compare him with the writers of the race among whom he lived, and particularly the epistolary class, in which he has taken his own stand, we are compelled to enroll him at the bottom of the column. This criticism supposes that the letters published under his name to be genuine, and to have received amendment at no other hand. . . . The improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites, has been observed by every one, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect of their condition of life. (266–67)

We should note that this final sentence carries a contradiction endemic to racist and proslavery discourses in the Americas. It simultaneously claims that Negro character is modifiable (in a social order), and as such has received any good character from a white source, while concluding that their inferior character is fixed or permanently established (in a natural order). One wonders about the relation of this passage to those of Kant of a similar nature from the *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime*. Whereas Kant denigrates what he thinks of as the American Indian in relation to his idea of the Negro slave, Jefferson defends his own idea of the North American Indian in relation to what he thinks of as “blacks” in the *Notes*. This specific scene of intersection has seemed so far unthinkable but now calls urgently for a patient unfolding and elaboration.

25. See Jordan, *White Over Black*, 455; and Peden, editor's note, in Jefferson, *Notes*, 286–88, fn. 6.
26. Historiographical research, and to a lesser extent ethnological research in general, have raced far ahead of philosophical research and fundamental critical thought in offering a contribution to a thinking of this question. For example, consider the organization of this problematic respectively in Edward S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975); Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938*, Johns Hopkins Studies in Atlantic History and Culture (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); and Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Yet, it seems that historiography and ethnology are wont to ask the question of the condition of possibility of the *relation* of slavery, except as a mundane and resolutely nontranscendental one. It remains necessary to move through and beyond, while remaining within, the

transcendental problematic, such that another thinking of immanence might occur. That is to say, the historical has this problem of the transcendental or its beyond already at stake in it, especially when the thematic problem is that of the condition and possibility of enslavement. However, it should be noted that this problem has the capacity to disturb most attempts to think the problem of sovereignty from a preoccupation with the established understandings of the inheritance of the Enlightenment, that is, from the standpoint of a putative sovereignty.

Even Michel Foucault—who, in his projects of the 1970s and in the years just preceding his untimely death, goes far in helping us to desediment this problematic (not to mention those who follow in his wake)—confronts paradoxes on this score in, for example, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 135–59; “The Subject and Power” (in particular the section titled “How Is Power Exercised?”), in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208–26; and Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003). These paradoxes no doubt can be situated with regard to his inhabitation of a problem posed in Greek thought in a certain way, and this way is a thought that understood itself as at stake only for free citizens, men and, not as such, slaves (and the status of women is at issue here, as well), even though they were most likely a substantial majority of the inhabitants of Athens of the fourth and fifth centuries BCE. I simply note the latter here, reserving this question for a further elaboration elsewhere (see Moses I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973], 63–93, cf. 79; Finley, “The Servile Statuses of Ancient Greece,” *Revue Internationale Des Droits de l’Antiquité*, 3rd series [1960]: 7; and Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*, W. B. Stanford Memorial Lectures [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 1–19). One wonders about the relation of the American South and ancient or classical Greece. This is the scene of a future inquiry. In addition, I note here and reserve for consideration in another context the question of a certain reconsideration of this question as it is developed in the section titled “Independence and Dependence of Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage” in the midst of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V. Miller, foreword by J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111–10.

27. For example, see Dana D. Nelson, *The Word in Black and White: Reading “Race” in American Literature, 1638–1867* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Paul Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 105–67.
28. “Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture” (*Writings*, 270; see also 264). Winthrop Jordan underlines this commitment of Jefferson’s:

Throughout his life Jefferson never deviated from his conviction that Negroes must be “removed” when freed, nor from the ground for that necessity. Six months before he died in 1826 he closed the matter with an octogenarian’s finality: “The plan of converting the blacks into Serfs would certainly be better than keeping them in their present condition, but I consider that of expatriation to the governments of the W.I. of their own colour as entirely practicable, and greatly preferable to the mixture of colour here. To this I have great aversion; but repeat my abandonment of the subject.” (*White Over Black*, 546–47)

One cannot but remark here the confirmed disavowal by Jefferson of his own progeny with his common-law wife, we might say, Sally Hemings, who was also his slave; see Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997); and John Chester Miller *The Wolf By the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991). Hortense Spillers's powerful formulation of such disavowal as introducing a root complication in the structures of identification for an African American subject position should be resolutely affirmed. And then, here in the context of the foregoing citation of Jefferson's voice, we can remark a double disavowal: of both his progeny *and* of the unavoidable complication of the movement of his own subjectivation by way of this relation. This points to the extension of this problematic into the domain of the constitution of paternity in every sense; that is, beyond any supposed parochialism of the bearing of either so-called sexual difference or so-called race difference. See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 203–29.

29. As quoted in note 16, a traditional formulation of such a difference is proposed in what has come to be called Aristotle's principle of noncontradiction, perhaps most fully offered at 1005b11–34 of his *Metaphysics*.
30. In this regard, perhaps Sidney Mintz's gesture in an introduction to a reissue of Melville J. Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1990), ix, in which he placed Jefferson's call for a "natural history" that would include the study of "black" and "red" men as an incipiting moment of an anthropological tradition in African American studies, would—if taken uncritically—put us on the wrong path.
31. The formulation in this sentence and the first sentence of the next paragraph has in mind the attempt by Michel Foucault in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (88–105) to elucidate by elaboration the enigmatic status of "*l'énoncé*" (which I will in this context translate as "utterance" or "legible mark," but which resists any stable elaboration by Foucault, not even to speak of a simple translation from one language or theoretical formulation to another). It has a special mode of existence, as Foucault formulates it, by which it is related to "laws of possibility, rules of existence for the objects named, designated, or described within it, and for the relations that are affirmed or denied in it." I am not concerned here to make absolute ontological claims about this mode of existence, as such; rather, I want to point toward the problem of specifying the movement of the irruption of being as thought. The movement of the presencing of thought. In this regard, what Foucault says specifically of a "referential" aspect of *l'énoncé* can be quoted at length as a way of proposing the order or status of the problem to be addressed here:

The referential of a statement [*l'énoncé*] forms the place, the condition, the field of emergence, the authority to differentiate between individuals or objects, states of things and relations that are brought into play by the statement [*l'énoncé*] itself; it defines the possibilities of appearance and delimitation of that which gives meaning to the sentence, a value as truth to the proposition. It is this group that characterizes the *enunciative* level of the formulation, in contrast to its grammatical and logical levels: through the relation with these various domains of possibility the statement makes of a syntagma, or a series of symbols, a sentence to which one may or may not ascribe a meaning, a proposition that may or may not be accorded a value as truth. (91–92; emphasis in the original)

Foucault then goes on to specify the relation of *l'énoncé* to "a subject" and to an "enunciative field," as well as to attempt to situate its "materiality"; that is, its possibilities for

“reinscription and transcription” and its “fields of use,” its “strategic potentialities” that “constitute for statements [*les énoncés*] a *field of stabilization* that makes it [repetition] possible” (103; emphasis in the original). The epistemological level of discourse and social practice would then appear only by way of the movements at stake in this “enunciative level” of generality in existence. It would be approached by way of a practice of inquiry that Foucault never ceased to affirm and that he called “archaeology.” And we may note here that the concept-metaphor of “archaeology” was most likely initially developed as a theoretical term for Foucault by way of his reading of Kant; the latter speaks of an archaeology of history in proposing a distinction between what he calls natural history and natural description, respectively, in his thought on nature and teleology, which in turn was deeply marked by the passage of thought recorded in his essays proposing a concept of race. On the latter, as an example, see Immanuel Kant “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy,” an essay that was first published in 1788. See note 17.

32. In “The Philadelphia Negro Project,” I elaborate the character and stakes of Du Bois’s epistemological contributions to thinking the question of the Negro, especially as formulated in his programmatic statement “The Study of the Negro Problems.”
33. I borrow and translate here a phrase formulated by Robin D. G. Kelley in another context. “Rebirths of African American Studies” was the title for a talk and discussion led by Kelley at Duke University in November 1994, as part of the W. E. B. Du Bois Lecture Series of its African and Afro-American Studies Program. Also, I reference Mae G. Henderson’s opening remarks at the session titled “The Politics of (Dis)Location: Black (Cultural) Studies in the Academy,” at the 36th Annual Convention of the Midwest Modern Language Association, 11–13 November 1994, in Chicago, a context in which some of the considerations of this essay were first presented.
34. These texts are cited from W. E. B. Du Bois’s “Conservation of Races,” pamphlet (American Negro Academy Occasional Papers 2, American Negro Academy, Washington, DC, 1897), 1–8, hereafter cited in text as CR; Du Bois, “Study of the Negro Problems”; Du Bois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *Atlantic Monthly: A Magazine of Literature, Science, Art, and Politics* 80, no. 478 (August 1897): 194–98; and Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*.
35. For example, see Wilhelm Dilthey, “The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Expressions of Life,” in *Descriptive Psychology and Historical Understanding*, trans. Richard M. Zaner and Kenneth L. Heiges (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 123–43; Georg Simmel, *Essays on Interpretation in Social Science*, ed. and trans. Guy Oakes (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980); Max Weber, “The Fundamental Concepts of Sociology,” in *Max Weber: The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons, trans. Alexander Morell Henderson (New York: Free Press, 1964), 87–157; Émile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, 8th ed., ed. George E. G. Catlin, trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller (New York: Free Press, 1964); and Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).
36. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, pars. 3–4.
37. See Thomas C. Holt’s thoughtful meditation on this theme in “The Political Uses of Alienation: W. E. B. Du Bois on Politics, Race, and Culture, 1903–1940,” *American Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (June 1990): 301–23.
38. By *historical*, I wish to affirm the thought of a kind of movement in the constitution of a sense of being that, even if it cannot and should not be hypostatized as an absolute or final example, brings into view the question of the sense of being by tracking worldly, or so-called mundane, problematics rather than simply the so-called or primarily transcendental

as such. This is certainly the practice that Du Bois exhibits throughout his work, but that is exemplified, for example, in the narrative “Of the Coming of John,” the penultimate chapter of *Souls*. However, in the main academic tradition, one can make several references: a certain thought of the transcendental in the work of Edmund Husserl, for example *Ideas I*; the elaboration of the “ontico-ontological” difference, as it is often remarked in the aftermath of Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*; the opening chapter of part 1 of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri C. Spivak [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976], 24) proposes a certain thought of the ultratranscendental, or the “trace.” All these references attempt to radicalize such a line of thought.

39. Frantz Fanon, some fifty years after Du Bois, will explicitly recognize this capacity. At the very beginning of the justly famous chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*, the chapter translated under the heading “The Fact of Blackness,” Fanon writes,

In the Weltanschauung of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation . . . the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has to place himself. . . . [As an example of one moment of this problematic, an experience of oneself as “body,” Fanon writes,] Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third person consciousness. (Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [New York: Grove, 1967], 109–10)

Yet, it is Ralph Ellison’s thought of ambivalence and the radical deployment and extension of it that one finds throughout the work of Hortense Spillers that might best underscore the pertinence of this problematic for contemporary discourses on the African American in the United States. See, among others, her essay “Neither/Nor . . .” in *Black, White, and in Color*. This matter is addressed in my essay “Between,” in *Assemblage: A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture* 20 (April 1993): 26–27.

40. Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro, from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Da Capo, 1997).
41. I attempt to account for the fullness and systematicity of this epistemological statement on its own terms and, in turn, to elaborate its contemporary bearing for research in this field, African American studies or African Diasporic studies, in my study, “The Philadelphia Negro Project.”
42. *The Philadelphia Negro* is Du Bois’s magnum opus in this mode.
43. *Souls of Black Folk* is Du Bois’s classic in this mode. It forms, as such, a companion to *The Philadelphia Negro*.
44. This can be specified on two levels: one internal to Du Bois’s own discourse; the other external to it and in terms of historiographical research generally. First, then, Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, in *The Complete Published Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois*, comp. and ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1976), from 1935, should be considered the full realization and exposure of this order of attention at the level of an accomplished historical narrative. Virtually every major thought advanced by Du Bois in this book had been announced in his earlier texts. Yet these ideas are produced in this context under the impress of a guiding problem of reflection: the status in historiographical discourse of the project of the reconstruction of American democracy that was ambivalently attempted and ultimately compromised following the Civil War and the abolition of legal slavery. This titular problem enables a simultaneous compression and elucidation of Du Bois’s principal ideas of historicity, especially with regard to something called America,

and an expansion of implication of the bearing of this example for thought in general. It is no anomaly then that this text has over the decades gradually emerged as Du Bois's single most accomplished statement of a re-vision of the world. Secondly, along another temporal track, we see those studies that document the impact on historiography, especially during the 1960s, of a vision such as that of Du Bois's, even if the scholars in question seem uncertain of his full *epistemological* importance in particular for situating the ensemble of questions gathered here in the broadest and most fundamental sense. For example, see David Brion Davis, "Slavery and the Post-World War II Historians," in *Slavery, Colonialism, and Racism*, ed. Sidney W. Mintz (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1974), 1–16; August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–1980*, Blacks in the New World (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 239–76; Peter H. Wood, "'I Did the Best I Could for My Day': The Study of Early Black History During the Second Reconstruction, 1960–1976," *William and Mary Quarterly*, series 3, 35 (April 1978): 185–225; and Eric Foner, "Reconstruction Revisited," *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 82–100.

45. I announce the results of only one aspect of a thinking through of "The Conservation of Races" here, as well as the other two essays ("Strivings of the Negro People" and "Study of the Negro Problems") named at the beginning of the discussion in this section of the essay. The full elaboration proper of a thinking with and through, a critical rethinking, of these essays and other texts by Du Bois that surrounds them is presented in my study "The Problem of Pure Being: Annotations on the Early Thought of W. E. B. Du Bois and the Discourses of the Negro," unpublished manuscript.
46. I am referring to the later work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Wilhelm Dilthey as preceding the group that I have in mind, which would be principally Edmund Husserl, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Franz Boas in their work that unfolded around the turn of the century. See Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Dilthey, "Understanding of Other Persons"; Weber, *Max Weber*; Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon, Discus, 1965); Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970); Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology: A Translation of Die Idee der Phänomenologie, Husserliana II*, trans. Lee Hardy (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic, 1999); Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. and comp. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, Albert Riedlinger, and Tullio De Mauro (Paris: Payot, 1986); and Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*. See also Franz Boas, *Race, Language and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), 639–47; George W. Stocking, ed., *A Franz Boas Reader: The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 57–77; George W. Stocking on Boas's contribution to an elaboration of a concept of culture between 1887 and 1911, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology, with a New Preface* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 133–233; Hans-George Gadamer for useful comments on this problem by way of a discussion of the work of Dilthey in "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 82–140; and H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890–1930* (New York: Vintage, 1977).
47. I refer here to the developments of the second chapter of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (27–73), in which the problematic is elaborated by way of a consideration of linguistics, especially the formulations of de Saussure.

48. This is a question that I explore in “‘The Occurrence of All These Arts of Life’: W. E. B. Du Bois and Franz Boas at Atlanta, Georgia, May 31, 1906” (1994), unpublished manuscript. See Franz Boas’s essays “The Outlook for the American Negro” and “Human Faculty as Determined by Race,” in *A Franz Boas Reader* (see note 46), 310–16, 221–70; Boas, *The Mind of the Primitive Man: A Course of Lectures Delivered Before the Lowell Institute, Boston, Mass., and the National University of Mexico, 1910–1911* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 253–72; and Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution*. It should be noted here that Boas delivered the commencement address for May 1906 at Atlanta University, where Du Bois was then a professor of sociology at the latter’s invitation and that the two men maintained a deep mutual respect until Boas’s death in 1942.
49. Several commonalities in this configuration should be remarked, even if only in brief. (1) In each case, including that of Du Bois, the decisive questions took their definitive shape in the work of each thinker from the mid-1890s through the first decade of the twentieth century. (2) In the work of each thinker, including that of Du Bois, a routine or given form of conceptualization encountered certain difficulties. These were difficulties of conceptualization or formulation, of methodological practice and of explanation. One should note here that the origin of these difficulties cannot be referred simply to the domain of knowledge, or the epistemological, as such. Rather, they entailed also, in no simple fashion, the whole horizon of thought and of existence, the transformation wrought in a global and long nineteenth century. Their announcement as thought is only one form or mode of their maintenance or being. These difficulties issued as a crisis in the practice of thinking, of thinking as a practice in the pursuit of knowledge, of thought as science. In each case, then, a given or routine form of problematization, of making something the site of a question, came into crisis. (3) In each case, with the exception of Du Bois, this shift in conceptualization was formative or central to a discipline of knowledge. The specific and complicated and overwrought history of the development of the *field* of African American studies from the years of the First World War through the reinaugurations of the field in the 1960s and 1970s and the relation of this development to the various *disciplines* of the human sciences in general, including here the humanities, in which the situation or problematic that I am outlining by way of the example of Du Bois would have its bearing, would explain in part this latter difference of Du Bois from this configuration. This “history” is yet to be fully thought and written.
50. To the extent that we both must and should be able to understand much more about the relation of the concepts and propositions of Du Bois’s thought and those of other figures in this configuration, this question must be approached without assuming that we already know in any determinate analytical instance either of the terms to be brought into critical relation. Each term shifts when configured in this way. Each discourse would have to be reread and thought from this perspective. Karen E. Fields has offered a pioneering and rich gesture in this direction in “Individuality and the Intellectuals: An Imaginary Conversation Between W. E. B. Du Bois and Émile Durkheim,” *Theory and Society* 31, no. 4 (August 2002): 435–62.
51. See Edward W. Said’s citation of Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “*e-laborare*” in his signal essay “Reflections on American ‘Left’ Literary Criticism,” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 158–77, which places it almost as an order of ontology (see 169–72):
- First, to elaborate means to refine, work out (*e-laborare*) some prior or more powerful idea, to perpetuate a world view. Second, to elaborate means something more qualitatively positive, the proposition that culture itself or thought or art is a highly complex and quasi-autonomous extension of political reality and, given the extraordinary importance attached by Gramsci to intellectuals, culture, and

philosophy, it has a density, complexity, and historical semantic value that is so strong as to make politics possible. Elaboration is the ensemble of patterns making it feasible for society to maintain itself. . . . Thus elaboration is the central cultural activity . . . it is the material making a society a society.

I further index Manthia Diawara's citation of the same in "Cultural Studies/Black Studies," which seems to imply Said's elaboration of a responsibility of the intellectual for a *critical* elaboration of this ontological order but does not explicitly cite him, and situates elaboration primarily as the space of a critical practice. Antonio Gramsci's articulation of this notion can be located in his "The Study of Philosophy," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 323–77. I propose the term *elaboration* here with those references in mind (but with some hesitation about the way that Said's extension of the term implies an ontological generalization that is not in itself given an account here). Here, I have in mind the question of an open response to Du Bois's life and practice as a form of theoretical responsibility, according to which as a first protocol the critic engaging his work must first assume responsibility for the questions that are announced therein on the terms by which they are announced, if his work is to remain available to the consideration of any contemporary question. This would require a certain passage through the text of Du Bois's thought, if not always, or only, the letter. Not only that, for, as Gramsci first proposed, elaboration is necessarily collective and cannot be accomplished in the work of only one thinker or the practice of a single individual. For an example of one motif of this question, see my essay "The Figure of the X: An Elaboration of the Du Boisian Autobiographical Example," in *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, ed. Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 235–72.

52. If the formulation just adduced seems difficult, that is itself due to the impossibility of addressing the paradoxical structure of this problematic under the heading of a thesis or declaration. This is the conceptual and rhetorical register of the central difficulty negotiated in Du Bois's thought. To the extent that we seek, in these few lines, to elucidate something of Du Bois's thought, this difficulty must be reproduced as a problem in our own enunciation.
53. The formulations about the abyssal structure of authority and problems of thought presented here are in light of some elaborations by Jacques Derrida in, for example, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference* (see note 2), 79–152; and his essay on the voice and the order of the phenomenological, in *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison, preface by Newton Garver, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 3–104. I reserve for another space a consideration of these developments on their own terms. And the figure of break proposed here is more about the terms of an elucidation of another necessity in thought than about some simple accomplished disposal or departure. Indeed, it might well be thought of as a kind of radicalization, turning, or revolution within an inherited situation. But I also have in mind some formulations of Michel Foucault in the later part of his itinerary, namely, his preface to *History of Sexuality, Volume Two*, trans. William Smock, in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 1: *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 199–205; his introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1985), 3–32, esp. 3–13; and part 4 of *History of Sexuality, Volume One*, 77–133. On the latter, consider Gayatri C. Spivak's "More on Power/Knowledge," in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald M. MacLean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 141–74.

54. Two wonderful examples of Du Bois's inhabitation of this situation can be followed in *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, in *Complete Published Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1975), from 1940, when he was seventy-two years of age. There, in his chapter "The White World," which will be followed by a chapter called "The Colored World Within," Du Bois produces in the former chapter, respectively two different, but continuous, fictional dialogues about the concept of race, with two "White" male interlocutors (who are described as his friends, one given a fictional name "Roger Van Dieman" [141], and the other unnamed except described as "free, white and twenty one" [153–54]). He precedes the opening of these dialogues with this summary statement:

With the best will the factual outline of a life misses the essence of its spirit. Thus in my life the chief fact has been race—not so much scientific race, as that deep conviction of myriads of men that congenital differences among the main masses of human beings absolutely condition the individual destiny of every member of a group. Into the spiritual provincialism of this belief I have been born and this fact has guided, embittered, illuminated and enshrouded my life. Yet, how shall I explain and clarify its meaning for a soul? Description fails—I have tried that. Yet, lest I omit the most important thing in the life of an American Negro today and the only thing that adequately explains his success, failures and foibles, let me attempt its exposition by personifying my white and colored environment. (139–40)

Now two further quotations, respectively. First, here is a bit of a dialogue between the autobiographical narrator and his fictional friend "Roger Van Dieman":

"Of course," he says, "you know Negroes are inferior." I admit nothing of the sort, I maintain. In fact, having known with some considerable intimacy both male and female, the people of the British Isles, of Scandinavia, of Russia, of Germany, north and south, of the three ends of France and the two ends of Italy; specimens from the Balkans and black and white Spain; the three great races of Asia and the melange [*sic*] of Africa, without mentioning American, I sit here and maintain that black folk are much superior to white. "You are either joking or mad," he says. Both and neither. This race talk is, of course, a joke, and frequently it has driven me insane and probably will permanently in the future; and yet seriously and soberly, we black folk are the salvation of mankind. (140–41)

Second is a dialogue between the narrator and a young friend who is confronted with the contradictions of a "code of Americanism"; that is, "the Golden Rule of Christianity" and its democratic formulas, of human brotherhood and equality, that nonetheless also "led directly and inevitably to another code . . . found in unfinished assumption rather than plain words . . . this code rested upon the fact that he was a White Man" (154–60), which eventually came to mean that "he could not conceive of a world where white people did not rule colored people" (163). Now the dialogue:

"Well, I like America. Darn it! I *love* it. My father died for it, although not in war—and I am reasonably willing to. There's no doubt about it, lambs have got no business prowling about lions and—oh, Hell! Honest to God, what do you think Asia and Africa would do to us, if they got the chance?" "Skin us alive," I answer cheerfully, loving the "us." (167)

And now finally, for another example, the scholar Karen Fields produces her own brilliantly ironic pathway through these enigmas in a commentary on the relation of Émile Durkheim's engagement with the matter of totemism (as a world in which "clansmen imagine their kinship to one another in terms of animals, plants, and occasionally inanimate objects. . .," as produced in the characterization of lineal groups in Australia by ethnographers up to the time of Durkheim's writing) in her essay "Durkheim and the Idea of Soul" (*Theory and Society* 25 [1996]: 193–203, esp. 194), the whole of which should be cited here (and whose remarkable recent complete retranslation of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* should also be noted), along with her superbly ironic "Individuality and the Intellectuals":

[O]ne of Durkheim's footnotes wittily upends the notion that the Australians were truly ignorant of the connection between intercourse and procreation. It would be better to say that they truly ignored it. And that they ignored it was entirely in keeping with the protoscientific mode in which collective identities are made. Once established as real, their collective identities entailed theories of heredity in whose terms the biological facts of procreation were irrelevant. By this same route we arrive not only at black Australians who resemble white cockatoos but also at the peculiar sense of shock I create every time I inform my students, dead-pan, that Frederick Douglass, the son of a slave and a slave owner, was one of the most distinguished white Americans of the nineteenth century. (Fields, "Durkheim and the Idea," 196)

55. See W. E. B. Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," in *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Non-periodical Literature Edited by Others*, comp. and ed. Herbert Aptheker, in *Complete Published Writings* (see note 7), 216–41.
56. Perhaps one such desedimentative motif that might well be followed in Du Bois's work, for example, is the question of the grounds of "White" identity. Tracking it might enable one to see how in this "half named" question, the so-called Negro question, there is an entire horizon that is taken for granted in the domain of the problem of the Negro for thought; that is, the taken-for-granted question of the presumption of the possibility of a pure or simple ground for being, as such. However, in an affirmative sense, a certain delimitation of Du Bois's discourse, by way of future engagements with it, might expose another thought of freedom, of possibility, of another world, of democracy, an illimitable becoming therein, something beyond, perhaps, the problem of the Negro as a problem for thought.
57. I am thinking here of a similar question posed by Jacques Derrida in light of the later work of Michel Foucault in "To Do Justice to Freud: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (Winter 1994): 227–66, see 264–65.
58. These formulations address certain aspects of Du Bois's essay "Sociology Hesitant" from late 1904 or early 1905, a reading of which I broach elsewhere. A copy of the manuscript titled "Sociology Hesitant" can be found on microfilm edition of the W. E. B. Du Bois papers ("Sociology Hesitant," typescript in *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois, 1803 (1877–1963) 1965*, comp. and ed. Herbert Aptheker, reel 82, frames 1307–12 [Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980]). The original papers are housed in the special collections of the W. E. B. Du Bois Memorial Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts. I simply note here that I brought the fact that this essay was available among the Du Bois papers to the attention of my close friend and colleague Ronald A. T. Judy in the spring of 1996, subsequently held several conversations with him by telephone regarding the essay after his retrieval of

the text from the archive, and in the spring of 1999 agreed to forego my own planned publication and introduction of the essay out of respect for his desire to do so. The occasion of the latter was a panel on “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Turn of the Millennium,” as part of the Collegium for African American Research, held on 20 March 1999 at Westphalia Universität, Münster, Germany. Professors Kevin Thomas Miles (co-organizer with me), Robert Bernasconi, and David Farrell Krell were also part of that important panel. (In this regard, the conference at Villanova University organized by Professor Miles, which is cited in note 1 of the present essay, should be understood as a certain kind of inauguration of these conversations and as a key moment in the interlocutions that have set loose or set on a different course several key conversations on “philosophy and race” in the United States since the mid-1990s, which cross several different borders, analytical and continental philosophy, questions of “gender” and “race,” and the divisions of the human sciences, social science and humanities, for example, as well as that border between earlier and later generations of post-1960s scholars.) As I recall, David Levering Lewis’s listing of this text as “since lost” in the first of his two-volume biography of Du Bois (*W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* [New York: H. Holt, 1993], 202) had led Professor Judy to understand that the text was no longer available (“Introduction: On W. E. B. Du Bois and Hyperbolic Thinking,” in “Sociology Hesitant: Thinking with W. E. B. Du Bois,” ed. Ronald A. T. Judy, special issue, *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 27, no. 3 [Fall 2000]: 1–35). Also, I wish to acknowledge that, prior to the dates noted earlier, I had engaged in correspondence and conversation with Professor Karen E. Fields regarding this manuscript “Sociology Hesitant” and, in part through her initiative, in 1997 had made plans to publish it).

59. I address the general necessity of *reading* Du Bois anew and of situating him as a thinker, rather than simply or primarily as an activist and political figure (even if now the figuration is under the heading of a cultural politics), which is still the overwhelming mode of approaching him, in the opening of my study “Problem of Pure Being.” One does not disavow the political inhabitation of Du Bois by approaching him under the heading of thought; instead, one radicalizes and deepens it (simultaneously specifying his discourse and freeing it). At such a juncture, the original oneness of being in thought is given an unfungible announcement as historical possibility; it simultaneously accepts a legacy and bequeaths one, or perhaps more than one, indeed, by way of this irreducible singularity.

However, the plane or order of other possible examples cannot and should not be understood as one composed of simply exchangeable samples in a series. Rather, or instead, the practices in question should be thought as maintaining within their texture, warp and woof, a certain tractable path of historicity, perhaps in unique or distinctive exemplification. Thus, if I seek to understand the conditions of thought and existence set afoot in an “African American” inhabitation of what is usually called music, it might be a necessary stage of formulating such an inquiry to simultaneously appropriate and disabuse the heading of composer by refusing the finality of its distinction from performer. At such a juncture of thought, the question of a certain example arises. One would not be remiss to offer a single proper name: Cecil Taylor. Or, in turn, it could be equally radical to offer a serial enumeration of incommensurable figures: Betty Carter, Sun Ra, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong. Must not singularity be recognized in each instance and in a way that nonetheless can also accept the status of the example?

60. In a similar way, Derrida, in a critically affirmative reading of Emmanuel Levinas as he engages the thought of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger on the question of the other, formulates the thought of what might well be called a transcendental “economy” of the relation to the other (in the specific scene of a discussion of Husserl’s *Cartesian*

*Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. D. Cairns [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960]) and writes of a “transcendental violence” in such relation; that is, the necessary passage through the same in the recognition of the other as other. Such necessity can be understood as a paradox of the same order, but in an obverse way, and arising from the same transcendental movement of force, as the necessary passage through the same as the problem of essence in the situation of Africanist figures in the discourses of the Negro. See Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics” (129), for the relevant formulation of “economy.”

61. See Wheatley’s poem “To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty’s Principal Secretary of State for North America, &c,” in her *Collected Works* (73–75, quotation at 74). In truth, the whole stanza should be read:

Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,  
 Wonder from whence my love of *Freedom* sprung,  
 Whence flow these wishes for the common good,  
 By feeling hearts alone best understood,  
 I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
 Was snatch[’]d from *Afric’s* fancy’d happy seat:  
 What pangs excruciating must molest,  
 What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast?  
 Steel’d was that soul and by no misery mov’d  
 That from a father seiz’d his babe below’d:  
 Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
 Others may never feel tyrannic sway?

62. I take the quotation deliberately from Du Bois’s uncanny and symbolic intervention in this historical memory, especially when he continues after recalling Truth’s question, and he writes “‘No,’ thundered the Douglass, towering over his Salem audience. ‘No, and because God is not dead, slavery can only end in blood,’” in *John Brown*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, in *The Complete Published Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1973), 93. Nell Irvin Painter clarifies the extent to which this question has come to us as an appropriated and overdetermined one in American discourses (*Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* [New York: Norton, 1996], 162–63).
63. Its supposedly impure “culture” might be considered one of the principal reasons that historically the discipline of anthropology in the United States devalued the African American in the domain of North America as an object of study. Or better, this question has always stood at the threshold of any inquiry of this field by this discipline. Perhaps for this reason, even Melville Herskovits preferred to study the African Diaspora outside of the United States, undertaking no major ethnographic work in this North American domain. This latter fact is not well known and is virtually unremarked in the scholarship on this important figure (see Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, *The New World Negro: Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies*, ed. Frances S. Herskovits [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966], esp. 43–61). The hypostatization of a preformed America or “White” culture is at the root of such a theoretical disposition. And perhaps it can be shown that this assumption functioned both within the tendency known as Herskovitsian and among those opposed to it. It remained a common ground of presupposition. This is not to diminish or set aside the fundamental work of Herskovits or his students. On the contrary, it is to deepen or radicalize the impulse that seemed to animate Herskovits’s thought after 1930. However, note the richly irreverent contribution by Richard Price and Sally Price concerning the diaries of Melville and Frances Herskovits from their first field trips in the summers of 1928 and 1929 among the Saramaka Maroons of Suriname, in *The Root of Roots, or, How Afro-American Anthropology Got Its Start* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003), cf. 83–87.

64. Robin D. G. Kelley's *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 1997) can be cited here as indexing the relevant political horizon of this epistemologically seated problematic from the contemporary horizon. It also proposes rich interventions, especially the epilogue, "Looking B(l)ackward: 2097–1997."
65. Or, in another discourse, Jacques Derrida's elaboration of a grammatology, or general science of the mark, under the heading of "*archi-écriture/archi-writing*," is an example of what I have in mind (see *Of Grammatology*). This would be a kind of paleonomy. I feel no need to diminish the originality of the late Professor Derrida's meditations on the problem of strategy in his work of the 1960s (see "From Restricted to General Economy" and "Violence and Metaphysics," for example, in *Writing and Difference* [see note 2]), the accomplishment of which is summarized in the interview quoted in the epigraph of this essay; or in his work in general. Yet, given the ease with which an old and presumptive, yet usually obscured, racist frame can be placed on the question of Du Bois's relationship to philosophy and the way of a certain hasty reading of the structure of citations in this essay could be announced, it must be noted that Du Bois's complex practice with regard to the question, as he put it, of "Negro freedom" (see Du Bois, "My Evolving Program") was exceedingly thoughtful, precisely with regard to the history of the questions that philosophy has claimed as its own. If I have made or performed any understated suggestion, it is that Du Bois, rigorously or even astringently, practiced a strategy of practical theoretical intervention on the terms of this inherited question. In turn, it can be systematically formulated and rethought according to a practice that I would place under the concept-metaphor desedimentation. (In part, I have referred thereby to Derrida, who tracked Husserl's idea of a desedimentation of the "origins" of science in his earliest work from 1962—*Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey [Stony Brook, NY: Nicholas Hays, 1977]—and developed the thought further in his own direction throughout the 1960s; cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* and "Hors Livre." Yet, I specifically propose this concept metaphor here as otherwise than a procedure that might be primarily one of recovery or return.) This heading names the track by which Du Bois should be placed in a manner parallel to *his* contemporaries, such as Husserl (and one of those who opened the pathways along which Derrida's thought took its first movements), Weber, Durkheim, Boas, or Freud. All of this, of course, is two and a half to three intellectual generations prior to Derrida's formulation of his own questions in the 1950s and early 1960s. The question then remains as to whence Du Bois in an itinerary such as Derrida's and, further, in contemporary thought in general. With regard to my own development, as I began to read the texts of Professor Derrida in the late 1980s outside of the classroom while I was at the University of Chicago, it was Du Bois's thought that more often than any other opened for me *in this reading* the spaces by which Derrida's discourse acquired its resonance for me. I can recall first hearing about Du Bois (and later reading the opening passages of *Souls of Black Folk*) through the guidance and teaching of a relative, Janice Herring, at my father's church, during my grammar school days. It was during Black History Month when I was perhaps six or seven. Of course, Du Bois's death in Accra, Ghana, would have occurred just a few years earlier. This would name the terrain of another kind of paleonomy.
66. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 9. The possible construal of the paleonymic decitation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* here (act 1, scene 3, lines 56–89), "To be or not to be . . ." not only maintains this possible reference, but, if its pertinence can be proposed, in turn disposes that reference toward a desedimentation of consciousness that would somehow expose the "invisibility" of "form" in being or the "silence of sound" (Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 6, 13). The theme of a transcendental patience (which is interwoven with its other, a certain impatience) legible within African American practice (Du Bois somewhere quotes lines 68–76 from *Hamlet*: "Must give us pause—there's the

respect / That makes calamity of so long a life. / For who would bear the whips and  
 scorn of time, / Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, / The pangs of  
 dispriz'd love, the law's delay, / The insolence of office, and the spurns / That patient  
 merit of th' unworthy takes, / When he himself might his quietus make / With a bare  
 bodkin? . . .") would then require (a) another thought of the historicity exposed in the  
 tragedy of *Hamlet* and (b) a futural gesture, perhaps at times theoretical, that would  
 reencode the African American problematic as epochal: exposing the measureless depths  
 of the aphonic sounds of an African American inhabitation of being. (The quotation is  
 from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, Arden edition [London:  
 Methuen, 1982].)