

Notes on W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

1. Background
 - a. Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, at the age of 35. By then he had already earned two bachelor degrees, studied in Berlin, become the first African American to receive a doctorate from Harvard, and earned his position as a professor at Atlanta University.
 - b. Hailing from a small town in Massachusetts, Du Bois didn't begin life amidst the harsher racial realities of America's South or even its northern cities. But he was soon exposed to those realities, moving first to Nashville for College and then later settling in the South. As several of his essays attest, he took the initiative to go out into some less-well-traveled pockets of America, so that he could learn how his fellow Black Americans were living. The conditions and situations he observed were often horrifying, yet, at times, also inspiring.
 - c. At a relatively early age, Du Bois would become one of the most prominent Black voices in America. As the leader of the Niagara Movement, he opposed what he saw as the conciliatory approach of Booker T. Washington, whose Atlanta Compromise had sought to secure economic and educational benefits for Southern Blacks in exchange for an agreement not to push too vigorously for full equality and civil rights.
 - d. Against Washington, Du Bois took the stance that full equality—in law and reality—had to be the goal. It could not wait for the long game of compromise to play out. Instead, an intellectual vanguard—the “Talented Tenth” of the Black population—should begin blazing the trail toward civil rights sooner rather than later. This was the vision Du Bois would bring to new movements like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization he helped to found.
 - e. Later in life, Du Bois came under scrutiny for the way he linked the problem of racial alienation to the economic realities of capitalism. We can see him discussing labor issues already in *Souls*, but the association of his work with socialist critiques of capitalist society became more widespread after WWII. In the context of the Cold War, a figure like Du Bois turned into something of a liability for the NAACP.
 - f. As the Cold War intensified, Du Bois found himself increasingly marginalized as a Black voice within America. His peace activism, his critique of capitalism, and his interest in meeting with anti-imperialist leaders around the globe only intensified this marginalization. Du Bois was put on trial for his anti-nuclear advocacy and investigated by the FBI. His passport was revoked at will by the U.S. government, severely limiting his freedom to travel.
 - g. He was able to leave from time and time, eventually dying during a visit to Ghana in 1963. The U.S. had refused to renew his passport. If he had survived, he likely would have had trouble ever returning to the country of his birth. The day after his death, during the March on Washington, there was a moment of silence observed by the 250 000 marchers in attendance. That same day, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke the words “I have a dream...”
2. The Veil of Double Consciousness
 - a. The format of Du Bois' most famous work might take us by surprise. Instead of offering up a systematic political or sociological analysis of the situation of Black Americans—which he would indeed do elsewhere—Du Bois engages in a kind of literary exploration of that situation from a number of different angles. The result is

a readable, flexible text that can adopt a number of distinct voices, so as to better speak to the variety of distinction factors that contribute to the Black experience in America.

- b. In the first essay, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” Du Bois sets a challenging question before himself: “How does it feel to be a problem?” (37) This is a question that Du Bois feels all around him, even if it’s seldom stated. His interactions with the “other world”—with the White world—make it clear to him that he is problematic within the context of American society.
- c. Du Bois is a problem in large part because, as an educated Black man, he stands at the precipice between two worlds. Between these racial worlds lies a “veil.” In his childhood, Du Bois was able to blissfully ignore this boundary-marker. But his first experience of racial discrimination awakened him to the painful reality: “Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.” (38)
- d. So what is life like behind the veil? It is, to begin with, a life of alienation. The Black American sees himself through the lens of White America. There is a layer of mediation between himself and himself, between himself and his own experience. Writes Du Bois: “After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and 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.” (38)
- e. The depth to which this double-consciousness colors Black experience has a chilling consequence for the ideal of American freedom. Didn’t the Civil War already happen? And Reconstruction, too? Weren’t the slaves freed? Aren’t Black Americans just as free as Whites? The Veil places a stark limit on this supposed emancipation.
 - i. Recall your Marx: is political emancipation for a group the end-game of emancipation? How deep does Alienation run? Of course, it’s unclear when Black America receives even the basic form of political emancipation...
- f. So: given double-consciousness, can we say that legal emancipation truly led to freedom? Du Bois remarks: “The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land.” (40) To attain true freedom and proper peace, the educated African American—Du Bois, perhaps—would have to overcome racial alienation, if possible: “In those somber forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself—darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another.” (41)
- g. Overcoming racial alienation thus means activating racial consciousness. The goal, at least at this stage, is not assimilation to White America or the obliteration of Blackness in service of some ideal of de-contextualized human nature. No, the path

toward a kind of global human cooperation must first pass through an active form of self-recognition in America's Black communities.

- h. As Du Bois puts it: "Work, culture, liberty—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack." (43)
 - i. In the second essay, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," Du Bois reiterates that—although the Civil War was indeed fought over slavery—emancipation itself has meant little so far. What is freedom without the "economic organization" necessary for freedmen to cultivate their freedom, to make something of it? (47) Without that economic form of emancipation, political emancipation fails to free Black Americans from the threat of "practical re-enslavement." (53)
 - j. In his subsequent analysis of the post-Civil-War Freedmen's Bureau, Du Bois points out all of the factors militating against the realization of Black emancipation. Half-hearted attempts at economic empowerment faltered on the rocky shores of poor land distribution. Local legislatures and courts worked to socially re-enslave blacks, turning to mores when the laws failed them. Despite its modest gains, the Bureau wasn't able to establish lasting goodwill between the freedmen and their former masters in the South. Paternalism squelched self-reliance. Old habits returned. (58)
 - k. Political emancipation thus fell tragically short of actually redeeming the social experience of Black Americans: "In such a situation, the granting of the ballot to the black man was a necessity, the very least a guilty nation could grant a wronged race, and the only method of compelling the South to accept the results of the war. Thus Negro suffrage ended a civil war by beginning a race feud." (60)
 - l. And so what's the situation America is left with? It is stark: "despite compromise, war, and struggle, the Negro is not free." (60)
3. Labor & Knowledge
- a. In his third essay, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington & Others," Du Bois critically evaluates Washington's position about how best to advance the interests of southern Blacks. As Du Bois tells it, Washington's program—encapsulated in the Atlanta Compromise to which the latter man agreed—stood on three main pillars: (1) industrial training for Black men; (2) reconciliation with Southern Whites; and (3) silent submission with regard to civil and political rights.
 - b. The result would be a situation of social separation combined with mutual progress. The races wouldn't mix or even attain full equality, but Blacks would at least be given the chance to advance economically and industrially, so that they could improve their standing gradually. (62-63)
 - c. In short, Du Bois thinks Washington has given away far too much ground. In effect, the Atlanta Compromise subjugates political rights to the notion of economic development. But, in this time of colonialism and racialized oppression, Du Bois argues that Black Americans should be self-assertive, not submissive. Self-respect is worth more than any resources the 'masters' might decide to hand out.
 - d. Du Bois phrase his criticisms sternly: "Mr. Washington's programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races. [...] In other periods of intensified

prejudice, all the Negro's tendency to self-assertion has been called forth; at this period a policy of submission is advocated. In the history of nearly all other races and people the doctrine preached at such crises has been that manly self-respect is worth more than lands and houses..." (67)

- e. In opposition to Washington's compromises, then, Du Bois thinks a full push should be made for: (1) the right to vote; (2) civic equality; and (3) education of African American youths according to their ability. (69)
- f. Du Bois' critique of Washington raises the question of what it would even mean for there to be "progress" in the Jim Crow South. And so we come upon his fourth essay: "Of the Meaning of Progress." By telling the tale of Josie, who longed to go away to school but instead lived and died in backbreaking labor, with little hope of any redemptive change, Du Bois puts a human face on the tragedy of Black emancipation in the South—and all around the country, of course.
- g. Though Du Bois himself was highly educated, he could still feel a kind of solidarity with his fellow African Americans. This was a solidarity forged not so much in a shared goal as in a shared limitation—the shared sense of being held back by the veil of double consciousness, the "Veil that hung between us and Opportunity." (77) Progress in racial emancipation, either in a small sharecropping town or in Du Bois' New England, is not something that can be easily measured.
- h. Of course, the strained situation of African Americans is not solely a question of political progress. It's also an effect of economic forces. Here we can see that, even early on, Du Bois was attuned to the deep ties connecting racial politics and economic practices.
- i. In his critical reflection on the money-chasing culture of his adopted home of Atlanta ("Of the Wings of Atalanta"), Du Bois writes: "in all our Nation's striving is not the Gospel of Work befouled by the Gospel of Pay? So common is this that one-half think it normal; so unquestioned, that we almost fear to question if the end of racing is not gold, if the aim of man is not rightly to be rich. And if this is the fault of Atlanta, how dire a danger lies before a new land and a new city, lest Atlanta, stopping for mere gold, shall find that gold accursed!" (83)
- j. Even if the antebellum culture of the South had rooted its racial hierarchy in honor as well as money, now money ruled that hierarchy supreme. The economic threat to the political emancipation of Black Americans is that they will be 'freed' only to chase after wage-labor in an economy that cares little for the actual quality of their lives. Even if they aren't forced to work, they remain beholden to an alien force—one which we've met earlier—the force of money. And so Du Bois poses another troubling question: "What if the Negro people be wooed from a strife for righteousness, from a love of knowing, to regard dollars as the be-all and end-all of life?" (85)
- k. True education, for Du Bois, isn't just about chasing material prosperity or maximizing earning potential. It's about reflecting on how best to live. That's what Washington misses with his plan for industrial training. Wage-labor won't secure true emancipation for Black Americans. Only education can do that.
- l. And so Du Bois puts the university at the core of his vision of society—for all races. He's not saying that industrial training doesn't matter, of course. Society does need workers of all kinds. But Black Americans should be given the chance to learn more than just what they need to get by.

- m. Du Bois puts it thus: “teach the workers to work and the thinkers to think... The worker must work for the glory of his handiwork, not simply for pay; the thinker must think for truth, not for fame.” (88)
 - n. As it stands, however, even many African Americans have trouble thinking of themselves in this high-minded way. They’ve internalized the low estimation of their own worth and capabilities, which they received from their White overlords. According to this antiquated way of thinking, “God created a *tertium quid* and called it a Negro—a clownish, simple creature, at times even lovable within its limitations, but straitly foreordained to walk within the Veil. To be sure, behind the thought lurks the afterthought—some of them with favoring chance might become men, but in sheer self-defense we dare not let them, and we build about them walls so high, and hang between them and the light a veil so thick, that they shall not even think of breaking through.” (90-91) This is the alienated path of thinking that must be done away with.
 - o. The permanent uplifting of the Black populace cannot take place solely through the “Training of Black Men” in industry (see Du Bois’ sixth essay title). Instead, such ‘training’ would have to be predicated upon the belief that human life counts for more than just material gain. And so we must ask: “Is not life more than meat and the body more than raiment? And men ask this today all the more eagerly because of sinister signs in recent educational movements. The tendency is here, born of slavery and quickened to renewed life by the crazy imperialism of the day, to regard human beings as among the material resources of a land to be trained with an eye single to future dividends.” (93)
 - p. So if there is to be any hope of progress—economic or otherwise—education will have to serve as the engine. Du Bois doesn’t believe that change will come from increased production at the industrial basis of society. Instead, he looks to the elite heights of education for a force that can pull the rest of Black America out its not-yet-emancipated state. He writes: “Progress in human affairs is more often a pull than a push, surging forward of the exceptional man, and the lifting of his duller brethren slowly and painfully to his vantage-ground.” (94)
 - q. Black America must therefore use its universities—what have been termed historically black colleges, most especially—to train up the most talented group it can find. Ever the statistician, Du Bois estimates that about a tenth of the African American population will serve as the vanguard of leadership—doctors and lawyers and scholars pointing the way toward a higher form of emancipation. To try to keep these minds caged in the factory could only lead to explosive social tensions: “by refusing to give this Talented Tenth the key to knowledge, can any sane man imagine that they will lightly lay aside their yearning and contentedly become hewers of wood and drawers of water?” (100)
 - r. For Du Bois, then, the only way to combat alienation is through education of the highest kind. The only way to rise above the Veil is through reaching out after Truth. (102)
4. The Economics of Exploitation
- a. In his seventh essay, “Of the Black Belt,” Du Bois continues to explore the economic factors that keep political emancipation from doing much good for America’s Black population. Yes, the slavemasters are gone, he admits, but they’ve merely been replaced by a merciless system of landlords and rentiers, who practice a

demoralizing brand of exploitation upon the Black tenants who actually live on the land. (107)

- b. The North may have ended slavery by defeating the South in the Civil War, but not the North enchains Black America by means of capitalist exploitation. A new economic overlord has arrived—the “Wizard of the North,” the “Capitalist” (109)—aiming mainly to extract money from the land of the South while leaving its infrastructure to rot. The people who live are left to their debt and despair, while the laws of the land seem to do little to improve their economic conditions.
- c. In his next essay, “Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece,” Du Bois makes it all too clear that this reigning economic uncertainty can break up families and undermine social stability from within. Ideals of American dreaming seem to crumble once they come into contact with the realities of African American communities: “America is not another word for Opportunity to *all* her sons.” (122)
- d. Political emancipation without economic emancipation thus makes a mockery of freedom: “The most piteous thing amid all the black ruin of wartime, amid the broken fortunes of the masters, the blighted hopes of mothers and maidens, and the fall of an empire—the most piteous thing amid all this was the black freedman who threw down his hoe because the world called him free. What did such a mockery of freedom mean? Not a cent of money, not an inch of land, not a mouthful of victuals—not even ownership of the rags on his back. Free!” (123) Gone is the Black slave, perhaps, but ever-present is the Black “laborer with indeterminate wages.” (123)
- e. The current form of economic organization seems to militate against any improvement of the situation for African Americans. Wage-labor and debt cycles offer little hope for the dream of ‘progress:’ “Once in debt, it is no easy matter for a whole race to emerge.” (125)
- f. Here we arrive at a potential interface between the struggle for Black emancipation and Marx’s account of class struggle. Race and economics are not two unique realms of society. Of class, Du Bois writes: “All social struggle is evidenced by the rise, first of economic, then of social classes, among a homogeneous population.” (129) he then proceeds to break down the various tiers of economic hardship faced by most Black Americans: impoverished sharecroppers, moneyless crop-mortgagers, moneyed crop-mortgagers, moneyed rentiers, and the sliver of a Black landowning class.
- g. In general, though, Black freedmen were not given an economic jump-start when they received their political emancipation. The African American worker always starts from behind because they start from a position of debt. Economic remedies, then, would seemingly have to play a role in the overcoming of racial alienation in American society.
- h. Writes Du Bois: “If they had been given an economic start at Emancipation, if they had been in an enlightened and rich community which really desired their best good,” then African Americans might have had a chance at improving their situation. But that was not the case. And so a dire situation triggers a call to action: “The rise of a nation, the pressing forward of a social class, means a bitter struggle, a hard and soul-sickening battle with the world such as few of the more favored classes know or appreciate.” (132)
- i. ...
- j. ...

5. Race & Social Conditions

- a. In his ninth essay, “Of the Sons of Master & Man,” Du Bois reflects more broadly on the colonial and imperial context of the racial situation in his America. The question of cultural interaction and exploitation can be asked in any corner of the globe; in no way is it to be limited to the American South. Almost everywhere, interracial contact is taking place on a number of levels: physical, economic, political, intellectual, civic, and religious.
- b. One of the most common results of racial strife around the globe is, as Du Bois points out, the phenomenon of ‘ghettoization.’ Herded into ghettos, subjugated communities can begin to lose sight of their own intrinsic variety and vibrancy. The substandard living conditions of these communities create a new problem: how are we to tell the difference between inherent and contextually conditioned qualities?
- c. Here we’re back in the world of Mill and Nietzsche, to an extent. Just because a racial community forced to live in terrible conditions continues to struggle socially doesn’t necessarily mean that this community is destined to struggle forever. Yet many in America would argue that there is something intrinsic to those minority communities which leads them toward their own demise.
- d. Du Bois—a sociologist, remember!—is not at all convinced that ‘natural’ qualities are to blame for a group’s social struggles. Even if he can’t entirely rule it out, he can confidently make the argument that we lack any evidence that would actually support a natural-scientific cause for ‘racial’ struggles. No, much more likely is that the substandard living conditions and endless persecution faced by minority groups is to blame for their difficult breaking out of a tough situation. (134-136)
- e. This process of ghettoization, furthermore, is not solely cultural. It’s fundamentally socioeconomic in its roots. All of Reconstruction failed to take the action needed to convert a vast, enslaved labor force into a modern industrial work-army. Instead, the “industrial exploitation of the New South” brought all of the ravages of capitalism without any accompanying quality-of-life improvements for the Black working classes.
- f. Writes Du Bois: “I insist it was the duty of someone to see that these workingmen were not left alone and unguided, without capital, without land, without skill, without economic organization, without even the bald protection of law, order, and decency—left in a great land, not to settle down to slow and careful internal development, but destined to be thrown almost immediately into relentless and sharp competition with the best of modern workingmen under an economic system where every participant is fighting for himself, and too often utterly regardless of the rights or welfare of his neighbor.” (136)
- g. And so—what’s to be done? Can we wait on the benign good will of Southern (or even Northern) Whites? No: “We must accept some of the race prejudice in the South as a fact...” (138) Instead, leadership will have to come from within the African American community itself: “today no one seriously disputes the capability of individual Negroes to assimilate the culture and common sense of modern civilization, and to pass it on, to some extent at least, to their fellows. If this is true, then here is the path out of the economic situation, and here is the imperative demand of trained Negro leaders of character and intelligence...” (138)
- h. Intellectual, cultural leadership is thus the primary solution to the industrial and economic hardship faced by Black Americans. More concretely, one of the immediate goals this educated vanguard must push for is effective suffrage for the

entire Black population. The ballot is to serve as a defender of freedom and a prod to further and broader education. (139)

- i. To leave African Americans without an effective means to vote is to doom them to the worst of majoritarian tyranny, that great threat warned of by Tocqueville and Mill: “But the point I have insisted upon, and now emphasize again, is that the best opinion of the South, today is not the ruling opinion. That to leave the Negro helpless and without a ballot today is to leave him, not to the guidance of the best, but rather to the exploitation and debauchment of the worst; that this is no truer of the South than of the North—of the North than of Europe: in any land, in any country under modern free competition, to lay any class of weak and despised people, be they white, black, or blue, at the political mercy of their stronger, richer, and more resourceful fellows, is a temptation which human nature seldom has withstood and seldom will withstand.” (141)
 - j. That’s not to say that suffrage is the only issue at hand. The judicial environment of America is just as unfriendly to its Black populace. What we in fact see is a “double system of justice,” the aim of which was originally to “use the courts as a means of re-enslaving the blacks. It was not then a question of crime, but rather one of color, that settled a man’s conviction on almost any charge. Thus Negroes came to look upon courts as instruments of injustice and oppression, and upon those convicted in them as martyrs and victims.” (142)
 - k. It is not just the law, but also the more that perpetuate this system of racial inequality. Beyond the tangible realities of law and education and politics, there is also what Du Bois calls “the atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life. In any community or nation, it is these little things which are most elusive to the grasp and yet most essential to any clear conception of the group life taken as a whole.” (143)
 - l. To remedy all of these legal and moral ills, then, Du Bois prescribes not one-sided charity but instead the advent of actual cooperation across racial lines: “Human advancement is not a mere question of almsgiving, but rather of sympathy and cooperation among classes who would scorn charity.” (146)
 - m. Color prejudice and social conditions are, to Du Bois, reciprocal factors contributing to the current situation. Both must change if the destructive effects of the ‘color line’ are to be overcome. Concludes Du Bois: “It is not enough for the Negroes to declare the color-prejudice is the sole cause of their social condition, nor for the white South to reply that their social condition is the main cause of prejudice. They both act as reciprocal cause and effect, and a change in neither alone will bring the desired effect. Both must change, or neither can improve to any great extent.” (147)
6. Race & Religion
- a. The next piece, “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” evokes the ‘spiritualism’ that’s been bubbling under the surface throughout the entire work so far. This could strike us as somewhat surprising, given that Du Bois is widely regarded as irreligious, agnostic, or even atheistic. Yet, however he’d have categorized his own attitude toward religion, Du Bois was keenly aware of the role it played in African American society. Witnessing a number of stirring, musically charged revivals during his time in the South left him sure enough of that.
 - b. Preachers, he noticed, had already begun to serve as a kind of Black leadership class. Church congregations, meanwhile, served as proto-governments, even attempted projects of self-governance. If his interest lay in exploring possibilities for political

and cultural leadership within the African American community, Du Bois could in no way ignore the real power of African American Christianity. (150-151)

- c. Of course, that doesn't mean the effect of Christianity on Black Americans has been benign. In the Antebellum South, a slave's longing for freedom could have been projected into an eschatological, indefinite future. Yes, you will be free—but not yet! Only at the end of the world will the slave be made equal with the master. For the slave, then, "Nothing suited his condition better than the doctrines of passive submission embodied in the newly learned Christianity. ... The Negro, losing the joy of this world, eagerly seized upon the offered conceptions of the next..." (153-154)
- d. Yet with the end of slavery and the slow growth of Black self-consciousness, a new brand of Christianity emerged. This version was less interested in delay than in swift action. Writes Du Bois: "The free Negro leader early arose and his chief characteristic was intense earnestness and deep feeling on the slavery question. Freedom became to him a real thing and not a dream. His religion became darker and more intense, and into his ethics crept a note of revenge, into his songs a day of reckoning close at hand. The 'Coming of the Lord' swept this side of Death, and came to be a thing to be hoped for in this day." (154)
- e. The deeper conflict which religious discourse is supposed to solve is the tension between two forms of Black resistance in America. According to Du Bois, the two poles here are something like Northern agitation and Southern complacency. On one end of the spectrum, it's riots in the streets; on the other, it's submitting to the status quo. All other attitudes can be mapped on the spectrum between these two limit-cases.
- f. But this geographical dichotomy might merely be an outward expression of the internal double-ness that afflicts every African American person, according to Du Bois. (Think back to his early comments on double-consciousness and the Veil...) Here he puts things eloquently: "From the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American as swept on by the current of the nineteenth while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century—from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence. The worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double worlds and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism." (155-156)
- g. And even if all of the emerging varieties of Black religiosity respond to this double-ness differently, still Du Bois thinks there is an underlying spiritual impulse that a wise leader could tap into: "But back of this still broods silently the deep religious feeling of the real Negro heart, the stirring, unguided might of powerful human souls who have lost the guiding star of the past and are seeking in the great night a new religious ideal. Some day the Awakening will come, when the pent-up vigor of ten million souls shall sweep irresistibly toward the Goal, out of the Valley fo the Shadow of Death, where all that makes life worth living—Liberty, Justice, and Right—is marked 'For White People Only.'" (158)
 - i. Here we can catch a hint, not only fo a direct call for the entry of religious discourse into the African American struggle for political and economic

recognition, but even of the kind of divinely empowered rhetoric later to be deployed by King and Malcolm X.

- h. Du Bois hits this eschatological note even more stirringly in his short piece “Of the Passing of the First-Born.” The death of his infant son had occasioned in Du Bois a morbid thought: was it better for him to have died than to have lived life under pain of the Veil? It’s a question that can never really be answered, of course. But the idea of children, at least, includes the thought of a future in which the old injustices are remedied. Writes Du Bois: “Surely there shall yet dawn some mighty morning to lift the Veil and set the prisoned free. Not for me—I shall die in my bonds—but for fresh young souls who have not known the night and waken to the morning...” (162-163)
- i. Perhaps, to some degree, this future figure of a religiously grounded intellectual—who can use his words to lead Black America towards a truer emancipation—has been anticipated in a figure like Alexander Crummell. Crummell was an early leader of free Blacks in America, known both for his intellectual accomplishments—he’d studied at Cambridge—and the religious authority with which he spoke. Still, his time allowed him little in the way of actual power. To Du Bois, he stood as the paramount example of a great man who went unknown to most, perhaps because society wasn’t ready to receive the sophisticated righteousness of his message: “And herein lies the tragedy of the age: not that men are poor—all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked—who is good?; not that men are ignorant—what is Truth? Nay, but that men know so little of men.” (171)
- j. This subtle thread of religious, even eschatological language spins on through the last two essays of the book. “Of the Coming of John” tells the story of a young Black man who leaves his community to gain an education. Upon returning as a teacher, his newfound perspective on the racial struggle fails translate into useful rhetoric, let alone effective action.
- k. With education, John learns to become aware of the Veil that conditions his own experience. Strangely, for Du Bois, the Veil is not necessarily a one-sidedly ‘bad’ thing. While the Veil does enclose one’s vision, it also discloses one’s condition. To see that you have a blind spot must be counted as a gain. And so John’s approach to the Veil is a kind of liberation.
- l. As Du Bois describes it: “He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erstwhile seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh.” (175)
- m. Education liberates John while also throwing him into confusion. Elevating his mind, he sees the racial contours of his situation clearly for the first time. Yet at the same time he also doubts himself: by becoming ‘educated’ in a Western way, is he becoming ‘white’ himself? Is he trying to be something he isn’t?
- n. This is a crisis that comes to a head when John comes home. Seeing the unjust situation of his old town in a new light, he tries to rally his fellow African Americans to change the status quo. But, seeing their down-home religiosity as stifling and politically stagnant, he refuses to speak in their theological tongue. This was a mistake. The people he spoke had little interest in ‘transcending’ religion; if change was to come, it would have to harness the power of religion than trying to float past

- it. (179) John's failure to realize this and act on it leads, disturbingly but perhaps not shockingly, to the implication of his violent lynching and death.
- o. The final essay, "The Sorrow Songs," then speaks to the expression of a religiously empowered voice in song. Perhaps what true black emancipation demands is not the end of the old ways, but the power of the hymns to challenge and overcome the hubristic assumptions of humankind. To Du Bois, the folk songs of the South are not just pleasant to the ear; they speak to the possibility of awakening and liberation—the rending of the Veil. (186)
 - p. Perhaps, then, it's best to end—as did Du Bois—with a flurry of eschatological flourishes:
 - i. "Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurances of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometimes, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins? Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?" (192)
 - ii. Against the "arrogance of people irreverent toward Time," he adds: "So woefully unorganized is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress, the meaning of 'swift' and 'slow' in human doing, and the limits of human perfectability, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shore of science." (192)
 - iii. Finally, we ask: "Would American have been America without her Negro people? Even so is the hope that sang in the songs of my fathers well sung. If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good, pitiful yet masterful, then anon in His good time America shall rend the Veil and the prisoned shall go free." (193)