



RACE AT THE CENTRE: THE RAMIFICATIONS OF W. E. B. DU BOIS'S SOCIOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY STUDIES

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Abstract: Starting from José Itzigsohn and Karida L. Brown's 2020 book, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, this article discusses the contribution of Du Boisian sociology to the field of postcolonial literary studies, arguing that his main concepts and his methodology might help untangle some of postcolonialism's current debates.

Keywords: postcolonialism, race, subjectivity, double consciousness, literary studies.

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The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois by José Itzigsohn and Karida L. Brown appeared in March 2020, two months before America and Western Europe entered yet another period of public debate regarding race, racism, and systemic inequality in the wake of George Floyd's death in police custody and the consequent civil unrest. These moments of intensified dialogue and protest have punctured recent history and have repeatedly brought to the fore questions about the legacy of slavery and colonialism in former imperial states, as well as colonized territories. With *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, however, the conversation reaches a new level of self-reflexivity, because, instead of simply responding to various arguments or theories exchanged in these ongoing debates or proposing another postcolonial point of view on the matter, the volume sets out to explore *why* race and racism have become inexhaustible topics in the academia, as well as the mass-media; why the concepts themselves are still under discussion, although all

democratic states have by now agreed on a theoretically anti-racist ethical stance; why an obsession with race is nothing but the logical consequence of the last four centuries of Western history. In short, *Itzigsohn* and Brown present the ways in which the sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois evolved to place race at the centre of modernity.

Of course, the book is first and foremost an extremely rigorous account, discussion, and periodization of Du Bois's work, organizing and making visible the ideas of a largely ignored, but revolutionary thinker in the field of sociology. As the authors constantly argue, Du Bois should be considered alongside Marx, Weber, and Durkheim¹ when looking back on the social and economic development of Europe and America.² Like his European counterparts, Du Bois transcended sociological parochialism and strived to think globally, searching for the hidden constants of Western progress, while also researching their effects on local communities and small social groups. Du Bois's relevance to the field

and the importance of such a comprehensive analysis of his writing become obvious when engaging with Itzigsohn and Brown's study. Nevertheless, the aim of this article is to discuss the centrality of race in our current understanding of history, empire, and capitalism, more precisely the notion that Du Bois's color line and double consciousness are not mere additions to the inventory of sociological concepts describing our past (Marx's class system, Durkheim's solidarity and organic society, Weber's rationalization and bureaucracy), but irreplaceable and essential tools in reckoning with the costs and victims of progress. In other words, discussing modernity without being constantly mindful of race and its persistent involvement in all Western forms of knowledge production, self-perception, humanism and ethics would produce an inaccurate picture of the past four centuries. And, needless to say, it would also amount to reproducing the discourse of colonialism, in which the filiation of white thought appears as independent from blackness, its conceptual double, and rooted organically in the European Renaissance and the Enlightenment, with no external input.³ For a narrower focus, the following text will be devoted specifically to the role of a racialized understanding of modernity (as theorized by Du Bois) in postcolonial literary studies: the ways in which it has impacted the evolution of the discipline and the solutions it might inspire for the current crises and deadlocks.

Intersectionality

From the very beginning, Du Bois maintained a dialogue with other, competing sociological theories of the West, especially Marxism, and managed to challenge and complete these perspectives, built exclusively on one side of the color line. Intersectionality has since become the watchword of postcolonial studies, acknowledging that categories like race, class, and gender cannot be separated in the formation of communities, their status, and their perception of the world. In this sense, the relatively recent debates around "postcolonialism without feminism" or "feminism without postcolonialism" can already be found – though in incipient form – in Du Bois's writing in the 1920s. In the last few decades, critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak or Partha Chatterjee have denounced Western interventionism and political control in the name of female liberation, with Spivak demystifying the apparently altruistic discourse against traditional practices like Sati by highlighting their manipulative drive⁴ and Chatterjee concluding that they were meant to "transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country."⁵ Today, the battleground of colonial "feminism" has moved to the Middle East and the Islamic enclaves within Western societies. But for Du Bois, it was

precisely the racial element that was missing from the female emancipation movement, because the white suffragettes, for instance, claiming the right to leave the household and be employed, were in a very different situation from black women, who were already largely working-class. While recognizing the limitations of Du Bois's analysis of gender (womanhood is still equated with motherhood), Itzigsohn and Brown also point out the intersection of race, class, and gender: "Du Bois argues that the experience of African American women is unique, as they bear the brunt of both exploitation and the legacy of slavery [...] For economic reasons, Black women had to work and, in many cases, earned more than Black men. This, combined with existing ideas about gender roles, led to the breakup of poor and working-class Black families."⁶ Similarly, in the well-known *The Philadelphia Negro*, the first empirical study of an urban community in American sociology, Du Bois describes the vicious circle of poverty and exclusion plaguing black social groups: a lack of integration into white society (exclusion from workers' unions, for example) led to more economic vulnerability, crime, and, ultimately, a perpetuation of racial prejudice.⁷ Race and class were once again amalgamated into a self-reinforcing system.

The tension between these equally problematic identities is also reflected in literature, and contemporary postcolonial studies are gradually paying more attention to the relationship between racial or class anxiety and the poetics and literary genres emerging in the post-emancipation era. In her 2013 study of postbellum black fiction, Andrea N. Williams argues that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, race and class were permanent competitors in America, complicating social ascendance, capital accumulation, and even the pursuit of education and producing a very specific brand of literature (represented by the likes of Pauline Hopkins, Sutton Griggs, or Paul Laurence Dunbar): "an identifiable repertoire of themes and formal patterns for representing intraracial stratification."⁸ What is more, Williams proposes an analysis of new formal elements such as repetitions, evasions, lacunae or narratorial intrusions, all of which would have been regarded as signs of aesthetic underdevelopment by the nineteenth-century canon, although they are, in fact, the stylistic translation of collective and individual anguish and social discomfort.

The Spectrum of Racism

Even within the confines of nineteenth-century America, the articulation of class and race yielded various social configurations, the confusion of which would only mean eliding the true power dynamics at play between different diasporic groups. In postcolonial studies, it has often been argued that Irish immigrants were also racialized immediately after their mass-migration



between 1815 and 1845: a million and a half Irish exiles settled in America in those three decades, and were faced with pervasive anti-Irish attitudes, based on the similarity between Celtic and black stereotypes (superstition, violence, excessive sexuality, childishness, tribal organization).⁹ In Sarah Heinz's words, "the Irish can be positioned in-between white colonizer and black colonized as they have taken up both roles in history, often at the same time."¹⁰ Du Bois himself noticed that Irish immigrants were, in certain areas, poorer than the black community,¹¹ and there was indisputable labor market competition between the two populations.¹² Nevertheless, job competition cannot fully explain the tendency of Irish immigrants to ally themselves with the supporters of slavery; rather, they distanced themselves from black communities when it became apparent that Irishness itself was fuelling racialization (unfamiliarity with urban life, Catholicism, a clannish social structure)¹³ and that whiteness could only be asserted in opposition to blackness. Then, while the Irish themselves have "sought analogies between Ireland's experiences of colonial oppression and the experiences of black people in slavery and subjugation,"¹⁴ it must be recognized that Irish exiles gained an improved socioeconomic status relatively quickly compared to black workers and eventually contributed to the displacement of African Americans from their traditional jobs.¹⁵ Economy aside, the very experience of racialized class struggle involved an array of specific inner conflicts for the black people of the Reconstruction era: social progress often carried with it an element of guilt, a loss of solidarity with one's initial community, alienation and doubleness. Du Bois himself dramatizes the tension between financial or intellectual emancipation and racial status in his short stories, which reflect the anxiety invariably associated with the mission of the Talented Tenth¹⁶, the elite imagined in the first stages of Du Bois's career and envisioned as the heroes of the black community. This elitist project by which the masses were supposed to follow the lead of black intellectuals and emancipate themselves became visibly ineffective later on and, although Du Bois's theories never renounced elitism altogether¹⁷, democratization and the agency of the masses gradually gained importance in his discourse. His fictional work, then, tells a second story about the evolution of Du Boisian thought: not only was the myth of the Talented Tenth an unsatisfactory tool for historical change, but the negative affects thrown upon the few socially affluent African Americans endangered solidarity within the racial community and threatened the potential of education and cultural production to represent and empower the marginalized.

In literary criticism, this phenomenon has especially left its mark on the ideological reading of black literature, with Phillis Wheatley as a perfect case study for racial consciousness and the imperative of loyalty to the African American cause. Wheatley was a slave in eighteenth-

century America, but became the first African-American writer to publish a book of poetry. Given the support she got from her white masters, who educated her and later benefited from her fame, and because of the generally Christian themes and Classicist poetics she opted for, Wheatley was and still is criticized for the perceived "betrayal" of her kind. Critics like J. Saunders Redding or Angelene Jamison have accused her of eliding slave suffering and indulging in a comfortable, apolitical poetry in order to please her readers: according to Jamison, she "wrote to Whites, for Whites and generally in the Euro-American tradition at that time."¹⁸ A lot can be said about the subversive potential of some of Wheatley's Christian stanzas, including instances of irony and transparent pleas for compassion towards the African American slave. Another branch of criticism (John Shields, Sondra O'Neal, Robert Kendrick) is actually based on the recognition of ambivalence in the poet's work and the analysis of a double voice speaking to distinct audiences. Regardless of our ethical evaluation of Wheatley's poetry, however, the sheer existence of these debates and the controversial nature of Wheatley's hybrid literary persona highlight the specificity of class struggle for black Americans (enslaved or emancipated), the traumatizing competition between conflicting allegiances, and the ethical pressure determining the formation of black identities.

Eurocentric Universals

As postcolonial studies evolved into a much more political movement, expanding outside the academia and campaigning for real social change, some contemporary critics like Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Welsh began using the term "decolonialism" to circumscribe their activism and their ambitious goals. And, while postcolonialism has certainly been indebted to Marxism from its very beginnings, Mignolo often argues that all "Occidental abstract universals" (Christianity, liberalism, utilitarianism, as well as Marxism) have become obsolete, since each proposed a unique truth and a single solution for the entirety of humanity.¹⁹ Instead, Mignolo champions a different approach, named *pluriversality* and based on the belief that no concept of progress and no political solutions or gnoseological patterns can be fully exported to other geographies or historical periods.

Therefore, a contemporary reading of Du Bois must take into account the increased demands of decolonialism,²⁰ asking whether the color line and double consciousness are not merely another universal born in Western universities and imposed on the rest of the world. A first answer lies in the very notion of "racialized modernity": although Du Bois posits that the color line is a global phenomenon, his analysis actually focuses on the relationship between capitalist development and racialization; in other words, the global perspective is

motivated by the geographical expansion of capitalist modes of production²¹ rather than an abstract, ontological theory of race. It is Western modernity and its forced institution in colonized territories that structure Du Boisian sociology. Itzigsohn and Brown also address the theories developed by Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond in response to Du Bois. The pair quote his work and recognize his fundamental contributions to the field, but argue that Du Boisian theses were not placed in a consistent frame and therefore they do not amount to a systematic theory of race. However, Itzigsohn and Brown view Emirbayer and Desmond's own system as more of a transplantable theory, which works in conjunction with other social fields like gender or class and is meant to transcend narrow circumstances, while Du Bois's writing is always rooted in context: "it is important to emphasize that Du Bois's sociology was not a sociology of race but a critique of racialized modernity."²² This degree of contextualization might seem like a sociological technicality or one methodological option among many, but it has to be considered in relation to the current opposition to critical theory and anti-racist activism, unfolding in conservative political discourses throughout the Western world: more precisely, the claim that the values, roots and mechanisms of liberal democracy and capitalism are abstract patterns, untainted by the "historical accidents" of racism and oppression; they are based on unquestionable moral principles like equality and fairness and should therefore meet with no resistance. Needless to say, contextualization is the primary method of exploding this ahistorical soap bubble, as well as the essentialist evaluations of "black progress" which ignore the obstacles placed in its way by white supremacy and social conditioning.²³

As further demonstration, Itzigsohn and Brown also explore the adaption and re-localization of Marx in Du Bois's writing, starting once again from the conjugation of class and race in the African American diaspora. Du Bois showed that, in the nineteenth century, it was black people rather than white abolitionists who worked for emancipation and managed to obtain freedom not only for a few isolated actors, but ultimately for the entire slave population.²⁴ To this day, his argument is still extremely relevant. On the one hand, it supports the claim that oppressed subjects can become the agents of their own emancipation. On the other hand, the myth of the white saviour and the "underground railroad" which signified the alliance between slaves and good-hearted abolitionists has recently made a surprising return in novels like Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* or televised series like WGN America's *Underground*. In a 2016 article for *The New Yorker*, Kathryn Schultz analyzed the trend, as well as the historical data it falsifies, proving that not only was the railroad far from centralized and flawlessly organized, but the role played by predominantly white sects like

the Quakers is vastly exaggerated, to the expense of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in direct response to racism and slavery. Schultz interprets this affinity for the underground railroad narrative as a strategy for alleviating collective guilt: "that desire to literally own part of the story of the Underground Railroad is extremely widespread and is much of what makes it so popular in the first place. In the entire history of slavery, the Railroad offers one of the few narratives in which white Americans can plausibly appear as heroes."²⁵ At the same time, however, the fantasy also obscures the systemic nature of racism both in the South and the North, whose legacy continues today, in spite of the multiple politically-motivated contestations of the fact. Du Bois understood better than anyone that asserting black agency was not just necessary for the general morale and the momentary emancipation of the diaspora, but also instrumental for the comprehension of racism and anti-racism as social forces.

Likewise, the narratives surrounding Reconstruction are under scrutiny in Du Bois's scholarship, as he proves that this period, theoretically governed by the ideal of full emancipation, ended up recreating the "white ruling bloc", uniting the economic interests of the Northern bourgeoisie and the South's elites and poor people alike.²⁶ Then, he confronts the theory of laboring class unity with the particular circumstances of the postbellum era, showing that when race enters the equation of potential labor solidarity, Marx's calculations do not hold up anymore.²⁷ Of course, this provides an eloquent example for Mignolo's critique of abstract universals, but it also sheds new light on the atmosphere which characterized Reconstruction and still informs political attitudes today. In public speeches given soon after the Civil War and especially at the opening of monuments commemorating slavery, there was general euphoria.²⁸ Black intellectuals like Booker T. Washington and, even more importantly, self-righteous white officials announced the beginning of an age of prosperity, democracy, and peace, implying that the anger, resistance, and sorrow of former slaves had been consumed in the war, either through the efforts of the white Union army or through the sacrifice of the few black soldiers. The suggestion that the brand-new American society would not have to undergo any more civil unrest or internal tensions was, of course, a well-crafted illusion, but it endures today: in recent months, anti-racism protests have been denounced as unnecessary, divisive, and self-defeating by right-wing media, using the same arguments voiced in the nineteenth century – the war has been won, equality is law, this is the time for social order.

Finally, Du Bois also questions Marx's thesis that capitalism is based on labor without coercion, since slave work was, in some respects, the very opposite of employment in a free market.²⁹ In fact, the notion of slave property, however meagre, or labor which cannot



be confiscated by the masters have produced various forms of artistic resistance, which were later included in many slave narratives: poems centred on sorrow and the hope of an afterlife, small creative gestures like singing, gardening, or imagining become a way of speaking to power precisely through their gratuitousness. As already stated, the art of slaves or former slaves like Wheatley is often interpreted as either political, responsible, and rebellious or, on the contrary, cowardly and submissive. Du Bois's analysis of slave work as opposed to capitalist modes of production could, however, help us reimagine black literature and to recognize those forms of agency which do not conform to our own, white ideas of literary rebellion. In fact, even Wheatley's poems about abstract entities like imagination or natural beauty could be read as both apolitical (evasion in the face of historical pressure to take up a definite role) and resistant: the production of a marketable object which can never fully belong to the master.

Knowledge(s) and Biographical Sociology

In many ways, the changes made by Du Bois in his own sociology throughout almost seven decades predicted the development of postcolonialism as a discipline and a reading method. A central idea in Itzigsohn and Brown's book is the shift from an early critique of the position assigned to black people in the American narrative of progress to the deconstruction of "racial and colonial capitalism as a whole"³⁰ later in his career. Similarly, as postcolonial thought became increasingly self-aware and metacritical, it began to question not only the status allowed to people of color in the white establishment, but also the system itself, engaging in a critique of Western modes of knowledge, philosophies, and aesthetic principles and questioning their compatibility with non-white epistemologies and artistic patrimonies. It all started with Said's famous *Orientalism* criticizing the way in which the West has been using "Oriental, prophetic knowledge" as a falsely reverent phrase and, at the same time, a justification of interventionism³¹ and colonialism ("civilizing the savage.") It led to much more sophisticated and self-reflexive modes of thinking about how knowledge is perceived and constructed in different communities. Anthropologists, for example, are now emphasizing the necessity of accommodation to other worldviews and the need to be aware of the incompleteness of this adaptation.³² In literary analysis, local poetics and the subversive force of regional literary theories are finally being discussed on an academic level. For instance, one of the most often quoted articles of the past decade³³ was written by Revathi Krishnaswamy in 2010 and decries the absence of peripheral aesthetic theories and philosophies from the university, while also applying her proposed solutions in the field of Indian literary currents and showing that non-Sanskrit,

marginal epistemologies have each produced a unique strand of literature or theatrical performance. The same methodological revolution is slowly permeating diasporic studies and their exploration of various forms of cultural displacement: an author like Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, for example, whose heritage in nineteenth-century America was both Native American and British (by birth and education alike) has recently generated debates around the subversive use of Ojibwe poetics (repetitive, fragmented, visual, and syntactically ambiguous) to convey and simultaneously question attitudes and feelings which were theoretically tolerated by Puritan ethics (a mother's affection for her children, worry, a sense of duty).³⁴

When it comes to the formation of knowledge and its geographical localization, two of Itzigsohn and Brown's essential ideas in their account of Du Bois's sociology are his reliance on personal experience when constructing his theories and the constant evolution of Du Boisian thought. The former refers to double consciousness being experienced before it was theorized, but it also determines Itzigsohn and Brown's methodology, namely reading in context. According to one of the endnotes detailing their approach to Du Bois's work, were we to treat theory as a historical event, whose transfer across time and space depends on a series of limiting or galvanizing factors, "we would realize how much theory is rooted in lived experience and how much the supposedly universal works of European and North American theorists are in fact provincial accounts rooted in their place and time."³⁵ As for the latter, the organic, metamorphic character of theory within the work of one writer or on a broader level represents a strong argument for the continued necessity of critical theory and postcolonial literary research. It can be safely assumed that, in today's heated debates about race, racism, and (in)equity, even the critics of theory or disciplines inspired by Marxism agree with the minimal ethical stance of postcolonialism: equality, human dignity, the basic goodness of human life.³⁶ Thus, in the political discourse (and the corresponding mass-media narratives) currently dismissing systemic racism, collective and inherited trauma, or the need for postcolonial cultural reevaluation, critics do not attack the foundation of critical theory; instead, they usually claim that the self-criticism or self-reflexivity and the conceptual struggle inside these disciplines are useless and autotelic, since the ethical frame remains unchanged. Therefore, it is essential to recognize and to show that movements like anti-racism did not and do not happen in a void; rather, they evolve with our own understanding of the world (just as Du Boisian theory did) and require constant reevaluation.

Double Consciousness and Alternative Forms of Belonging

At this juncture, it becomes obvious why sociology is an irreplaceable discipline in tackling racism and its legacy. However, the parallels drawn between Du Boisian theory and literary studies are not just a coincidence or a similar evolutionary path. On the contrary, Du Bois's understanding of racialized subjectivity and its mechanisms of self-expression informed and made possible the theoretical framework of postcolonial critique, because it exposed the traces of slavery and colonialism as manifested in the self-perception of the diasporic subject and their perception of the colonizing other. Itzigsohn and Brown explain the influence of pragmatism on Du Bois's work, focusing on William James and George Herbert Mead, whose writings explored the formation of subjectivity through social interaction, self-reflexivity, and mutual acknowledgement and judgment. James, for instance, went as far as to hypothesize the existence of multiple social selves, defined by the need to adapt to multiple worldviews or group profiles, sometimes resulting in internal conflict.³⁷ Then, the plight of racial prejudice is not a mere external force to be confronted by the already-formed individual, but an insidious reality affecting them at every stage in their development, a climate rather than an isolated event. What is more, "as mutual recognition is central to the formation of the self, lack thereof has a devastating impact on the formation of the self"³⁸ – while this has been discussed by sociologists on an individual level, the same can be said about communities and micro-cultures lodged inside dominant ones: speaking in a void, having no proper place for self-representation, and being constantly ghettoized (albeit not in legal terms or in very transparent ways) further complicate the creative process: a celebration of one's identity can simultaneously constitute a traumatic effort to make oneself heard, palatable, marketable. Not even those writers whose work defies racial hierarchies and imposed roles or identities can fully emancipate themselves from the inertia of their own society, because, as Mead explained, the formation of a coherent self is only achieved when the individual has adapted to the expectations of the social group.³⁹ Therefore, black diasporic identity will often be fractured and placed under a considerable amount of pressure. In fact, Itzigsohn and Brown describe a disciplinary reform, conducted through Du Bois's work – traditionally, sociology has looked at individual sociogenesis particularly through the lens of interaction, communication, and sameness (building bridges between isolated human beings).⁴⁰ But for the diaspora, none of these processes make sense without their counterforces (alienation, displacement, alterity, miscommunication, difference). This is where double consciousness comes into play: in the disputed territory of continuity and rupture, belonging and exclusion, in and out.

Besides, it is also double consciousness that we might

resort to in order to address one of the most pressing questions of literary postcolonialism: where is agency?

In his 2003 contribution to *Theorizing Diaspora*, Stuart Hall draws the distinction between two major interpretations of cultural identity in the contemporary world. On the one hand, he argues, identity can be based on a shared history; it should therefore be collective and relatively fixed or secure, hidden under the more superficial strata of historical change. This view played a major role in postcolonial endeavours, e.g., it was at the core of what the poets of *Negritude* tried to achieve (Aimé Césaire or Leopold Senghor) and it inspired certain branches of Pan-Africanism. On the other hand, there is the fluid, unstable, metamorphic collection of similarities and differences that we sometimes equate with identity: "far from being grounded in mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."⁴¹ For poststructuralists like Bhabha and for Stuart Hall himself, this second concept of identity is obviously preferable: identity as performance, diasporic subjectivity more or less overlapping with Bhabha's notion of hybridity. However, while silently indulging the belief in emancipation and empowerment through cultural mobility, Hall is also painfully aware of the main problem of deconstructivism, namely the need to stop Derrida's process of signification (the endless conceptual play) in a strategic, but contingent point, keeping in mind the arbitrariness of one's position in the game.⁴² Therefore, although postcolonialism is undoubtedly rooted in deconstructivism and conceptual scepticism, it must be stressed that agency and hybridity (or performative, fluctuating subjectivity) do not always go together; the diasporic subject cannot be universally defined as a metamorphic entity escaping categorization, for the simple reason that this label might prove just as oppressive as the national one. In fact, diasporic fiction often explores this exact point of contention through characters whose agency, power, and self-determination lie with the possibility of filiation and tradition: Leila Aboulela or Jhumpa Lahiri, for instance, focus on the silent resistance of diasporic women, who refuse to be measured by the Western standards of female success; to them, the useful fiction of the nation is not only a home, but also the only space where they can speak. Double consciousness can prove to be a useful instrument in navigating these theoretical tensions, precisely because it never predicts an end to the oscillation from one side of the Veil to the other (American and black, a vocal presence and a descendant of slavery), without invalidating the two identitarian poles, either; without denouncing them as oppressive fictions. At the same time, Du Bois's sociology of twoness resonates with Paul Gilroy's contemporary criticism of



cultural studies. Gilroy has repeatedly highlighted the still ethnocentric and geographical circumscription of culture in academic work and its impact on the way in which the black political discourse perceives nationality, arguing that new forms of belonging need to emerge in response to the trauma of population displacement: his “black Atlantic”⁴³ is one such community in which movement does not exclude a shared identity and solidarity – a secret, “negative continent” between Africa and America, created on the slave ships which dissolved all nationalities and bred a new form of kinship and togetherness, rooted in trauma and creative survival. A similar idea was developed by Du Bois in the later stages of his Pan-African involvement: “His understanding of the movement’s goal also changed. Rather than pursuing a belief in uplifting Africa and the Africana diaspora into Western modernity, Du Bois started to seek answers to the questions of how to build independent nations within the historical institutions of African societies that promoted a collective orientation.”⁴⁴ Granted, Du Bois still employs the nation as a form of organized community, but it is obvious from his work and Itzigsohn and Brown’s analysis that new forms of belonging and solidarity were being moulded, even within a recognized, self-celebrating nation like America. In short, Du Bois understood that Western modes of development had proved unable to aid the emancipation of the black diaspora and needed to be reinvented.

In World Literature studies, as well, the postcolonial emphasis on the formation of subjectivity has produced numerous critical responses to the most influential systemic perspectives on history and literature (Casanova, Moretti, even Wallerstein). It is in no way a complete shift away from these attempts at transnational generalization, especially since – besides their valuable insights into the book market, cultural competition, genre fluctuation, to name but a few – these theorists ultimately expose the Western understanding of national culture (its archetypal birth, the struggle for representation, and the criteria which finally consecrate a national literature). Writing from the centre, where, Casanova argues, the intricacies of peripheral subjectivity are invisible,⁴⁵ they also practice and display the internal logic of Western literary theory. The response to ambitious works like *The World Republic of Letters* has, in fact, been most productive, with critics even embarking on case studies in order to disprove Casanova’s sweeping assertions and producing brilliant analyses of regional literary theories and the social forces shaping the local concept of “literature.” In this sense, Christopher Prendergast has argued against the use of national competition as the single explanation of literary history,⁴⁶ showing that a writer like Wordsworth, for instance, typically read as fighting against French hegemony, might have been driven by different imperatives altogether: his preference for the language

of the “common English man”, Prendergast argues, has more to do with class (against aristocratic, eighteenth-century poetry), gender (a masculine literature which combats feminizing influences) and region (rural vs. urban) than a direct rivalry between England and the rest of the world. But the most problematic aspect of Casanova’s work in terms of double consciousness⁴⁷ is the implicit uniformization of the concept of literature, namely the equivalence between autonomy and literary development, refinement, and merit. It is a subtle judgment made by Casanova all throughout the book, and it reduces the subjectivity of the postcolonial writer to a limited profile and a preset destination: he must seek freedom from national literary norms and aesthetic patterns, so that experimentalism can consecrate his work on an international stage and grant him access to the hegemonic centre; these are the celebrated authors, and “what makes them heroes is that, in besieging the citadels of the literary imperium, they succeed in conquering not only for themselves but for the institution of literature a certain ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy.’”⁴⁸ The postcolonial preference for case studies, then, derives from the desire to explore the formation of literary subjectivities in their own spaces, paying much more attention to the often intricate and traumatic experience of literary production on the margins: always checking the dominant narrative and wondering if it will tolerate diasporic specificity; regarding oneself from within the community as well as from the outside; tensions between the racial label applied by modernity to each and every one of its inhabitants, and, on the other hand, the irreplaceable individuality of the writer, beyond their ethnicity or skin colour – all of these require that literary criticism and theory employ not only sociocriticism as it has been understood in recent decades, but also a mode of reading inspired by sociological phenomenology and the analysis of diasporic sociogenesis.

Affect and a New Definition of Humanity

Discussing the affective shift brought about by Du Boisian sociology might seem utterly non-scientific or irrelevant, further cementing the belief that personal experience and emotion have no place in the academia. For the black diaspora of twentieth-century America, though, affect and optimism were not only instrumental in finding the energy and the courage to fight systemic injustice, but also necessary for the expression of a new humanism. First, Du Bois was adamant that power and creativity could be reclaimed even in the face of institutional oppression.⁴⁹ This emphasis on beauty and identity born out of trauma is still incredibly strong in African American communities today, as it has been in postcolonial studies. Miraculous phenomena like the Caribbean Surrealist movement, for instance, used political occupation and creolization as a springboard

into truly unknown literary territories. Critics like Andreea N. Williams, whose work has already been mentioned, or Simona Bertacco⁵⁰ have delved into the formal experimentalism which sometimes characterizes diasporic writing, as a way of telling “abnormal”⁵¹ – i.e., traumatic – stories. Paul Gilroy, in his turn, has often expressed his belief in a “historical mission” of “cultural insurgency” in the wake of oppression, although suffering can never be redeemed or justified through the cultural effervescence it triggered.⁵²

Finally, the affective turn of Du Boisian sociology also challenged the supposedly anti-racist narratives of the Reconstruction. The already discussed discourse surrounding the commemoration of slavery immediately after the Civil War presents a paradoxical image of the black soldier and establishes the limits of his humanity through this very reductive and politically convenient profile: the machismo of the outraged warrior preparing for self-sacrifice (especially since black soldiers were most at risk, having minimal or no previous instruction), combined with a *surprising* degree of civility (discipline, obedience, self-control). In other words, the very discourse that was supposed to celebrate black people and to allow them unprecedented freedom once again locked them inside an acceptable configuration of humanity – anything which exceeded the boundaries of this perfect military behaviour (unbridled anger, the refusal to give one’s life for the country of his colonizers, an aversion to violence even in times of war) would not be tolerated. With Du Bois, racial prejudice was addressed from a different angle. Instead of proving to the white population that the former slaves could actually be useful to white society (as the soldiers were) or that their future behaviour would be carefully programmed, Du Bois countered the theories of scientific racism by turning its language and methodology against its own agenda: in *The Health and Physique of the Negro American*, he demonstrates that there are no significant physical differences between the races, then focuses on the cultural and psychological differences between racial

groups (all caused by sociohistorical conditions, rather than a racial essence or nature). Eventually, reaching the conclusion that there cannot be a scientific definition of race,⁵³ since whiteness and blackness were ideological constructs predicated on skin colour, but actually motivated by the need to other any exploited population, he rethinks humanity as manifested primarily through affect and creativity (with black “sorrow songs” as a perfect example): a much broader definition of the human being than the one allowed during Reconstruction. The wondrous thing, however, was that Du Bois knew how to take advantage of the fine line between advocating for black humanity through their creative solutions to oppression and virtually celebrating their power and agency.

Conclusion

Not enough has been said in this article about the relevance of Du Bois’s work, as well as Itzigsohn and Brown’s excellent analysis to the discipline of sociology. I am convinced that those in the field will discuss it much better than I ever could. Instead, the aim of this text was to explore how Du Boisian sociology prepared the ground for postcolonial literary theory, its mutations, and its crises. First, Du Bois’s color line remains an example for balancing a global perspective and contextualization, given that racism has reared its many ugly heads throughout Western history, causing distinct types of trauma for each community it plagued. Second, the impact of double consciousness on the way in which we read postcolonial literature and theory is constantly renewed, as World Literature has since become a back-and-forth game between generalization and localization. As for the exact historical moment that we find ourselves in, when politics and the media keep distracting us from the ultimate ethical pillars of postcolonialism – the dignity of human life and its inherent worth – Du Bois’s work can refocus the humanities on their duty to dialogue and criticism.

Notes:

1. José Itzigsohn & Karida L. Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois: racialized modernity and the global color line* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), xiii, 1, 15, 133.
2. Of course, by introducing Du Bois at the centre of the discipline, the canon of sociology is not only expanded, but also challenged in its fundamental assumptions. Speaking about his recent book, José Itzigsohn explicitly states that the field of sociology still bears the mark of colonialism, especially through ahistoricism and a preference for atheoretical analysis. Bringing Du Bois into the conversation should finally change that. See José Itzigsohn, “On W.E.B. Du Bois, Double Consciousness, and Racialized Modernity,” interviewed by Ștefan Baghiu and Vlad Pojoga, *Transilvania* no. 2 (2021): 1-10; Ștefan Baghiu, “W.E.B. Du Bois în studiile contemporane: conștiința dublă și modernitatea rasializată”, *Transilvania* no. 2 (2021): 22-30.
3. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha shows that the supposedly universal grand narratives of the nineteenth century (evolutionism, Christianity, utilitarianism) were also used as colonial strategies. Partly because of their employment in political and economic domination (which weakened their perceived objective nature) and partly because of their geographically limited value (as dogmas of the modernized West), the great stories of modern historicism were questioned and challenged when confronted with the worldview of colonized peoples: “it is the ‘rationalism’ of these ideologies of progress that increasingly



- comes to be eroded in the encounter with the contingency of cultural difference.” Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 195.
4. G. C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988).
 5. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 118.
 6. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 85.
 7. *Ibid.*, 101-103.
 8. Andrea N. Williams, *Dividing Lines: Class Anxiety and Postbellum Black Fiction* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 3.
 9. Sarah Heinz, “‘Not White, Not Quite’: Irish American Identities in the U.S. Census and in Ann Patchett’s Novel *Run*,” *American Studies* 58, no. 1 (2013): 85.
 10. *Ibid.*, 84.
 11. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 4.
 12. Bruce Nelson, *Irish Nationalists and the Making of the Irish Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 69-70.
 13. *Ibid.*, 69.
 14. John Brannigan, “Ireland, and Black! Minstrelsy, Racism, and Black Cultural Production in 1970s Ireland”, *Textual Practice* 22, no. 2 (2008): 230.
 15. Bruce Nelson, *Irish*, 70.
 16. A. N. Williams, *Dividing Lines*, 178-179.
 17. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 16, 191, 226, 245.
 18. Angelene Jamison, “Analysis of Selected Poetry of Phillis Wheatley”, *The Journal of Negro Education* 43, no. 3 (1974): 408.
 19. Walter Mignolo, *Dezobediința epistemică*, trans. Ovidiu Țichindeleanu (Cluj: Idea, 2015), 41-42.
 20. It must be said that the decolonialist cult of local specificity and the analytical rigour it requires are not universally accepted in contemporary critical theory. Critics like Vivek Chibber, for instance, have accused postcolonialism (and especially subaltern studies: Spivak, Chakrabarty) of perpetuating an Orientalist mindset by positing that different cultures have produced different political psychologies, which are now incompatible and untransferable. Such theorists, Chibber argues, ignore the universalization of capitalism and the similar forms of oppression and resistance created around the world. They indulge in an unfounded critique of Marxism and weaken the global potential for solidarity. However, although Chibber believes that Marxist political critique is still viable – albeit rooted in the European Enlightenment – I have chosen to test Du Boisian sociology against the ambitions of decolonial thought, in an attempt to navigate the branches of contemporary postcolonial theory and to place Du Bois in the network. Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013), 284-296.
 21. In this sense, Du Boisian sociology and Chibber’s understanding of capitalism are convergent.
 22. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 14.
 23. In the eighteenth century, the same debate took place between Hume, who believed that black people simply *could* not readily emancipate themselves and start producing art and abstract thought due to their limited natures, and James Beattie, one of the first theorists to engage in contextualization: “that every practice and sentiment is barbarous which is not according to the usages of modern Europe, seems to be a fundamental maxim with many of our critics and philosophers.” James Beattie, “A Response to Hume”, in *Race and the Enlightenment*, ed. Samuel Chukwude Eze (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 36.
 24. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 9.
 25. Kathryn Schultz, “The Perilous Lure of the Underground Railroad”, *The New Yorker*, August 2016.
 26. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 9.
 27. *Ibid.*, 82.
 28. Such speeches were given at the inauguration of the Freedmen’s Monument or the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Monument.
 29. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 17.
 30. *Ibid.*, 16.
 31. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 46-47.
 32. In her studies of Mesoamerican feminine culture, Sylvia Marcos points out that Western anthropological methodologies often fail when faced with distant cultures, especially when they do not rely on the same abstract categories as Western science and philosophies (the opposition between the sacred and the secular, God, linear progress and so on).
Sylvia Marcos, *Femeile indigene și cosmoviziunea decolonială*, trans. Ovidiu Țichindeleanu (Cluj: Idea, 2014), 109-111.
 33. Revathi Krishnaswamy, “Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization”, *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 4 (2010).
 34. In a recent anthology devoted to Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, Robert Dale Parker compared the translations into English done by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Jane’s husband and an ethnologist studying “the vanishing savage”, with a new translation from Ojibwe, commissioned specifically for this book. He analyzes Henry’s interventions not only in terms of added stanzas

- or themes, but also regarding the style, the length of the verses, the emotional profile of the poetic voice, all of which are (intentionally) lost in translation. Thus, Parker's most interesting conclusions have to do with Jane Johnston Schoolcraft's stylistic subversion of the female and poetic roles imposed on her, the freedom granted by the manipulation of the Ojibwe language even when writing Romantic poetry, and the elision of agency through distortive translation.
- Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky*, ed. Robert Dale Parker (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).
35. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 226.
 36. In an article for *NA - Advances in Consumer Research*, Val Larsen and Newell D. Wright set out to criticize Habermas and what they consider to be second-wave critical theory by focusing on the supposedly authoritative role of the critic in relation to the society they aim to converse with and emancipate. Without trying to provide a rebuttal of their argument, it is noteworthy that the principles they identify behind critical theory are, in their words, "abstract ideals subscribed to by most everyone." Val Larsen and Newell D. Wright, "A Critique of Critical Theory: Response to Murray and Ozanne's *The Critical Imagination*," *NA - Advances in Consumer Research* 20 (1993).
 37. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 32-33.
 38. *Ibid.*, 33.
 39. *Ibid.*, 34.
 40. *Ibid.*, 17.
 41. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in *Theorizing Diaspora*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel & Anita Mannur (Blackwell, 2003), 236.
 42. *Ibid.*, 240.
 43. Paul Gilroy, "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," in *Theorizing Diaspora*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel & Anita Mannur (Blackwell, 2003).
 44. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 10.
 45. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 33-34.
 46. Christopher Prendergast, "Negotiating World Literature," *New Left Review* 8 (2001): 109-110.
 47. The double consciousness theorized by Du Bois is, of course, site-specific and has to do with racialization and the presence of racialized bodies in the territory dominated by their former colonists and enslavers. However, inasmuch as Du Boisian twoness refers to a double gaze and self-perception (within the metropolis, the dominant group, the centre, but also on its margins), geographical and cultural peripherality have *certain* elements in common with the fragmented subjectivity of the racialized individual.
 48. Christopher Prendergast, "Negotiating World Literature," 108.
 49. "The overwhelming presence of the color line did not mean that people living behind the veil lacked agency." Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 189.
 50. In her 2014 article on the link between the diaspora and aesthetic virtuosity, Bertacco argues that difficult and experimental texts by postcolonial authors make an ethical demand on the reader, asking them to assist the colonized subject while they elucidate the meaning of their own experiences and search for the best ways in which to tell the story - non-European poetic strategies, which defy the colonizer's canon.
- Simona Bertacco, "Between virtuosity and despair: formal experimentation in diaspora tales," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 50, no. 6 (2014): 662.
51. *Ibid.*, 648.
 52. Paul Gilroy, interviewed by Thomas Hylland Eriksen. A conversation entitled "Conviviality in a Seamless World," 2019.
 53. Itzigsohn & Brown, *The Sociology of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 21.

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