

Ripping the Veil: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Long Memory of the African Diaspora

Tristan Striker

W.E.B. Du Bois began trespassing the minute he entered the hallowed halls of Harvard University. As the first person of African descent to earn a doctoral degree from Harvard under the tutelage of one of American history's progenitors, Albert Hart, Du Bois's legacy is commemorated today in the form of the Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, which is considered widely to be the epicenter of African and African American scholarship. After his upbringing in New England and his education at Fisk University, Harvard was the culmination of Du Bois's journey towards formulating one of his most overlooked endeavors: the study of African and African American history. Among his historical works, *Black Reconstruction* stands as one of the best examples of the critical life of Du Bois's historical works. Now seen as an early exemplary work of revisionist historiography, Du Bois's challenge of the Dunning School of Reconstruction History was not received well in the Jim Crow United States. This important historical work is not the first or only intervention Du Bois offered into the production of the American historical narrative. Two works in particular, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America* (Du Bois's doctoral dissertation published in 1896) and *The Negro* (1915), stand as two exemplary works on the history of the African slave trade and the African continent, respectively, and are not merely revisionist historiography. Du Bois's intervention into the historical narrative crafted by traditional historians about the concept of Africa and slave trade has been documented and discussed by Robert Gregg and Eric Sundquist, among others. The true impact of these works lies in the way in which they trespass the hallowed halls of history through memory. Using Du Bois's idea of the "long memory" of the African diaspora, a memory transmitted and passed down through generations of the descendants of formerly enslaved individuals, this paper explores how Du Bois's trespassing memory overthrows history.

As such, history is explored in this paper not as an academic pursuit, a manifestation of collective memory, or even as the social framework of memory, to use Maurice Halbwachs's term for written records, archives, and monuments. Instead history is treated as an epistemic position and an ontological lens, a way to organize, make sense of, and define the way the world works and is put together. I interrogate historiography, the

methodology with which historians organize, hierarchize, and prioritize cultural mnemonic productions that make history a highly effective mechanism of control. In other words, I propose that Du Bois unveils the hegemonic and oppressive nature of traditional historiography, built as it is on ideas of progress, Providence, and destiny that inherently buries what it deems unworthy of remembrance. Du Bois, as one of the excluded, the forgotten, trespasses on the sacred ground of history by embracing what he calls the long memory of the African diaspora over the inclusion of people of African descent in the already existing narrative of history, a flawed and violent space made powerful by its exclusionary nature. Du Bois's sentiment of feeling "imprisoned, conditioned, depressed, exalted and inspired" within "the folds of this European civilization," his feelings of being "integrally a part of it and yet, much more significant, one of its rejected parts" demonstrates how he viewed himself as a trespasser within an epistemology that depends on his status as an outsider (Du Bois *Dusk* viii).

In order to fully understand Du Bois's subversive and radical acts of trespassing in his "historical" works, it is important to look at the way in which Du Bois conceived of his own imagination and process of remembering, a process that is articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Dusk of Dawn*. In *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois reflects that "one thing is sure," which is that the bond he shares with his "ancestors" is based on a "common history," the suffering of "a common disaster," and a "long memory" of the "social heritage of slavery" (Cited in Gilroy 126). Du Bois conceives an idea of a collective memory as the source not just of his identity, but also of the memory that holds that identity together. Paul Gilroy, when talking about Du Bois and the use of music, reveals the importance of religion in bringing to the surface "the buried social memory of that original terror," the Middle Passage (129). Implicit in this practice is a belief that there is a buried social memory that can be dug up and revived. This buried social memory is similar to what Pierre Nora calls "true memory," or "gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body's inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories" (Nora 13). Like Joseph Roach, I believe in the supremacy of Nora's true memory in opposition to "history," which Nora sees as "voluntary and deliberate, experienced as a duty...never social, collective, or all-encompassing" (13). However, while Roach explores true memory through bodily performance in *Cities of the Dead*, I theorize the act of imaginative writing as a powerful way of deconstructing what is often seen as the primary method of historical production: written records and archives. Nora acutely constructs true memory as "tak[ing] refuge" from the "flame" of history, which by its very organizational nature consumes and reduces to ash whatever does not fit into the system it is helping create. Like Du Bois's presence in Harvard belies the very exclusionary history its scholars primarily produced, Du Bois's written history of Africa and people of African descent belies these same historical narratives that resist African and African American participation. These memories trespass the historical conception of race, elucidating history's weak links. Using recorded history, the cornerstone of historiography, as a Trojan horse allows Du Bois to breach the high walls of the ivory establishment. Du Bois's presence at Harvard changed this institution's history as a school to never have graduated an African American individual from its graduate school. In similar fashion, Du Bois's historical writings change traditional historiography and its tendency to exclude people of African descent from its practices.

Before we can engage Du Bois's struggle with history, we must walk the path he took to arrive at his idea of the "long memory" that, to him, unites people of African descent across the world. There were three especially crucial moments to Du Bois developing this idea: his time in New England as a child, his time at Fisk University, and his time at Harvard University. The New England upbringing juxtaposes with his time at Fisk, allowing Du Bois to see more clearly the bond that ties people of African descent he encounters together. This insight into the mechanisms of diaspora, however shallow, set up Du Bois's more thorough engagement of it at Harvard through the discipline of history, a pursuit that would prove to be life-long. The repetition of his New England upbringing in most of his autobiographical works, including his interview with Moses Asch, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and *Dusk of Dawn*, establishes the importance that upbringing had in setting him up to appreciate what he termed "Negro culture," which he encountered fully for the first time at Fisk University. In *W.E.B. Du Bois, A Recorded Autobiography*, Du Bois tells Moses Asch,

"I go down to Fisk University and suddenly I am in a Negro world where all the people except the teachers (and the teachers in their thought and action) belong to this colored world and the world was almost complete. I mean, we acted and thought as people belonging to this group. And I got the idea that my work was in that group. That while I was, in the long run, going to try to break down segregation and separateness, yet for the time I was quite willing to be a Negro and to work within a Negro group" (Side 1 Band 1).

This feeling of separateness from the accepted norm, of being part of a group of people who occupied another world, would stay with Du Bois through his educational career. Most important in this parcel of the interview is the way in which Du Bois, looking back, predicts his own future in breaking down racial barriers, one that he subjugates to the responsibility he had to the "Negro group" that he believed himself to belong to. In fact, Fisk is the source of the "feeling of a separate race", and the importance of this feeling must not be understated (Side 1 Band 1). Even if we as readers believe in the importance of moving beyond the confines of race, something that Du Bois himself believed, the reality is that Du Bois's time in New England, a largely white area of the country, increased the impact his subsequent time at Fisk would have. The memory of this moment of identity formation for Du Bois, one articulated verbally in an interview, is all the more potent. Du Bois's idea of responsibility to a social group, articulated verbally, is part of that long memory, the true memory of the African diaspora. Throughout the rest of the interview, Du Bois talks frequently about how his responsibility manifested itself through a dedication to "Negro history," on which he "began to concentrate" at Harvard under Albert Hart, one of the first professionally trained historians, and continued to work on at Atlanta University.

The social memory Du Bois learns of while at Fisk is what he taps into when constructing his narrative in *The Negro* and *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*. The long memory that unites the Pan-African diaspora gives Du Bois and others who identify as being part of this kinship system a different way of interpreting the world, what Du Bois famously calls the "veil" of race. In *the Negro*, the veil does not distort the vision of the subject. On the contrary, *The Negro* and *The Suppression of the Slave Trade* reveal, among other things, what Du Bois really meant with that metaphor: the world of which he and others are a part has a distorted view of him and the other world he occupies and imposes

this view on those they distort, much like one would throw a veil over someone's eyes. Du Bois works not just to throw off this veil, but also to take this veil apart, thread by thread, and figure out how it functions as a tool of mnemonic oppression. The veil, Du Bois reveals, is the fabric of history, a heavy veil worn proudly by those who produce it and thrown unceremoniously on those who it not only distorts to others, but to themselves whenever they look within and at each other.

Du Bois begins tearing the veil of history at Harvard while writing his dissertation under Albert Hart, a famous and influential historian and one of the pioneers of scientific historiography. How strange to find that Du Bois does not begin in Africa at all, but in the United States. Once here, Du Bois does not dive into the history of the African people by engaging their memory, but rather the memory of the nation's governing body, the law, and the archives of reactions to and interpretations of that law. While strange at first, this harbor from which Du Bois begins his voyage back to the darkened myth of the Euro-colonial concept of the "Dark Continent" can actually, in hindsight, be the only place to start. Seeing as to his place of residency and education at Harvard University, one of the primary factories of Western History, Du Bois engages history with the tools given to him by the very people who helped write it. Du Bois carries this tendency, begun in *The Suppression of the Slave Trade To The United States of America*, with him through the rest of his career. "The question of the suppression of the slave trade," Du Bois knew, "is so intimately connected with the question as to its rise" (5) that the two cannot be separated. The suppression Du Bois is referring to is of course not merely the eventual ending of the slave trade due to pressures from within the body politic and without, but also to the suppression by that body of any acknowledgement of that question within its collective memory. In other words, Du Bois is not so much interested in tracing the fall of the slave trade in the United States, but more in the ways in which the country as a whole, through its laws and the voices of its elected representatives, forgot the slave trade and the role it played in the building of this nation. So when Du Bois states the purpose of his book to be "to set forth the efforts made in the United States of America, from early colonial times until the present, to limit and suppress the trade in slaves between Africa and these shores" (178), he is not merely revising history. He is explaining its mechanism of forgetting. Du Bois is both setting forth the efforts to end the trade and the efforts to erase the trade from the collective memory of the nation. History is not about revision. It is about erasure, and Du Bois knows this. This is why much of the text of his dissertation is devoted to exposing the ways in which history has been used to forget what cannot and should not be forgotten.

As we have said before, Du Bois's first supra-historical act is the exposure of forgotten elements of memory to the historical gaze, thereby delimiting and refuting history's infallibility. The second, more sinister act comes in the form of revealing actual negligence in the specified historical moment. These acts of negligence translate to the ways in which they are not remembered by the larger collective, despite the existence of numerous records. Again, it is not so much the exposure of the records that is important, but rather the exposure of the neglect to which these records have been subjected. A particularly poignant example presents itself in chapter eight, appropriately called "The Period of Attempted Suppression." Du Bois's text trespasses on history through an engagement of law, one of the primary recording artifacts. By juxtaposing laws as the primary form of historical documentation with the interpretations and reactions to these

laws by those who attacked or defended them, Du Bois sets the stage for the grand act of neglect that he proves was pervasive throughout the 19th century. After noting the lack of documentation supporting the government's reinforcement of anti-slave trade laws, Du Bois shows that lawmakers were "criminally negligent" in reinforcing the law and prosecuting offenders, with an air of "official silence" hanging over the entire chain of U.S. antislavery laws (2763). The U.S., in short, was wary of having "her criminal negligence in enforcing her own laws thus exposed" (3481). By making the sacred realm of law the primary area of critique, Du Bois is able to "expose" not merely negligence, but the "blissful, and perhaps willing, ignorance of the state of the trade" (4465). Like collective memory, law relies on collective agreement and belief in its rightness, a concept Gregg Crane calls "consensual determination of public standards" (7). In the case of the slave trade, there existed a discrepancy between the written law, which forbade it, and the belief in that law by those who were meant to follow it. This is no civil disobedience, since those that were disobeying the laws forbidding the slave trade were the lawmakers themselves. In order for this disobedience to be feasible, those who created the laws had to turn a blind eye to what was right in front of them. More importantly, those who would later craft the narrative of American history would have to forget this disobedience ever happened. Like the lawmakers in the early 19th century, historians have dutifully forgotten this part of American history. As Herbert Klein notes, "Despite its central importance in the economic and social history of Western expansion, its fundamental role in the history of America...the Atlantic slave trade remained one of the least studied areas in modern Western historiography," a lack based on "ignor[ance]." Klein continues that "Even today...the gap between popular understanding and scholarly knowledge remains as profound as when the trade was first under discussion," with a "surprising ignorance" even pervading "the scholarly world at large about the nature of the trade" (xvii). In other words, Du Bois points to a mnemonic, rather than historical, handicap, a willful forgetting that is predicated on national economic interests. This mnemonic handicap leads to the formation of history as we know it, a history that leaves out the large role the U.S. played in the slave trade through the Civil War.

While Du Bois acquires his intimate knowledge of the inner workings of history from his education at Harvard, it is his own engagement with the "long memory" of the African diaspora that bestows on him the ability to challenge the sovereignty of history in his subsequent texts. Where the dissertation provides Du Bois with a space in which to engage the instrumentality of forgetting to the formation of history, his later works allow Du Bois to use the "long memory" of the African diaspora to apply this knowledge to a life-long struggle with the infamous veil that Du Bois believes separates the races. In the "Suggestions of Further Reading" section of his seminal and oft-forgotten *The Negro*, he prefaces what is presumed to be his source material for his own attempt at a complete history of the African continent with: "There is no general history of the Negro race." This simple declaration impacts in multiple ways the reader and the text that precedes it. First, Du Bois's sense of verbal irony is put into practice in how closely he echoes Hegel's violent assertion that Africa lies outside of the confines of human history: "At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit...What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History" (Hegel 99). On the very first page, Du Bois, tongue firmly in cheek, refers to "those...who would write universal history and leave out Africa" (9).

His direct mention of universal history can leave no doubt to whom he is referring. This echoing of Hegel is no coincidence. Like Narcissus, Hegel sees only his own memories and refuses to hear those of the proverbial Native in the bush, turning said Native into an echo-like reverberation doomed to haunt the outskirts of the universal historical narrative. Du Bois, then, is echoing, returning back upon Hegel and his followers their arrogance and privilege. Here, then, we find another way in which this simple statement functions in the text. It, too, echoes, ripples, and reverberates throughout the text and throughout subsequent historiography concerned with Africa and those of African descent. The further verbal irony is found directly after the statement, where we find the sources Du Bois used to compile his text. However, (and this is where Du Bois's brilliance shines) these sources, as Du Bois points out, are incomplete and some are even "ridiculous" (273). *The Negro*, then, is not merely Du Bois's attempt at writing Africa and Africans all over the world into an already existing universal history. Instead, Du Bois challenges the very notion of history as it was known at the time of *The Negro's* publication. As he notes a little further down the page, "None of these authors write from the point of view of the Negro as a man, or with anything but incidental acknowledgement of the existence or value of his history" (273). How, then, can Du Bois suggest these further readings to his readers, let alone base his own history on these sources? Du Bois reveals the unreliability of existing knowledge about Africa by making the reader rely on incomplete texts for further reading. Next to this, Du Bois reveals the shortcomings of traditional historicity through the very practice of it. Like any responsible historian, Du Bois gives his sources. In providing them, he exposes the mechanism of silence of which they are all a part. He uses traditional historiography to turn history on its head.

Du Bois continues the unraveling of history in the preface to the text: "The time has not yet come for a complete history of the Negro peoples" (6). Again, tongue in cheek, Du Bois places his work within the larger context of universal history. The complete history, lying somewhere in the future, contradicts Hegel's and many others' beliefs that African history, if there is any, can be fully articulated and is already finished, whatever civilization they had having died out long ago. Instead, Africa's "history" is a constant process. In explaining why, Du Bois lists a series of problems, including lack of archeological data and a need to understand documented source materials in other languages. The most important reason he gives has nothing to do with traditional historiography, but relates directly to human interpretation and the inherent problems surrounding it. Du Bois points to the 'racial prejudice against darker peoples' (6) as the most potent poison slowing the pulse of African historiography. The world, according to Du Bois, is not ready for "judicial appraisal of the peoples of Africa." The problem is not the lack of sources or the sand that covers the monuments and physical evidence of grand civilizations. The problem is the lack of vision, the prevalence of ignorance that clouds the eyes of those beyond the African diasporic community who would gain something valuable from this history.

Du Bois's efforts in *The Negro* are an affirmation of his own importance to the process of producing historical narratives. Instead of accepting his prescribed fate as an ahistorical non-entity, doomed to exist only as a subject of the Western historical gaze, Du Bois affirms his role as a judge and jury of the testimony offered by some extremely arrogant witnesses to the passing of time; witnesses, it must be said, that have led themselves to believe it their sole duty to interpret this passing of time and impose that interpretation on everyone else. *The Negro* engages the "dialogical structure" of "trust" implicit in testimony, where the witness's credibility relies on the trust of the listener. As Paul Ricoeur reveals in

Memory, History, Forgetting, "Certification of the testimony then is not complete except through the echo response of the one who receives the testimony and accepts it" (164). Du Bois rejects the testimony thus far brought before him, and instead acts as judge, piecing together the knowledge available in order to paint a comprehensive picture. The person in the bush spying on Narcissus is not the Native out of white imagination, but something much more powerful: the echo without which all that self-aggrandizement means nothing. For after Narcissus waists away, it is Echo that keeps his memory alive. Only Du Bois takes it one step further. His echo denies Narcissus's greatness, and in its place produces a different memory that reverberates throughout the decaying archives of history, a memory that shows Narcissus in his true colors.

The issue of interpretation and the centrality of memory become apparent when one notices what Du Bois chooses to focus on in *The Negro*. While the first part of the book is largely devoted to establishing the early history of the African continent, the entire work is tinged with Du Bois's own subjective voice. Despite the fact that Du Bois insists on the importance of objectivity and the scientific method, he cannot resist making his immense project personal. In other words, Du Bois's human history must privilege memory over history, since by his own admission there are not enough sources available to construct a historical narrative through the scientific method. In saying that "The history of Africa is unusual" (10), Du Bois is referring to the ways in which African cultures have been "uprooted...leaving only misty reminders of the ruin in the customs and work of the people" (29). Unlike European history, African history, according to Du Bois, exists only in the monuments and memories of the people. Traditional historiography's reliance on monuments, documents, and archives often leaves out the very human elements contained implicitly within these source materials. This is an inevitable result of objectivity, something that Du Bois respects but clearly moves away from in *The Negro*.

Du Bois remembers African history in the sense that, by his own admission, at the time of his writing *The Negro*, "the Negro has no history, culture, or ability" (139). Next to the echoing of Hegel's assertion quoted above, that Africa lies at the "threshold of history," the verbal irony in this sentence is thick. Not only is Du Bois subtly referring to the lack of such traditional history in the book itself, but he also makes clear the reason why those of African descent, and his text, have none, or rather *where* they have none. They have no history and ability "for the simple fact that such human beings as have history and evidence culture and ability are not Negroes!" (139). This sentence lends itself to misinterpretation due to its verbal complexity. In short, Du Bois dismantles the perception of Africa's "unhistorical" non-existence by exposing a simple truth, namely that the historical framework within which Du Bois is working is one produced by men and women who separated themselves from those they perceived to be "Negroes" and put them outside of history. In other words, the idea of history itself is a construct created by people who subsequently *chose* not to allow those of African descent into that epistemic framework. Du Bois extends this metaphysical moment by making "evidence," the very fabric of history, into a verb that describes the action, or production, of "culture and ability." Evidence is not a thing, but an action. Du Bois is not at all the conciliatory student of the history. Instead, he is fully aware that the landscape he is traversing is one where his subject matter is not welcome. Du Bois here answers his own repeated question: "Why is it, then, that so much of misinformation and contempt is widespread concerning Africa and its people...among men

of education and knowledge?" (138). The education and knowledge is the problem, troubling the dark waters of Du Bois's "historical" text, making it much more than just a reinterpretation of "ridiculous" sources.

So the question arises again: what is *The Negro*? It is clearly not an historical text. While Du Bois seems to privilege the historical conception of knowing the past, he also understands that it must be separated from the past at large. In this context, Du Bois's interrogation of the slave trade, a central concern in this text and the beginning of his historical career, takes on a different and more important meaning. To Du Bois, the "historical facts" are where one finds problems, not answers. To him, the "origin" of "color prejudice" comes from these facts, not "physical or cultural causes." Instead, these facts in themselves are the source of the problem, for the "answer" lies in "modern Negro slavery and the slave trade" (142). Next to the devastating dismantling of historiography, Du Bois's research on the slave trade from the perspective of the African continent may be his greatest achievement in this text. In his discussions of the slave trade, he puts into action his critique of history and supports the importance of memory. We learn, simply, that the objectivity and empiricism of history is a myth perpetuated to hide amnesia on a large scale: "The natural desire to avoid a painful subject has led historians to gloss over the details of the slave trade and leave the impression that it was a local west-coast phenomenon and confined to a few years. It was, on the contrary, continent wide and centuries long and an economic, social, and political catastrophe probably unparalleled in human history" (155). Next to the obvious revelation of the actual scale of the international African slave trade, Du Bois's remarks reveal his thorough understanding of the limitations of history as both a discipline and an ontological and epistemic system. The historians Du Bois engages and cites at the end of *The Negro*, as well as those that come after, forget what they deem detrimental to the overall progress of their version of human history. Klein reasons that the slave trade "was ignored because of its close association with European imperialism and a resulting lack of interest in a morally difficult problem" (xvii). The consequence, however, is that historians all acknowledge not just the existence of the slave trade in the act of forgetting it, but also the subjective and mnemonic nature of historiography. The use of the word "impression" is no coincidence. Du Bois is fully aware of its Platonic origin (see *Theaetetus and Phaedrus*). These historians wanted to leave an impression in the collective memory wax of what they perceived to be a progressing civilization that could not afford to sink in the awful truth of its wealth and power. The impression in itself, however, is ineffable proof of the existence of the very memory they wanted to obliterate. He subsequently tears the fabric of history asunder, leaving in the gashes a space that would provide many with the opportunity to remember on their own terms. It started with Du Bois's choice to remember the slave trade, a choice that goes as far back as his days at Fisk and Harvard.

The massive cultural amnesia concerning the slave trade presents Du Bois with an opportunity to display the powers of memory and the foibles of forgetting. Throughout his text, Du Bois continuously makes clear the importance of the slave trade to the society in which he lives. In so doing, he brings to the surface his own apparent conflict over memory and history. In effect, Du Bois demonstrates history's need for forgetting. However, he makes clear, through his own efforts, that choice is not reserved for those who write it. Above all else, Du Bois's discussion of the slave trade influenced many scholars and authors after him. Du Bois is one of the first to frame the slave trade as the "first step in modern

world commerce, followed by the modern theory of colonial expansion" (233). In addition, Du Bois is also one of the progenitors of the theory that the slave trade is not just the cause of modern "color prejudice," but also of the stunting of African development (67) [Walter Rodney, in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, acknowledges Du Bois's pioneering work in naming European imperialism and its effect on African development]. All of these theories, while centering on Du Bois's missions to both deconstruct prejudice and propagate Pan-Africanism, are attached to the slave trade and its legacy. It is this legacy, in turn, that becomes most valuable in *The Negro*. With this text, Du Bois produces a space wherein one can begin to unravel this legacy in its myriad forms.

Du Bois's narration in *The Negro* is unabashedly artistic and imaginative. The imaginative thread that holds the text together, Du Bois's "so short a story" of "mainly conclusions and generalizations" (6), further belies the text's historical pretensions. Moreover, this imaginative thread places Du Bois's enterprises firmly in the mnemonic sphere. The book's first paragraph is worthy of quoting at length.

Africa is at once the most romantic and the most tragic of continents. Its very names reveal its mystery and wide-reaching influence. It is the "Ethiopia" of the Greek, the "Kush" and "Punt" of the Egyptian, and the Arabian "Land of the Blacks." To modern Europe it is the "Dark Continent" and "Land of Contrasts"; in literature it is the seat of the Sphinx and the lotus eaters, the home of the dwarfs, gnomes, and pixies, and the refuge of the gods; in commerce it is the slave mart and the source of ivory, ebony, rubber, gold, and diamonds. What other continent can rival in interest this Ancient of Days (9)?

The constant references to the ways in which Africa has been and continues to be viewed by historians and colonizers mirror the ways Du Bois focuses much of *The Souls of Black Folk* on correcting the gazes of the white interloper. However, since he concerns himself with his own memory, he indirectly reveals the way his own sight, his self-conception, has been compromised by these gazes. The "mystery" of the "dark continent" romanticizes Africa, placing it firmly within the realm of the imaginary. By summarizing current historical interpretations of the African continent, Du Bois exposes the ways in which these supposedly scientific viewpoints are based on anything but empiricism. Du Bois's discussion of the different names further brings to the surface the many ways Africa has been and continues to be conceptualized by everyone who does not believe themselves to be a part of the physical confines of the continent. This plethora of names shows an Africa that resists definition. Instead, Africa, or whatever name it receives from those who think it in their power to define it, exists only in the imagination. This is exactly what Du Bois realizes, both in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Negro*; Africa is an imagined place, even in the Pan-African sense, one that exists in the memories of the displaced individuals who imagine their return. Paul Gilroy discusses the difficulty Du Bois had with incorporating Africa into "modernity," which led him to instead to see Africa as "a mythic counterpart to modernity in the Americas" (113). While I agree that Du Bois sees Africa as mythic, I would amend Gilroy's assertion to say that Du Bois was fully aware of this mythologizing and its sources and consequences. There was not so much anxiety around not being able to fit Africa into modernity (a concept Du Bois critiques with works like the ones discussed here) as an awareness of the nature of modernity and its shortcomings. What Du Bois powerfully

shows in *The Negro* is that even those who believe themselves above memory, who see themselves within the hallowed halls of history, participate in the crafting of an African myth that contributes to the perception of Africa as existing outside of history.

The long memory, not the tradition of history, enables Du Bois to be able to see the legacy of the slave trade. Du Bois's concern with the future is not limited to the hope he shows for the African continent and its descendants spread across the globe. His awareness of the way in which the slave trade has poisoned the world is staggering considering the sources he was working with. To Du Bois, in direct opposition to many of his contemporaries, transatlantic slavery was "different from that of the past" (this after having spent a considerable amount of time expounding on African slavery before 1450) in that it "came in time to be founded on racial caste, and this caste was made the foundation of a new industrial system" (Du Bois *Negro* 149). Du Bois does not have radically different archives at his command, nor does he have a way to travel back in time to interview those directly involved. He does, however, have the long memory of the African diaspora, which gives him that second sight. In this case, he sees what traditional historians, up to the moment of the publication of *The Negro*, had been unable to see. The system that "traded human beings" was of "such tremendous proportion that the physical, economic, and moral effects are still plainly to be remarked throughout the world" (149). The adverb "plainly" is important here and signifies Du Bois's heavy critique of history and historiography. It is embarrassing and telling enough that the result of a trade that lasted more than 400 years had been ignored and mutated by historians up to the point of Du Bois's own extensive study, an embarrassment Du Bois exposes at the end of his book through his citations. It is worse that these effects were "plainly" to be seen. The plainly remarked effects of the slave trade can no longer be ignored, however, thanks to the efforts of Du Bois in his historical works.

Even the moments where Du Bois seems to reproduce or engage traditionally Eurocentric ideas about race are trespassed by the tensions of his own vision and the long memory of the African diaspora. Much has been made of the ways in which Du Bois apparently panders to traditional white ideas about race within *The Negro*. There are many such moments. Take, for example, the discussion of color in chapter one. A scientific proposal that differences in color are due to climate, harkening back to geohumoral theory, is preceded by a declaration that "no scientific definition of race is possible" (13). This contradiction seems to work against Du Bois's empiricism, but this is exactly what Du Bois wants. Throughout the text, Du Bois undermines deterministic scientific theories with his own insights and observations. When one reads on about race and the scientific reason for color, one learns that "there have been repeated efforts to discover, by measurements of various kinds [like the hair measurements Du Bois provides in the ending sentences of the paragraph right above this one!], further and more decisive differences which would serve as really scientific determinants of race" (15). The measurements and theories Du Bois summarizes earlier in *The Negro* function like a presentation of an object meant to be dramatically dismantled seconds later. One does not come for the object. One comes for the destruction, in grand fashion, of said object. Du Bois explodes the racial myths perpetuated by European anthropologists and historians by juxtaposing them to his own interpretations. To Du Bois, hair follicle measurements do not adequately explain the way "typical races are continually changing and developing, amalgamating and differentiating" (15). Du Bois takes this opportunity to explain to anyone not yet on board that "in this little book...we are

studying the history of the darker part of the human family” (15). The book studies the history. It does not attempt to write or rewrite it. This is an important point to clarify for Du Bois. He is not constructing a history, but studying one already in existence and dismantling it. This part of the human family, furthermore, “forms...a social group distinct in history, appearance, and to some extent in spiritual gift” (15). This declaration, while clearly referring to the African diaspora, is powerful in its ambiguity. Du Bois seems to go against his own strategy by differentiating the diaspora based on two things he systematically deconstructs throughout his text (history and appearance) and one that he does not define (spiritual gift). This sentence, better than any other, displays Du Bois’s own veiled interpretation, one where his New England upbringing and Harvard education clashes with the long memory of the diaspora. The African diaspora is distinct in these three categories, not because Du Bois deems them to be so, but because they are perceived as such by a scientific tradition in which Du Bois is well versed. Du Bois is making this claim from the standpoint of an historicist. Despite what Du Bois knows to be true, the diaspora continues to be viewed as a cohesive entity not because of common experience or memory (Du Bois’s ideation) but because of fallacious myths.

Here, then, Du Bois claims a role among the long line of writers who contributed to the building of the City of Bones (one of August Wilson’s figurations), an imagined place where forgotten and denied memories collect. What makes Du Bois different from creative writers like Wilson, Toni Morrison, and Charles Johnson is that he produced this space within, and trespassed on, the hostile currents of scholarship and academia, a legacy that cannot be understated. Du Bois understood that, despite the outcry of many critics of Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism, keeping this “long memory” intact and participating in its development was essential to African American social development (Sundquist 474). However, his efforts of preservation went beyond the spirituals. Using these spirituals as vessels of memory served to imbed within *The Souls of Black Folk* the mobility and displacement inherent within these sorrow songs (470). Du Bois begins here what he would finish in *The Negro*. However, in this text, Du Bois does not use the “sorrow song”. Instead, he uses the memory of the slave trade and the Middle Passage, the source for the sorrow song and its aesthetic of displacement, to bring about the same result: a text, seemingly in the Western historical tradition, upon which is superimposed the “long memory” of the African diaspora. As noted above, Du Bois successfully trespasses on the sacred ground of Western historiography. The result of this preservation of the memory of the slave trade and the Middle Passage was an explosion of historical and creative texts that resounded with the echoes of these memories. Furthermore, the extensive research Du Bois did, as well as the interpretation he offered in *The Negro*, helped produce a literary space in which artists were for the first time free to engage these topics free from the restricting influence of those “ridiculous” narratives offered by the veiled historians.

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Tristan Striker is a Ph.D. Candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center. He is currently writing his dissertation on memory and history in African American literature, with special emphasis on the ways in which memories of the Middle Passage resonate throughout African American literature and how these memories subvert the silencing that inevitably comes with the movement of history. Tristan has taught all over the CUNY system, including City College and John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and is currently a Writing Fellow at Bronx Community College.