

# The Souls of an Ex-White Man:

W. E. B. Du Bois and the Biography of John Brown

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*For Herbert and Fay Aptheker*<sup>1</sup>

DEATH ALWAYS COMES AT LEAST TWICE TO ONE WHOSE LIFE IS MARKED BY greatness, once in life and again in biography. And, more radically, if death is always at least double, then it most assuredly is never only double. One death always begets more death. If death, however, is understood first of all or only as loss, then the rich drama, the generosity, of this incessant doubling will most assuredly remain closed up and withdrawn. The difficulty of tracking some of the modalities of this irruptive doubling of death always shows itself in the scene of biography.

There is perhaps no better example of this generosity of the double, of the excessive giving that arises within the space of absence, than the narrative of the death or deaths, or lives, of John Brown. It is this enigma that sets the stage or scene of W. E. B. Du Bois's telling of this tragic and beautiful story.<sup>2</sup>

It is this second death, of course, that must occupy our attention, for it is within its unfolding that the first is named, maintained, and given meaning or a kind of livelihood. John Brown, at least, will always lead a double life within the space of this second death, the death of biography: once as a

friend of the Negro in life, and again as their martyr in death. Both stories are wont to be told enough. For the telling of the story of Brown's friendship with the Negro is also the story of the death of a "White" man. And the telling of the story of the martyrdom of John Brown is also the story of his life as icon of the possibility of a new beginning, the story of a social being formed within the idea of belonging simply and purely to a "White" race who yet came to recognize himself as configured within the movement of an unsettled question, one that he, perhaps strategically, continued to call by the name of the "Negro question." This latter movement, of course, would be one in which neither reference, "White" or "Negro," could be easily set aside. For this reason, the story of John Brown can only be a story with a double reference. For this reason, it is enigmatic and difficult of telling.

Yet, of the many biographers of John Brown and of the incessant and ceaseless re-telling of his life's story in almost every genre of literature, including song, we and ensuing generations have W. E. B. Du Bois to thank for bequeathing to us the story or narrative of the *double* soul or souls of John Brown.

What we know is that John Brown was a "White" man who died to achieve the freedom of the Negro. What we do not yet realize, or really know, is the extent to which he already lives again, through death, as some historical being that is yet to come. Of course, he survives as an icon or as an ideal—a monumental, even if oft-denigrated, figure who stands as an appeal for the future. Also, however, he survives within the risk and loss of living as a flesh-and-blood man, configured within the very limits and frame of the world into which he was born. He survives, that is, as an example of a flesh-and-blood man whose character acquires its peculiar force only in and through the limits of his being, rather than because he transcended them. This survival is, thus, not absolute; rather, it is always at stake in the struggle toward another liberty or liberation; it is always at risk of giving up or reproducing that which it seeks to overthrow, perhaps due to the very force with which it seeks to carry out this overturning. This latter thought is the lesson, the historical inscription, both obvious and subtle, that W. E. B. Du Bois's *John Brown* can teach us. It is a telling of something within the frame of what we think we know, in such a way that the unknown within it begins

to acquire a certain unstable and enigmatic legibility. This is the performance of Du Bois's narrative. How is this so?

## I

First, we might surmise that it is, perhaps, because he was not absolutely decided on the moral bearing of his tale, unlike so many studies of the life of this man, that Du Bois did not fail to recognize that, even if named primarily as an apocalypticism, one often articulated in the idioms of evangelical Christianity, death was the central meaning of life for John Brown. Du Bois's narrative is positioned within the space of a certain horror, one that we may usefully describe as metaphysical. In the turning folds of Du Bois's narrative of Brown's boyhood, maturity, marriage, fatherhood, violent militance, and martyrdom, Brown seems unable to inhabit the present in any simple fashion. Moved perhaps by the theological position of death within Christianity, or perhaps by a sense of chance and fate within a young and expansive society—one marked strongly by a sense of the frontier that was nineteenth-century America—Brown developed a profound sense of disjunction from the world into which he was born, as Du Bois describes it, especially the institution of slavery. This disjunction was marked by a sense of the way in which the possibility of absolute loss remains open within the most mundane and secure activities of living. Herein, it seems, Du Bois positions a certain question as open within the consciousness of John Brown: is it only the Negro American—for whom slavery as violence can be considered to open a movement of metaphysical horror or withdrawal with each inscription within the flesh, the body, the way of being of the slave—is it only such a being who can live within death, upon its jowls so to speak, and yet give rise incessantly to stark, originary, perhaps meaningful life? It is this question or one like it, we might suggest or hypothesize, that forms itself somewhere in the shadows, the dark recesses, of this melancholic Du Boisian narrative. The response, Du Bois's or Brown's, formulated by Du Bois through Brown, is that it is not simply or only the Negro American.

Du Bois describes a melancholic John Brown, compelled to challenge the very terms of his fate or death. In doing so, the narrative that his life and

precipitate death makes possible outlines a tear in the fabric of providence, and thus marks his struggle with the limits that have been bestowed upon him as privilege. It moves in some tenacious relationship of maintenance or affirmation, as well as a sense of loss, of the sense of possible being that has been withdrawn, the ways of being a “white” man that have been marked as beyond the acceptable or the normal, that is, the ways of being other than a “White” man. This struggle, marked so tenaciously within the life of John Brown, we might call the melancholic movement or structure of whiteness.

Perhaps because he senses or realizes that Brown’s melancholia is rooted in his uncertain struggle over the possible meanings of his own death, Du Bois was able to recognize that the uncertain outcome of that struggle motivated and organized the life and practice of John Brown.

## I I

There is a second register of Du Bois’s telling of this story, however—one that gives it historical and intellectual uniqueness. And, we might suggest that herein, Du Bois reveals the secret that so many, writing on the life and death of John Brown, have been unable to discover or to recognize. Du Bois, I suggest, recognized within the life of John Brown a simple, but fundamental and radical orientation. And in addition, Du Bois found a means by which to bring this radical orientation of John Brown into renewed relief. What was this orientation? John Brown seemed to understand that, to the extent that in America of the nineteenth century, especially at the end of the antebellum era, he was socially and historically understood as “white,” as a “White” man; that in order for him to live he must give this socially-granted life over to death (or not to live, or to maintain himself only within a kind of death by living as a “White” man); or rather, we might say, that in order to live, he had to take this socially- and historically-granted life and dispense with it, kill it, destroy it, give it up to the risk and possibility of absolute dissolution. This meant that, within the circuit of his own experience, he had to die twice: once as that ordinary historical being called a “White” man, and again, as that flesh-and-blood being who can only be given a “proper” name: John Brown.

Within this death of John Brown “proper” opens another movement of the double, one whose possibility and bearing is already set loose in the first movement of double death. This second movement of the double, of course, is the figure of the double with which I opened this preface, and under whose heading I have placed the question of biography. This complicated figure of the double arises because the “proper” name can never have an absolutely proper reference; that is, it can have no proper birth or death, cannot come into being on the basis of some true reference, or dissipate with the absolute loss of such a reference. With regard to “whiteness,” Brown, for example, realizes that it has no true or simple ground. It remains an open question as to whether he realized fully the implication of the possibility that it had no true or simple death. With regard to the first death, the death of John Brown in flesh and blood, John Brown “proper,” the radical impossibility of the proper as such means that this extraordinarily proper physical death must be re-lived, recreated, rebirthed incessantly, in discourse, biography of one kind or another; this is precisely because there is not, nor can there be, any absolute referent or absolute loss or absence of such. Hence, John Brown must be an example that stands only for itself or himself, an historical monstrosity or dream that our discourse or words cannot fail to produce. We are compelled, then, to make up for this ineffability of the proper, its reclusiveness. We try to do it in discourse, in narrative, in biography. As such, John Brown is condemned by history, not only to live *or* die again, anew, with each generation, but to live *and* die, again, anew, perhaps always. Du Bois, it seems to me, practiced a recognition of this enigma.

If John Brown seemed to live this necessity of a double cathexis, of the death of the “White” man and the death of John Brown “proper,” did he in fact maintain some actual recognition or reflection of such? Certainly, he understood both necessities; but it must remain a question as to whether he understood both together. It is Du Bois’s narrative that weaves these two questions together in discourse. This is the enigmatic line of originality in Du Bois’s elaboration. This is perhaps what it means for Du Bois to say in the preface to the first edition that the only “excuse” for his study is a “new emphasis,” a “different point of view.” How does this unfold, if we follow Du Bois?

The recognition on John Brown's part that, I have suggested, set in motion this movement of the double was not simple or pure; it was not *sui generis*. We must not forget that the imagined thought of such a possibility—that of an absolute repleteness—was the ultimate reference of cathexis for the nascent discourse and practice of “whiteness” in mid-nineteenth century America. Thus, it must be underlined here that this recognition of the necessity of a certain disjunction from the given moorings of his identification as a “White” man, and through it his struggle with the coming meaning of his death—a meaning that by necessity preceded for him his death—that this recognition was itself achieved or produced by the strange movement of a “White” man becoming “otherwise,” other than simply “white,” perhaps. We will not try to name all at once what he became—avoiding, first, the idea that he became something else all at once or finally, and also, secondly, the idea that he became, simply, Negro, or Black. We can instead rest with Du Bois's formulation in the preface to the first edition of this study, that Brown, perhaps of all “Americans has perhaps come nearest to touching the real souls of black folk.” Of course, it is only meaningful to rest with such a thought if we also follow its path of implication, the path followed by Du Bois in the narrative itself. In this narrative, that “touch” is always a response, a mark of a passion, carried bodily, invoked by a call or gesture, a solicitation that is otherwise than a simple or passive invitation. Within the narrative, whether by a particular figure or as the slave in general in America, it was the Negro American that, according to Du Bois, solicited the recognition of John Brown. We can underline that this solicitation was not passive by considering what it set in motion within the movement of self-identification of John Brown: a movement of becoming other. On the one hand, becoming “otherwise” for Brown was both to become other than a “White” man, while yet unavoidably reproducing that very figure of being, even in the movement of becoming other, of becoming other than simply “white.” On the other hand, this movement, this becoming other, is also to become what one “is” through or by way of the other. It is, thus, this risk of self in the detour or passageway through the other that remains the scene of the production of the deaths and lives of John Brown. It is the historical form of this passage to self by way of the other that Du Bois takes as

a palimpsest for the inscription of his own narrative of John Brown “proper.” It is the history of this passage by way of the other in the production of John Brown that Du Bois’s narrative seeks to tell.

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Du Bois writes in his first preface that “the viewpoint adopted in this book is that of the little known but vastly important inner development of the Negro American.” What exactly does Du Bois mean by reference to something he calls the “inner development” of the Negro or African American?

Nearly every commentator on Du Bois’s study of John Brown, since its first publication in 1909, has remarked or called attention to this passage. Yet, it seems to me, most have not succeeded in providing a convincing account of the structure of this “viewpoint”—that is, the organization and pertinence for historiographical study of the “inner development of the Negro American.” Yet, the position that a reader takes concerning this formulation will affect, to some extent and in a decisive manner, almost every other aspect of one’s interpretation of this great study. To the extent that this formulation remains inscrutable or simply opaque to the reader, one would be hard-pressed to recognize or trace the lineaments of Du Bois’s elaboration and its most decisive gestures. The central bearing of Du Bois’s approach is not in and of itself substantive or primarily substantive; that is, it is not first of all or ultimately about particular or specific empirical or concrete matters. Rather, the meaning of this reference to the “inner development of the Negro American” is primarily an epistemological one, having to do with the very way in which the object of critical reflection comes into view or being. This is what Du Bois means when he refers to “point of view” as the site of the originality of his study. In particular, this epistemological frame has certain theoretical effects, we might say, having to do with the orientation of an interpretation, or of the explanations put forth in this biography. It does not have so much to do with a particular substantive insight, or set of such insights or revelations. It should almost go without saying that still less does this originality have to do with the production or circulation of facts. Indeed, we know from Du Bois’s own statements that his is a study

produced almost entirely on the basis of previously published sources, entailing, thus, no archival investigation by him. What Du Bois enacts, as he says that he has sought to do, is quite simply to study John Brown from the point of view of the Negro. Yet this, as I have already suggested, is where the simplicity ends concerning this narrative.

This point of view that arises within the “inner development of the Negro American” concerns the consciousness, or more precisely the self-consciousness, of the Negro. What scholars and other commentators on this study of Du Bois’s have yet to realize is that Du Bois formulates and carries out his approach to his study of John Brown on the analytical premise of the relevance of the double cathexis of the Negro, of the double reference of the Negro, to both an Africa and an America, to the interpretation of the life story and deaths of a “White” man, John Brown. What is this relevance?

Du Bois had already proposed the enigmatic bearing of a double reference within the social and historical identification of the Negro American in “Conservation of Races” (1897) and “Strivings of the Negro People” (1897), and in the revised version of the latter that stands as the opening essay of his classic *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* of 1903.<sup>3</sup> For Du Bois, in the historical and existential sense, this movement of double identification was set loose within, or as the formation of, the self-consciousness of the Negro American through the palpable force of a limitation or mark (often, but not always, of exclusion) which would distinguish one social figure from another under the heading of race. Within the movement of this double cathexis, Du Bois describes a sense of “double consciousness” as the sense of being, the relation to self, or the self-consciousness of the Negro American. It is to this structure that Du Bois refers when he speaks of the “inner development of the Negro American.”

In that essay, Du Bois had famously written that:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this



sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (*Souls*, 3 [chap. 1, par. 3])

What is first of all important here is to recognize something of the architecture of this formulation by Du Bois. We might consider what Du Bois calls “second-sight” as a sort of general historical structure of reflection (one which of necessity refers to the possibility of reflexivity in general, even if that is not its primary idiom of elaboration here by Du Bois or our primary concern). Within the frame of this historically-situated reflection and reflexivity, we might consider, then, a sense of this reflexivity, a sense of being, to arise for a particular historical and social figure. The figure is the Negro. This sense of being Du Bois describes as a kind of “double consciousness.” Secondly, what must also be remarked is something of the kinetic force of this formulation for Du Bois. For him, this movement of double consciousness, although appearing or motivated in its appearance under the heading of the negative, also appears under the heading of the affirmative. Du Bois names the structure of “second sight” as also a “gift” in the very locution of his announcement of its formulation. And despite his concern for the difficulty—the violence and paralysis—that can attend this movement of the double, within the very next paragraph of this essay, Du Bois refuses to disavow (or affirms, to put it precisely) either term of the double reference that configures this movement of “double consciousness,” even if he affirms each differently.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He

simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (*Souls*, 4 [chap. 1, par. 4])

For Du Bois, in this essay, the difficulty of this double reference did not mean that the Negro should reject one term or aspect of its identification for another. Rather, this doubling was the very future or possibility of its becoming. It marked out the very space and possibility of desire and that which is yet to come.

Within the gesture of this affirmation of the bearing, the legibility, the heterogeneity, of a double reference is situated the conceptual resource on which he draws to illuminate the question of John Brown.

This affirmation sets loose within Du Bois's conception of the African American a profoundly rich understanding of the possibility of a new way or new ways of social being, ways that would be excessive to the simple and oppositional divisions that would dominate the social field in which the Negro American arises. This figure of the double gives rise to an excessiveness within the American context in a two-fold manner. On the one hand, it maintains the social being of the Negro in a domain of identification that refuses to abide by the oppositional logic or categories of racial distinction; one *can* be both a Negro and an American. It confounds the ultimate premise of racial distinction, a categorical or oppositional logic of distinction or identification. On the other hand, it affirms a difference as operative in America, one that Du Bois, perhaps strategically, perhaps anachronistically (and perhaps not) names as "African." This difference produces a heterogeneity within the general social field of American life and history, one that would be organized according to a racist logic of categorical distinction and be given over to a narrative of purity, of the self-replenishment and historical becoming of a white subject, an historical and social being supposedly arising of its own initiative, unmarked by any sign of difference. Such a subject would be understood to realize the purity of its own self-image in every form of historical and social activity. For this reason, we might suggest, Du Bois considered the reference to Africa, or a difference that could not be simply dissolved, an essential reference in the recognition of the position of the

Negro in America. He would not let the mark of such a reference or difference be erased from the historical ledger in positioning the African or Negro in America. He maintained such, even as he resolutely insisted upon the indentification of the Negro as also American, also in a manner that could not be simply dislodged or dismissed.

It is this double reference of the Negro American that Du Bois uses, critically and affirmatively, to reopen the question of the meaning of the death and the life of John Brown. How does he do this? It is at the precise site, in a conceptual sense, on the ground of the conceptualization that he has already formulated with regard to the African American, the conceptualization of an historical difference that Du Bois has already named as “African” in the 1890s, as we saw in the passage from *The Souls of Black Folk* quoted above—it is with reference to this difference that Du Bois begins to tell, or re-tell, the narrative of John Brown.

Du Bois begins this biography, not with a statement of when and where John Brown was born in America, but with a first chapter, titled “Africa and America,” about the contribution of Africa to the making of America. Let us recall the extraordinary epigraph and opening two paragraphs of this opening chapter. In so doing, we may be able to make legible the analytical bearing of Du Bois’s formulation of the heterogenous reference of the Negro American in his biographical study of John Brown.

“That it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet saying, Out of Egypt have I called My son.”<sup>4</sup>

The mystic spell of Africa is and ever was over all America. It has guided her hardest work, inspired her finest literature, and sung her sweetest songs. Her greatest destiny—unsensed and despised though it be—is to give back to the first of continents the gifts which Africa of old gave to America’s father’s fathers.

Of all inspiration which America owes to Africa, however; the greatest by far is the score of heroic men whom the sorrows of these dark children called to unselfish devotion and heroic self-realization: Benezet, Garrison, and Harriet Stowe; Sumner, Douglass and Lincoln—these and others, but above all, John Brown (*John Brown*, 15).

Du Bois thus situates John Brown squarely within the folds of the productivity of Africa in America. However, both terms of this double figure are essential for the formulation of Du Bois's argument, for this positioning of the Negro American and John Brown to be coherent and attain analytical force. If there is no reference to Africa, only to an America, then analytically one is hard put to remark the distinctiveness of the role or function of the Negro in the development and making of American history, or of the great historical figures in American history. If there is no reference to America, and the Negro is understood as essentially and definitively something other than American, as African in a simple and primordially-given sense, then the Negro in Africa might conceivably have a place in human history, perhaps even tangentially in America, but there could be no analytic or historiographical recognition of its position within the great maelstrom of historical becoming that was the making of the American project (for some four centuries by the turn of the last century). In order to recognize the bearing of the "inner development" of the Negro on understanding the death and life of John Brown, this essential doubleness of the Negro in America must be affirmed at every level of generality. This affirmation of the double stands at the root of Du Bois's interpretation of John Brown.

Du Bois frames this question first in a global manner, as "Africa's" relation to "America." America's "destiny," its great future, is, for Du Bois, to be responsible to the great legacy of ancient Africa. This ancient legacy is borne out in American history through the inspiration to greatness that the history of the Negro in America sets loose or calls forth in America. Within this global and broad social frame, Du Bois positions the telling of the story of great figures. It is here, positioned within the broad sweep of world historical movements, that Du Bois situates the telling of the story of one individual. If the ancient legacy of Africa is moving in America, it is through the striving and passion of the Negro American. Exactly how such inspiration is produced in the life of John Brown is the prime and motivating question of this biographical narrative. And as the telling of the narrative, as such, bears no proper substitute, I will only remark, as a question, the way in which Du Bois's discourse accomplishes or fails to accomplish its task. It is the concern of this introduction simply to formulate and bring the character of this task into a certain relief.

What should be added here is that, for Du Bois, his study was exemplary—exemplary in every way: of the position of the Negro in America, both in the past and in the future; of the possibilities for rethinking the history of America from this standpoint; of the place of a great individual in the life of a nation; of the passion necessary for the historian or biographer to recognize the meaning of history (to offer a few examples). It is perhaps for this reason that its title is iconic, standing for the man, the book, the symbol—each, in a movement of reference that has a shuttling instability, with the final meaning of this title resting simply with none. This instability, of course, is part of the instability of the proper in general, and thus part of what opens the question of John Brown, incessantly, to the future.

With the economical and deft formulations of his opening two paragraphs, then, Du Bois sketches the entire frame of his study and begins his narrative. We must remember and maintain in heightened relief the fact that this narrative does not begin in New England, in Connecticut, where John Brown “proper,” so to speak, was born in the flesh, but by reference to Africa, to another beginning.

What this other beginning means narratively or interpretively is that Du Bois will construe John Brown as configured in a double cathexis, just as Du Bois has described himself and the Negro American in general, with a double reference to both Africa and America. That is to say that Du Bois will describe for John Brown, a man socially and historically understood as “white,” a structure of double reference, a kind of reference that he had already described for the Negro American as a kind of “double consciousness.” Thus, in a theoretical sense—that is, with regard to its angle of interpretation—Du Bois’s study is a sustained inquiry into the structures of “double consciousness” of a “White” man, understood by Du Bois to be configured as such by way of his being with reference to the Negro in America.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, what is of equal importance is a structure of possibility, a general epistemological condition of Du Bois’s narrative that is sedimented everywhere, but remains almost just beyond legibility: namely, that the essential condition of possibility of Du Bois’s own narrative, of his “new emphasis” in the telling of the story of John Brown, of his “different point of view,” is the structure of double cathexis, of “double consciousness,” that configures the

ground of his own social being and, for Du Bois, the Negro or African American in general. He, Du Bois, is only able to tell the story of John Brown from this “new” standpoint, that is, of recognizing John Brown’s production and self-identification as a social being by way of a double reference to both the Negro (or Africa) and America, by way of his own inhabitation of a certain double reference. Du Bois’s own “double consciousness” is the condition of possibility of his narrative of John Brown’s “double consciousness.” As Du Bois will write of himself just a few months after the publication of *John Brown*, in a radical and ground-breaking essay, “The Souls of White Folk,” he is both a Negro and a “White” man, formed within the movement of the production of each; and hence, he can claim to see and understand each from the “inside,” so to speak.<sup>6</sup> Du Bois, perhaps, wrote that later essay on the basis of the accomplishment of the narrative of *John Brown*. The thesis of the later essay, to which I have just referred, might well be taken as the ultimate thesis of the biographical study, *John Brown*.

What Du Bois has accomplished here is the study of the production and dissolution of “whiteness” by way of an account of the history of the position of the Negro in America.<sup>7</sup> Du Bois delivers John Brown to us, and to the future, by situating the meaning of John Brown as a figure arising within or through the meaning of the Negro, the African, in the history of America and, by implication, the modern world. This is the uniqueness and enduring legacy of Du Bois’s study. In this regard, it stands as a monument to the position of John Brown within the historical consciousness of the Negro in America.<sup>8</sup> Yet it also stands as an exemplary testament to those “White” men who, over the centuries past and in those yet to come, have discovered from the “inside” out the enigmatic difficulty of living on the basis of a kind of death, one that entails “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals,” configuring the meaning, for oneself and thus for history, of one’s own body, one’s own flesh. For we must remember or recognize that it is ultimately of John Brown’s relationship to himself, his sense of himself, his self-consciousness, that Du Bois so persistently and carefully seeks to give an account. We can perhaps recognize the form or movement of two “souls,” one bending into the other, one moving inextricably within the other, in a statement of John Brown’s given near the end (John Brown

“proper,” the one who has already sought the death of John Brown the “White” man), the statement with which Du Bois closes his study: “You may dispose of me very easily—I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still unsettled—this Negro question, I mean. The end of that is not yet.” Who knows but that perhaps this *John Brown*, this biography, this story that begins from a death, is the living proof of this statement or last testament of John Brown, “proper.”



#### N O T E S

1. The central thought of this essay had been in gestation for some years when, in mid-February 1998, I was privileged to be the afternoon guest in the home of Dr. Herbert Aptheker and the late Fay Aptheker in San Jose, California. After a nearly two-hour conversation with Dr. Aptheker, in the course of which, among other matters, he shared some poignant autobiographical reflections with me, we shared a fine meal at their favorite restaurant. Upon my return to my home and study in North Carolina a few days later, the text offered here announced itself early one morning, “all in a day as it were.” Other than the addition of bibliographic specifications, it remains without essential modification. I dedicate it thus to Dr. Aptheker and his late wife Fay Aptheker, in honor of their lifelong companionship, and with my deepest thanksgivings for their generous hospitality.
2. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *John Brown* (New York: International Publishers, [1962] 1972, reprint); originally published in 1909, but reissued by Du Bois in 1962 on the occasion of the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, with a new preface and textual additions by the author. The present essay was initially solicited as a new preface or introduction for a reprint edition of the original publication of Du Bois’s biographical study of John Brown to be presented in the “Race in the Americas Series” of Johns Hopkins University Press. It was delivered in February 1998. For reasons unclear to me, that reprint edition was never published. I have left the marks of that aspect of the occasion of its preparation intact here. Since that time, two new editions of this biography have been released: *John Brown*, ed. John David Smith (Armonk, N.Y. and London, England: M. E. Sharpe, [1909] 1997); and *John Brown*, ed. David Roediger (New York: Modern Library, [1909] 2001). Although distinctively helpful respectively, needless to say, neither of the introductions to these new editions was able to bring into thematic relief the central motif of Du Bois’s approach which I attempt to name in this essay. In

this sense, in both this particular case and in general, Du Bois remains (not only to be read but more fundamentally) to be thought.

3. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Conservation of Races," *The American Negro Academy Occasional Papers*, no. 2 (Washington, D.C.: American Negro Academy, 1897); W. E. B. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic Monthly* 80 (August 1897): 194–98; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 5th ed. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1904). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Souls*, followed by page number along with chapter and paragraph numbers.
4. This quotation is from the King James Version of the *Holy Bible*, "The Gospel According to St. Matthew," 2:15. The locution of the biblical passage is dense, as it is the interpretive apostolic voice that follows upon the scribal voice that has just recalled the "angel of the Lord" appearing in a dream to Joseph, after the visit of the magi, directing him to "flee into Egypt" until the passing of King Herod, who would seek the death of the Christ child. It refers, among other texts, to Numbers 23:22, "God brought them out of Egypt," but especially to Hosea 11:1, "When Israel was a child then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt." If the latter, especially, is so, then perhaps "Israel, therefore, the 'son' of the prophet's texts, prefigured the Messiah." The latter quotation is from the editor's notes to Matthew 2:15 in *The Jerusalem Bible*, ed. and trans. Alexander Jones et al. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1966). However, the locution of Du Bois's act of quotation is dense in a commensurate and, in this case, allegorical fashion. The quotation performs by way of Du Bois's placement, as it also references the double configuration of the prophetic voice—here by way of allegorical recollection of the ancient Jews of Israel, Egypt, and the prophecy of the coming of a Messiah, folding over this ancient and sacred account of deliverance (already an iterative account, which is both historical and spiritual, by the act of the inscription that is the Gospel of Saint Matthew) to reveal another structure of prophetic reference, one that is still yet to come, both fictively within the frame of the narrative of the biography that is yet to be told, and historically within the symbolic, specifically moral, horizon of the "America" that was the scene of existence for John Brown and for Du Bois in the time of his writing, and which, perhaps, remains for us. I leave aside, for now, other aspects of this densely embedded act of quotation.
5. In paragraphs 10–15 of the third chapter of *Souls*, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," Du Bois offers a capsule narrative of the development of African American leadership from 1750 to 1900, placing John Brown within this genealogy on a plane of continuity with Charles Lenox Remond, William Cooper Nell, William Wells Brown, and Frederick Douglass as key figures in the mid-nineteenth century who represented a new historical moment of the "self-assertion" of Negro rights "by himself." That placement must be understood with reference to the formulation of Brown's historical position, proposed by Du Bois in the biographical study. Likewise, Du Bois's genealogical



placement of Brown in *Souls* affirms the orientation that I have followed in reading this biography (*Souls*, 47–51 [chap. 3, par. 10–15]).

6. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," *Independent* 69 (18 August 1910): 339–42; reprinted in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, compiled and introduced by Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson, 1982), 2:25–29; also reprinted in a conjoined fashion with Du Bois's slightly later 1917 essay, "Of the Culture of White Folk," as one long essay in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson, 1975), 29–52. *Darkwater* was originally published in 1921 to offer a perspective on the devastated horizon of a demoralized world after the First World War from a "veiled corner," a view from which, as Du Bois writes in the "Postscript" (presented in the usual place of a preface), "the human scene has interpreted itself to me in unusual and even illuminating ways (*Darkwater*, vii)." Du Bois titles the penultimate chapter of *John Brown* "The Riddle of the Sphinx," and then in *Darkwater* includes his poem by the same title, "The Riddle of the Sphinx," as the "intermezzo" that follows the chapter therein called "The Souls of White Folk." Both editions of the two volumes cited above in this note are part of the *Complete Published Works of W. E. B. Du Bois*, compiled, edited, and introduced by Herbert Aptheker and published by Kraus-Thomson Org. Ltd. (White Plains, New York) in 37 volumes (1973–1986).
7. I briefly formulate the distinctiveness of this approach with reference to our contemporary discussions in the opening stages of the essay, "Originary Displacement," *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 249–86. In this context, the fundamental character of Du Bois's formulation in the opening essay of *Souls*, 8 (chap. 1, par. 9), almost in passing, of the "half-named" Negro problem comes into traceable relief.
8. Benjamin Quarles, *Blacks on John Brown* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), and *Allies for Freedom: Blacks and John Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press); Philip S. Foner, "Blacks and John Brown," in Philip S. Foner, *History of Black Americans: From the Compromise of 1850 to the End of the Civil War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), 240–65.