

*Historical  
Fiction as  
Sociological  
Interpretation  
and  
Philosophy:  
on the Two  
Methodological  
Registers of  
W. E. B. Du  
Bois' The Black  
Flame*

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**Abstract**

Between 1957 and 1961, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote a lengthy work of historical fiction, a trilogy collectively titled *The Black Flame* (1957, 1959, 1961). Through the lenses of four American families, the narrative offers an illuminating glimpse into the American, political drama of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on the degree to which “the negro problem” featured in important decisions and events. While this paper will examine a few of the specific arguments that emerge from *The Black Flame*, I am primarily concerned here with a meta-question, namely Du Bois’ curious methodological choice in this late-life project. I argue that as historical fiction, *The Black Flame* operates on two methodological registers with historical, sociological, and philosophical import. First, the text serves as “sociological interpretation.” In this capacity, the sociologist-qua-creative-artist uses “pure imagination” (Du Bois 1957, 315) in the service of articulating and understanding the “distinct social mind” (Du Bois 1898, 20) of Black people. Second, *The Black Flame* functions as DuBoisian “propaganda” (Du Bois 1996c/1926), entailing arguments and insights that are not reducible to the facts; in short, it functions as Philosophy.

*Keywords:* W. E. B. Du Bois; *The Black Flame*; Historical Fiction; Philosophy; Sociology

Between 1957 and 1961, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote a lengthy work of historical fiction, a trilogy collectively titled *The Black Flame* (1957, 1959, 1961). Through the lenses of four American families, the narrative offers an illuminating glimpse into the American, political drama of the late 19th and early

20th centuries, focusing on the degree to which “the negro problem” featured in important decisions and events. Reiterating ideas found in his other works—like *Black Reconstruction* (1935)—the narrative foregrounds the gravity of the “Negro Problem” in the formation and constitution of American culture and political institutions.

While this paper will examine a few of the specific arguments that emerge from *The Black Flame*, I am primarily concerned here with a meta-question, namely Du Bois’ curious methodological choice in this late-life project. “Why were they written?” as Lily Phillips asks, a long time reader of *The Black Flame*. (Phillips 2015, 167) Jennifer Terry notes that Du Bois’ own reflections give us strong reasons to position “his fictional and poetic compositions as a part of the same investigative, elucidatory, and highly committed project as the rest of his oeuvre.” (Terry 2008, 48) In other words, a strong case can be made that *The Black Flame*, as well as Du Bois’ two earlier novels, can—and perhaps *should*—be read as continuous with his life-long project to study Black people and their problems.

In reply to Phillips’ question, I argue that as historical fiction, *The Black Flame* in particular operates on two methodological registers with historical, sociological, and philosophical import. First, *The Black Flame* functions as “sociological interpretation,” employing Du Bois’ own formulation from “The Study of Negro Problems” (1898). In this capacity, the sociologist-qua-creative-artist uses “pure imagination” (Du Bois 1957, 315) in the service of articulating and understanding the “distinct social mind” (Du Bois 1898, 20) of Black people, an historical and sociological component of culture and society that “history can but mention and which statistics can not count.” (ibid.) Second, *The Black Flame* functions as “propaganda” (Du Bois 1996c/1926) in the strong, DuBoisian sense, which is to say, entailing arguments and insights that are not reducible to the facts; in short, it functions as Philosophy. In this capacity, arguments manifest in at least three distinct sites that are unique to a narrative style of presentation. Arguments present as character analyses, descriptions of place, and the articulation of the temporal contingencies of both an historical moment and the passage of time.

I will begin with a brief explanation of the Negro Problem, which, as I have intimated, is the primary question of most of Du Bois’ writings, including *The Black Flame*. Then I will examine the two methodological registers of this story.

### ***What Does It Mean to Be a Problem?***

We can understand the “Negro Problem” in at least three ways that make historical fiction a useful methodological tool. First, the “Negro Problem” is the historical and political condition whereby bodies of a certain physiognomy are rendered morally inferior, such that they must, for example, “ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.” (Du Bois 1996b/1923, 68) In this sense, the idea and identity of the Negro is socially and politically “problematic.” For example, Du Bois describes

the ways in which the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 rendered the Negro the site of a pressing legal and political concern by abruptly creating a new, large demographic of quasi-citizens out of chattel, i.e. property. The political question as it pertains to the Negro has often been some permutation of, “What should be done with *them*?”<sup>1</sup> Du Bois examines this aspect of the problem using both history and historical fiction, both of which include explanations of the context, temporally and geographically.

Second, the identity of the Negro is psychologically and existentially problematic. The presumed, attendant inferiority of the Negro precedes and contradicts many aspects of evidence and experience. Nahum Chandler describes this dissonance as, “the non-coincidence of supposed essence and its sign”(Chandler 2014, 46) On the one hand, so-called Negroes encounter themselves in American society as an over-determined and actively excluded Other, producing the experience that Du Bois famously termed “double-consciousness.”(Du Bois 1996a/1903, 102) On the other hand, non-Negroes rarely see the person behind the caricaturizing veil; on the basis of the prejudicial gaze that is cast upon the Negro, the extant exclusions and condescension are not only thought to be natural but often desirable. The examination of problems of this sort requires access to the various perspectives involved, and a form that can tolerate the inevitable inconsistencies. Du Bois examines this aspect of the problem using fiction, autobiography, and historical fiction, each of which grants the reader access to the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of historical actors.

And third, the idea of the Negro is metaphysically and epistemologically problematic. Whereas the Negro “Problem” is measurable and concrete, there is no consistent empirical correlate to the “Negro” per se. In other words, though the problem is often framed in terms of racial *identity*, the sociological frame of *racism* is ontologically prior. As John Solomos and Les Back explain, paraphrasing Robert Miles, “‘races’ are created within the context of political and social regulation [i.e. within the context of *racism*]. Thus ‘race’ is above all a political construct.”(Back and Solomos 2000, 8) Journalist Ta-Nehesi Coates pithily echoes the insight in his widely-read memoir, *Between the World and Me*: “race is the child of racism, not the father.”(2015, 10) This means, as Chandler explains, that an examination of the Negro Problem must negotiate the “logical *aporia* that requires that [Du Bois] speak *as if* that which he wishes to bring under one coherent analytical frame already exists as such an epistemological (or reflective) entity.”(Chandler 2014, 33) In other words, we often begin our examination from the Negro stereotype, rather than the actual lives of Black people. Consequently, an examination of the Negro often risks begging the question, inadvertently presuming aspects of the problem that one wishes to call into question.

The problem is compounded when we consider that we cannot simply proclaim like James Baldwin and others that there are no

Negros, that the “Negro” is a falsehood and does not exist, denying “the integrity or ground of the distinction and difference that has been proclaimed.”(Chandler 2014, 15)<sup>2</sup> Such a denial, Chandler explains, has “not overturned existing hierarchies (conceptual and political) of power and authority. It will, in an essential sense, leave the *status quo* intact.”(Chandler 2014, 16) Since the idea of the Negro manifests as a negative node of an ostensibly normal white subject, like the creative emergence of the “Evil One” in the Nietzschean slave morality(Nietzsche 1989, 39), a denial of the Negro, in the absence of a critique of whiteness, merely treats the symptoms of racism rather than the cause.<sup>3</sup> Du Bois engages this aspect of the Problem in almost all of his works.

### ***A Nonagenarian’s Sociological Methods: The Black Flame***

*The Black Flame* is an attempt to study the “Negro Problem” on at least two methodological registers, each of which is substantiated by Du Bois’ own thoughts. First, the text functions as an instance of “sociological interpretation.” In “The Study of Negro Problems,”(1898) Du Bois explains that “sociological interpretation”

should include the arrangement and interpretation of historical and statistical matter in the light of the *experience* of other nations and other ages; it should aim to study those finer manifestations of social life which *history can but mention and which statistics can not* [sic] *count*, such as the expression of Negro life as found in their hundred newspapers, their considerable literature, their music and folklore and their germ of esthetic [sic] life—in fine, in all the movements and customs among them that manifest the existence of *a distinct social mind*. (1898, 20; my emphasis)

In “Sociology Hesitant,”(2000/1905) Du Bois explains further that the task of sociology is “to study the deeds of men [sic]”(2000, 40); or rather, it is “an attempt to discover the laws underlying the conduct of men [sic].”(41) This task is complicated by the fact that the “laws underlying the conduct of men” are comprised of aspects of this “distinct social mind”—such as intentions and “self-directing will”(41)—that are not accessible by direct observation. Furthermore, luck is sociologically relevant. Du Bois states plainly that sociologically speaking, our world entails “Chance as well as Law.”(41)

Now consider Du Bois’ explanation of the project of *The Black Flame*, a work of historical fiction. I quote at length from the postscript of part one, *The Ordeal of Mansart*(1957):

The basis of this book is documented and verifiable fact, but the book is not history. On the contrary, I have used fiction to interpret those historical facts which otherwise would not be clear. Beyond this I have in some cases resorted to pure imagination in order to make unknown and unknowable history relate an ordered tale to the reader. In a

few cases I have made slight and unimportant changes in the exact sequence of historical events and in names and places. In no case have these changes altered, to my mind, the main historical background.

It may well be asked, and as one who has done some historical research I join in the asking, why should one tamper with history at all in order to write truth? The answer of course is Never, if exact truth can otherwise be ascertained. But every historian is painfully aware how little the scientist today can know accurately of the past; how dependence on documents and memory leaves us all with the tale of the past half told or less. The temptation then comes to pretend we know more than we do and to set down as accurate history that which is not demonstrably true. To me it seems wiser and fairer to interpret historical truth by the use of creative imagination, provided the method is acknowledged and clear.

When in this world we seek the truth about what men have thought and felt and done, we face insuperable difficulties. We seldom can see enough of human action at first hand to interpret it properly. We can never know current personal thought and emotion with sufficient understanding rightly to weigh its cause and effect. After action and feeling and reflection are long past, then from writing and memory we may secure some picture of the total truth, but it will be sorely imperfect, with much omitted, much forgotten, much distorted

This is the eternal paradox of history. (1957, 315)

A text that combines these two discursive elements—history and fiction—is productively paradoxical. On the one hand, such a text is *historical*; it is *non-fiction*. It presumes to be true in the strong sense of being factual.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, it functions like any work of fiction, reporting the fabricated and presumably unreportable. The inclusion of the products of “*pure* imagination” would seem to degrade the integrity of any “true” account. Yet, if an ostensibly fictional account can be verified in meaningful and impactful ways in the historical record, which is to say, if we are led to *believe* that someone *like* a character actually lived, or something *like* these series of events *probably* occurred, then the account cannot remain *purely* imaginative in any strict sense. Moreover, these inclusions enable the author/narrator to fill in the “unknown and unknowable” gaps in the Archive, which “history can but mention and statistics can not count.” Du Bois goes on to claim that this strategy, the use of “pure imagination” in the service of something like truth, is not only useful, but essential in some sense. He says:

There is but one way to meet this clouding of facts and that is by the use of imagination where documented material and personal experience are lacking... just what men thought, the actual words they used, the feelings and motives which impelled them... these facts are

gone forever. But it is possible for the creative artist to imagine something of such unknown truth. If he is lucky or inspired, he may write a story which may set down a fair version of the truth of an era, or a group of facts about human history. (1957, 315–316)

The sociologist-qua-creative-artist supplements the historical record with “pure imagination” in the service of understanding “a distinct social mind.” As a brief aside, in the field of History, it is noteworthy that the inherent limitations of the Archive—i.e. “the eternal paradox of history”—and the prominent role of interpretation in the production of historical accounts, have led many historians to employ creative methods of ‘patching’ and ‘grounding’ of otherwise fragmented accounts.<sup>5</sup>

As historical *fiction*, *The Black Flame* also operates on a second methodological register: DuBoisian propaganda. Basically, while the resulting account cannot be called “factual,” insofar as it is believable the reader is inclined to appreciate an alternate purpose or methodological emphasis. In other words, rather than reporting details of the past directly, this chimera of fiction and non-fiction—which manages not to decompose to either side in the compost of contradiction—attains something beyond simplistic rhetorical flourish or crude presentation of fact; it becomes an argument, a proposal for a way to read and understand the past of a people.

This persuasive dimension of fiction is what Du Bois means by propaganda. In the oft-quoted passage from “The Criteria of Negro Art” (1996c/1926), Du Bois explains:

[The artist] has used the truth—not for the sake of truth, not as a scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universals understanding. Again, artists have used goodness—goodness in all its aspects of justice, honor, and right—not for the sake of an ethical sanction but as the true method of gaining sympathy and human interest.

The apostle of beauty thus becomes the apostle of truth and right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. . . . Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. (1996c/1926, 327–328)<sup>6</sup>

The word “propaganda” has a sorted history.<sup>7</sup> We think of Orwellian manipulation. We think of art works that are little more than vehicles for a ‘message.’ And as a reaction, we wish for a ‘pure’ art, works that present us with beauty and pleasure, plain and simple. This aspiration, however, betrays a naïve idea of art, for beauty and pleasure have never been plain or simple. Du Bois notes, for example, that white



audiences find interesting only certain depictions of Negroes: “Uncle Toms, Topsies, good ‘darkies’ and clowns.” (327) More generally, characters in art are never neutral representations of people. Any portrayal of a Black person will entail an implicit claim of what such a person is like. Are we subservient naturally or only conditionally? Do we have an inner life like the reader? Are we believably human? Could we ever be the hero of a story? Or is the literary ceiling of our cultural imagination a Wrightian anti-hero like Bigger Thomas? Du Bois argues that the ideas of beauty, truth, and goodness, are always interwoven.

To this end, consider Du Bois’ prefatory remark to his first novel, *The Quest for the Silver Fleece* (1911):

He who would tell a tale must look toward three ideals: to tell it well, to tell it beautifully, and to tell the truth. The first is the Gift of God, the second is the Vision of Genius, but the third is the Reward of Honesty. In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* there is little, I ween, divine or ingenious; but, at least, I have been honest. In no fact or picture have I consciously set down aught the counterpart of which I have not seen or known; and whatever the finished picture may lack of completeness, this lack is due now to the story-teller, now to the artist, but never to the herald of the Truth. (1911, 10)

Though *Quest* may not be beautiful-written or well-told, as DuBois humbly suggests, it is honest and complete with regard to its subject, i.e. the Negro Problem, and therein lies its value. Like fiction generally, *Quest* is not a vehicle into which the artist simply pours truths and ideas of justice. Fiction always makes a claim about the world. And in spite of its large dose of “pure imagination,” historical fiction, like *The Black Flame*, makes a claim about the world entailed by the historical record.

Crudely, we might describe the persuasiveness of fiction as the ‘suspension of disbelief.’ And this is not a trivial consideration. Good stories must be believable. They must compel the reader to accept, by means of a certain logical deduction—i.e. a hypothesis—that something like this account *could* happen if certain conditions were met. This is a negative criterion that takes the “true” extra-textual world of the reader as the starting place. Characters are measured against our experiences of people. Fictional settings are measured against our corporeal knowledge of actual places. Du Bois characterizes this consideration as simply “honesty.”

A second persuasive dimension, however, a more active one, is the production of Beauty, which is “the Vision of Genius,” according to Du Bois. A text is beautiful, not simply because it is believable, but because it is compelling. As I have argued elsewhere,

beauty characterizes the prescriptive force of the exemplary... This sense of ‘prescription,’ however, is not deontological. Rather, it describes

the attractiveness of our beliefs and values. To say that the exemplary is prescriptive is to say simply that it is compelling; it exhorts us to believe or act in ways that are consonant with it. (Jaima 2014, 192)

Furthermore, the Exemplary—and by extension, the Beautiful—is not a found object; it is actively produced. As Toni Morrison notes in the Afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, concerning the revelation that birthed her first novel, “Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could do.” (Morrison 1970, 209) For the sake of our current analysis, we should note that descriptions of characters or places are not simply biographies and geographies. They are the distillation of experiences and data, articulating an archetype, an Example, which entails an argument that they are *representative* in spite of their particularity. In the case of historical fiction, this persuasive dimension will overlap somewhat with Du Bois sense of sociological interpretation.

Let us now examine the execution of these two methodological dimension in *The Black Flame*. For the sake of space, I will restrict my analysis to the first volume, *The Ordeal of Mansart*. First a narrative summary: the story recounts the drama at the end of Reconstruction and its devolution into “Jim/Jane Crow” at the beginning of World War One—roughly the years 1876 to 1914. Du Bois’ narrator is an omniscient voice, discussing characters in the third person. Consequently this voice is privy to the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of men and women on all sides of the racial, political, and socio-economic divides. The story alternates between the perspectives of three families: the Breckenridge family, who are members of the landed, southern aristocracy; the Scroggs family, who are members of the poor, white working class; and the Mansart family, who are members of the poor, Black working class, most of whom are also the direct descendants of slaves.

The story opens with a complicated meeting, of sorts, between Colonel Breckenridge, Sam Scroggs, and Tom Mansart. Each actor is at odds with the other two, and each in different ways tries to manipulate the triangular political dynamic to serve the interests of their respective groups. As history verifies, Scroggs and Mansart should ally themselves against Breckenridge. Scroggs, however, aspires to southern aristocracy through a sense of racial kinship, and glimpses the opportunity through continued Negro subjugation. Breckenridge encourages the division between Scroggs and Mansart by playing both sides: he disingenuously appeals to Scroggs sense of racial solidarity while secretly taking advantage of the cheap Negro labor Mansart represents. Mansart advocates simply for the fair treatment of Negroes in the labor market, contrary to the wishes of Scroggs.

Very soon, we arrive at the tragic circumstances that coincide with the birth of Tom Mansart’s son, our protagonist Manuel Mansart. Tom Mansart is killed, ironically, for rescuing Mrs. Breckinridge from a riot.



A mob of poor whites accuses him of raping her. This event secures the racial alliance between Scroggs and Breckenridge, at least officially. The story then follows these actors as their fates unfold. Colonel Breckenridge is preoccupied with the maintenance of his wealth, which entails undermining Scroggs without obviously allying with Negroes. Sam Scroggs acquires some political power, and continues his efforts to exclude black workers from labor unions and political office. And Manual Mansart grows up, thanks to his mother, with a healthy skepticism of both the white aristocracy and the white workers. As an exemplar of his community, he aspires to be independent and live with dignity. He acquires an education, and begins his career in the budding Negro school system, the nature and purpose of which is a question of national debate.

As instances of sociological interpretation, Du Bois' descriptions of character probe deeply into the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of members of these families. Consider, first, Clarice Breckenridge, nee Du Bignon, wife of the Colonel. Mrs. Breckenridge supposedly "knew Negroes." She had been in close contact with them most of her life, albeit in service roles. Legend had it that the Du Bignons "might have a touch of the 'Tar Brush,'" (1957, 20) meaning that they had some Negro ancestry. Nevertheless, aristocracy for Mrs. Breckenridge is neither "an effort [nor] an ambition. It is simply a fact." (12) As the narrator notes, the Du Bignon "blood might ennoble a slave, but they themselves could suffer no taint." (20) This somewhat ambiguous relationship to Negroes does some work narrative work to explain Mrs. Breckenridge's crippling guilt as she grapples with her inadvertent complicity in the death of Tom Mansart. Unlike her husband or her daughter, Negroes, while necessarily inferior, remain distinctly "human"; consequently, she finds Tom Mansart's death to be tragic. Through Clarice Breckenridge we learn something about the sociology of white guilt; it manifests as a function of proximity to Negroes while negotiating an idea of universal humanity and a personal sense of superiority.

Generally, the personages that populate *The Black Flame* are what E. M. Forster would call "flat characters." (1927, 67) These are characters "constructed round a single idea or quality" (67) and whose salient identifying characteristic might be "expressed in one sentence." (68) This is not point of criticism. For the sake of sociological interpretation, "flat characters" are quite effective. Their relative simplicity highlights their archetypal dimension and foregrounds the context of their emergence. Besides, the single sentence might be a complicated one. For example, the character Betty-Lou Breckenridge, daughter of Clarice and John, the Colonel, was "born too late to be a Southern lady of the old regime, and too early for real education and a career" (Du Bois 1957, 48); she was born in 1852. A few other examples: Abe Scroggs, the son of Sam Scroggs, "hated Negroes with a dark, unreasoning passion." (206) And

Manuel Mansart sought to “avoid white folk and never trust them,” though “they must be met and met pleasantly so as to avoid retaliation and to keep their good-will.”(118) Most importantly, though, for our purposes, analysis via *characters*, rather than demographics, enables us to examine the interactions between incompatible or irreconcilable beliefs and perspectives. We can juxtapose contradictory and contrary beliefs. Keeping in view that a particular constellation of attributes are actually people, we can appreciate the ways in which correlative circumstances from which the salient differences emerge are, in an important sense, biographies. Consequently we can speculatively delve into the minds and hearts of these personages, and articulate possible motives and intentions.

We find another case of sociological interpretation in Du Bois’ descriptions of place. After Manuel Mansart finishes his education, he takes a job in Jerusalem, a “typical small Georgia town”.(197) The narrator goes on to explain Jerusalem’s attributes:

a typical Georgia town. That meant it was a square, set at the meeting point of four country roads. . . . The square was nearly always filled with folk, white and black, mingling in good-natured fellowship but with clearly defined lines of cleavage: Negroes lined the curbs and hitching post; whites occupied the walls and steps. . . . There was always a certain tenseness in the air which at times, especially on drunken Saturdays, brought one or two quick police to rush some black man to jail. Whites were seldom arrested. . . . A half dozen Negro prisoners always went to the jail to be leased Monday morning to farmers as laborers.

Thus the pattern of race segregation and control was laid down and kept rigid. . . . Mobs could suddenly be gathered and lynchings arranged by whites. Riots and murders were carried out by rule. One or two policemen watched the Negroes. These towns by the thousands in the South kept the interracial pattern intact, held political control of the state, and were the center of stern religious dogma. It was no empty joke to assert in this land, ‘Man made the city, God made the country, but the Devil made the small town.’ (1957, 197–199)

We might contrast Jerusalem with Du Bois’ description in the *Souls of Black Folk* of Albany, Georgia, “a typical southern country town.”(1903/1996a, 160) In chapter VII, “Of the Black Belt,” the reader accompanies DuBois-the-narrator on a somber journey from Atlanta southward to Albany. We observe apparent symptoms of the legacy of racial prejudice: poor black masses who once bolstered a lucrative cotton industry, now forgotten and ignored. Albany, Georgia, of course, is a real place. The factual existence of Albany, however, renders it brutally particular. An additional argument needs to be made in order to claim that it is a “typical” town, an argument that remains unarticulated. Absent this argument, the descriptive tone produces the

rhetorical and literary effect or retaining a voyeuristic valence. While the account is detailed and impactful, the reader is left with the sense that poor Black people live ‘over there,’ south of Atlanta.

By contrast, Jerusalem is a *fictional* town in Georgia. This status grants the town a degree of abstraction. Consequently, Jerusalem is implicitly “typical.” By virtue of not actually existing, it can only be *similar* to “thousands” of other *real* towns in the South. Yet, the rich descriptions render it tangible and believable. It becomes, borrowing Marcel Proust description of universals, “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.” (2003, 264) In short, Jerusalem is *exemplary*. Jerusalem is “real” because it is believable and particular; there are enough details for the reader to see the square rise from the dusty crossroad, effecting a tangible verisimilitude. Jerusalem is ideal because of its claim to be typical. The details interspersed with analysis allow the sense of place to float like a concept of the South, yet tethered to the “real” so as not to evaporate into abstraction. Jerusalem is both “everywhere” and “right here.” An actual place, like Albany, Georgia, is not exactly believable, since, as the adage goes, “truth can be stranger than fiction.” As just noted, the historical specificity of an actual town risks rendering it *merely* particular, vulnerable to the retort: the racism in Albany makes it seem like a miserable place, but it is not like the whole state of Georgia, much less the entire South. Conversely, in every small town, like the believable yet imaginary Jerusalem, the Negro lives among us, occupying an integral, subordinate place in the existential matrix.

Furthermore, the narrator poses several implicit questions in the description of this late 19th century locale that are still relevant to contemporary American readers. For example, resonating with contemporary literature on mass incarceration, we observe in Jerusalem the historical reach of the racially correlated exploitation of the exception to the Thirteenth Amendment, enabling the continued enslavement of Black people. Also, the narrator describes the imbrication of race and class in Jerusalem as it pertains to domestic work: “Every white woman [in Jerusalem] who had any claim to standing or even decency must have at least one black servant: someone to cook, wash dishes, clean house and care for the babies.” (1957, 200–201) In the contemporary moment, the demographics of workers in these “informal economies” is still disproportionately non-white. (Tuominen 1994; Banks 1999) And whereas we no longer have vagrancy laws supporting the same kinds of exploitative conditions, a similar dynamic ensues when the workers are immigrants and/or undocumented.

The narrator also describes the intricate ways in which access to sex in Jerusalem manifested as a function of racial power dynamics:

Every white man of any pretension was expected to have a white wife and at least one colored concubine. Each colored man could have a

colored wife but he might be asked to share her with a white man. On the other hand, he must not dare even think of touching a white woman even accidentally. . . . If [a colored woman] were pretty and comely they must marry early and even then their husbands had a hard time protecting them from white men. . . . On the other hand, white women were guarded fiercely in physical and mental harems. . . . They must pose as 'pure' . . . Always they were shrinking from white aggressors and running wildly from black rapists. (1957, 201–202)

In spite of anachronistic concerns about DuBois' "feminism," (Simpsons, 2014) the narrator portrays here a sensitivity to the unique vulnerabilities of both white and Black women, which resonates with much of the contemporary feminist literature.<sup>8</sup> Second, we observe here parallels with the historiography cataloging the genealogy of the stereotype of the Black, male rapist, particularly with an eye to its persistence against evidence. Third, against the backdrop of contemporary manifestations of racism, the history and sociology of interracial relationships, as intimated by the narrator, remains an interesting area of research today.

There is one important dimension to this sexual nexus that Du Bois' narrator curiously and lamentably omits, namely the sexual abuse of Black men during slavery and the aftermath. The social and political power that whiteness conferred rendered white men *and women* potential sexual predators of both Black women *and men*. The particular omission of any mention by Du Bois' narrator of the sexual vulnerability of Black men, especially at the hands of white women, Thomas Foster explains, runs "the risk of reinscribing the very stereotypes used by white slave owners and others who reduced black men to bestial sexual predators and white women to passionless and passive vessels." (Foster 2011, 464) Du Bois would have been aware of the 1951 case of Willie McGee, and presumably others like it that were less publicized. (Curry 2017)

Two concluding thoughts: Du Bois' appeal to history accomplishes the suspension of disbelief in a manner that must be appreciated as an argument for a particular interpretation of the historical moment. This story emerges from a concrete and verifiable context, rather than an imaginary and metaphorical time and place. In other words, *The Black Flame* is about the racial drama *in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century*, not simply a social and political drama *like this*. Character descriptions serve as sociological analyses, i.e. studies of the types of people who lived during this time. By contrast, characters in pure fiction function more generally as a philosophical anthropology. Whereas general fictional accounts are believable depending on the degree to which they resonate with the readers' experiences of people and places, historical fiction relies additionally on the readers'

familiarity with history. Pure fiction appeals to a subjective sense of truth; as a reader we ask, ‘do *I* believe this story?’ Historical fiction appeals to an intersubjective, historical sense of truth; as a reader we ask, ‘is this story consistent with the Archive?’

Second, the omniscience of the narrator renders the voice racially ambiguous in a way that is rhetorically effective. Compare this narratorial voice to the one that we find in *Souls*. Du Bois asks rhetorically in the Forethought, “[N]eed I add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?” (1996a/1903, 100) If the reader is disinclined to trust a Black voice, then s/he will be reluctant to consider sincerely the arguments and insights in *Souls*. The “Gentle Reader” to whom Du Bois appeals in *Souls* will remain at arm’s length, like the epigraphic musical *notation* that remains mute on the page and entirely inaccessible for those who do not already know the songs, not to mention those who do not read music.<sup>9</sup> In *The Black Flame*, by contrast, the reader might not readily trust Du Bois’ narrator, since s/he *might* be a “Negro,” but the narrator’s ambiguous identity inclines us to withhold immediate *distrust*. Also, the narrator of *The Black Flame* sympathetically thematizes the various kinds of readers as characters in the text. In finding aspects of ourselves in various places in the narrative, we acquire personal reasons to suspend our disbelief. A well-rendered character like myself or a palpably depicted setting like a place where I have been gives readers ways to invest themselves in the narrative, and perhaps be persuaded by its claims.

### **Conclusion**

Historical fiction, with its paradoxical relationship to truth, serves a decidedly philosophical purpose. On the one hand, Du Bois’ attempt to patch history in this manner is consistent with what he calls “sociological interpretation.” Historical fiction enables a narrator to articulate and speculate on the “unknown and unknowable” (1957, 315), which includes the “expression of Negro life” where “history can but mention” and “statistics can not count.” (1898, 20) Yet, on the other hand, as Lily Phillips observes, “Within [The Black Flame], Du Bois explored his ideas about the relation of history to thought, action, and identity, and he even provided some of the clearest examples of his thinking about thinking.” (2015, 157) Phillips continues, “We see DuBois here rethinking about his earlier work and ideas, reconsidering and presenting it anew.” (166) Beyond mere interpretation, *The Black Flame* proposes a manner in which to study questions of this sort. Questions that are inextricably historical require a narrative dimension. Questions that pertain to psychological and existential phenomena require descriptions of minds and moments, i.e. characters who have experiences. And questions that pose a problem for thought require a form that can accommodate paradoxes and

apparent contradictions. As a concluding suggestion: if *The Black Flame* in particular, and fiction in general, prove to be effective and persuasive tools for the study of philosophical question, then perhaps those of us who wear DuBoisian hats—historians, sociologists, philosophers—will make similar methodological choices. At the very least, we might read more fiction and poetry as productively contributing to our scholarly projects.

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## NOTES

1. See, *Souls*, ch.2 “Of the Dawning of Freedom”
2. I attribute this methodological strategy to Baldwin somewhat disingenuously. Baldwin certainly appreciated that while this was a necessary starting place for productive criticism, it was not an end in itself. Here, I paraphrase one of Baldwin’s responses in an interview with Psychologist Kenneth Clark in the 1963 documentary entitled, “The Negro and the American Promise.” Baldwin’s actual words are: “What white people have to do, is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place. Because I’m not a nigger. I’m a man, but if you think I’m a nigger, it means you need it. . . . If I’m not a nigger here and you invented him—you, the white people, invented him—then you’ve got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that. Whether or not it’s able to ask that question.” (*James Baldwin from “The Negro and the American Promise.”* Filmed 1963. Online Video, American Experience on PBS, 19:57. Posted 2004. <http://www.pbs.org/video/2112495022/>. See especially minute, 18:25 to the end (19:57).
3. For a philosophical study of whiteness, see Yancy, George (ed.). 2004. *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*. New York: Routledge.
4. Some might find this characterization of history to be overly reductive. Yet even while acknowledging the arguments of some persuasive dissenters—like Hayden White—and the compelling assertion that artifacts are merely “surrogates of the past, not the past itself” (Norton and Donnelly 2011, 5), to tell the Truth about the past remains a disciplinary aspiration. As Ann Curthoys and John Docker note in their collaborative book, *Is History Fiction?* “No one—including us—would do history, would pursue historical research, unless she and he thought they could arrive, however provisionally, at some kind of truth about the past.” (2006, 5)
5. Consider a recent conversation between historians Thulani Davis, Martha Hodes, and David Kazanjian, each of whom incorporate creative strategies in their research. Davis engages the “impossibility of recovery . . . as a prologue, not an ending.” (2015, 62) Hodes calls for “leaps of grounded imagination,” (2015, 70) to supplement not only archival silences but suspicious overwriting; for example, in *Mourning Lincoln* (2015), Hodes could not rightfully exclude—and thus *creatively* includes—the “troublesome . . . mediated sources” (69) of Black mourning, namely accounts ventriloquized by whites. And Kazanjian proposes “overreading quotidian for the scenes of speculation it so often entails” (2015, 81); rather than focusing on the details themselves, a creative “overreading” betrays the “conjunction in which the text was embedded.” (79)
6. For a recent, insightful analysis of “The Criteria of Negro Art,” see Taylor, Paul C. 2016. *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. 1 edition. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell. (especially, Ch. 3, “Beauty to Set the World Right”)

7. see, Henderson, Gae Lyn, and M. J. Braun (eds.). 2016. *Propaganda and Rhetoric in Democracy: History, Theory, Analysis*. SIU Press.
8. On the contemporary feminist literature, see Alcoff, Linda, and Elizabeth Potter (eds.). 2013. *Feminist Epistemologies*. Routledge.; and Davidson, Maria del Guadalupe, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale L. Marcano (eds.). 2010. *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*. SUNY Press. On historiographic anachronisms, see Newman, Louise Michele. 1999. *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States*. 1 edition. New York: Oxford University Press. And Curry, Tommy J. 2016. "Ethnological Theories of Race/Sex in Nineteenth-Century Black Thought: Implications for the Race/Gender Debate of the Twenty-First Century." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, edited by Naomi Zack, 565–75. Oxford University Press.
9. For an insightful examination of the epigraphic musical phrases, see Miles 2000, "Haunting Music in the *Souls of Black Folk*."

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