



TWO

Illusions of Race

If this be true, the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races . . .¹

W. E. B. Du Bois

Alexander Crummell and Edward Wilmot Blyden began the intellectual articulation of a Pan-Africanist ideology, but it was W. E. B. Du Bois who laid both the intellectual and the practical foundations of the Pan-African movement. Du Bois's life was a long one, and his intellectual career—which he called the “autobiography of a race concept”²—encompassed almost the whole period of European colonial control of Africa. It is hard to imagine a more substantial rupture in political ideas than that which separates the division of Africa at the Congress of Berlin from the independence of Ghana, yet Du Bois was a teenager when the former happened in 1884, and, in 1957, he witnessed—and rejoiced in—the latter. And, as we shall see, there is an astonishing consistency in his position throughout the years. Not only did Du Bois live long, he wrote much; if any single person can offer us an insight into the archaeology of Pan-Africanism's idea of race, it is he.

Du Bois's first extended discussion of the concept of race is in “The Conservation of Races,” a paper he delivered to the American Negro Academy in the year it was founded by Alexander Crummell. The “American Negro,” he declares, “has been led to . . . minimize race distinctions” because “back of most of the discussions of race with which he is familiar, have lurked certain assumptions as to his natural abilities, as to his political, intellectual and moral status, which he felt were wrong.” And he goes on: “Nevertheless, in our calmer moments we must acknowledge that human beings are divided into races,” even if “when we come to inquire into the essential differences of races, we find it hard to come at once to any definite conclusion.”³ For what it is worth, however, “the final word of science, so far, is that we have at least two, perhaps three, great families of human beings—the whites and Negroes, possibly the yellow race.”⁴

Du Bois is not, however, satisfied with the “final word” of the late-nineteenth-century science. For, as he thinks, what matter are not the “grosser physical differences of color, hair and bone” but the “differences—subtle, delicate and elusive, though they may be—which have silently but definitely separated men into groups.”

While these subtle forces have generally followed the natural cleavage of common blood, descent and physical peculiarities, they have at other times swept across and

ignored these. At all times, however, they have divided human beings into races, which, while they perhaps transcend scientific definition, nevertheless, are clearly defined to the eye of the historian and sociologist.

If this be true, then the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races. . . . What then is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.⁵

We have moved, then, away from the “scientific”—that is, biological and anthropological—conception of race to a sociohistorical notion. And, by this sociohistorical criterion—whose breadth of sweep certainly encourages the thought that no biological or anthropological definition is possible—Du Bois considers that there are not three but eight “distinctly differentiated races, in the sense in which history tells us the word must be used.”⁶ The list is an odd one: Slavs, Teutons, English (in both Great Britain and America), Negroes (of Africa and, likewise, America), the Romance race, Semites, Hindus, and Mongolians.

Du Bois continues:

The question now is: What is the real distinction between these nations? Is it physical differences of blood, color and cranial measurements? Certainly we must all acknowledge that physical differences play a great part. . . . But while race differences have followed along mainly physical lines, yet no mere physical distinction would really define or explain the deeper differences—the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences—undoubtedly based on the physical, but infinitely transcending them.⁷

The various races are

striving, each in its own way, to develop for civilization its particular message, its particular ideal, which shall help guide the world nearer and nearer that perfection of human life for which we all long, that “one far off Divine event.”⁸

For Du Bois, then, the problem for the Negro is the discovery and expression of the message of his or her race.

The full, complete Negro message of the whole Negro race has not as yet been given to the world. . . .

The question is, then: how shall this message be delivered; how shall these various ideals be realized? The answer is plain: by the development of these race groups, not as individuals, but as races. . . . For the development of Negro genius, of Negro literature and art, of Negro spirit, only Negroes bound and welded together, Negroes inspired by one vast ideal, can work out in its fullness the great message we have for humanity. . . .

For this reason, the advance guard of the Negro people—the eight million people of Negro blood in the United States of America—must soon come to realize that if they are to take their place in the van of Pan-Negroism, then their destiny is *not* absorption by the white Americans.⁹

And so Du Bois ends by proposing his *Academy Creed*, which begins with words that echo down almost a century of American race relations:

1. We believe that the Negro people, as a race, have a contribution to make to civilization and humanity, which no other race can make.
2. We believe it is the duty of the Americans of Negro descent, as a body, to maintain their race identity until this mission of the Negro people is accomplished, and the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility.¹⁰

What can we make of this analysis and prescription? On the face of it, Du Bois's argument in "The Conservation of Races" is that "race" is not a "scientific"—that is, biological—but a sociohistorical concept. Sociohistorical races each have a "message" for humanity, a message that derives, in some way, from God's purpose in creating races. The Negro race has still to deliver its full message, and so it is the duty of Negroes to work together—through race organizations—so that this message can be delivered.

We do not need the theological underpinnings of this argument. What is essential is the thought that Negroes, by virtue of their sociohistorical community, can achieve, through common action, worthwhile ends that will not otherwise be achieved. On the face of it, then, Du Bois's strategy here is the antithesis of a classic dialectic in the reaction to prejudice. The thesis in this dialectic—which Du Bois reports as the American Negro's attempt to "minimize race distinctions"—is the denial of difference. Du Bois's antithesis is the acceptance of difference along with a claim that each group has its part to play, that the white and the Negro races are related not as superior to inferior but as complementaries; the Negro message is, with the white one, part of the message of humankind. What he espouses is what Sartre once called—in *negritude*—an "antiracist racism."¹¹

I call this pattern a classic dialectic, and, indeed, we find it in feminism also. On the one hand, a simple claim to equality, a denial of substantial difference; on the other, a claim to a special message, revaluing the feminine "Other" not as the "helpmeet" of sexism but as the New Woman.

Because this is a classic dialectic, my reading of Du Bois's argument is a natural one. To confirm this interpretation we must establish that what Du Bois attempts, despite his own claims to the contrary, is not the transcendence of the nineteenth-century scientific conception of race—as we shall see, he relies on it—but rather, as the dialectic requires, a revaluation of the Negro race in the face of the sciences of racial inferiority. We can begin by analyzing the sources of tension in Du Bois's allegedly sociohistorical conception of race, which he explicitly sets over against the "scientific" conception. The tension is plain enough in his references to "common blood"; for this, dressed up with fancy craniometry, a dose of melanin, and some measure for hair curl, is what the scientific notion amounts to. If he has fully transcended the scientific notion, what is the role of this talk of "blood"?

We may leave aside for the moment the common "impulses" and the voluntary and involuntary "strivings." For these must be due either to a shared biological inheritance, "based on the physical, but infinitely transcending" it; or to a shared history; or, of course, to some combination of these. If Du Bois's notion is purely sociohistorical, then the issue is common history and traditions; otherwise, the issue

is, at least in part, a common biology. We shall only know which when we understand the core of Du Bois's conception of race.

The claim that a race generally shares a common language is also plainly inessential: the "Romance" race is not of common language, nor, more obviously, is the Negro. And "common blood" can mean little more than "of shared ancestry," which is already implied by Crummellian talk of a "vast family." At the center of Du Bois's conception, then, is the claim that a race is "a vast family of human beings, always of a common history [and] traditions."¹² So, if we want to understand Du Bois, our question must be: What is a "family . . . of common history"?

We already see that the scientific notion, which presupposes common features in virtue of a common biology derived from a common descent, is not fully transcended. It is true that a family can have adopted children, kin by social rather than biological law. By analogy, therefore, a vast human family might contain people joined together not by biology but by an act of choice. But it is plain enough that Du Bois cannot have been contemplating this possibility: like all of his contemporaries, he would have taken it for granted that race is a matter of birth. Indeed, to understand the talk of "family," we must distance ourselves from *all* of its sociological meaning. A family is usually defined culturally through either patrilineal or matrilineal descent alone.¹³ But if an individual drew a "conceptual" family tree back over five hundred years and assumed that he or she was descended from each ancestor in only one way, the tree would have more than a million branches at the top. Although, in fact, many individuals would be represented on more than one branch—that far back, we are all going to be descended from many people by more than one route—it is plain, as a result, that a matri- or patrilineal conception of our family histories drastically underrepresents the biological range of our ancestry.

Biology and social convention go startlingly different ways. Let's pretend, secure in our republicanism, that the claim of the queen of England to the throne depends partly on a single line from one of her ancestors nine hundred years ago. If there were no overlaps in her family tree, there would be more than fifty thousand billion such lines, though, of course, there have never been anywhere near that many people on the planet; even with reasonable assumptions about overlaps, there are millions of such lines. We chose one line, even though most of the population of England is probably descended from William the Conqueror by *some* uncharted route. Biology is democratic: all parents are equal. Thus to speak of two people being of common ancestry is to require that somewhere in the past a large proportion of the branches leading back in their family trees coincided.¹⁴

Already, then, Du Bois requires, as the scientific conception does, a common ancestry (in the sense just defined) with whatever—if anything—this biologically entails. Yet apparently this does not commit him to the scientific conception, for there are many groups of common ancestry—ranging, at its widest, from humanity in general to the narrower group of Slavs, Teutons, and Romance people taken together—that do not, for Du Bois, constitute races. Thus, Du Bois's "common history," which must be what is supposed to distinguish Slav from Teuton, is an essential part of his conception. The issue now is whether a common history is something that could be a criterion that distinguishes one group of human beings—extended in time—from another. Does adding a notion of common history allow us to

make the distinctions between Slav and Teuton, or between English and Negro? The answer is no.

Consider, for example, Du Bois himself. As the descendant of Dutch ancestors, why does not the history of Holland in the fourteenth century (which he shares with all people of Dutch descent) make him a member of the Teutonic race? The answer is straightforward: the Dutch were not Negroes, Du Bois is. But it follows from this that the history of Africa is part of the common history of African-Americans not simply because African-Americans are descended from various peoples who played a part in African history but because African history is the history of people of the same race.

My general point is this: just as to recognize two events at different times as part of the history of a single individual, we have to have a criterion of identity for the individual at each of those times, independent of his or her participation in the two events, so, when we recognize two events as belonging to the history of one race, we have to have a criterion of membership of the race at those two times, independently of the participation of the members in the two events. To put it more simply: sharing a common group history cannot be a *criterion* for being members of the same group, for we would have to be able to identify the group in order to identify *its* history. Someone in the fourteenth century could share a common history with me through our membership in a historically extended race only if something accounts for their membership in the race in the fourteenth century and mine in the twentieth. That something cannot, on pain of circularity, be the history of the race.¹⁵

There is a useful analogy here, which I relied on a moment ago, between the historical continuity of races and the temporal continuity of people. Du Bois's attempt to make sense of racial identity through time by way of a figurative "long memory" subserves the same function as John Locke's attempt—in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*—to make literal memory the core of the soul's identity through time. For Locke needed to have an account of the nature of the soul that did not rely on the physical continuity of the body, just as Du Bois wanted to rely on something more uplifting than the brute continuity of the germ plasm. Locke's view was that two souls at different times were, in the philosopher's jargon, "time slices" of the same individual if the later one had memories of the earlier one. But, as philosophers since Locke have pointed out, we cannot tell whether a memory is evidence of the rememberer's identity, even if what is "remembered" really did happen to an earlier person, unless we know already that the rememberer and the earlier person are one. For it is quite conceivable that someone should think that they recall something that actually happened to somebody else. I have simply applied this same strategy of argument against Du Bois. History may have made us what we are, but the choice of a slice of the past in a period before your birth as your own history is always exactly that: a choice. The phrase the "invention of tradition" is a pleonasm.¹⁶

Whatever holds Du Bois's races conceptually together, then, it cannot be a common history. It is only because they are already bound together that members of a race at different times can share a history at all. If this is true, Du Bois's reference to a common history cannot be doing any work in his individuation of races. And once we have stripped away the sociohistorical elements from Du Bois's definition of race, we are left with his true criterion.

Consequently, not only the talk of language, which Du Bois admits is neither

necessary (the Romance race speaks many languages) nor sufficient (African-Americans generally speak the same language as other Americans) for racial identity, must be expunged from the definition; now we have seen that talk of common history and traditions must go too. We are left with common descent and the common impulses and strivings, which I put aside earlier. Since common descent, and the characteristics that flow from it are part of the nineteenth-century scientific conception of race, these impulses are all that is left to do the job that Du Bois had claimed for a sociohistorical conception: namely, to distinguish his conception from the biological one. Du Bois claims that the existence of races is "clearly defined to the eye of the historian and sociologist."¹⁷ Since common ancestry is acknowledged by biology as a criterion, whatever extra insight is provided by sociohistorical understanding can only be gained by observation of the common impulses and strivings. Reflection suggests, however, that this cannot be true. For what common impulses—whether voluntary or involuntary—do Romance people share that the Teutons and the English do not?

Du Bois had read the historiography of the Anglo-Saxon school, which accounted for the democratic impulse in America by tracing it to the racial tradition of the Anglo-Saxon moot. He had read American and British historians in earnest discussion of the "Latin" spirit of Romance peoples, and perhaps he had believed some of it. Here, then, might be the source of the notion that history and sociology can observe the differing impulses of races.

In all these writings, however, such impulses are allegedly discovered to be the a posteriori properties of racial and national groups, not to be criteria of membership of them. It is, indeed, because the claim is a posteriori that historical evidence is relevant to it. And if we ask which common impulses that history has detected allow us to recognize the Negro, we shall see that Du Bois's claim to have found in these impulses a criterion of identity is mere bravado. If, without evidence about his or her impulses, we can say who is a Negro, then it cannot be part of what it is to be a Negro that he or she has them; rather it must be an a posteriori claim that people of a common race, defined by descent and biology, have impulses, for whatever reason, in common. Of course, the common impulses of a biologically defined group may be historically caused by common experiences, common history. But Du Bois's claim can only be that biologically defined races happen to share, for whatever reason, common impulses. The common impulses cannot be a criterion of membership of the group. And if that is so, we are left with the scientific conception.

How, then, is it possible for Du Bois's criteria to issue in eight groups, while the scientific conception issues in three? The reason is clear from the list. Slavs, Teutons, English, Hindus, and Romance peoples each live in a characteristic geographical region. (American English—and, for that matter, American Teutons, American Slavs, and American Romance people—share recent ancestry with their European "cousins" and thus share a mildly more complex relation to a place and its languages and traditions.) Semites (modulo such details as the Jewish Diaspora and the westward expansion of the Islamized Arabs) and Mongolians (this is the whole population of eastern Asia) share a (rather larger) geographical region also. Du Bois's talk of common history conceals his superaddition of a geographical criterion: your history is, in part, the history of people who lived in the same place.¹⁸

The criterion Du Bois is actually using amounts, then, to this: people are members

of the same race if they share features in virtue of being descended largely from people of the same region. Those features may be physical (hence African-Americans are Negroes) or cultural (hence Anglo-Americans are English). Focusing on one sort of feature—"grosser differences of color, hair and bone"—you get "whites and Negroes, possibly the yellow race," the "final word of science, so far." Focusing on a different feature—language or shared customs—you get Teutons, Slavs, and Romance peoples. The tension in Du Bois's definition of race reflects the fact that for the purposes of European historiography (of which his Harvard and University of Berlin trainings had made him aware), it was the latter that mattered, but for purposes of American social and political life it was the former.

The real difference in Du Bois's conception, therefore, is not that his definition of race is at odds with the scientific one: it is rather, as the dialectic requires, that he assigns to race a different moral and metaphysical significance from the majority of his white contemporaries. The distinctive claim is that the Negro race has a positive message, a message that is not only different but valuable. And that, it seems to me, is the significance of the sociohistorical dimension; for the strivings of a race are, as Du Bois viewed the matter, the stuff of history: "The history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all history."¹⁹ By studying history, we can discern the outlines of the message of each race.

We have seen that, for the purpose that concerned him most—namely for understanding the status of the Negro—Du Bois was thrown back on the "scientific" definition of race, which he officially rejected. But the scientific definition (Du Bois's uneasiness with which is reflected in his remark that races "perhaps transcend scientific definition") was itself already threatened as he spoke at the first meeting of the Negro Academy. In the latter nineteenth century most thinking people (like many even today) believed that what Du Bois called the "grosser differences" were a sign of an inherited racial essence, which accounted for the intellectual and moral deficiency of the "lower" races. In "The Conservation of Races" Du Bois elected, in effect, to admit that color was a sign of a racial essence but to deny that the cultural capacities of the black-skinned, curly-haired members of humankind—the capacities determined by their essence—were inferior to those of the white-skinned, straight-haired ones. But the collapse of the sciences of racial inferiority led Du Bois to repudiate the connection between cultural capacity and gross morphology, to deny the familiar "impulses and strivings" of his earlier definition. We can find evidence of this change of mind in an article in the August 1911 issue of *The Crisis*, the journal of the American National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which he edited vigorously through most of the early years of the century.

The leading scientists of the world have come forward . . . and laid down in categorical terms a series of propositions²⁰ which may be summarized as follows:

1. (a) It is not legitimate to argue from differences in physical characteristics to differences in mental characteristics. . . .
2. The civilization of a . . . race at any particular moment of time offers no index to its innate or inherited capacities.²¹

The results have been amply confirmed since then. And we do well, I think, to remind ourselves of the current picture.

The evidence in the contemporary biological literature is, at first glance, misleading. For despite a widespread scientific consensus on the underlying genetics, contemporary biologists are not agreed on the question whether there are any human races. Yet, for our purposes, we can reasonably regard this issue as terminological. What most people in most cultures ordinarily believe about the significance of "racial" difference is quite remote from what the biologists *are* agreed on, and, in particular, it is not consistent with what, in the last essay, I called *racialism*. Every reputable biologist will agree that human genetic variability between the populations of Africa or Europe or Asia is not much greater than that within those populations, though how much greater depends, in part, on the measure of genetic variability the biologist chooses. If biologists want to make interracial difference seem relatively large, they can say that "the proportion of genic variation attributable to racial difference is . . . 9–11%."²² If they want to make it seem small, they can say that, for two people who are both "Caucasoid," the chances of differing in genetic constitution at one site on a given chromosome have recently been estimated at about 14.3 percent, while for any two people taken at random from the human population the same calculations suggest a figure of about 14.8 percent. The underlying statistical facts about the distribution of variant characteristics in human populations and subpopulations are the same, whichever way you express the matter. Apart from the visible morphological characteristics of skin, hair, and bone, by which we are inclined to assign people to the broadest racial categories—black, white, yellow—there are few genetic characteristics to be found in the population of England that are not found in similar proportions in Zaire or in China, and few too (though more) that are found in Zaire but not in similar proportions in China or in England. All this, I repeat, is part of the consensus.

A more familiar part of the consensus is that the differences between peoples in language, moral affections, aesthetic attitudes, or political ideology—those differences that most deeply affect us in our dealings with each other—are not to any significant degree biologically determined.

This claim will, no doubt, seem outrageous to those who confuse the question whether biological difference accounts for our differences with the question whether biological similarity accounts for our similarities. Some of our similarities as human beings in these broadly cultural respects—the capacity to acquire human languages, for example, or the ability to smile—are to a significant degree biologically determined. We can study the biological basis of these cultural capacities, and give biological explanations of features of our exercise of them. But if biological difference between human beings is unimportant in these explanations—and it is—then racial difference, as a species of biological difference, will not matter either. We can see why if we attend to the underlying genetics.

Human characteristics are genetically determined,²³ to the extent that they are determined, by sequences of DNA in the chromosome—in other words, by genes.²⁴ A region of a chromosome occupied by a gene is called a *locus*. Some loci are occupied in different members of a population by different genes, each of which is

called an *allele*; and a locus is said to be *polymorphic* in a population if there is at least a pair of alleles for it. Perhaps as many as half the loci in the human population are polymorphic; the rest, naturally enough, are said to be *monomorphic*.

Many loci have not just two alleles but several, and each has a frequency in the population. Suppose a particular locus has n alleles, which we can just call 1, 2, and so on up to n ; then we can call the frequencies of these alleles x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n . If you consider two members of a population chosen at random and look at the same locus on one chromosome of each of them, the probability that they will have the same allele at that locus is just the probability that they will both have the first allele (x_1^2), plus the probability that they'll both have the second (x_2^2) . . . plus the probability that they will both have the n th (x_n^2). We can call this number the *expected homozygosity* at that locus, for it is just the proportion of people in the population who would be homozygous at that locus—having identical alleles at that locus on each of the relevant chromosomes—provided the population was mating at random.²⁵

Now if we take the average value of the expected homozygosity for all loci, polymorphic and monomorphic (which geneticists tend to label J), we have a measure of the chance that two people, taken at random from the population, will share the same allele at a locus on a chromosome taken at random. This is a good measure of how similar a randomly chosen pair of individuals should be expected to be in their biology, and a good guide to how closely—on the average—the members of the population are genetically related.

I can now express simply one measure of the extent to which members of those human populations we call races differ more from each other than they do from members of the same race. For the value of J for "Caucasoids"—estimated, in fact, largely from samples of the English population²⁶—is estimated to be about 0.857, while that for the whole human population is estimated at 0.852. The chances, in other words, that two people taken at random from the human population will have the same characteristic at a random locus are about 85.2 percent, while the chances for two (white) people taken from the population of England are about 85.7 percent. And since 85.2 is 100 minus 14.8, and 85.7 is 100 minus 14.3, this is equivalent to what I said previously: the chances of two people who are both "Caucasoid" differing in genetic constitution at one site on a given chromosome are about 14.3 percent, while, for any two people taken at random from the human population, they are about 14.8 percent.

The conclusion is obvious: given only a person's race, it is hard to say what his or her biological characteristics (apart from those that human beings share) will be, except in respect of the "grosser" features of color, hair, and bone (the genetics of which is, in any case, rather poorly understood)—features of "morphological differentiation," as the evolutionary biologist would say. As Nei and Roychoudhury express themselves, somewhat coyly, "The extent of genic differentiation between human races is not always correlated with the degree of morphological differentiation."²⁷ This may seem relatively untroubling to committed racials. Race, they might say, is at least important in predicting morphological difference. But that, though true, is not a biological fact but a logical one, for Nei and Roychoudhury's races are defined by their morphology in the first place. The criterion for excluding

from an American "Caucasoid" sample people with black skins is just the "gross" morphological fact that their skins are black. But recent immigrants of eastern European ancestry would be included in the sample, while dark-skinned people whose ancestors for the last ten generations had largely lived in the New World would be excluded.

To establish that this notion of race is relatively unimportant in explaining biological differences between people, where biological difference is measured in the proportion of differences in loci on the chromosome, is not yet to show that race is unimportant in explaining cultural difference. It could be that large differences in intellectual or moral capacity are caused by differences at very few loci, and that at these loci, all (or most) black-skinned people differ from all (or most) white-skinned or yellow-skinned ones. As it happens, there is little evidence for any such proposition and much against it. But suppose we had reason to believe it. In the biological conception of the human organism, in which characteristics are determined by the pattern of genes in interaction with environments, it is the presence of the alleles (which give rise to these moral and intellectual capacities) that accounts for the observed differences in those capacities in people in similar environments. So the characteristic racial morphology—skin and hair and bone—could be a sign of those differences only if it were (highly) correlated with those alleles. Since there are no such strong correlations, even those who think that intellectual and moral character are strongly genetically determined must accept that *race* is at best a poor indicator of capacity.

When I defined *racism* in Chapter 1, I said that it was committed not just to the view that there are heritable characteristics, which constitute "a sort of racial essence," but also to the claim that the essential heritable characteristics account for more than the visible morphology—skin color, hair type, facial features—on the basis of which we make our informal classifications. To say that biological races existed because it was possible to classify people into a small number of classes according to their gross morphology would be to save racism in the letter but lose it in the substance. The notion of race that was recovered would be of no biological interest—the interesting biological generalizations are about genotypes, phenotypes, and their distribution in geographical populations. We could just as well classify people according to whether or not they were redheaded, or redheaded and freckled, or redheaded, freckled, and broad-nosed too, but nobody claims that this sort of classification is central to human biology.

There are relatively straightforward reasons for thinking that large parts of humanity will fit into no class of people who can be characterized as sharing not only a common superficial morphology but also significant other biological characteristics. The nineteenth-century dispute between monogenesis and polygenesis, between the view that we are descended from one original population and the view that we descend from several, is over. There is no doubt that all human beings descend from an original population (probably, as it happens, in Africa), and that from there people radiated out to cover the habitable globe. Conventional evolutionary theory would predict that as these populations moved into different environments and new characters were thrown up by mutation, some differences would emerge as different characteristics gave better chances of reproduction and survival. In a situation where

a group of people was isolated genetically for many generations, significant differences between populations could build up, though it would take a very extended period before the differences led to reproductive isolation—the impossibility of fertile breeding—and thus to the origin of a new pair of distinct species. We know that there is no such reproductive isolation between human populations, as a walk down any street in New York or Paris or Rio will confirm, but we also know that none of the major human population groups have been reproductively isolated for very many generations. If I may be excused what will sound like a euphemism, at the margins there is always the exchange of genes.

Not only has there always been some degree of genetic linkage of this marginal kind; human history contains continued large-scale movements of people—the “hordes” of Attila the Hun, the Mediterranean jihads of the newly Islamized Arabs, the Bantu migrations—that represent possibilities for genetic exchange. As a consequence, all human populations are linked to each other through neighboring populations, *their* neighbors, and so on. We might have ended up as a “ring species,” like the gulls of the *Larus argentatus* and *Larus fuscus* groups that circumscribe the North Pole, where there is inbreeding between most neighboring populations but reproductive isolation of the varieties that form the beginning and end of the chain of variation, but we did not.²⁸

The classification of people into “races” would be biologically interesting if both the margins and the migrations had not left behind a genetic trail. But they have, and along that trail are millions of us (the numbers obviously depending on the criteria of classification that are used) who can be fitted into no plausible scheme at all. In a sense, trying to classify people into a few races is like trying to classify books in a library: you may use a single property—size, say—but you will get a useless classification, or you may use a more complex system of interconnected criteria, and then you will get a good deal of arbitrariness. No one—not even the most compulsive librarian!—thinks that book classifications reflect deep facts about books. Each of them is more or less useless for various purposes; all of them, as we know, have the kind of rough edges that take a while to get around. And nobody thinks that a library classification can settle which books we should value; the numbers in the Dewey decimal system do not correspond with qualities of utility or interest or literary merit.

The appeal of race as a classificatory notion provides us with an instance of a familiar pattern in the history of science. In the early phases of theory, scientists begin, inevitably, with the categories of their folk theories of the world, and often the criteria of membership of these categories can be detected with the unaided senses. Thus, in early chemistry, color and taste played an important role in the classification of substances; in early natural history, plant and animal species were identified largely by their gross visible morphology. Gradually, as the science develops, however, concepts are developed whose application requires more than the unaided senses; instead of the phenomenal properties of things, we look for “deeper,” more theoretical properties. The price we pay is that classification becomes a more specialized activity; the benefit we gain is that we are able to make generalizations of greater power and scope. Few candidates for laws of nature can be stated by reference to the colors, tastes, smells, or touches of objects. It is hard for us to accept that the colors of objects, which play so important a role in our visual experience and our

recognition of everyday objects, turn out neither to play an important part in the behavior of matter nor to be correlated with properties that do. Brown, for example, a color whose absence would make a radical difference to the look of the natural world, is hard to correlate in any clear way with the physical properties of reflecting surfaces.²⁹

This desire to save the phenomena of our experience by way of objects and properties that are hidden from our direct view is, of course, a crucial feature of the natural sciences. At the heart of this project, as Heisenberg—one of the greatest physicists of our and any time—once pointed out, is a principle that he ascribed to Democritus:

Democritus' atomic theory . . . realizes that it is impossible to explain rationally the perceptible qualities of matter except by tracing these back to the behaviour of entities which themselves no longer possess these qualities. If atoms are really to explain the origin of colour and smell of visible material bodies, then they cannot possess properties like colour and smell.³⁰

The explanation of the phenotypes of organisms in terms of their genotypes fits well into this Democritean pattern. In the same way, nineteenth-century race science sought in a heritable racial essence an explanation of what its proponents took to be the observed phenomena of the differential distribution in human populations both of morphological and of psychological and social traits. What modern genetics shows is that there is no such underlying racial essence. There was nothing wrong with the Democritean impulse, only with the particular form it took and the prejudices that informed—perhaps one should say “deformed”—the theorists' views of the phenomena.

The disappearance of a widespread belief in the biological category of the Negro would leave nothing for racists to have an attitude toward. But it would offer, by itself, no guarantee that Africans would escape from the stigma of centuries. Extrinsic racists could disappear and be replaced by people who believed that the population of Africa had in its gene pool fewer of the genes that account for those human capacities that generate what is valuable in human life; fewer, that is, than in European or Asian or other populations. Putting aside the extraordinary difficulty of defining which genes these are, there is, of course, no scientific basis for this claim. A confident expression of it would therefore be evidence only of the persistence of old prejudices in new forms. But even this view would be, in one respect, an advance on extrinsic racism. For it would mean that each African would need to be judged on his or her own merits. Without some cultural information, being told that someone is of African origin gives you little basis for supposing anything much about them. Let me put the claim at its weakest: in the absence of a racial essence, there could be no guarantee that some particular person was not more gifted—in some specific respect—than any or all others in the populations of other regions.³¹

It was earlier evidence, pointing similarly to the conclusion that “the genic variation within and between the three major races of man . . . is small compared with the intraracial variation”³² and that differences in morphology were not correlated strongly with intellectual and moral capacity, that led Du Bois in *The Crisis* to an

explicit rejection of the claim that biological race mattered for understanding the status of the Negro:

So far at least as intellectual and moral aptitudes are concerned we ought to speak of civilizations where we now speak of races. . . . Indeed, even the physical characteristics, excluding the skin color of a people, are to no small extent the direct result of the physical and social environment under which it is living. . . . These physical characteristics are furthermore too indefinite and elusive to serve as a basis for any rigid classification or division of human groups.³³

This is straightforward enough. Yet it would be too swift a conclusion to suppose that Du Bois here expresses his deepest convictions. After 1911 he went on to advocate Pan-Africanism, as he had advocated Pan-Negroism in 1897, and whatever African-Americans and Africans, from Asante to Zulu, share, it is not a single civilization.

Du Bois managed to maintain Pan-Africanism while officially rejecting talk of race as anything other than a synonym for color. We can see how he did this if we turn to his second autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*, published in 1940.

In *Dusk of Dawn*—the “essay toward the autobiography of a race concept”—Du Bois explicitly allies himself with the claim that race is not a “scientific” concept.

It is easy to see that scientific definition of race is impossible; it is easy to prove that physical characteristics are not so inherited as to make it possible to divide the world into races; that ability is the monopoly of no known aristocracy; that the possibilities of human development cannot be circumscribed by color, nationality or any conceivable definition of race.³⁴

But we need no scientific definition, for

All this has nothing to do with the plain fact that throughout the world today organized groups of men by monopoly of economic and physical power, legal enactment and intellectual training are limiting with determination and unflagging zeal the development of other groups; and that the concentration particularly of economic power today puts the majority of mankind into a slavery to the rest.³⁵

Or, as he puts it pithily a little later, “the black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”³⁶

Yet, just a few pages earlier, he has explained why he remains a Pan-Africanist, committed to a political program that binds all this indefinable black race together. This passage is worth citing extensively.

Du Bois begins with Countee Cullen’s question—What is Africa to me?—and replies:

Once I should have answered the question simply: I should have said “fatherland” or perhaps better “motherland” because I was born in the century when the walls of race were clear and straight; when the world consisted of mutually exclusive races; and even though the edges might be blurred, there was no question of exact definition and understanding of the meaning of the word. . . .

Since [the writing of “The Conservation of Races”] the concept of race has so changed and presented so much of contradiction that as I face Africa I ask myself:

what is it between us that constitutes a tie which I can feel better than I can explain? Africa is of course my fatherland. Yet neither my father nor my father’s father ever saw Africa or knew its meaning or cared overmuch for it. My mother’s folk were closer and yet their direct connection, in culture and race, became tenuous; still my tie to Africa is strong. On this vast continent were born and lived a large portion of my direct ancestors going back a thousand years or more. The mark of their heritage is upon me in color and hair. These are obvious things, but of little meaning in themselves; only important as they stand for real and more subtle differences from other men. Whether they do or not, I do not know nor does science know today.

But one thing is sure and that is the fact that since the fifteenth century these ancestors of mine and their descendants have had a common history; have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory. The actual ties of heritage between the individuals of this group vary with the ancestors that they have in common with many others: Europeans and Semites, perhaps Mongolians, certainly American Indians. But the physical bond is least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas. It is this unity that draws me to Africa.³⁷

This passage is affecting, powerfully expressed. We should like to be able to follow it in its conclusions. But, since it seduces us into error, we should begin distancing ourselves from the appeal of its argument by noticing how it echoes our earlier text. Color and hair are unimportant save “as they stand for real and more subtle differences,” Du Bois says here, and we recall the “subtle forces” that “have generally followed the natural cleavage of common blood, descent and physical peculiarities” of “The Conservation of Races.” There it was an essential part of the argument that these subtle forces—impulses and strivings—were the common property of those who shared a “common blood”; here, Du Bois does “not know nor does science” whether this is so. But if it is not so, then, on Du Bois’s own admission, these “obvious things” are “of little meaning.” And if they are of little meaning, then his mention of them marks, on the surface of his argument, the extent to which he cannot quite escape the appeal of the earlier conception of race.

Du Bois’s yearning for the earlier conception that he has now prohibited himself accounts for the pathos of the chasm between the unconfident certainty that Africa is “of course” his fatherland and the concession that it is not the land of his father or his father’s father. What use is such a fatherland? What use is a motherland with which even your mother’s connection is “tenuous”? What does it matter that a large portion of his ancestors have lived on that vast continent, if there is no subtler bond with them than brute—that is, culturally unmediated—biological descent and its entailed “badge” of hair and color?

Even in the passage that follows his explicit disavowal of the scientific conception of race, the references to “common history”—the “one long memory,” the “social heritage of slavery”—only lead us back into the now-familiar move to substitute for the biological conception of race a sociohistorical one. And that, as we have seen, is simply to bury the biological conception below the surface, not to transcend it. Because he never truly “speaks of civilization,” Du Bois cannot ask if there is not in American culture—which undoubtedly is his—an African residue to take hold of and

rejoice in, a subtle connection mediated not by genetics but by intentions, by meaning. Du Bois has no more conceptual resources here for explicating the unity of the Negro race—the Pan-African identity—than he had in “The Conservation of Races” half a century earlier. A glorious non sequitur must be submerged in the depths of the argument. It is easily brought to the surface.

If what Du Bois has in common with Africa is a history of “discrimination and insult,” then this binds him, on his own account, to “yellow Asia and . . . the South Seas” also. How can something he shares with the whole nonwhite world bind him to a part of it? Once we interrogate the argument here, a further suspicion arises that the claim to this bond is based on a hyperbolic reading of the facts. The “discrimination and insult” that we know Du Bois experienced in his American childhood and as an adult citizen of the industrialized world were different in character from that experienced by, say, Kwame Nkrumah in colonized West Africa, and were absent altogether in large parts of “yellow Asia.” What Du Bois shares with the nonwhite world is not insult but the *badge* of insult, and the badge, without the insult, is just the very skin and hair and bone that it is impossible to connect with a scientific definition of race.

Du Bois's question deserves a more careful answer than he gives it. What *does* cement together people who share a characteristic—the “badge of insult”—on the basis of which some of them have suffered discrimination? We might answer: “Just that; so there is certainly something that the nonwhite people of the world share.” But if we go on to ask what harm exactly a young woman in Mali suffers from antiblack race prejudice in Paris, this answer misses all the important details. She *does* suffer, of course, because, for example, political decisions about North-South relations are strongly affected by racism in the metropolitan cultures of the North. But this harm is more systemic, less personal, than the affront to individual dignity represented by racist insults in the postindustrial city. If she is an intellectual, reflecting on the cultures of the North, she may also feel the meditated sense of insult: she may know, after all, that if she were there, in Paris, she would risk being subjected to some of the same discriminations; she may recognize that racism is part of the reason why she could not get a visa to go there; why she would not have a good time if she did.

Such thoughts are certainly maddening, as African and African-American and black European intellectuals will avow, if you ask them how they feel about the racist immigration policies of Europe or the institutionalized racism of apartheid. And they are thoughts that can be had by any nonwhite person anywhere who knows—in a phrase of Chinua Achebe's—“how the world is moving.”³⁸ The thought that if I were there now, I would be a victim strikes at you differently, it seems to me, from the thought—which can enrage any decent white human being—that if I were there and *if I were not white*, I would be a victim.³⁹ Yet we should always remember that this thought, too, has led many to an identification with the struggle against racism.

The lesson, I think, of these reflections must be that there is no one answer to the question what identifications our antiracism may lead us into. Du Bois writes as if he has to choose between Africa, on the one hand, and “yellow Asia and . . . the South Seas,” on the other. But that, it seems to me, is just the choice that racism imposes on us—and just the choice we must reject.

I made the claim in Chapter 1 that there are substantial affinities between the racial doctrines of Pan-Africanism and other forms of nationalism rooted in the nineteenth century, in particular, with Zionism. Since we cannot forget what has been done to Jews in the name of race in this century, this claim is bound to invite controversy. I make it only to insist on the ways in which the Pan-Africanism of the African-American creators of black nationalist rhetoric was not untypical of European and American thought of its day, even of the rhetoric of the victims of racism. With Du Bois's position laid out before us, the comparison can be more substantially articulated.

But, given the sensitivity of the issue, I am bound to begin with caveats. It is no part of my brief to argue that Zionism has to be racist—not the least because, as I shall be arguing finally, the Pan-Africanist impetus can also be given a nonracist foundation. Nor is it my intention to argue for the claim that the origins of modern Zionism are *essentially* racist, or that racialism is central to the thought of all the founders of modern Zionism. It seems to me, as I have said, that Judaism—the religion—and the wider body of Jewish practice through which the various communities of the Diaspora have defined themselves allow for a cultural conception of Jewish identity that cannot be made plausible in the case of Pan-Africanism. As evidence of this fact, I would simply cite the way that the fifty or so rather disparate African nationalities in our present world seem to have met the nationalist impulses of many Africans, while Zionism has, of necessity, been satisfied by the creation of a single state.

But despite these differences, it is important to be clear that there were Jewish racialists in the early story of modern Zionism; that they were not marginal figures or fringe madmen; and that they, like Crummell and, later, Du Bois, developed a nationalism rooted in nineteenth-century theories of race. It is important in the practical world of politics because a racialized Zionism continues to be one of the threats to the moral stability of Israeli nationalism; as witness the politics of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane. But it is theoretically important to my argument, because, as I say, it is central to my view that Crummell's inchoate *theoria*, which Du Bois turned to organized theory, was thoroughly conventional.

Now, of course, to establish that Crummell's view was conventional, we should need no more than to cite the historical writings of the first academic historians in the United States, with their charming fantasies of Puritan democracy as part of a continuous tradition derived from the Anglo-Saxon moot, or the works of British Anglo-Saxon historiography, which traced the evolution of British institutions back to Tacitus's Teutonic hordes; and I shall, indeed, take up some of the issues raised in these writings at the start of Chapter 3. But *that* comparison would leave out part of what is so fascinating about the thought of these early nationalists. For, however anachronistic our reaction, our surprise at Crummell and those of his Zionist contemporaries that shared his racialized vision is that they, as victims of racism, endorsed racist theories.

So that when we read “The Ethics of Zionism” by Horace M. Kallen, published in the *Maccabean* in New York in August 1906, we may feel the same no-doubt-anachronistic astonishment.⁴⁰ Kallen's essay was based on a lecture he had given to a

gathering of an American Zionist organization (the *Maccabaeans* was its official publication). He says: "It is the race and not the man who, in the greater account of human destiny, struggles, survives or dies, and types of civilization have always reflected the natural character of the dominant races."⁴¹ And we remember Du Bois's "the history of the world is the history, not of individuals . . . but of races." He asks: "What then has the Jew done for civilization? What is his place in the evolution of the human race? What is his moral worth to humanity?"⁴² And we are reminded of Du Bois's races each "struggling . . . to develop for civilization its particular message."

There are, of course, instructive differences between Kallen's "ethics" and Du Bois's. Part of the historical divergence between African-American and Jewish-American conceptions of identity is revealed when Kallen explicitly rejects a religious or cultural conception of Jewish identity:

Here is an intensely united people of relatively unmixed blood, and intense race consciousness, sojourning in all parts of the earth, in some manner successfully, and the natural object of hatred of those among whom it lives. To avoid the effect of this hatred many of the race have tried to eliminate all resemblances between themselves and it. Their languages are as various as the countries in which they live; they proclaim their nationalities as Russian, English, French, Austrian, or American and relegate their racial character to a sectarian label. "We", they say, "are not Jews but Judaists.[]"⁴³

. . . our duty i[s] to Judaize the Jew.⁴⁴

For this argument presupposes as its antagonist a purely cultural nationalism of a kind that was to develop fully among African-Americans only later. Kallen saw "Cultur-Zionism" of this sort as not "much better than assimilation,"⁴⁵ which, of course, he actively opposed also. But this resistance to assimilation could not be part of Du Bois's position, either: assimilation, which some took to be a possibility for a brief moment after the American Civil War, did not become more than a theoretical possibility again—save for the few African-Americans who could "pass for white"—until after the civil rights movement, and then, of course, it was largely rejected in favor of a cultural nationalism of *Roots*.

Nevertheless, *mutatis mutandis*, the operative ideology here is recognizably Du Bois's; American Jewish nationalism—at least in *this* manifestation—and American black nationalism are (unsurprisingly) part of the same scheme of things.⁴⁶

If Du Bois's race concept seems an all-too-American creation, its traces in African rhetoric are legion. When Kwame Nkrumah addressed the Gold Coast Parliament in presenting the "motion of destiny" accepting the independence constitution, he spoke these words:

Honourable Members . . . The eyes and ears of the world are upon you; yea, our oppressed brothers throughout this vast continent of Africa and the New World are looking to you with desperate hope, as an inspiration to continue their grim fight against cruelties which we in this corner of Africa have never known—cruelties which are a disgrace to humanity, and to the civilisation which the white man has set himself to teach us.⁴⁷

To a person unencumbered with the baggage of the history of the idea of race, it would surely seem strange that the independence of one nation of black men and women should resonate more with black people than with other oppressed people; strange too that it should be the whiteness of the oppressors—"the white man"—as opposed, say, to their *imperialism*, that should stand out. It should seem a strange idea, even to those of us who live in a world formed by racial ideology, that your freedom from cruelties I have never known should spur me on in my fight for freedom *because we are of the same color*. Yet Du Bois died in Nkrumah's Ghana, led there by the dream of Pan-Africanism and the reality of American racism. If he escaped that racism, he never completed the escape from race. The logic of his argument leads naturally to the final repudiation of race as a term of difference—to speaking "of civilizations where we now speak of races." The logic is the same logic that has led us to speak of gender—the social construction out of the biological facts—where we once spoke of sex, and a rational assessment of the evidence requires that we should endorse not only the logic but the premises of each argument. I have only sketched the evidence for these premises in the case of race, but it is all there in the journals. Discussing Du Bois has been largely a pretext for adumbrating the argument he never quite managed to complete.

In Chapter 1, I distinguished two kinds of racism—intrinsic and extrinsic: Du Bois's theoretical racism was, in my view, extrinsic. Yet, in his heart, it seems to me that Du Bois's feelings were those of an intrinsic racist. He wanted desperately to find in Africa and with Africans a home, a place where he could feel, as he never felt in America, that he belonged. His reason would not allow him to be an intrinsic racist, however; and so he reacted to the challenges to racialism by seeking in more and more exotic ways to defend his belief in the connection between race and morally relevant properties.

The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us. As we have seen, even the biologist's notion has only limited uses, and the notion that Du Bois required, and that underlies the more hateful racisms of the modern era, refers to nothing in the world at all. The evil that is done is done by the concept, and by easy—yet impossible—assumptions as to its application.

Talk of "race" is particularly distressing for those of us who take culture seriously. For, where race works—in places where "gross differences" of morphology are correlated with "subtle differences" of temperament, belief, and intention—it works as an attempt at metonym for culture, and it does so only at the price of biologizing what *is* culture, ideology.

To call it "biologizing" is not, however, to consign our concept of race to biology. For what is present there is not our concept but our word only. Even the biologists who believe in human races use the term *race*, as they say, "without any social implication."⁴⁸ What exists "out there" in the world—communities of meaning, shading variously into each other in the rich structure of the social world—is the province not of biology but of the human sciences.

I have examined these issues through the writings of Du Bois, with the burden of his scholarly inheritance, seeking to transcend the system of oppositions whose acceptance would have left him opposed to the (white) norm of form and value. In his

early work, Du Bois takes race for granted and seeks to revalue one pole of the opposition of white to black. The received concept is a hierarchy, a vertical structure, and Du Bois wishes to rotate the axis, to give race a "horizontal" reading. Challenge the assumption that there can be an axis, however oriented in the space of values, and the project fails for loss of presuppositions. In his later writings, Du Bois—whose life's work was, in a sense, an attempt at just this impossible project—was unable to escape the notion of race he explicitly rejected. I shall show in later essays that this curious conjunction of a reliance on and a repudiation of race recurs in recent African theorizing.

We may borrow Du Bois's own metaphor: though he saw the dawn coming, he never faced the sun. And it would be hard to deny that he is followed in this by many in Africa—as in Europe and America—today: we all live in the dusk of that dawn.



THREE

Topologies of Nativism

Au delà du refus de toute domination extérieure, c'est la volonté de renouer en profondeur avec l'héritage culturel de l'Afrique, trop longtemps méconnu et refusé. Loin d'être un effort superficiel ou folklorique pour faire revivre quelques traditions ou pratiques ancestrales, il s'agit de construire une nouvelle société dont l'identité n'est pas conférée du dehors.¹

CARDINAL PAUL ZOUNGRANA

Martin Farquhar Tupper, an Englishman who lived through most of the nineteenth century, was an extremely prolific writer; in his day the verses in his *Proverbial Maxims* were read by millions, and his two novels and many other writings gathered him a respectable public. Nowadays, Tupper is known only to those with a historical interest in popular writers of the nineteenth century or an antiquarian interest in bad verse. But in 1850 Tupper was at the height of his popularity and his powers, and in that year he published these soon-to-be-famous words in a new journal called the *Anglo-Saxon*.

Stretch forth! stretch forth! from the south to the north,
From the east to the west,—stretch forth! stretch forth!
Strengthen thy stakes and lengthen thy cords,—
The world is a tent for the world's true lords!
Break forth and spread over every place
The world is a world for the Saxon race!

The *Anglo-Saxon* lasted only a year, but its tone is emblematic of an important development in the way educated Englishmen and women thought of themselves and of what it was that made them English—a development that was itself part of a wider movement of ideas in Europe and North America. As heirs to the culture of the modern world, a culture so crucially shaped by the ideas that Tupper's poem represents, almost all twentieth-century readers, not merely in Europe and America but throughout the world, are able to take for granted a set of assumptions about what Tupper means by "race." Those assumptions, which amounted to a new theory of race, color our modern understanding of literature—indeed of most symbolic culture—in fundamental ways, and this despite the fact that many of these assumptions have been officially discarded.