

# What Counts as a Collective Gift? Culture and Value in Du Bois' *The Gift of Black Folk*

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## Abstract

In *The Conservation of Races*, Du Bois advocates that African Americans hold on to their distinctiveness as members of the black race because this enables them to participate in a cosmopolitan process of cultural exchange in which different races collectively advance human civilization by means of different contributions. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Tommie Shelby have criticized the position that Du Bois expresses in that essay as a problematic form of racial essentialism. This article investigates how Du Bois' 1924 book *The Gift of Black Folk* escapes or fails to escape that criticism. It is easy to worry that the diversity of what Du Bois in this book is willing to treat as a black contribution to the development of America pushes us from the problem of essentialism to the other extreme: a lack of any conceptual constraints whatsoever on what can count as a black gift. I will argue that recognizing the cultivation of historical memory as a form of cultural activity is key to understanding the concept's unity.

## 1. Introduction

W.E.B. Du Bois, long known as an African American intellectual and activist of towering importance, has in recent times become increasingly recognized as a philosopher of uncommon depth and historical significance. In order to appreciate him as such, there are certain essays and books that one must read. Most notable among the essays is 'The Conservation of Races', an 1897 work that did much to stimulate and shape the concerns of philosophy of race as an area of professional research as it developed over the course of the last few decades of the twentieth century and the first couple of decades of the present one. I will say more in the first section of this article about why that essay has been so influential. Among his books, I would single out three as essential: *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), his most famous work; *Darkwater* (1920), a politically charged collection of essays, short stories, and poems; and *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), an autobiography that is also a study of the complexities of conceptualizing race.

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In what follows, I will not be delving into the significance of any of those three books but rather shining a light on a book that has thus far received much less attention: *The Gift of Black Folk*, published in 1924 as part of a book series commissioned by the Knights of Columbus on the contributions of various ethnic minorities to the United States. The other two books that appeared in the series were titled *The Jews in the Making of America* and *The Germans in the Making of America*, and thus, accordingly, the subtitle of Du Bois' book is *The Negroes in the Making of America*. While I do not count it as one of the works that one simply must read in order to appreciate Du Bois as a philosopher, I nevertheless view *The Gift of Black Folk* as indispensably important for puzzling through some questions of fundamental importance raised by his general theoretical approach to the fight against racism.

Du Bois was, to use a term that first rose to prominence in Canadian politics not long after his death, a proponent of *multi-culturalism*. He believed in the productive and progressive power of cultural diversity and, directly related to that belief, he was also a black cultural nationalist, a proponent of the pursuit of autonomy for black people through the preservation and cultivation of black cultural difference. When we encounter cultural nationalism, there are critical questions we ought to ask concerning what might be involved in the collective task of valuing and maintaining distinctive cultural practices. What demands upon individuals within the group are being made here? Does this approach to culture wrongfully constrain the freedom of individuals to construct their own identities in ways that ought to worry us? These questions become tougher still when what we are talking about is a racial form of cultural nationalism. Might the black cultural nationalist be leading us toward a model of cultural identity rooted in problematic notions of heritable racial essences?

My claim about *The Gift of Black Folk* is that it is helpful and, indeed, necessary for figuring out what we can or cannot say on Du Bois' behalf in answer to such pointed questions. In the first section, I will rehearse the expressions of multiculturalism and black cultural nationalism in 'Conservation' and the criticisms of his position in that essay by the philosophers Kwame Anthony Appiah and Tommie Shelby. In the second section, I will explain why it makes sense to turn to *The Gift of Black Folk* to think about how applicable Appiah and Shelby's criticisms are to Du Bois once we move beyond 'Conservation'. We will see that the diversity of things that Du Bois is willing to call a gift in this book raises the question of whether, far from pegging him as too much of an essentialist,

we might rather see him as so permissive in what he will treat as a special black contribution that there are no limits on the concept whatsoever. Finally, in the third section, I will focus on the blatantly paradoxical idea of an involuntary gift, which comes up multiple times in *The Gift of Black Folk*. We should worry about the ethical implications of viewing history the way Du Bois encourages when he invokes this idea. Still, noticing the freedom we have to revise our attitudes toward the past is key, I will claim, to recognizing the idea as meaningful, and this furthermore allows me to identify the self-conscious practice of remembering the past as a cultural activity able to bring unity to the concept of the black gift.

### 2. 'Conservation' and its Critics

On March 5, 1897, in Washington, D.C., Du Bois delivered 'Conservation' at the very first meeting of the American Negro Academy, a learned society founded by his mentor, Alexander Crummell. At what we might call the climax of the essay, Du Bois envisions the Academy helping to generate and standing at the centre of an organized invigoration and proliferation of African American cultural institutions: 'Negro colleges, Negro newspapers, Negro business organizations, a Negro school of literature and art, and an intellectual clearing house, for all these products of the Negro mind, which we may call a Negro Academy' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 44). Preceding this climactic point, however, and thus forming the bulk of the essay, is the theoretical background justifying this practical stance. The question that Du Bois sets out to investigate is 'the real meaning of race' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 39). He suggests that African Americans in his time often worry when encountering discussions of the nature of race because it is so common for these discussions to end up having disturbing implications concerning their status as human beings. There is a temptation, as a result, to 'deprecate and minimize race distinctions' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 38). Du Bois also suggests that, in addition to emphasizing the unity of humanity, African Americans discussing race tend to focus on the wrongs of discrimination. He announces his intention, by contrast, to look at race from a broader perspective: 'It is necessary in planning our movements, in guiding our future development, that at times we rise above the pressing, but smaller questions of separate schools and cars, wage-discrimination and lynch law, to survey the whole question of race in human philosophy and to lay, on a basis of broad knowledge and careful insight, those large lines of policy and

higher ideals which may form our guiding lines and boundaries in the practical difficulties of everyday' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 39).

Du Bois then makes the move that has made the essay seem so prophetic to many philosophers of race in the present: he denies that research in the natural sciences has been able to illuminate the significance of racial difference and claims we must instead take up the perspective of 'the historian and sociologist' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 40). From that perspective, a race may be defined, according to him, as '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' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 40). Given this talk of shared traditions, impulses, and ideals, the sociohistorical account of race that Du Bois offers us here is an account of races as sharing cultures.

Note, further, that this definition of races as cultural groups is directly connected to his multiculturalism. Modern civilization, as Du Bois understands it, is the ongoing result of strivings for ideals by different groups that he considers to be races in the sociohistorical sense of the term: 'The English nation stood for constitutional liberty and commercial freedom; the German nation for science and philosophy; the Romance nations stood for literature and art, and the other race groups are striving, each in its own way, to develop for civilization its particular message, its particular ideal, which shall help to guide the world nearer and nearer that perfection of human life for which we all long, that 'one far-off Divine event'' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 42).

Given this understanding of race, Du Bois suggests that, if black people fail to value their racial identity, they do a disservice not only to themselves but to the world as a whole. They rob themselves and the world of the valuable cultural contributions that their particularity enables them to develop. Du Bois acknowledges, however, that it can be tempting for African Americans to see the cessation of any perception of them as racially different as the only hope for the coming to an end of the oppression they experience in the United States. He considers as an objection to his imperative of embracing black identity the idea that 'our sole hope of salvation lies in being able to lose our race identity in the commingled blood of the nation' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 43).

In response to this objection, Du Bois provides a remarkable affirmation of the reality and value of cultural hybridity. He says of his people, on the one hand: 'We are Americans, not only by birth and by citizenship, but by our political ideals, our language, our religion' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 44). On the other hand, he claims:

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'Farther than that, our Americanism does not go. At that point, we are Negroes, members of a vast historic race' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 44). As a distinct black African-descended people, they can credit themselves, in his view, with having already greatly contributed a number of distinctive cultural contributions to America: 'We are that people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 44). This evidence of the ability to contribute further justifies the practical conclusion that African Americans must avoid downplaying racial difference and instead hold on to their distinctive group identity as members of the black race. In doing so, they will not replace the goal of ending anti-black discrimination with the goal of making more cultural contributions but rather they will combine these goals: 'it is our duty to conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals; as a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development' (Du Bois, 1996, p. 44).

Kwame Anthony Appiah's 1985 article, 'The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race', sparked a vigorous debate on what to make of 'Conservation' and of race in general in ways that have shaped philosophy of race as an area of study ever since. For one thing, Appiah's piece established anti-realism about race as an important position in philosophy, requiring a sophisticated response from those who disagree. It begins with discussion of how little genetic difference there is among humans and thus how little reason to think that any significant biological differences between humans may be captured by talk of racial difference. Toward the end, Appiah quips: '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' (Appiah, 1985, p. 35).

Before that conclusion, however, he performs a famous and controversial critical analysis of Du Bois' definition of a race. (It should be noted that Appiah has in recent years abandoned the critique of 'Conservation' expressed in 'The Uncompleted Argument', but it remains worth revisiting for its powerful attack on the possibility of a sociohistorical account of race.) Appiah investigates how each of the components of Du Bois' definition could help us distinguish between races on a non-biological basis and finds that none of them do the job. Most notably, he argues that Du Bois' appeal to the notion of a 'common history' is circular: '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' (Appiah, 1985, p. 27). Appiah furthermore claims that what Du Bois implicitly relies on to distinguish his idiosyncratic list of races (which, as we have seen, includes black people alongside groups such as the English, the Germans, and the Romance nations) is really a geographic criterion: 'people are members of the same race if they share features in virtue of being descended largely from people of the same region' (Appiah, 1985, p. 29). But while the shared feature may be cultural in certain cases, as far as Appiah can see, the only thing that can plausibly be seen as uniting the diverse members of the black race is a broad physical resemblance. His critique, then, is that 'Conservation' does not really move beyond the traditional notion of race as a matter of biologically inherited characteristics, both physical and behavioural: '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 were inferior to those of the white-skinned, straighter-haired ones' (Appiah, 1985, p. 30).

Tommie Shelby, in his 2005 book *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*, also takes a critical stance on 'Conservation' but there is a big difference between his critique and Appiah's. If Appiah's main concern was that Du Bois misrepresents human reality with a biologically essentialist *description* of racial difference, then Shelby leads us to worry about how racial essentialism can be a source of unjustified *prescriptions*, even when the racial essence is supposedly non-biological. Shelby's target is thus not the definition of race in 'Conservation' but rather what he takes to be the essay's main moral and political principle: 'Du Bois was convinced that a collective black identity – based primarily on a shared history and culture, and only secondarily, if at all, on a common biological inheritance – is a necessary component of an emancipatory black solidarity' (Shelby, 2005, pp. 205–206).

Shelby believes this requirement of a sense of shared cultural identity is, first of all, unnecessary for cultivating unity among black people for the purpose of fighting racism. Secondly, he believes it is not just unnecessary but actively hurtful. He claims that pushing for allegiance to a common cultural identity is counterproductive to black solidarity because doing so constrains individual freedom in a way that discourages unity: 'If there is group pressure to conform to some prototype of blackness, which collective identity theory would seem to require, this would likely create 'core' and 'fringe' sub-groups, thus alienating those on the fringe and providing them with

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an incentive to defect from the collective effort' (Shelby, 2005, p. 229). Racial essentialism, on this account, ostracizes those who feel unable to identify with the chosen set image of blackness. It is therefore self-defeating in a call for black solidarity in the face of oppression.

Appiah and Shelby's critiques of 'Conservation' force us to question what we ought to see as the ultimate legacy of this influential essay. There should be no doubt that it is a philosophical classic, even if only for the way it seeks to create space for what we today call social constructionism about race. The tougher question is how plausible and attractive we should find its vision of black cultural unity. Should we find it laudable to encourage a sense of pride in racial difference among African Americans and other black people, based on a self-understanding as members of a culturally distinct group whose cultural difference is beneficial not only to themselves but to the world as a whole? Or is this a way in which Du Bois leads us astray? I believe engaging with *The Gift of Black Folk* can help us wrestle with this question.

### 3. Introducing *The Gift of Black Folk*

Near the end of the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, which is a revised version of an essay that Du Bois published in the same year as the year in which he presented 'Conservation', we find Du Bois once again claiming that the goals of achieving equality and of preserving and cultivating the distinctiveness of black culture are not at odds but must be pursued simultaneously. He writes of 'striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack' (Du Bois, 1903, p. 11). As in 'Conservation', he also claims that there is a history of black cultural contributions to America preparing the way for future giving: 'We the darker ones come even now not altogether empty-handed: there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and

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reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness' (Du Bois, 1903, pp. 11–12).

These words from *Souls* require us to ask the same questions inspired by 'Conservation': should we be led by Appiah to view the traits and talents of black people that Du Bois talks about here as naturally inherited – passed down in the blood, so to speak – and, if not, how else should we understand them? Does the goal of fostering and developing these traits and talents place a burden on black individuals to live up to cultural standards of blackness in the way that Shelby argues is counterproductive? Given the fame of this book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, it is perhaps curious that so few read and discuss *The Gift of Black Folk*, since the title evidently makes it sound like something of a sequel.

So what do we find, when we look for answers to the questions we have raised, in *The Gift* (as I'll now call it)? Well, there is at least one passage in the book that seems to confirm rather clearly that Appiah was right – that is, that Du Bois understands the cultural uniqueness of black people in a straightforwardly biologically essentialist way. Chapter 8 of *The Gift*, entitled 'Negro Art and Literature', begins with this paragraph: 'The Negro is primarily an artist. The usual way of putting this is to speak disdainfully of his 'sensuous' nature. This means that the only race which has held at bay the life destroying forces of the tropics, has gained therefrom in some slight compensation a sense of beauty, particularly for sound and color, which characterizes the race. The Negro blood which flowed in the veins of many of the mightiest of the Pharaohs accounts for much of Egyptian art, and indeed Egyptian civilization owes much in its origin to the development of the large strain of Negro blood which manifested itself in every grade of Egyptian society' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 287). Note how Du Bois protests the disdain with which people talk of the alleged sensuousness of black people, but not because he wants to reject the stereotype thus labeled. It is the disdain that constitutes the problem. The concern here with revaluing what has been denigrated fits well with Appiah's description of what is going on in 'Conservation'. And then, of course, the final sentence of the paragraph confronts us with a direct appeal to the power of black blood flowing through veins.

So maybe we should say 'case closed' and simply accept that what Du Bois has to say about black culture is rooted in an outdated understanding of racial belonging, making his work of no less historical interest but much less practical relevance. Or, perhaps, we should not be so hasty. Consider how, later in the same chapter, Du Bois begins to talk about the black contribution to literature. If you



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know something about the history of African American literature, you might suspect that he would begin with Phillis Wheatley. He does, in fact, go on to call her 'easily the pioneer', but before that, he has pages on what he calls 'the influence which the Negro has had on American literature', by which he means literature by white Americans (Du Bois, 1924, pp. 292, 298). You might wonder whether this influence is a matter of how the special black sense of beauty has had effects beyond that which is produced by black people themselves. What we find, though, is that he is talking simply about the presence of black people and the problems surrounding them as a theme in the writing and oratory of white Americans. He tells a story that reaches all the way back to Shakespeare, for whom he says (presumably speaking of Othello) 'the black man of fiction was a man, a brave, fine, if withal overtrusting and impulsive, hero' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 293). In the context of American slavery, by contrast, 'he emerged slowly beginning about 1830 as a dull, stupid but contented slave, capable of doglike devotion, superstitious and incapable of education' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 294). Controversy over abolition made him 'a victim, a man of sorrows, a fugitive chased by bloodhounds, a beautiful raped octo-noon, a crucified Uncle Tom, but a lay figure, objectively pitiable but seldom subjectively conceived' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 294). After the era of Reconstruction following the Civil War, 'the black man was either a faithful old 'Before de wah' darky worshipping lordly white folk, or a frolicking ape, or a villain, a sullen scoundrel, a violator of womanhood, a low thief and misbirthed monster' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 294). At the time Du Bois is writing, he says the black character in literature is 'slowly but tentatively, almost apologetically rising – a somewhat deserving, often poignant, but hopeless figure; a man whose only proper end is dramatic suicide physically or morally' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 294).

This is a fascinating overview of how black people have been depicted in literature by white authors and, given that Du Bois was a Harvard-trained historian, it is not surprising to see him offering us such a perspective. What is curious, however, is that we are being offered this account of how black people have influenced American literature simply by being depicted within it as an example of how black people have contributed to America. If we are to call this a contribution, it seems fair at least to say that it is not a very active kind of contributing. All that needs to be done by black people to contribute in this way is to simply exist and, by virtue of existing, within this American context, they are able to be depicted. Du Bois acknowledges precisely this concern when he

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writes: 'It may be said that the influence of the Negro here is a passive influence and yet one must remember that it would be inconceivable to have an American literature, even that written by white men, and not have the Negro as a subject. He has been the lay figure, but after all, the figure has been alive, it has moved, it has talked, felt and influenced' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 293). As a reply to an objection, this is intriguing, but not very clear. I take him to be saying, at least in part, that the kind of presence black people have had in American literature is by itself evidence of the active part they have played in American life, even if to be written about is a passive experience.

Part of what seems paradoxical about treating being written about as a contribution, however, is the emphasis Du Bois places on how black people have been depicted in literature so often as caricatures. They have been not merely depicted but distorted and dehumanized. Du Bois writes: 'As a normal human being reacting humanly to human problems the Negro has never appeared in the fiction or the science of white writers, with a bare half dozen exceptions; while to the white southerner who 'knows him best' he is always an idiot or a monster, and he sees him as such, no matter what is before his very eyes' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 295). If it is already strange to think of being depicted as a contribution, then it seems even stranger to think of being distorted and misrepresented as a contribution. After all, we can imagine situations in which allowing ourselves to be depicted – say, by serving as the model for an aspiring painter – might be a gift of sorts, but it is difficult to imagine knowingly consenting to being represented in false and damaging ways.

Du Bois continues: 'And yet, with all this, the Negro has held the stage. In the South he is everything. You cannot discuss religion, morals, politics, social life, science, earth or sky, God or devil without touching the Negro. It is a perennial and continuous and continual subject of books, editorials, sermons, lectures and smoking car confabs. In the north and west while seldom in the center, the Negro is always in the wings waiting to appear or screaming shrill lines off stage. What would intellectual America do if she woke some fine morning to find no 'Negro' Problem?' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 295). Again, understood as a defence of taking the fact of being misrepresented as a contribution to American culture, this is not quite clear. What we can most certainly take from it is a major theme of the book – namely, that America is not America without black people, that to imagine America without black people is to come up with a fiction so vastly different from what America is that it would be misleading to think of it as in any way an envisioning of America, given how central black people have been to American

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life, history, and culture. This is a powerful, insightful sentiment. What it leaves unresolved, however, is how acknowledgement of this centrality relates to promoting the goal of black people preserving their cultural difference in order to enrich America and the rest of the world with their distinctive cultural contributions.

This is why I say we should not be hasty, as it is inaccurate to see *The Gift* as simply providing a clearly essentialist answer to the question of how black people can and should view themselves as having contributed and as able to contribute further. Nowhere beyond that opening portion of Chapter 8 is there so blatant an appeal to the idea of special powers in racial blood. What we get instead is a bewildering variety of activities, experiences, and characteristics, sometimes active but sometimes seemingly passive, sometimes complimentary to black people but sometimes degrading. One helpful feature of the book given the task of summarizing this variety is that each chapter has a kind of subtitle encapsulating its content, and so I will now delve further into the book by quoting and commenting upon these subtitles.

Chapter 1, 'The Black Explorers', is summarized this way: 'How the Negro helped in the discovery of America and gave his ancient customs to the land' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 35). Central to the chapter is the story of Estevanico, the enslaved black Moroccan who ended up becoming the first black person to visit various parts of what is now the United States in the 1530s. His story is an important one but notice the difference between telling that story and speaking of the gift of black music, or even of the gifted poetry of Phillis Wheatley. It is not clear what, if anything, we might see as culturally distinct about this black man's role in the Spanish exploration of North America. The part of the summary about giving ancient customs to the land seems to refer not to anything Estevanico did but rather to Du Bois' discussion of the hypothesis that Africans visited the Americas before 1492, a hypothesis partly supported by reference to artistic forms and agricultural practices among the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Even if accurate (and it should be noted that the hypothesis is viewed by most historians today as exceedingly doubtful), there are critical questions we should ask about how contributions to indigenous cultures preceding the European colonization of the Americas relate or do not relate to culturally contributing to the United States.

Let us move on, nevertheless, to Chapter 2, 'Black Labor', which is summarized as follows: 'How the Negro gave his brawn and brain to fell the forests, till the soil and make America a rich and prosperous land' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 52). The language here is active, suitable

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to how we would think of a gift, even if not a culturally distinctive one. And yet, central to this chapter is the experience of slavery, which we obviously have much reason to think of as the very opposite of the idea of a gift. I will say more about this in the next and final section of this article. Chapter 3, 'Black Soldiers', is summarized: 'How the Negro fought in every American war for a cause that was not his and to gain for others a freedom which was not his own' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 80). Here again, we have active language, suitable to gift-giving, and yet once again reason to worry that compelled service will be misidentified as a gift. Even if we are talking about service freely and voluntarily performed, the question remains of how we value this as a gift given the basic unfairness that this summary evokes.

Chapter 4, 'The Emancipation of Democracy', is summarized: 'How the black slave by his incessant struggle to be free has broadened the basis of democracy in America and in the world' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 135). It is usefully combined with Chapter 5, 'The Reconstruction of Freedom', which is summarized: 'How the black fugitive, soldier, and Freedman after the Civil War helped to restore the Union, establish public schools, enfranchise the poor white and initiate industrial democracy in America' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 184). It is in Chapter 5 that Du Bois specifies what he takes to be the 'greatest gift' of black people to America, an evidently important point to which we will return (Du Bois, 1924, p. 212).

Chapter 6, 'The Freedom of Womanhood', is summarized: 'How the black woman from her low estate not only united two great human races, but helped lift herself and all women to economic independence and self-expression' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 259). You might wonder how it is possible to talk of the black and white races as united, before even wondering how this accomplishment of unity might be attributed to black women. On the other hand, you might be the kind of quick-witted person who realizes immediately that Du Bois is talking about the way that the systemic problem of rape under slavery biologically united the two races and, if so, you might also be duly horrified at the idea of this as a gift.

Chapter 7, 'The American Folk Song', is summarized: 'How black folk sang their sorrow songs in the land of their bondage and made this music the only American folk music' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 274). This chapter is, in one way, relatively uncontroversial for our purposes, as it fits well with the idea of a distinctive cultural gift that we get in 'Conservation', but it is thus also questionable how much it advances our understanding of the nature of black gift-giving. Chapter 8, which I have already discussed at length, is summarized:

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‘How the tragic story of the black slave has become a central theme of the story of America and has inspired literature and created art’ (Du Bois, 1924, p. 287). Lastly, Chapter 9, ‘The Gift of the Spirit,’ is summarized: ‘How the fine, sweet spirit of black folk, despite superstition and passion, has breathed the soul of humility and forgiveness into the formalism and cant of American religion’ (Du Bois, 1924, p. 320).

The opening paragraphs of this final chapter of the book are relevant to how we judge the seemingly blatant essentialism we found in Chapter 8, and so are very much worth discussing. Du Bois writes: ‘Above and beyond all that we have mentioned, perhaps least tangible but just as true, is the peculiar spiritual quality which the Negro has injected into American life and civilization. It is hard to define or characterize it – a certain spiritual joyousness; a sensuous, tropical love of life, in vivid contrast to the cool and cautious New England reason; a slow and dreamful conception of the universe, a drawling and slurring of speech, an intense sensitiveness to spiritual values – all these things and others like them, tell of the imprint of Africa on Europe in America’ (Du Bois, 1924, p. 320). The admission that he is dealing with something real but hard to define, hard to characterize, and barely tangible, is interesting as a reflection upon the difficulty of precision when dealing with aspects of culture like general style, common mannerisms, and so on. How is this influence transmitted, according to Du Bois? He writes: ‘One way this influence has been brought to bear is through the actual mingling of blood. But this is the smaller cause of Negro influence. Heredity is always stronger through the influence of acts and deeds and imitations than through actual blood descent; and the presence of the Negro in the United States quite apart from the mingling of blood has always strongly influenced the land’ (Du Bois, 1924, pp. 320–321). We see here that, for Du Bois, it is indeed possible for biological reproduction to pass on cultural characteristics, but that is not the primary way in which black cultural influence should be measured. This stance is reminiscent of his claim in ‘Conservation’ that race is more social and historical than natural because, while racial difference *generally* involves ‘common blood’, it does not *always* involve it.

In any case, if Du Bois was concerned primarily with the power of blood, one would expect the greatest gift of black people in his eyes to be some characteristic behavioural tendency that he isolates and praises. By contrast, what Du Bois actually identifies as the greatest gift of black people is the way that they used what political power they had during the exceptional period of post-Civil War

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Reconstruction. Chapter 5, 'The Reconstruction of Freedom', was something of a trial run for his masterpiece of historical writing, published a little over a decade later: *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). In the part of the chapter where he uses the term 'greatest gift', he has just been discussing the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave the vote to black men. Du Bois describes the passing of the amendment as a necessity in the face of the determination of former secessionists to re-enslave and re-subjugate black people as best they could. Du Bois writes: 'Thus, Negro suffrage was forced to the front, not as a method of humiliating the South; not as a theoretical and dangerous gift to the Freedmen; not according to any preconcerted plan but simply because of the grim necessities of the situation. The North must either give up the fruits of war, keep a Freedmen's Bureau for a generation or use the Negro vote to reconstruct the Southern states and to insure such legislation as would at least begin the economic emancipation of the slave. *In other words the North being unable to free the slave, let him try to free himself. And he did, and this was his greatest gift to this nation*' (Du Bois, 1924, pp. 211–212).

How was this the greatest gift? Note, first, the framing: unlike moments where he seems to call passive experiences gifts, this gift is all about black agency. Du Bois describes the Fifteenth Amendment as if it were a form of moving out of the way by the federal government. The African American is described as responding by freeing himself through the vote, which does not sound like beneficence to others, as we would expect from a great gift, but rather caring for oneself. Black people caring for themselves, in this case, though, meant effectively advancing modern civilization, or so Du Bois argues. He provides evidence that state constitutions after the participation of black people in Southern state governments during Reconstruction were more democratic in ways that remained the case even after black people were pushed out of the political process in the wake of the end of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow segregationist law. Property qualifications that excluded poor white people were removed by legislatures that included black people and depended upon black votes. The public school system that benefited coming generations of white Southerners was also pioneered during Reconstruction. Advances of these sorts represent to Du Bois the proof that freedom for black people ultimately means greater freedom for all people. Clearly, this is a gift and clearly it is great.

Still, we must ask, once again: what does it mean for thinking about black cultural difference? Reading *The Gift* may lead you to conclude

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that just about anything can be called a gift, resulting in the worry that it is not essentialism that should cause us concern with respect to Du Bois but rather vacuity. Let me explain by returning to Shelby's critique of black cultural nationalism. Having argued that it is an unhelpful restriction on the freedom of black individuals to require embracing a black cultural identity for participation in black solidarity against racism, Shelby considers the objection that the problem can be solved by acknowledging the diversity of black cultures: 'One could of course mean to include under 'black identity' *all* of the cultural traits that are embraced and reproduced by blacks. This, however, would have the effect of rendering collective identity theory vacuous, because blacks cannot help taking on cultural traits of one sort or another, and therefore the imperative to 'conserve blackness' would have no prescriptive force – it would not require blacks to do anything but literally 'be themselves' (Shelby, 2005, p. 232). Applied to *The Gift*, one might argue that Du Bois makes gift-giving not only everything black people do but everything that they experience, and this makes both the idea of progress through black cultural contribution and the associated imperative to preserve the distinctiveness of black culture rather meaningless.

But maybe we are simply reading *The Gift* wrong. Maybe we are supposed to understand it as only incidentally concerned with black cultural difference and rather as providing, first and foremost, a general account of the centrality of black people to American life, history, and culture. Maybe the word 'gift' in the title is nothing but a rhetorical flourish that should not be taken so seriously, allowing us to find it unsurprising that he discusses activities like voting and legislating during Reconstruction and experiences like being depicted and caricatured in the literature of white American authors. Such activities and experiences are undoubtedly relevant to the claim that black people have been central to the development of America.

### 4. The Paradox of the Involuntary Gift

It seems to me, however, that Du Bois directly blocks this reading of the gift idea as a mere rhetorical flourish by repeatedly flaunting the paradoxical nature of some of his references to gift-giving. In Chapter 2, he refers to black labour as 'the gift of labor, one of the greatest that the Negro has made to American nationality. It was in part involuntary, but whether given willingly or not, it was given and America profited by the gift' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 76). What are we to make of

this talk of an involuntary gift? Let us first acknowledge what is so clearly distasteful about referring to the forced labour of slavery as a gift. Slavery involved violent coercion and it is quite reasonable to hold that there is no such thing as a gift that has been given through the violent coercion of the gift-giver by the gift's recipient. It is plausible to read Du Bois as suggesting that America's profit allows us to speak of a gift – that is, that where someone has benefited from the labour of another, especially in cases where this labour has not been performed for the sake of remuneration, we can focus on that unpurchased benefit and call the labour a kind of gift.

But we should reject this. We can and should insist, against Du Bois, that we move decisively away from talking about gifts whenever we move away from talking about goods or services that one offers to another by choice, with the conscious intention of providing some benefit. Labour performed without remuneration, when performed voluntarily to benefit others, can reasonably be called a gift. Labour performed without remuneration, where that labour has been extracted from the labourer by the threat of force, is a kind of dehumanizing exploitation that we should never refer to as a gift. We ought not to condone playing with words in such a way that we lose this vital distinction, because to do so dishonours those who are victimized by practices of forced labour and, correspondingly, overlooks the virtue to be honoured in cases where it is appropriate to speak of gift-giving.

But where does this leave us? Must we view Du Bois as having presented us with a picture of gift-giving so controversial as to be little better than gibberish? I think not. I have argued that we should criticize, on a moral basis, his characterization of slavery as a gift, but I also think there is a way of reconstructing what he is up to that makes the characterization richly meaningful, despite being inadvisable. Consider this striking sentence from the concluding part of Frantz Fanon's classic work of existentialism, *Black Skin White Masks*: 'I am a man, and I have to rework the world's past from the very beginning. I am not just responsible for the slave revolt in Saint Domingue. Every time a man has brought victory to the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to enslave his fellow man, I have felt a sense of solidarity with his act' (Fanon, 2008, p. 201).

Fanon is pushing us here in a direction that is, in one sense, diametrically opposed to Du Bois' orientation. Fanon recommends here a refusal to take any special pride in black accomplishments and a vow to celebrate instead any moment where human beings managed to surmount oppression. This is a repudiation of black



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cultural nationalism and thus a contradiction of Du Bois' position. What is nevertheless instructive about the passage for our purposes is the way that Fanon speaks of this shift in thinking – a shift from previously seeing the appeal of black pride to embracing the option of solidarity with all humans – as a matter of reworking the past. This too is purposefully paradoxical, as it sounds like making the choice to change the past, when the past cannot change.

What Fanon is bringing up with this paradoxical formulation is the freedom we have to revise our subjective relationship with the past. We cannot choose what the past is in any radical sense that would imply the ability to move backward rather than forward in time, but we can and often do choose what we want the past to mean to us. Understood in this way, what Du Bois suggests in *The Gift* is that, when we look back at the past and see the pain of slavery, there is something empowering about refusing to see it solely as a story of victimization and choosing instead to see how its part in the growth of American wealth might be understood as a benefit for which black people ought to be thanked. Du Bois implies, in other words, that black shame over enslavement ought to be replaced with white gratitude through a collective revision of the meaning of slavery. I have already claimed that we should not follow him in this, but it is a meaningful sentiment.

This key to understanding what sense it makes to speak of involuntary gifts also delivers us the key to understanding how the diversity of gifts in *The Gift* can be related to the project of preserving black culture. The decision to revise the meaning of the past is the decision to actively remember something, where part of what is active about this process of remembering is the choice of what to value in the past and how. Consider this poetic bit of the book's preface, which Du Bois calls the 'Prescript': 'We who know may not forget but must forever spread the splendid sordid truth that out of the most lowly and persecuted of men, Man made America' (Du Bois, 1924, p. 33). There are splendid things like music in the story of black people in America as well as sordid things like slavery, rape, and war, and since the splendid stuff emerges out of such a sordid context, the sordid in an important sense provides the condition for the splendid. To see value in the various parts of the African American experience is thus a complicated affair, but what is uncomplicatedly valuable for Du Bois is the choice to remember it all. The 'we' in the phrase just quoted, while not necessarily exclusively black, can plausibly be taken to refer primarily to black people. The collective remembering that Du Bois is promoting can therefore be understood as an important kind of black cultural practice.

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To promote the cultivation of collective memory is to promote a sociohistorical process that cannot be confused with any biologically essentialist rendering of black cultural activity. Indeed, given the wide variety of things to be remembered (to which future historians will constantly be adding), the promotion of this cultural practice cannot be confused in the slightest with the promotion of any constraining 'prototype of blackness'. And yet there is nothing vacuous about the demand that Du Bois makes of black people here either. This is because to remember just anything will not do. Remembering the specific story of black people is the point and, in doing so, black people do engage in gift-giving of a vital kind. Despite his questionable rhetorical use of the idea of involuntary gifts in suggesting how we revise our understanding of the African American experience, I share Du Bois' fundamental faith that the black cultural practice of telling and retelling the various stories that comprise the larger story of black life in modernity contributes profoundly to enlightening and enriching not only the minds and lives of black people but the minds and lives of all.

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