

Poetically Dwelling with the Veil: The Intellectual, Moral, and Aesthetic Dimensions of W.E.B. Du Bois's Educational Philosophy

Rodino F. Anderson
Teachers College, Columbia

Just over a hundred years since its 1903 publication, scholarship on W.E.B. Du Bois's educational philosophy as presented in his *Souls of Black Folk* remains scant. Marginalized for its supposedly radical claims against the existing race theories of the time that understood Negroes as savages, dismissed as a sentimental, chaotic work of poor exegetical thinking, and charged as a work of either elitism, Victorian hubris, or down right antiquated understanding, Du Bois's *Souls* remains a work on the periphery of American philosophical and educational thinking.¹ Aware of these polemical charges, recent works by educational philosophers Bartley L. McSwine, Odesa M. Weatherford-Jacobs, Derrick P. Aldridge, and Terry O'Neal Oatts look to correct damaging criticisms by concentrating their attentions on Du Bois's educational philosophy in *Souls*.

Attentive to the marginalized Du Bois, McSwine feels the need to introduce Du Bois to the field of educational philosophy by asking and answering three basic questions: Who was he? What was his educational philosophy? Why does it matter now?² Weatherford-Jacobs's exhaustive connections between Du Bois's conception of education and G.W.F. Hegel's notion of *Bildung* in his *Philosophy of History* and *Phenomenology of Spirit* demonstrate that Du Bois broke through his time's biologically grounded racial categories by showing that education can empower the American Negro race to "accomplish affirmation as world historical people."³ Aldridge goes further by developing a coherent educational philosophy of *Souls*, grounding its recurring concepts and creating an educational model of particular importance for African American youth.⁴ Following Aldridge, while advancing a critical race theory, Oatts painfully reminds us that Du Bois's *Souls* reads like a contemporary work, for even one hundred years after its 1903 appearance, the race problems of Du Bois's twentieth century are very much alive in our twenty-first century.⁵

In this essay, I hope to advance the scholarly focus on *Souls* as a work of educational philosophy. I will suggest that the book embodies a distinctive fusion of intellectual, moral, and aesthetic features that, in turn, render it a text as timely for today as it was one hundred years ago. The forms of racial injustice may have evolved in that time, but not the fact of injustice. Du Bois anticipated this state of affairs in the very structure and style of his soulful book. I will try to chart some of that soulful movement in this essay.

METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION TOWARD *SOULS*

Composed of fourteen essays — nine that were previously written but refashioned, and five newly sketched for the book — bracketed by a "Forethought" and an "Afterthought," the *Souls of Black Folk* is often cast as a haphazard set of parts rather than as a compositional whole.⁶ Critics have charged the work as evoking a

semblance of continuity by Du Bois's appended "Sorrow Song" at the beginning of each essay, which differ markedly one from the other in theme, style, and structure. Grossly attempting to stitch together autobiographical, sociological, and fictional genres, it supposedly fails as a text proper. Is it philosophy, educational text, sociology, psychology, political science, biography, or possibly even a manifesto?

Rebecka Rutledge suggests that the anti-genre of the essay form which Du Bois employs is "fraught with the very sort of tension that marks Du Bois's inquiries...." The essay form complements, moreover, his "open ended-dialectical method."⁷ Thus, Du Bois as a thinker interested in the intercessions of his queries writes in a liberating form, but nonetheless, a form. His deconstructionist-like approach is comprehensible when we consider that Du Bois thought himself to have created a style that reaches beyond his European training. According to Richard Cullen Rath, Du Bois generates a distinctively African style:

He [Du Bois] characterized the style as "African." Du Bois made no apology, contending that "the blood of my fathers spoke to me and cast off the English restraint of my training and surroundings." "The resulting accomplishment," he concluded, "is a matter of taste." It "lost in authority but gained in vividness" because of its African perspective. It might tempt certain readers to contest every statement impatiently, but "some revelation of how the world looks to me cannot easily escape" even those readers. "One who is born with a cause" — for so he assessed himself — "is predestined to a certain narrowness of view, and at the same time to some clearness of vision within his limits with which the world often finds it well to reckon."⁸

I propose to examine what I take to be a poetic vision in Du Bois's distinctive style. The scholars referred to above all mark an artfulness in Du Bois's writing, an artfulness that Ross Posnock thinks helps cut "against habits inculcated by capitalist rationalism," which encourages a rethinking of the "alleged antagonism between the aesthetic and political."⁹ To see how this Du Boisian artfulness helps us understand the movement of the educational philosophy in *Souls*, I draw upon David Hansen's conception of poetics from his "Poetics of Teaching."¹⁰ In particular, I want to take seriously the idea that a poetics of writing, like a poetics of teaching, can fuse intellectual, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of human creativity.

To illuminate the poetics of Du Bois's writing in *Souls*, I will focus on his provocative notion of the veil. The Veil as symbol, metaphor of mediation, or a thought-thing grounded in "pragmatist ideas about *relations*" all prove to be invaluable ways of interpreting Du Bois's project.¹¹ The Veil as a poetic concept features at one and the same time intellectual, moral, and aesthetic dimensions.

THE POETICS OF THE VEIL

THE INTELLECTUAL

What is the Veil for Du Bois? In the "Forethought," Du Bois says that he has sketched the two worlds "within and without the Veil," then stepping within and "raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses" (*SBF*, v). This positional term that helps Du Bois's societal/racial perspectives to have wide application — black, white, and a "faintly" harmonious reconciliation — may very well be an axiomatic concept, as Judith Blau and Eric Brown suggest,¹² rooted in the dynamic thinking of "relation."¹³ However, I want to suggest something more radical than a

self-evident postulate at work in Du Bois's thinking about how the Veil constructs a doubled reality. The Veil as a categorical analogy apprehends the law-like force that governs Negro consciousness and, as such, makes clear the gravity of his predicament.

The Veil as a thought-thing resembles a category in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Perhaps Du Bois, under Santayana's private tutelage of Kant's work while studying at Harvard, pondered the third category of Relation with particular concentration to the third subset of *Community* (interaction between agent and patient).¹⁴ As an analogy of experience, "experience is possible only through the presentation of a necessary connection of perceptions."¹⁵ This necessary connection of perception is what Kant calls the "principle of simultaneity," for things are simultaneous if in an empirical intuition the perception of a substance follows the perception of another reciprocally.¹⁶ For Du Bois, the Veil is a reality of experience so long as a connection of perceptions subsists. That is, the Veil as an intellectual construct (a thought-thing) is present because, for Du Bois, the Negro finds himself always mitigating between seemingly diametrically-opposed, simultaneous forces of perception. Psychologically recast, Du Bois writes, "One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (*SBF*, 2). For Du Bois, the Negro is "born with a veil," because the White world renders the Negro subservient *a priori*, marking him as a *tertium quid* — an ambiguous third something, somewhere between cattle and man — on the hierarchical, intellectual ladder (*SBF*, 2, 51, 61).

It might be tempting to think that these problems of racial prejudice and the disjointed Negro Self could be solved by the removal of the Veil, whether theoretically or practically. For Du Bois, this is not the case. Scholars are attentive to the fact that Du Bois never talks about removing or destroying the Veil. After a childhood experience where a white classmate denied the young Du Bois the opportunity to exchange visiting cards because of his skin color, Du Bois says, "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through..." (*SBF*, 2). Though the Veil remains, Du Bois prefers to "dwell above" the Veil. How then are we to make sense of this positional relationship to the Veil? What does dwelling above the Veil mean for Du Bois?

THE MORAL

We enter the ethical and moral landscape of Du Bois's thinking, a terrain so provocative its ground may seem alien to us — other worldly, for its environment is so distant to us. The implications of the Veil's intellectual dimensions render the Negro spirit torn, doubled, war ridden because of un-reconciled strivings. The end of the Negro striving would be "to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (*SBF*, 2). The better and truer self Du Bois envisions does not "Africanize America," nor "bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism" (*SBF*, 3). Du Bois believes that both cultures have something

to teach one another and the world. Moreover, because the Veil makes an African American identity possible, Du Bois believes the Negro is “gifted with second sight in this American world” (*SBF*, 2). Graphically restated, the Negro problem is a “concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic” (*SBF*, 7).

The way America confronts the Negro problem can have far reaching implications for realizing the ideals of its Democracy, which could be educative for the world. Working together, White and Black, to genuinely promote the welfare of all those citizens is a gesture that would demonstrate to all who are attentive to American culture that its *Declaration of Independence* is not a legislation of hypocrisy. Could it be true, Du Bois must have continuously thought to himself, that all men *are* created equal, and Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness are attainable? Du Bois ardently believes that this must have been the disposition of the American Negro, for no men “ever worshiped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith” (*SBF*, 3). Freedom for Du Bois means opportunity, for opportunity allows humankind to participate in the construction of its life: “This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius” (*SBF*, 3).

So far from inalienable rights being realized in his time, Du Bois is left to dwell above the Veil. Dwelling above the Veil certainly connotes the sense of freedom. If this then is the sense of freedom, what happens in the ether above the Veil? Du Bois provides two significant panoramic descriptions, the first ending as a question:

The sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could never decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head — some way. (*SBF*, 2)

The second passage, one of the most vivid in all of *Souls*, acts as a response:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color-line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. (*SBF*, 67)

Deciding he was not to be violently competitive with White America, Du Bois set himself on a mission to reap the fruits of opportunity: freedom to help create culture. Suggestively, Du Bois does so by casting himself in a world-historical drama with some of the greatest minds of Western civilization. Yet what is most striking about these two passages is the continuity from educational desire to educational fulfillment. For Du Bois, becoming a co-worker in the kingdom of culture necessitates education.

Du Bois charts the historical reality of the Negro striving for freedom. After the Negroes tried in vain to secure their newly granted freedom in the first decade following emancipation, the political power to vote was granted in the second decade. Failing to vote themselves into the “kingdom,” a new ideal of “book-learning” seized their thoughts. It is in the arduous appropriation of an education that

“leisure for self-reflection and self-examination” were born. Here was the dawning of self-consciousness, the faint revelation that in order to attain a place in the world, the Negro “must be himself, and not another” (*SBF*, 5).

By critically connecting Du Boisian educational ideas of striving as emerging from Hegelian notions of *Bildung*, Weatherford-Jacobs reminds us that the goal of this striving is two-fold: African Americans as a world historical people have contributed to world culture, and African Americans have a unique spirit.¹⁷ In so doing, she importantly reminds us that there is no “absolute agreement,” no one-to-one correspondence, between the souls of black folk and that *Zeitgeist* of German *Bildung*.¹⁸ To say that the Negro self-consciousness is the same as the German spirit is to comprehend the Negro thinking under an ideology that denigrates Negro consciousness, believing it to be animal-like in terms of the evolutionary and biological scientific thinking that ruled in Du Bois’s day.¹⁹

If it is education that is charged with the cultivation of a Self, as Du Bois believes, what kind of education does he advocate? Given the limited scope of this essay, a full response is not possible. To my knowledge, Derrick P. Alridge is the only scholar offering a cogent model that answers this question in a robust way. Borrowing his term of *communal education*, I offer an observation that brings to life what I take to be at the core of Du Bois’s educational philosophy.

In “Of the Training of Black Men,” Du Bois rewrites an inscription the graduate students at Atlanta University placed on a gravestone:

In grateful memory of their
Former teacher and friend
And of the unselfish life he
Lived, and the noble work he
Wrought; that they, their
Children, and their chil-
Dren’s children might be
Blessed. (*SBF*, 62)

Du Bois muses on its meaning. He writes,

not alms but a friend; not cash, but character. It was not money these seething millions want, but love and sympathy, the pulse of hearts beating red blood....The teachers in these institutions came not to keep the Negroes in their place, but to raise them out of the defilement where slavery had wallowed them. The colleges they founded were social settlements; homes where the best of the sons of the freedmen came in close and sympathetic touch with the best traditions of New England. (*SBF*, 62)

Du Bois is taken by the moral ideas of friendship, character, love, and sympathy. Du Bois sees that the close kinship that these “seething millions” have fostered, while finding a social settlement, has allowed them to flourish as human beings. It is the social settlement of this educational environment that nourished souls. Du Bois suggests that an educational space must first *gather*. What is taught in the educational space is the tradition, those norms that shape one’s environment. Here, the handing down of tradition is not done with the view in mind simply to replicate authority. This would not be in keeping with Du Bois’s thinking of the Veil — the “gift” of the Negro. The handing down, this giving, is a larger sense of gathering. Education for Du Bois is the moral formation of man within a community.

THE AESTHETIC

However, education does not aim at simply preserving, merely living out life with a store of knowledge. For Du Bois, education perpetuates creativity. What is this creativity and where does it come from? I return to the Veil and its intellectual formulation above, particularly the category of *Relation* and its subset, *Community*. The Veil gave the Negro a sense of two-ness that gave birth to two un-reconciled strivings. Only when the two-ness merges into a better and truer self and the doors of opportunity open can the Negro exercise his freedom in the kingdom of culture. Culture, for Du Bois, must necessarily be attained by an education, which inhabits a community of sympathetic teachers and learners. It is this interaction of a “loving” community that fosters the moral formation of man. Moral man as the center of culture allows “higher individualism” to persist and evolve, respecting “the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it.” The freedom of the higher individual “seeks expansion and self-development; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammelled alike by old and new” (*SBF*, 66).

The full force of the Veil sweeps across the imagination, and, in the howling wind it creates, the Negro genius emerges for Du Bois as the one carrying the Veil. Is it he? Is it all those who are born with the Veil? Is the “gift” of the Negro race an unrealized “latent genius”? If so, “Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land?” (*SBF*, 67). My poetic intention here is only to enliven Du Bois’s provocative, aesthetic concept of genius so as to point to a theory of play that emerges from *Souls’s* concept of the Veil. Du Bois’s implicit play theory most resembles Kant’s play theory in his *Critique of Judgment*. Both are concerned with the education of the individual that suffers from cognitive dissonance.

Readdressing the theme of relation and community, I will briefly discuss the meaning of the *sensus communis* in the *Critique of Judgment*. In the *sensus communis* there is a “faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought.”²⁰ Kant digresses into the three maxims of the understanding to invigorate the common sense by his maxims of enlightenment, “(1) to think for oneself; (2) to think in the position of everyone else; and (3) always to think in accord with oneself.”²¹ Stated differently, these maxims are directed toward self-cultivation. We must (1) emancipate ourselves from dogmas and the reigns of determinism; (2) try to find ourselves in communion with others, for it tests the validity of our judgments; and (3) repeat with vigor the first and second maxims and try to hold them in harmony, for the harmony coheres one’s world-view. The second maxim Kant identifies with the power of judgment, and it is the second that is most important for self-cultivation. This theory of play is only significant if we can engage our examples with examples of others.

Du Bois would agree with the way Kant’s *sensus communis* works, but would localize the phenomena to the American Negro: “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eye’s of the other, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world” (*SBF*, 2). Because of the special function of the Veil, the Negro holds the key

to an enlightened state of being for all. Just as Kant grounds his community on the principles of aesthetic judgments, judgments that are always mitigating between cognitions, feelings, and imaginations, Du Bois thinks that the complexity of the Negro soul must be seen — however “faintly” by Du Bois’s raising of the Veil — as a soul that strives to become a co-worker in the creation of Democratic culture. If the Negro became a participant in culture, the battle of the warring selves could end, giving birth to a harmonious worldview that only the Negro could voice.

Thus a better, truer *sensus communis* could be realized in this world. But without communion, there is no union, and the house that be divided is the house that cannot stand. For Du Bois, a play theory implicit in this notion of the Veil says that we are not merely related to one another, but must act in concert to enrich culture. Cultivation of the Negro soul in all of its dimensions, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic, is only possible by dwelling with the Veil.

CONCLUSION

“Just how would I do it?” Du Bois asked himself of the life mission he should take to combat his denied recognition, impoverished reality of opportunities, and his striving to create.

It was the ideal of “book-learning”...Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan; longer than the highway of Emancipation and law, steep and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life.... To the tired climbers, the horizon was ever dark, the mists were often cold, the Canaan was always dim and far away. If, however the vistas disclosed as yet no goal, no resting-place, little but flattery and criticism, the journey at least gave leisure for reflection and self-examination; it changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. In those somber forest of his striving his own soul rose before him, and as he saw himself — darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. (*SBF*, 2)

It was through “book-learning” that Du Bois found his mission. To be himself in the course of education’s arduous toil made Du Bois respect himself. It is a powerful thing to find a cause, a purpose in this world. All the more satisfying is the realization that one’s cause is rooted in one’s agency. If we take Du Bois to be that genius, that human soul of “higher individualism” he identifies in “Of the Training of Black Men,” what then is his gift?

To answer this question, I return to David Hansen’s notion of a poetics of teaching: “teaching constitutes artfulness, or, put in more dramatic terms, a form of world-making.” For Hansen, articulating the nature and significance of teaching is an ongoing task, because

teachers have no alternative but to be responsive to the human world, a world continuously marked by change. That world is also a busy, hectic, often contradictory environment, and its multiple demands — sometimes hostile to genuine education — can blur perception of what resides at the heart of teaching.²²

Anachronistically, Hansen’s trenchant observations about the practice of teaching not only helps paint a picture of Du Bois as an educator of the highest order, but renders Du Bois’s world of racial injustice, crippled moral identity, and stifled creativity relevant to present day educational concerns. Du Bois’s philosophy of

education, looked at through his poetic concept of the Veil, reveals that the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of the educational landscape today is still made of rough, rugged journeys. Mountains sometimes seem to spring up from nowhere, and seismic fissures leave open gapping, perilous pitfalls for those disadvantaged many that dwell in those dark domains. In the wake of No Child Left Behind, skyrocketing higher educational costs, and the boom of distance learning, Du Bois's philosophy of education concerned with notions of relation, community, and creativity remains timely.

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1. For a full reference of those who have made these charges, see Richard Cullen Rath, "Echo and Narcissus: The Afrocentric Pragmatism of W.E.B. Du Bois," *Journal of American History* 84, no. 2 (1997): n3.
 2. Bartley L. McSwine, "The Educational Philosophy of W.E.B. Du Bois," in *PES Yearbook 1998*, ed. Steve Tozer (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999).
 3. Odesa M. Weatherford-Jacobs, "Hegel and Du Bois: A Study of the Influence of G.W.F. Hegel on the Early Writings of W.E.B. Du Bois (1896–1903)" (PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 2002), 3–4.
 4. Forthcoming book based on his dissertation. Derrick P. Alridge, "The Social, Economic, and Political Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois During the 1930s: Implications for Contemporary African-American Education" (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1997). Though Alridge's work is concerned with Du Bois's later educational writings, his model has its genesis in *Souls*.
 5. Terry O'Neal Oatts, "W.E.B. Du Bois and Critical Race Theory: Toward a Du Boisian Philosophy of Education" (PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2003), 171–172.
 6. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994). This work will be cited as *SBF* in the text for all subsequent references.
 7. Rebecca Rychelle Rutledge, "Metaphors of Mediation: Race and Nation in Black Atlantic Literature" (PhD diss., Washington University, 2001), 143, 144.
 8. Rath, "Echo and Narcissus," 461.
 9. Ross Posnock, "The Distinction of Du Bois: Aesthetics, Pragmatism, Poetics," *American Literary History* 7, no. 3 (1995): 502.
 10. David T. Hansen, "Poetics of Teaching," *Educational Theory* 54, no. 2 (2004): 119.
 11. McSwine, "Educational Philosophy of W.E.B. Du Bois," 5; Rutledge, "Metaphor of Mediation"; and Rath, "Echo and Narcissus," 484.
 12. Judith R. Blau and Eric S. Brown, "Du Bois and Diasporic Identity: The Veil and the Unveiling Project," *Sociological Theory* 19, no. 2 (2001): 221.
 13. Rath, "Echo and Narcissus," 485–486.
 14. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 132, 247–252.
 15. *Ibid.*, 247.
 16. *Ibid.*, 276.
 17. Weatherford-Jacobs, "Hegel and Du Bois," 177–178.
 18. *Ibid.*, 179.
 19. Furthermore, Du Bois evokes the term self-consciousness to work through, but ultimately challenge the very notions of dominant Hegelian thinking concerning the spirit of man. The American Negro's metaphysical quandary is not overcome by a dialectical force as yet materialized, a synthesis of his warring selves that will achieve his true, monistic self. Rather, his "gift" is his double consciousness, which has come about by the historical fact of race contact and not by shifting idealisms. The Negro's "dogged strength," that persistent will that holds his soul together, keeps his unreconciled strivings from

tearing him into diametrically opposed forces. It is a harmony of the two selves — the African, the American — that Du Bois is after, not a synthesis that yields yet another thesis.

20. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 2000), section 40.

21. Ibid.

22. Hansen, “A Poetics of Teaching,” 141, 142.