Unreconstructed Democracy: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Case for Reparations

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W. E. Du Bois's observations about the links between Americans' unwillingness to acknowledge the legacies of slavery and the shortcomings of formal equality in the post-Reconstruction era anticipate the obstacles to racial justice in the "post-civil rights" era. His study of the "splendid failure" of Reconstruction indicates how a kind of willful national amnesia prevented black citizens from enjoying in fact the freedom and equality they were guaranteed by law. Arguing that the story of racial injustice is still importantly a story about memory's suppression, I use Du Bois's writings to explore the case for reparations as one element of a larger effort to expose the presence of the slave past and to undermine the continuing effects of slavery and Jim Crow.

Memory—of what has been, of acts of commission or omission, of a responsibility abdicated—affects the future conduct of power in any form. Failure to adopt some imaginative recognition of such a principle merely results in the entrenchment of a political culture that appears to know no boundaries—the culture of impunity.

Wole Soyinka (1999)

Whereas the persistence of racial injustice poses a challenge for the present and future of American democracy, understanding and responding to such injustice requires a new orientation toward the past. It is in this regard that W. E. B. Du Bois's analysis of "the problem of the color-line" remains a powerful resource for reflection on contemporary politics in the United States. Through the failure of Reconstruction and its aftermath, Du Bois provides a window onto the ways in which the American democratic project has been hobbled by the denial of the significance of slavery and the decades of Jim Crow segregation that followed from it. He also shows how this unwillingness to confront the past is connected to the failures of formal equality as an antidote to the poison of racial injustice. In so doing, he sheds light on the dilemmas of the "post-civil rights" era.¹

I aim to suggest how Du Bois's analysis of Reconstruction and the disappointments that followed illuminated the disappointments that succeeded the triumphs of the civil rights era or "second Reconstruction." Focusing on his reflections on the "splendid failure" (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 708) of Reconstruction in The Souls of Black Folk and Black Reconstruction in America, I explore Du Bois's account of the measures that would have been necessary to bridge the gap between formal guarantees of equal citizenship and substantive racial equality. Sustaining that gap, Du Bois attests, is an unwillingness to confront the unasked question of what the United States owed to the women and men who had been enslaved. My analysis focuses on three dimensions of this reticence: the absence of serious discussion about the kinds of economic policies that would have ensured the former slaves their freedom; the reluctance to acknowledge what Du Bois calls the "gifts" of African Americans, their contributions to the making of the United States; and the fundamental failure to come to terms with the denial of black humanity "at the heart of slavery" (Davis 1996). Contending that these issues continue to lurk behind debates about racial justice, I consider the case for reparations as a concrete "resistance to forgetting" (Minow 1998, 5), one element of a larger effort to acknowledge the afterlife of past racial injustices and to eliminate racial disparities in the distribution of power and powerlessness.

Writing in "the shadow of a deep disappointment," Du Bois ([1903] 1997, 40) apprehends the paradox of formal equality: The guarantees of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, though inculcably precious, engendered a kind of public forgetfulness about slavery and fed the Southern fury against the former slaves. "The War Amendments," he observes at the turn of the twentieth century, "made the Negro problems of to-day" (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 45). While he would not relinquish those amendments, Du Bois ([1903] 1997, 125) perceives that the constitutional promise of rights that apply regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude" assured liberal-minded citizens that enough had been done, perpetuating the "carelessness" that characterized the national attitude toward the former slaves. Much the same can be said for the post-civil rights predicament. Black Americans fought hard for the formal guarantees embodied in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting

¹ Although I focus on "the color-line" between white and black Americans and insist on the centrality of slavery to the history of American democracy, I do not mean to imply that the black-white line is the only salient racial distinction in the United States or that African Americans are the only group of citizens who experience disadvantages on account of race.
Rights Act of 1965, and, like other vulnerable populations, they do not have the luxury of dispensing entirely with the language of formal equality in which those guarantees are framed. At the same time, the promise enshrined in those laws has come to be interpreted in ways that allow white Americans to disown the past and its implications for the present, thereby compounding the disadvantages faced by the very people the laws were passed to protect. For example, Derrick Bell writes that the courts have collapsed the distinction between race-based remedies for decades of racial injustice and the segregationist policies of the Jim Crow period. The result of such interpretation is that, "for equal protection purposes, whites become the protected 'discrete and insular' minority" (Bell 1993, 80). Thus it becomes all the more difficult to summon the collective will to respond when activists and scholars identify disturbing trends in residential and educational segregation and the disadvantages they engender or when the wealth gap that white and black Americans have inherited from previous generations is exposed.

One might acknowledge the paradox and still contend that it is reckless to respond by insisting on a relation between the shortcomings of Reconstruction in the nineteenth century and the unfinished business of the civil rights revolution in the twentieth. There are, to be sure, substantial differences between the two periods and reasons to be wary about easy comparisons between them. Known as the "nadir" of African American history, the years that followed Reconstruction witnessed the development of new forms of political, social, and economic oppression. Together with the organized terror of such groups as the Ku Klux Klan and the widespread practice of lynching, these forms of oppression instituted the regime of neoslavery that prevailed in the South until the Civil Rights Movement challenged it in the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, the legitimacy of such developments was bolstered by historical accounts of Reconstruction, which painted the postwar experiment in black political participation as a disaster and blamed it for widespread corruption and fiscal mismanagement (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 711–29; Foner 1988, xix–xxvii). The Civil Rights Movement, in contrast, is viewed as a highpoint in U.S. history, and the visibility of powerful African Americans, the paens to racial equality offered up by political leaders, and Americans' enthusiasm for Martin Luther King, Jr., Day celebrations indicate how much has changed.

Notwithstanding the obvious differences between the two reconstructions and their aftermaths, deep similarities remain. Although I can provide only a compressed discussion here, let me call particular attention to the ways in which both reconstructions were marked by an absence of serious discussion about the sorts of economic changes required to counteract generations of exploitation and discrimination, a blindness toward the crucial role of African Americans in securing their own freedom and that of their fellow citizens, and a willingness to privilege the needs and feelings of whites over the implementation of black citizens' constitutionally guaranteed rights. In both cases, moreover, the passage of civil rights legislation was followed by a backlash—often couched in the rhetoric of self-help—against attempts to give concrete substance to legal promises. Tellingly, recent studies show that although white Americans are supportive of the principles of racial justice in a way that they were not during the Jim Crow era, they are resistant to policies that might realize those principles (Boo and Smith 1998; Kinder and Sanders 1996). Thus one might reasonably conclude that the "carelessness" Du Bois discerns at the turn of the twentieth century remains in effect a century later.

I do not offer Du Bois's account of Reconstruction merely as a caution that history not be repeated, however. To do so is to neglect the larger contribution to the practice of democratic theory embodied in Du Bois's use of history. By drawing attention to the experiences and accomplishments of the invisible actors at the center of the conflict over slavery and Reconstruction, Du Bois imagines what a genuinely democratic society might look like. A "self-conscious creator of black counter-memory" (Blight 1994, 46), Du Bois concentrates on those Americans who have been excluded from the benefits of American democracy and from its history. In doing so, his work resonates with Judith Sklar's (1991, 15) suggestion that "one way to undertake a historically rich inquiry into American citizenship is... to investigate what citizenship has meant to those women and men who have been denied all or some of its attributes, and who ardently wanted to be full citizens." Consideration of one example from Du Bois's ([1903] 1997, 123) work indicates his contribution to democratic theory by calling attention to the limitations of legal guarantees of freedom from the vantage point of the ex-slave:

Free! The most piteous thing amid all the black ruin of wartime, amid the broken fortunes of the masters, the blighted hopes of mothers and maidens, and the fall of an empire,—the most piteous thing amid all this was the black freeman who threw down his hoe because the world called him free. What did such a mockery of freedom mean? Not a cent of money, not an inch of land, not a mouthful of victuals,—not even ownership of the rags on his back. Free!

2 For an extended treatment of this paradox of formal equality, see Williams 1991.
3 The literature on these subjects is too extensive to be adequately surveyed here. Instead I simply mention three noteworthy treatments: Massey and Denton (1993) on residential segregation; Orfield, Eaton, and the Harvard Project on School Desegregation (1996) on education; and Oliver and Shapiro (1997) on wealth.

4 On this last point, the fate of Brown v. Board of Education (1954) provides a forceful example. After unanimously outlawing segregation in public schools, the Supreme Court issued a second decision concerning implementation, Brown II (1955), in which it ordered that desegregation proceed "with all deliberate speed," thereby subordinating the constitutional rights of black schoolchildren to other considerations. In her essay on "whiteness as property," Cheryl Harris (1993, 1755) notes that this decision "articulated a new and heretofore unknown approach to rectifying violations of constitutional rights—an approach that invited defiance and delay." For a more thorough list of the parallels between the two post-reconstruction periods, see Klinckner and Smith 1999.
As the passage suggests, Du Bois’s preoccupation with the condition of African Americans does not indicate a narrowness of perspective. His attention to “the broken fortunes of the masters” and “the blighted hopes of mothers and maidens” reveals an appreciation for the wider suffering wrought by the Civil War. In a similar vein, he advises, in a 1915 editorial in *The Crisis*, that the “fiction of failure” that represents Reconstruction (and the participation of African Americans in their own government) as the low point in American democracy also provides a basis for discrediting suggestions about extending the vote to women and immigrants (Du Bois 1915, 132). Both examples support Du Bois’s insistence that much can be learned about the prospects for all citizens by studying the lives of a society’s most vulnerable members and his insight into the general benefits that follow from policies that aim to improve the circumstances of particular groups.

Offering a counter to triumphalist narratives about American democracy, Du Bois’s writings speak directly and critically to contemporary debates in American political science and public life. He anticipates, for example, much of the discussion occasioned by Rogers Smith’s (1997) critique of the notion that the United States has been defined by a single, liberal political vision; and he offers sober reflections on the implications for American political culture of the continuing power of the “Lost Cause” tradition in which the legacy of the Confederacy is disconnected from slavery. His exploration of the concepts of equality and freedom simultaneously demonstrates how ardently he cherishes these ideals and exposes their consanguinity with the specifically American horrors of racial slavery and Jim Crow segregation. It reveals, furthermore, Du Bois’s capacity to marry the material with the symbolic and psychological in a way that demands that his readers see the meaning of political principles from multiple perspectives. In his reflection on the valence of freedom during Reconstruction, for instance, Du Bois observes that “to the Negro ‘Freedom’ was God; to the poor white ‘Freedom’ was nothing—he had more than he had use for; to the planter ‘Freedom’ for the poor was laziness and for the rich, control of the poor worker; for the Northern business man ‘Freedom’ was the opportunity to get rich.” Because the language of American democracy has been rendered “in different and unknown tongues” (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 347), Du Bois’s effort to bring to public attention the aspirations and experiences of citizens who have been systematically unheard from is itself a democratic act. It exemplifies the kind of historical consciousness necessary to come to terms with the demands of democracy in the post-civil rights era.

**RIGHTING RECONSTRUCTION HISTORY**

Animating Du Bois’s passion for retelling the story of Reconstruction is his assessment of the period as Americans’ first genuine experiment in democracy. The years that followed the Civil War witnessed not only the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments but also the flowering of black political participation and the writing of more democratic state constitutions across the South. In light of these accomplishments, the susceptibility of Reconstruction history to distortion and glaring omissions suggests to Du Bois a deeper reluctance to admit the capacity of African Americans to inhabit the mantle of citizenship. When he begins his inquiry into “the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century” in *Souls*, he avers that it can be revealed only through the excavation of things that have been “buried” (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 34); and the rest of the book is replete with allusions to burial, silences, veils, and ghosts. The subtitle of *Black Reconstruction* promises in a similar vein that the text to follow corrects a crucial absence from the historical record—a “history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America.” Although he recognizes that his study will inevitably reopen wounds that have barely healed, Du Bois insists that nothing is more dangerous to democracy than a history that merely flatters. By straining “to paint the South as a martyr to inescapable fate” and “to make the North the magnificent emancipator,” accepted accounts of Reconstruction prevent honest evaluation (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 723). *Souls and Black Reconstruction* propose instead to restore the memory of African Americans’ role in the undoing of their bondage and of the nation’s unwillingness to part entirely with the vestiges of slavery that its commitment to democracy made untenable.

Both texts make plain the thinness of most white Americans’ commitment to the emancipation of African Americans or their inclusion as equal partners in the polity. Racial slavery was the underlying cause of the Civil War, Du Bois contends, although abolition was not part of the North’s original plan. Tracing attempts by the Union Army to deal with the thousands of fugitives who flooded their camps, he notes that the slaves were treated as “contraband” or returned to their masters before being recognized as “a military resource” by the Northern army (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 46; see also Du Bois [1935] 1964, chaps. 4, 5). He uses words uttered by Frederick Douglass in 1865 to capture the

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5 Support for this view became, briefly, a topic of intense scrutiny during the confirmation hearings of Attorney General John Ashcroft and Interior Secretary Gale Norton. For Du Bois’s reflections on the “Lost Cause” tradition, see Du Bois (1935) 1964, 704; for a summary of the history and significance of this tradition, see Blight 2001a.

6 Thomas Holt elaborates on this disjunction between the expectations of the former slaves and the Northern industrialists who sought to control them. Using C. B. Macpherson’s notion of possessive individualism, Holt (1982) argues that the aim of the Northern “emancipators” was to transform the former slaves into a working class; freedom would thus mean the opportunity to compete in the market, and inequality would be accepted as a “natural” consequence of supply and demand.

7 Du Bois indicates the stakes of this kind of recovery when he relates that he was commissioned by *Encyclopedia Britannica* to write “a history of the American Negro,” and the editors insisted on deleting any references to Reconstruction. When they refused to publish even a short statement about the different ways the period was remembered by black and white Americans, Du Bois withdrew his article (Du Bois 1964, 713; see also Lewis 2000, 232–35).
deeper meaning of the conflict: "The Civil War was begun 'in the interests of slavery on both sides. The South was fighting to take slavery out of the Union, and the North fighting to keep it in the Union; the South fighting to get it beyond the limits of the United States Constitution, and the North fighting for the old guarantees;'—both despising the Negro, both insulting the Negro" ([Du Bois [1935] 1964, 61]). By this account, the freedom of black Americans was unintended. "It was the price of the disaster of war," according to Du Bois ([1935] 1964, 83), and the program of reconstruction was disabled from the start.

Consequently, the end of the Civil War abandoned the four million former slaves to a nether region between freedom and the deeper hell of slavery. To tell the story of this in-between state, Du Bois marshals an enormous amount of historical and sociological evidence. He captures the challenges posed by racial slavery and the difficulty of reconstructing American democracy with particular poignancy, however, when he distills the significance of a mass of data into a single, vivid image. Most effectively realized in Souls, this device reveals Du Bois's sensitivity to the complex claims that the past makes on the present and indicates the inadequacy of formal equality and the legal promise of freedom as a source of redress or a guarantor of future change. The following description of the "two passing figures of the present-past" provides just one example of Du Bois's ([1903] 1997, 54–55) deftness in limning the condition of American democracy as it entered Reconstruction:

...the one, a gray-haired gentleman, whose fathers had quit themselves like men, whose sons lay in nameless graves; who bowed to the evil of slavery because its abolution threatened untold ill to all; who stood at last, in the evening of life, a blighted, ruined form, with hate in his eyes—and the other, a form hovering dark and mother-like, her awful face black with the mists of centuries, had at some point quailed at that white master's command, had bent in love over the cradles of his sons and daughters, and closed in death the sunken eyes of his wife,—aye, too, at his behest had laid herself low to his lust, and borne a tawny man-child to the world, only to see her dark boy's limbs scattered to the winds by midnight marauders riding after "cursed Niggers."8

This image, which exposes the violent intertwining of black and white, of past generations and future hopes, indicates the depth and force of the obstacles preventing black Americans from escaping the limbo between slavery and citizenship.

Despite his understanding of these obstacles, Du Bois ([1935] 1964, 703) cautions that there are only two alternatives: "either extermination root and branch, or absolute equality. There can be no compromise."9 What would this "absolute equality" require? In what ways did Reconstruction promise that it could be realized? How was that promise retracted? To respond, I consider three dimensions of Du Bois's work on the period: his argument about the relationship between economic reconstruction and democratic ideals, his delineation of the contributions of black Americans to the nation, and his insistence that a denial of black humanity is at the root of the failure either to endorse the first of these lines of argument or to recognize the second.

Treating the economic claims of Souls and Black Reconstruction together requires some caution, for the later book is indebted to Marxian theory in a way that the earlier one is not. Whereas Souls criticizes the self-help philosophy of Booker T. Washington and blames the nation's abandonment of political and spiritual ideals on the ascendancy of the materialism of the Gilded Age, Black Reconstruction offers a full-blown analysis of the role of industrial capitalism in undoing the work of Reconstruction. There are moments when Du Bois's effort to shape the narrative of Black Reconstruction into a Marxian framework lends itself to infelicitous description (the former slaves and poor Southern whites become the black and white "proletariat"), but this book essentially fleshes out ideas embedded in the argument of its predecessor. In both texts, the assessment of the economic dimension of Reconstruction's promise and shortcomings is informed by twin convictions: that democracy must be grounded in an economically self-sustaining citizenry and that, through their labor on the land and in the army, the former slaves had more than earned the resources necessary for their independence.

The conception of democracy that animates both texts is characterized by the absence of gross inequality or the dependency that accompanies it.10 Democratic citizenship, for Du Bois, entails at least a basic education and the economic wherewithal to live a relatively comfortable life free from unearned debt. It encourages mutual cooperation among citizens, inculcates self-respect, and rewards such virtues as thrift and responsibility. Political institutions are served as well when economic self-sufficiency is combined with education and suffrage. Du Bois argues. Tracing the accomplishments of the Reconstruction legislatures, he shows how the entire region benefited from the inclusion of new voices in governmental deliberations and the challenge to the planters' oligarchical control. Although this connection between economic independence and citizenship is certainly not unique to Du Bois, what is distinctive is his examination of these values in the context of Reconstruction. Thus he presents the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, or Freedmen's Bureau, as an agent of large-scale social

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8 For a more extended treatment of Du Bois's use of imagery to convey the meaning of vast historical events and of this image, in particular, see Blight and Goode-Wood-Williams 1997, 13–16.

9 Here, Du Bois echoes Alexis de Tocqueville's ([1835] 1969, 362) assertion that "there is no intermediate state that can be durable between the excessive inequality created by slavery and the complete equality which is the natural result of independence."

10 Du Bois does not go so far as to call for complete economic equality in Souls. Rather his meaning is closer to Rousseau's ([1762] 1978, 75) conception of a society in which "no citizen should be so opulent that he can buy another, and none so poor that he is constrained to sell himself." In Black Reconstruction, Du Bois goes further, maintaining that economically stratified democracies must find ways of redistributing wealth and income.
change. With responsibilities that included the establishment of schools in the postwar South, the administration of justice, and the dispersal of abandoned lands, the Freedmen's Bureau represents for Du Bois an institution that held out the promise of a lasting independence from the domination of the planters for poor Southerners, black and white. "The Freedmen's Bureau was the most extraordinary and far-reaching institution of social uplift that America has ever attempted," Du Bois insists. "It had to do, not simply with emancipated slaves and poor whites, but also with the property of Southern planters. It was a government guardianship for the relief and guidance of white and black labor from a feudal agrarianism to modern farming and industry" (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 219). Underfunded and lasting only seven years (from 1865 until 1872, with no budget after 1870), the Freedmen's Bureau was largely unable to accomplish its objectives. A Bureau designed to last for decades and to oversee "a careful distribution of land and capital and a system of education for the children," in contrast, might have translated the promise of Emancipation into genuinely equal citizenship (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 785).

To a great extent, Du Bois attributes Americans' inability to recognize the democratic potential of the Freedmen's Bureau to the perverse development of the "American Assumption." That assumption, the conviction that wealth is the reward for hard work and that anyone can achieve material success by dint of his or her own effort, may never have applied in the lives of most Americans (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 182–83). But turned against the freedmen and women, it distanced successive generations from the wrong of slavery and denied those who profited from that wrong bore any ongoinning responsibility for it. "To give land to free citizens smacked of 'paternalism,'" Du Bois relates. "It came directly in opposition to the American assumption that any American could be rich if he wanted to, or at least well-to-do; and it stubbornly ignored the exceptional position of a freed slave" (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 201–2).

That such gifts were "showered" on the railroads during the same period mattered little (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 212). What the end of the Freedmen's Bureau signifies to Du Bois ([1935] 1964, 182), therefore, is not the triumph of a culture in which labor is rewarded but the ascendancy of a culture of wealth and power. Thus he contends that Northern industry was able to sound the death knell for Reconstruction when black emancipation no longer served its interests (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 187). This is not to say that only white Americans subscribed to this philosophy. Of Booker T. Washington's embrace of the "American Assumption" and his willingness to sacrifice political and civil rights in the name of economic development, Du Bois ([1903] 1997, 72) observes, "His doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs."

One could argue that the "American Assumption," strictly applied, also makes the case for the redistribution of land and other resources to the former slaves. After all, it was their exertions that transformed the land into cotton and tobacco. Not only did black labor provide the underpinning for the antebellum South, Du Bois ([1935] 1964, 5) maintains, but it fueled the industrial development of the northern United States and Europe. To the claim that the former slaves were unwilling to work without the motivation of the lash, he replies with examples of blacks' eagerness to cultivate abandoned lands during the war. The "key to the situation," he writes, is that "the Negroes were willing to work and did work, but they wanted land to work, and they wanted to see and own the results of their toil" (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 67; see also Foner 1988, 50–60, and Litwack 1979, 387–408). Furthermore, he discerns African Americans' extraordinary desire for economic independence in the fact that the Freedmen's Bureau—a symbol, to many white Americans, of black dependency and Northern imposition—was funded for its first year by the freedmen themselves through rents collected on the land on which they labored (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 602). Viewed in this light, the promise of "forty acres and a mule" represents, not a hand-out, but "the righteous and reasonable ambition to become a landholder, which the nation had all but categorically promised the freedmen" (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 56).

It is unsurprising, then, that black leaders repeatedly returned to the issue of land distribution as their most fundamental concern, despite the intransigence of most white leaders on the issue (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 368). Reasonable though it may have been, this "land hunger" of the former slaves was met with "surprise and ridicule" (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 602). Whereas the idea of compensating the former slave owners for their losses was seriously considered by Abraham Lincoln himself (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 150), proposals to pay the former slaves were generally dismissed as a weapon to punish the South (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 602).

One must be careful here not to misread Du Bois's insistence on the value of economic independence and

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11 It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a critical account of the notion of racial uplift that informs Du Bois's views at the turn of the twentieth century (see Gaines 1996).

12 For example, Andrew Johnson's (1808, 399) 1866 veto of the Freedmen's Bureau Bill appeals to the American Assumption in its criticism of the Bureau for offering aid not enjoyed by "the thousands, not to say millions, of the white race who are honestly toiling from day to day for their subsistence."

13 Representative Thaddeus Stevens (R-PA) and Senator Charles Sumner (R-MA) were two important exceptions.

14 Economist William Darby, Jr. (1990, 5), notes that every case of compensation related to losses incurred under slavery in the Western Hemisphere has concerned reparations for slave owners, not the slaves or their descendants.

15 Recapitulating this logic, recent Supreme Court decisions have, according to Gary Orfield, treated school desegregation plans as a form of punishment for past segregation rather than a means of securing adequate schooling for children of color. The most pernicious aspect of this reasoning is that it redescribes the effort to reconstruct educational opportunities as a short-term fix for a problem of the past (Orfield, Eaton, and the Harvard Project on School Desegregation 1996, 2).
the historical evidence of black fitness for such independence as an appeal for more scrupulous application of the American Assumption. In *Souls*, his resistance to such an appeal is most clearly manifest in his rejection of “the Gospel of Work and Money” as spiritually cramped, a threat to any higher sense of human aspiration (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 67):16 and in *Black Reconstruction*, he exposes the inadequacy of idealizing individual effort without attending to structural forms of injustice. In this regard, Du Bois departs from Jennifer Hochschild’s (1995, xviii) reluctant conclusion that the best hope for a more democratic future is to accept the ideological dominance of the “American Dream,” the components of which resemble Du Bois’s American Assumption, and to demand that American society live up to the tenets of that dream.17 The demand for land and education, the two principal objectives of the freedmen and women, are not simply presented as prerequisites for individual “success.” Rather, Du Bois ties this demand—incoherently in *Souls* and explicitly in *Black Reconstruction*—to the larger aspiration to restructure American society so that no group of citizens would be excluded from the concrete promise of freedom.

Connected to Du Bois’s view of the centrality of slave labor in the making of the United States are larger claims about the contributions of African Americans to the physical, political, and spiritual creation of the nation. Black Americans, he argues in *Souls*, have offered their neighbors three gifts: “a gift of story and song . . . ; the gift of sweat and brawn . . . ; and . . . a gift of the Spirit” (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 192–93). Whereas Du Bois’s elaboration of “the gifts of black folk” is part of a larger effort to develop a concept of race, my focus here is restricted to the ways in which this language enables him to challenge official memories of slavery, Reconstruction, and the disappointments that followed.18 By delineating the depth and extent of black Americans’ part in the abolition of slavery and the effort to create a more democratic society, Du Bois ([1903] 1997, 192) dispels white assumptions about black passivity, and he provides a resounding answer to his own rhetorical question: “Your country? How came it yours?”

For Du Bois ([1935] 1964, chap. 4), the reconstruction of American democracy began with the initiative of the slaves, thousands of whom participated in a “General Strike” by fleeing from the plantations to the Union army camps. The armies of the North and South and their supporters denied the significance of slavery to the conflict, but the slaves had no such illusions about the stakes of the war. Even before they were welcomed by the Union as laborers, spies, and, finally, soldiers, their abandonment of their masters created a labor shortage that crippled the Confederacy. The magnitude of the slaves’ role in their own emancipation cannot be overstated, Du Bois ([1936] 1985, 105–6) attests, contributing the conclusion of the Civil War to “the largest and most successful slave revolt.” Peter Kolchin (1993, 204) builds on Du Bois’s analysis, concluding that “by refusing to act like slaves—blacks throughout the South struck a mortal blow to slavery.” The claim, which is further borne out by Lincoln’s recognition of the strategic value of the Emancipation Proclamation, discredits the characterization of black Americans as helpless or the liberation produced by the war as entirely the gift of the white North. Furthermore, it exposes the danger of any discourse of self-help that obscures the enormity of what African Americans have done to help themselves.

Du Bois goes still further. He credits black Americans with securing new freedom and more substantive equality for all Americans during Reconstruction. In *The Gift of Black Folk* (in a chapter entitled “The Reconstruction of Freedom”), he describes the role of African Americans in reestablishing the Union, founding public schools, extending the vote to poor whites, and creating the basis for “industrial democracy in America” (Du Bois 1924, chap. 5). With regard to education, for example, he notes that the idea of public education in the South, which benefited poor whites in the region, grew out of the clamor by black Americans for access to schools (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 638). Additionally, he attributes the elimination of property qualifications for officeholding and the passage of a wide array of social legislation in Southern states to the period of black political power (Du Bois 1910). Recording the contribution of black leaders to the elevation of politics, at the national level, he observes that the words of black representatives “were, perhaps, the last clear, earnest expression of the democratic theory of American government in Congress” (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 629).

Despite the arguments in favor of providing the former slaves with the basic resources necessary to secure their freedom and the importance of acknowledging their gifts to the nation, Du Bois perceives a more fundamental obstacle to democratic reconstruction. In the note to the reader with which he begins *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois ([1935] 1964) makes the following proposition: “I am going to tell this story as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail my audience.” He is, in other words, warning that any understanding of American history must take seriously the view of that history from the perspective of the former slaves and that, for white Americans, this requires an openness to reevaluating everything they believe. The telling of the story of Reconstruction thus becomes crucial to the work of reconstruction. Its erasure from public narratives reveals the underlying truth that white Americans see their black neighbors as “a thing apart” or a “terrarium quid” somewhere between human beings and cattle (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 370; [1903] 1997, 90).

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16 According to Arnold Rampersad ([1976] 1990, 86), at the time *Souls* was published, Du Bois held that “to limit life to the achievement of what is called the American dream was teleological pessimism of the most sordid kind.”

17 For further discussion of the reluctance of African Americans—across a wide ideological spectrum—to embrace all of the tenets of what Du Bois calls the American Assumption, see Dawson 2001.

18 David Levering Lewis (1993, 286, 446) links Du Bois’s book-length treatment of the subject, *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924) to the racial theory he begins to articulate with “The Conservation of Races” (1897) and continues to develop throughout his career.
Displaying an acute gift for moral psychology, Du Bois ([1940] 1984, xxx) probes "the vaster and far more intricate jungle of ideas conditioned on unconscious and subconscious reflexes." Plumbing beneath the surface, he argues that a residual resistance to accepting the equal humanity of the slaves made the experiment in reconstruction unthinkable and its undoing vicious. That resistance could not be fully obliterated by the legislative commitments made to the freedmen and women, he writes, and it persists in damaging both black and white citizens.

"Never in modern times," Du Bois ([1935] 1964, 39) writes, "has a large section of a nation so used its combined energies to the degradation of mankind. The hurt to the Negro in this era was not only his treatment in slavery; it was the wound dealt to his reputation as a human being." Du Bois' most famous articulation of the impact of this wound is captured in his formulation of "double consciousness." Although double consciousness implies a kind of gift, the heightened perception that comes with second sight, it exacts a terrible toll. It means living with a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 38).19 For working men and women, such inner turmoil can destroy the motivation to seek better lives and can lead to a variety of social ills. For black leaders, Du Bois argues, it is crippling.

Damaging though the "precept of black inferiority" (Higginbotham 1996) may be to African Americans, Du Bois ([1935] 1964, 52, 166) asserts that it is "fatal" when it infects the minds of whites. To make his point, he quotes a statement issued by black leaders in 1864 that goes to the heart of white Americans' stake in black subordination: "You cannot need special protection. Our degradation is not essential to your elevation, nor our peril essential to your safety" (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 235). The result of white dependency on such "special protection" is a distorted sense of self-worth and an incapacity to comprehend the gap between professed ideals and actual practices. Hence the troubles that beset the Freedmen's Bureau (chief among them, lack of funds, time, and adequate force) reveal a deeper truth: "The very name of the Bureau stood for a thing in the South which for two centuries and better men had refused even to argue,—that life amid free Negroes was simply unthinkable, the maddest of experiments" (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 54). If the nation as a whole embraced emancipation in response to Southern recalcitrance between 1864 and 1868, that commitment proved weaker than the assumption that black Americans were less than fully human (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 329–30). With Southern planters measuring their value through their continuing capacity to control the labor of others, with white workers accepting the "public and psychological wage" of racial superiority in lieu of adequate payment for their labor (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 700),20 and with Northern whites believing themselves to be relieved of further responsibility for the aftereffects of slavery, the whole nation found itself at the end of Reconstruction living in a kind of "phantasmagoria" that rendered it unfit for democracy (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 705).

NOTES TOWARD A THIRD RECONSTRUCTION: THE QUESTION OF REPARATIONS

One might accept Du Bois's analysis of the opportunity lost in Reconstruction and acknowledge the parallels between the disappointments of that period and those that followed the era of civil rights and still ask how they bear on contemporary prospects for American democracy. Is it even appropriate at the turn of the twenty-first century to claim, as Du Bois does at the dawn of the twentieth, that Americans are evasive about the importance of slavery and the Jim Crow system that followed from it? If the example of recent scholarship is any indication, the verdict on that question has changed. The prodigious outpouring of historical treatments of American slavery, particularly those that focus on the perspectives of the women and men in bondage, provides just one example of a new attitude and indicates the extent of Du Bois's influence on contemporary scholars. Inquiry into cultural traditions that developed out of the slave experience and the reclamation of slave narratives as a prized literary resource also reflect a departure from the academic traditions of silence and misrepresentation against which Du Bois wrote. Yet these developments, though promising, do not indicate a broader public willingness to address the fundamental questions Du Bois ([1935] 1964, 715) raises in Black Reconstruction: "What was slavery in the United States? Just what did it mean to the owner and the owned?"

Implicit in those two questions is a third: What does the United States owe the former slaves and their descendants? That this question has gone largely unasked in American public life suggests a resistance to acknowledging the reach of slavery beyond abolition or the continuing effects of the forms of racial oppression to which the abolition of slavery gave rise. This unwillingness suggests as well the deeper political significance of the quest for reparations. "Closure is not possible.... Yet silence is also an unacceptable offense, a shocking implication that the perpetrators in fact succeeded, a stunning indictment that the present audience is simply the current incarnation of the silent bystanders complicit with oppressive regimes" (Minow 1998, 5). Although Minow's words do not identify reparations as the sole or best answer to historic injustices, they emphasize the costs to the present generation of citizens of failing to offer some substantial response to the worst crimes committed in the nation's name. By way of conclusion, therefore, I sketch the beginnings of an argument for reparations as "a structure of memory".

19 The literature concerning Du Bois's concept of double consciousness is so extensive that I do not attempt to summarize it here.

20 For further discussion of the political implications of the "wages of whiteness," see Olson 2002.
and critique’ (Soyinka 1999, 39). My aim is not to offer specific proposals. Nor do I mean to imply that reparations alone would be a cure for racial injustice; as the Minow quotation suggests, the obligation to respond does not diminish the incompleteness of any possible response. Instead I use Du Bois’s analysis of Reconstruction as a basis from which to explore whether and how reparations might serve as a component of the broader effort to address the persistence of racial injustice and to imagine anew the demands of democracy in the post-civil rights era.

Before returning to Du Bois’s arguments, let me briefly address the larger context of the reparations struggle. Although the idea of reparations is not new, the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of demands that collective injustices be concretely memorialized through some form of restitution. The German program of reparations for victims of Nazi crimes is perhaps the most prominent example, but other efforts include legislation to restore property stolen from indigenous peoples in North America, Australia, and New Zealand; movements to obtain apologies and compensation from Japan for victims of the Nanjing massacre and of the “comfort women” system; and calls for compensation for losses sustained by Africans as a result of slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism. Within the United States, recent examples include Florida’s payments to survivors of the Rosewood massacre and their families, the federal government’s reparations to victims of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, and the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which allocated $20,000 apiece to Japanese American internment camp survivors (see Darby 1990 and Yamamoto 1998). The struggle for reparations, in the case of American slaves and their descendants, dates back to the nineteenth century and, according to Vincenzo Verduz (Verduz 1993, 600–607), can be organized into five periods of activism: the Civil War and Reconstruction period, the turn of the twentieth century, Marcus Garvey’s movement in the early twentieth century, the later years of the modern civil rights movement (late 1960s to 1970s); and the years following the passage of the Civil Liberties Act in 1988. Whereas the issue was largely marginalized in the earlier periods and mainstream civil rights organizations once kept their distance, the movement for black reparations has recently acquired momentum and attracted wider attention. For example, Representative John Conyers (D-MI) has introduced a bill in every Congress since 1989 to acknowledge the horrors of slavery and establish a commission that would study the idea of reparations; other indications of interest include the public attention generated by Randall Robinson’s (2000) The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks; the announcement of plans by a group of prominent civil rights lawyers and academics to initiate lawsuits against the U.S. government, corporations, and individuals who benefited from slavery (Ogletree 2002); and the passage of resolutions by several city councils—including Chicago, Detroit, Dallas, and Nashville—to consider possible forms of reparations (Robinson 2002).

Notwithstanding the success of reparations movements around the world and the renewed attention to slavery’s lingering questions in the United States, the will required to move from affirmation of principle to implementation in practice remains both inadequate and largely divided along the color line. Mirroring the gap between white support for principles of racial equality and resistance to policies designed to ensure it, approximately 90% of white respondents in a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll opposed cash payments to descendants of slaves; 55% of African Americans polled supported the idea (Zremski 2002). Even proposals for an apology without compensation provoke resistance. The fate of the Conyers bill is telling. Not only has it languished in committee every time it has been introduced, but its cosponsors have been predominantly African American. It is perhaps unsurprising that claims for reparations have had little effect, but it is nonetheless worth inquiring why this idea has remained largely inconceivable in the United States, even as sweeping legal, political, and social changes have taken place.

Arguing that the story of reparations is centrally a story of memory’s suppression, I return to the submerged questions excavated by Du Bois’s history of Reconstruction. Du Bois’s analysis of Americans’ refusal to come to terms with slavery’s persistent political implications and his demonstration of the central role played by African Americans in the making of the United States indicate the urgency of seriously considering the idea of reparations as one element of a third attempt at democratic reconstruction. This is not to say that Du Bois himself would endorse a campaign for reparations. Indeed, he might well dismiss it as a pipedream, much as he did in 1916, when a group of African Americans sought compensation from the U.S. Treasury for a share of the revenues from American cotton production. Of the vow by the group’s attorney to seek $68 million, Du Bois (1916, 133) scoffed, “Of course, he can claim it and anybody else can claim it and they may also claim the moon but the chance of getting

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21 Dominick LaCapra’s distinction between two senses of commensurability helps to clarify this point. Whereas reparations, or any form of compensation for historic injustice, clearly fails the test of commensurability insofar as it cannot equal the suffering wrought by the original wrong, it can nonetheless serve as a “necessarily imperfect translation.” Thus, writes LaCapra (1998, 197, n. 13), “certain acts, including reparations and the public acknowledgment of injustice on the part of perpetrators or those taking up their dire legacy, may be acknowledged by victims as acceptable even if never fully satisfactory or adequate.”


23 When Representative Tony Hall’s resolution calling for an official apology for slavery was first introduced, it elicited hate mail from both white and black Americans. Whites resisted the apology itself; blacks, the failure to link it to material redress (Montgomery 2000). Similarly, Representative Tom DeLay’s reaction to Bill Clinton’s expression of regret for the slave trade during a 1998 trip to Africa exposes the fury the idea is capable of evoking. DeLay broke with the tradition of not criticizing the president while he was abroad and told reporters that the expression of regret was tantamount to “attacking his own country in a foreign land” (Page 1998).
the one is about as great as that of getting the other.”24 Despite Du Bois’s own reservations about the costs of succumbing to “the latest craze,” his examination of the “splendid failure” of Americans’ first attempt to realize their democratic commitments suggests three lines of argument in favor of reparations for slavery and for the decades of segregation that followed from it.

First, reparations could respond to both strands of Du Bois’s claims about the economic requirements of a genuinely reconstructed democracy. Conceived as a massive investment in black communities, rather than a per capita payment, and targeted primarily at the poorest African Americans, reparations could create a basis for attacking the deep economic inequality Du Bois understands to be incompatible with democracy and thereby broadening the base of African Americans who can be said to enjoy the fruits of citizenship in a meaningful sense. Du Bois’s study of the short-lived experiments that allowed former slaves to work abandoned lands during the Civil War provides a glimpse of the opportunity lost when the Freedmen’s Bureau was prevented from carrying out the redistribution of Southern lands and establishing the former slaves as “peasant proprietors” (see Du Bois [1935] 1964, chap. 4, [1903] 1997, chap. 2). Furthermore, his attention to the perspectives of the former slaves enables him to articulate a critique of Reconstruction’s shortcomings that speaks to the limits of recent civil rights legislation as well: Without a significant material commitment, the Thirteenth Amendment was just part of a “legalistic formula . . . [that] did not cling to facts” (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 188). Du Bois’s account of the link between the subjugation of African Americans at the close of Reconstruction and the concentration of capital in the hands of a small industrial class also serves as a reminder that any argument for reparations, although targeting African Americans specifically, should be conceived as a component of a larger commitment to eliminating disparities of wealth and power among Americans more broadly.

Reparations speak to the second strand of Du Bois’s economic claims by providing some recompense for the years of slave labor and for the exclusion from access to resources that succeeded abolition. By attending to the value of African Americans’ labor under slavery and to the continuities between slavery and the neoslavery of the Jim Crow period, Du Bois exposes the roots of present inequalities. What succeeded Reconstruction, he argues, was the disenfranchisement of black citizens, the revival of racial caste distinctions, the systematic exploitation of black workers, the deliberate impoverishment of black schools, the widespread denial of access to health care and other social services, the use of the criminal justice system as a cheap source of black labor, and the condoning of mob violence as an instrument of social control (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 693–708). “We can trace the sediminated material inequality that now confronts us directly to this opprobrious past,” write Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro (1997, 188) in their study of the wealth gap between white and black Americans.25 Moreover, Du Bois’s examination of the ways in which white Americans as a group profited from the oppression of blacks shows that an account of what is owed to African Americans need not reinforce the individualist framework of the “American Assumption.” Anticipating recent work by Derrick Bell, Cheryl Harris, George Lipsitz, and others, Du Bois’s retelling of the fall of Reconstruction reveals how whiteness provides a kind of “cash value” (Lipsitz 1998, vii), even for those white Americans who disavow racial privilege (see Bell 1993, Du Bois [1935] 1964, 700–701, and Harris 1993). Although it would be impossible to calculate with any exactness what is owed for uncompensated and undercompensated work and the cost to generations of black families of discrimination and restricted access to public resources, Du Bois provides an important reminder that the failure even to consider what kind of recompense might be appropriate represents a kind of continuing “carelessness” and constrains the project of conceiving more democratic practices and institutions.

A second way to link Du Bois’s exploration of Reconstruction to an argument for reparations is to consider what he calls “the gifts of black folk.” This element of the argument is crucial, for it supplements the language of apology with the language of gratitude. Speaking of the period after the Civil War, Du Bois ([1935] 1964, 188) insists that “Negroes deserved not only the pity of the world but the gratitude of both South and North.” Du Bois’s comment suggests that it is imperative that the construction of a sincere and long overdue apology not reinforce conceptions of black victimhood or neediness.26 Emphasizing black contributions as a cornerstone of the argument—through careful attention to the rhetoric promoting reparations measures as well as the institution of museums, memorials, and educational programs—would help to allay the well-grounded fear that a campaign for reparations would be interpreted simply as an instance of special pleading. Such a public reimagining of the debt to African Americans could be revolutionary. It would discredit the assumptions that inform traditions of public “charity” for black Americans. Generous charity was, after all, commonplace even in the segregated South (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 145–46), but the impetus behind programs of almsgiving was, and is, misplaced. Not only does it reinforce racial hierarchies but also it perpetuates the erasure of black accomplishments and the fear of black success that often lies behind white efforts to prevent African Americans from enjoying

24 According to reparations activist Queen Mother Audley Moore, Du Bois overcame his earlier reluctance to reparations before his death (Verduin, 1993, 605).

25 Taking institutional barriers to black home ownership as just one measure of the policies and practices that perpetuated racial inequality until well after the passage of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, Oliver and Shapiro (1997, 8–9) estimate that African Americans living today have sustained approximately $2 billion in losses.

26 In this regard, Du Bois’s analysis provides a response to Adolph Reed’s (2000) concern that arguments for reparations, which Reed characterizes as a political “nonstarter,” reinforce perceptions of poor and working-class blacks as culturally “defective.”
political, economic, or social equality (see Du Bois [1935] 1964, 633). A form of reparations acknowledging the gifts Du Bois describes, therefore, would not require that black Americans sacrifice their claims to agency in making their claims for the resources necessary to live a decent life.

Moreover, Du Bois’s account of the contributions of African Americans to the construction and reconstruction of American democracy provides a rebuttal to charges that the demand for black reparations is necessarily “divisive.” Certainly, the purpose of reparations is to advance the prospects and interests of black citizens. Yet Du Bois’s historical exploration of the “gifts of black folk” exposes links between the improvement in African Americans’ political and economic fortunes and the protection of other vulnerable members of American society. He notes, for example, that members of Congress such as Senator Blanche K. Bruce and Representative John A. Hyman, both former slaves, fought against restricting Chinese immigration and for assistance to the Cherokee, respectively (Du Bois [1935] 1964, 629; Foner 1988, 538). Further, the possibility that the fight for reparations might offer opportunities to bridge, rather than widen, social divisions is suggested more recently by the vocal support of members of the Black Congressional Caucus for reparations in the Japanese American case (Yamamoto 1998, 486). Without concluding that reparations for black Americans will inevitably produce benefits for other citizens or form the basis for new coalitions, Du Bois’s historical narrative credits the claim that redress for slavery and segregation can only divide.

Perhaps the third element of Du Bois’s analysis of Reconstruction, his perception that the failure to acknowledge the equal humanity of black men and women lies at the root of Reconstruction’s undoing, appears less compelling in the post-civil rights context. Is Du Bois’s appeal for a concrete, public accounting of the crimes of racial slavery and its aftermath as an affirmation of the human worth of the slaves and their descendants still pressing? One could argue that it is precisely this worth that is reaffirmed by the passage of the Civil War amendments and the civil rights legislation of the last century, yet the persistent failure to make adequate progress toward substantive racial equality indicates otherwise. The challenge here is not so much to undermine explicit arguments about racial inferiority as to confront the residual assumptions that sustain public silences and feed the resistance to action in matters of racial injustice. In spite of enormous change in American racial attitudes, there is still political value in investigating why the claim of the ex-slaves to compensation was considered laughable in the nineteenth century and what makes the suggestion (literally) outrageous in the minds of so many Americans today. As Boris Bittker (1973) suggests, the historical absence of discussion about proposals for reparations is telling. It reveals what Bill Lawson (1992, 77) calls a “functional lexical gap,” a failure of language to express the status and experiences of black citizens.

My reading of Du Bois’s claims about the complex entanglement of past and present suggests that filling that gap requires attending not only to the claims of living African Americans but also to what W. James Booth (2001) calls “memory-justice.” Justice, according to Booth, requires a responsiveness to crimes of the past; in this case, it demands that Americans today admit the humanity of the “many thousands gone” by examining what Du Bois calls the “buried” truths of slavery and Jim Crow. Not to be confused with individual guilt, the obligations imposed on the current generation of American citizens are better understood as an aspect of their inheritance. “Every generation,” writes Hannah Arendt (1964, 298), “by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the fathers as it is blessed with the deeds of the ancestors.” This is not to say that present-day politics ought to be consumed by a perfectionist effort to rectify every misdeed of the past. Rather, the political promise of such a conception of justice resides in its rejoinder to automatic dismissals of reparations as unjustly penalizing the innocent. By demanding that Americans examine the collective injustice at the core of the nation, reparations may help to prevent today’s citizens from becoming “the current incarnation of the silent bystanders” with regard to the nation’s worst

30 Jürgen Habermas makes a similar point in the context of the Historians’ Debate about the relationship between contemporary Germany and the Nazi past: “There is first of all the obligation that we in Germany have—even if no one else any longer assumes it—to keep alive the memory of the suffering of those murdered by German hands, and to keep it alive quite openly and not just in our own minds” (quoted in LaCapra 1998, 196). Thomas McCarthy (2002), who also quotes from this text, considers how the Historians’ Debate sheds light on the politics of memory in the United States.

31 Sheldon Wolin (1989) and David Blight (2001b) provide powerful accounts of the ways in which American national identity has been constructed, to a significant degree, by the active forgetting of slavery. Any program of reparations would require public engagement with the question of how American national identity has been constituted. It would also require that Americans as a group address the question of black national identity. Although debates about the nature and boundaries of black identity are far too complex to be adequately explored here, it is worth remembering Robert Westley’s (1998, 469) observation that “the irony posed by the very question of Black national group status is that in ordinary social and political discourse, Blacks are treated as a group for every purpose other than rights-recognition.” This is not to say that the history of African Americans provides the only example of the intimate relationship between racial and national identity in the United States. For a discussion of the connections between race and nation in the case of Mexican Americans, see Holt 2000, 49–55.

27 Recent attention to the Tulsa riot of 1921—in which thousands of whites descended on the prosperous African American section of the city, burning its buildings and killing an undetermined number of its residents—reinforces this point (see Brophy 2002, Hirsch 2002, and Staples 1999).

28 Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2002) make a analogous point by exposing the limitations of conventional interest-group politics and showing how multiracial coalitions have succeeded in achieving broad social benefits by “enlisting race” rather than attempting to ignore or transcend it.

29 For an acute examination of the phenomenon of unconscious racism and its effects on American law, see Lawrence 1987.
crimes (Minow 1998, 5). Properly conceived, a program of reparations for slavery and segregation could help to stretch the bounds of the thinkable by reorienting Americans to see their history from the perspective of the former slaves and their descendants. The promise of such a reorientation resides in its capacity to discredit the lingering impulse to “answer all queries concerning the Negro a priori” (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 96).

There are, to be sure, dangers to pursuing claims for reparations. Most pernicious are the risk of inciting an antiblack backlash and the possibility that a monetary settlement would fix, once and for all, the public meaning of slavery and segregation, forestalling any thorough-going attempt to consider what needs to be done to effect racial justice. One lesson of the brutality with which the achievements of Reconstruction were undone is that any large-scale attack on racial injustice is perilous. Du Bois’s attention to the sources and effects of this brutality suggests that the aspiration to counter centuries of racial hierarchy through reparations must confront a difficult dilemma: Insofar as it fosters an enlarged historical consciousness, reparations could help to generate the kind of political will necessary to attack racial injustice, but without the prior development of such consciousness, Americans are unlikely to support any substantial program of reparations. Furthermore, some forms of reparations—those that aim to close the book on American racial history rather than opening it to scrutiny and revision by successive generations—might be worse than none at all. In this regard, the acceptance, by some white neoconservatives, of reparations as a one-time alternative to affirmative action or other forms of redress surely ought to give its advocates pause (Feagin and O’Brien 1999, 343). “Without change in the material conditions of racial group life,” warns Eric Yamamoto (1998, 520) “reparations are fraught with repressive potential. Without attitudinal and social structural transformation of a sort meaningful to recipients, reparations may be illusory, more damaging than healing. No repair. Cheap grace.” Beyond these concerns lies a host of technical and strategic questions that would require attention before any program of reparations could be undertaken. My aim is neither to minimize these challenges nor to imply that Du Bois’s work provides answers to all of them, but to read his retelling of the story of Reconstruction as a basis for understanding what democracy requires and as a reminder that today’s swift dismissals of reparations have a largely untold and ignoble history.

The promise of reparations is not a promise of easy redemption. Rather, Du Bois’s narrative suggests how a public commitment to reparations could call attention to Americans’ halting, limited, and perpetually unfilled democratic aspirations. By opening the door to a collective exploration of the past’s imprint on the present, such a commitment could create the possibility of new democratic imaginings. That the financial and, for many white Americans, psychological costs of any meaningful program of reparations for racial slavery and segregation would be staggering goes without saying. That no amount would provide adequate recompense for the horrors of slavery, or the forms of racial oppression that succeeded it, ought to be even more obvious. Yet the lesson of Du Bois’s postmortem on the nineteenth-century democratic experiment is that the costs of choosing not to face up to the enduring legacies of racial slavery are incalculably high. Although there is much truth to the view that fixating on the past or wallowing in guilt solves nothing, the banishment of centuries of history to the remote past, particularly when those centuries were followed by decades of deliberate policies of racial injustice, is undemocratic; and formal guarantees of racial equality, while a critical element of the move toward democracy, are not only inadequate but potentially regressive when they provide justification for continued forgetfulness. Thus, despite all that has happened since Du Bois investigated the “splendid failure” of Reconstruction, one lesson of his work is that the idea of reparations deserves a serious hearing. Despite all that has changed, his warning to his thoughtful fellow citizens still resonates: “Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse” (Du Bois [1903] 1997, 193).

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22 For an incisive critique of attempts to restrict the responsibility to address the slave past to the descendants of slave owners, see McCarthy 2002.

23 For an extended exploration and critique of the political dangers that inher in longings for redemption, see Shulman 1996.