# BEYOND UNITY

## *Du Bois and Race Politics in the Twenty-First Century*

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### INTRODUCTION

Lawrie Balfour and Robert Gooding-Williams have given us powerful new works of scholarship on the political thought of W. E. B. Du Bois. Not only do these publications enrich the field of Du Bois scholarship, they exemplify the exciting possibilities at the intersection of political theory and race politics.

I'd like to focus my comments on an intriguing tension between what each author emphasizes in theorizing Du Bois's political thought and what this difference in emphasis might mean for the study of race politics today. What intrigues me here is the contrast between Balfour's insistence on the need to engage the tragedy and evasions of America's racial past and Gooding-Williams' emphasis on Black politics as a practice of freedom—a form of action based not on unity or rule but on a vision of politics as something Blacks "do together." What sorts of tensions and insights emerge when trying to take both these projects seriously? If questions of history, memory, and freedom all matter, how might we balance these contending claims? Finally, how do these reassessments and theoretical interventions regarding African American politics lead to a reconsideration of race politics more generally? More specifically, how might the insights generated by this scholarship influence the terrain of racial politics beyond African Americans and the Black-White divide?

### WAYS OF READING

Before turning to these questions, I'd like to briefly note the significance of not only these two works' content, but the mode of theorizing both books enacts. One of the most profound and pleasurable aspects of reading Balfour and Gooding-Williams is encountering two political theorists deeply invested in giving the Afro-modern tradition of political thought the careful and serious attention it deserves. In calling for better practices of theorizing, Balfour characterizes political theory as a tradition shadowed by an "unowned past" that pushes slavery and its legacies to the margins

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(2011, p. 6). In a related vein, Gooding-Williams notes that political theorists have often failed to take race seriously as an intellectual and political project, arguing that engaging the Afro-modern tradition requires "just the sort of attentive reading and probing analysis that we have been accustomed to give works like Aristotle's *Politics*, Locke's *Second Treatise*, and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*" (2009, p. 7).

This call to seriously grapple with this tradition of thought and attend to the subtlety and rich complexity of a thinker such as Du Bois might seem unnecessary. Yet more often than not, the field of political theory has failed to meet this standard. While it's true that in recent years scholars have accorded questions of race a higher profile in the field, Balfour's point regarding the *type* of attention these individual texts receive is worth elaborating. Too often, political theorists approach the Afro-modern tradition as a kind of emancipatory supplement to the tradition of Western political thought, offering critical and sustained readings of canonical theorists (Machiavelli, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Foucault) alongside a quote or two by one of a handful of established writers on race (in the case of the Afro-modern tradition, Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Martin Luther King Jr. are typical; in Latino political thought, Gloria Anzaldúa is a particular favorite). Such theoretical "drive-bys" are meaningful, if only in their effort to signal the progressive political commitments of the theorists making these fleeting references. In this mode of political theorizing, race scholars become more talisman than text, their names signifying justice, democracy, and inclusivity. The logic of the emancipatory supplement promises to enhance and correct (but never replace) dominant modes of theorizing.

The work of Gooding-Williams and Balfour stands in contrast to this approach, with both scholars offering careful, critical, and rigorous readings of Afro-modern political thought. In doing this, both authors make a critical intervention into the logic of the emancipatory supplement, modeling a far more demanding alternative that raises the bar for what it means for political theorists to engage the study of race and, more specifically, African American political thought.

## FACING THE WORST, IMAGINING THE NEW

Despite their shared orientation, Balfour's *Democracy's Reconstruction* (2011) and Gooding-Williams' *In the Shadow of Du Bois* (2009) offer readers distinct—even divergent—analyses of W. E. B. Du Bois. In many ways, this is precisely the point. Like the work of other great theorists, Du Bois's political thought continues to resonate with contemporary political life in new and unanticipated ways. Because this work is complex and capacious enough to accommodate multiple interpretations, my goal is not to reconcile the readings of Du Bois that these two excellent books put forward. Nevertheless, I *do* want to suggest that reading these authors together reveals two aspects of theorizing race in the twenty-first century that are both necessary and potentially at odds (or in tension) with one another.

Gooding-Williams links his critique of Du Bois to his larger reconsideration of Black politics as a practice of freedom, action, and re-creation—of what it might mean to rethink the "we" of Black politics as a practice of *beginning* rather than a form of group rule. For Balfour, Du Bois's work serves as a democratic resource that allows us to "conceive alternative futures by regarding the past anew"—an approach that compels us to confront the tragedies and evasions of our shared racial past and present (p. xi). Both theorists draw on Du Bois, but their engagements constitute two quite different theoretical interventions: Balfour's approach takes Du Bois's work as an occasion to conceive a more democratic future by more fully considering the



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tragedy of our shared racial past, while Gooding-Williams asks us to move beyond Du Bois's shadow to construct a nonfoundationalist account of political action and plurality. Are these demands in tension with one another? What political and theoretical challenges are posed by taking both of these projects seriously? Can we do both? If freedom is a practice of becoming, of ceaseless initiation, how does such a politics attend to history, tragedy, and memory? What does it mean to engage the past while imagining the new?

It's not my intention here to ask either author to settle such questions. Instead, I raise these questions in the spirit of furthering a conversation regarding what it might mean to imagine a politics that can accommodate both plurality and memory.

## Our "Present-Past"

Drawing on Du Bois's vast body of published work, Balfour's book highlights three interconnected themes: the critical power of Du Bois's idea of a "present-past," his exploration of "black exemplarity," and the "global reach" of his political imagination (2011, p. 20). I will focus primarily on Balfour's engagement with Du Bois's notion of the "present-past" and the ways in which he "engages the past in order to reflect on democratic possibilities in the present" (p. 48). Du Bois (1997), in *The Souls of Black Folk*, has created depictions of such emblematic figures as the Southern slave-owner ("the gray-haired gentleman") and the tortured slave mother which reveal the horrible complexities of America's suppressed racial past. For Balfour, such passages capture the "challenges posed by the heritage of racial slavery" and the "complex claims that the past makes on the present" (p. 28).

For Balfour, Du Bois's work "makes a particular kind of political critique possible in the present" (p. 22). Calling us to confront what she calls "our mixed inheritance," Balfour draws on Du Bois to think through a paradoxical tradition of American thought that "reinvented liberty and slavery simultaneously" (p. 6). By pressing us to confront the tragic dimensions of the nation's founding, Balfour argues that Du Bois's political thought "enables us to grasp the ways in which racial subjugation has been constitutive, rather than anomalous, in American history and in modern experience more broadly" (p. xi). Equally important, Du Bois's writings highlight America's "political culture of evasion . . . a tradition of denial that is tightly woven into political life in the United States from its earliest years" (p. 59). Balfour links this culture of evasion with certain practices within the tradition of political theory, particularly the "reluctance to treat race and racial injustice as fundamental to the study of modern democratic life" (p. 5). Here, she shows how her approach both draws on and breaks with contemporary political theorists who call us to confront the "scale of humanly inflicted suffering" yet often sidestep political questions associated with "modern slavery and colonial conquest" (p. 5). Balfour does a thoughtful and impressive job of critiquing the many ways that political theorists (including George Kateb, William Connolly, Martha Nussbaum, and Benjamin Barber) elide the "knotty questions of racial identity and difference" (p. 75). In this sense, her criticisms are outwardly directed—away from Du Bois and toward the field of political theory and American political culture more generally.

Balfour persuasively shows Du Bois offering a powerful alternative to this history of evasion, compelling us to confront a series of tragedies in American political thought: "not simply that the founders bequeathed a system of racial slavery that only unspeakable violence could overcome but that they bequeathed a political culture of evasion and deferral that would continue to compromise Americans' attachment to liberty and equality" (p. 137). Here, Balfour finds democratic resources in Du Bois's call to "face



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the worst" and his insistence that our present-past "imposes responsibilities on each successive generation to eradicate entrenched forms of racial injustice" (p. 139). Yet as she notes, attending to the "living presence of the past is not the same as living in or for the past" (p. 16). Instead, she is interested in the linkages between "historical knowledge and political possibility" (p. 9).

In its push against America's tendency toward a politics of evasion and disavowal, I find much to praise in Balfour's work. Moreover, it's clear that her interest in reparations (broadly understood) is driven by a belief that the past (and its suppression) exerts a real "living power" on America's racial present (p. 20). I agree. But I wonder how this emphasis on "the heavy inheritance of the present-past" might *also* serve to occlude our political vision when it comes to imagining new practices of world-building. Put somewhat differently, how might Balfour's reading of Du Bois lead her to emphasize a past history of shared suffering that is crucial to wrestle with and understand, but that also deflects attention from an equally emergent reality, one that involves (to quote Gooding-Williams) "the persistent and accelerating differentiation of African American experience" (2009, p. 218)? To engage this increased multiplicity as a site of possibility (rather than loss) for African American politics, I turn now to Gooding-Williams and his more agonistic engagement with the thought of W. E. B. Du Bois.

## Political Freedom and the Challenge of the Moment

According to Gooding-Williams, understanding the significance of Du Bois as a political theorist and of Du Bois's (1997) *The Souls of Black Folk* as political theory requires attending to the history of White supremacy in the United States (2009, p. 30). As such, *In the Shadow of Du Bois* seeks to analyze and "reconstruct" Du Bois's *Souls* and "its exploration of how to create and conduct a politics for African Americans that counters white supremacy in the instance of Jim Crow" (p. 4). The book shows Gooding-Williams exploring what he sees as the limitations and blind spots in the political thought of Du Bois, particularly Du Bois's conception of African American politics as a form of group rule and the idea that Black politics should take the form of "expressive self-realization" (p. 4). Political expressivism presumes that Blacks as a group are united by a collectively shared ethos or spirit. Arguing for a different relationship between Black identity and Black politics, Gooding-Williams seeks to "weaken the persistent appeal" of an African-American politics premised on unity and a vision of politics as rule. Instead, he turns to Frederick Douglass ([1855] 2003) in *My Bondage and My Freedom* to articulate a nonexpressivist account of Black politics "as collective debate, deliberation, and action" (2009, p. 217).

Drawing on *My Bondage*'s politics in action, Gooding-Williams suggests that "an effective, activist politics may forge race-conscious African American solidarities and identities, but without the manifestation of a racially or ethnically specific form of life that is present prior to politics. And rather than advance a unified black politics that is rooted in a unified ethos, *Bondage* permits us to imagine a good in proliferating, multiple, and mutually contestable ways of doing black politics" (pp. 14–15). Here, the Afro-modern tradition of political thought is a resource but also a form of inheritance that haunts Black politics. Troubled by the grip that certain readings of Afro-modern thought have had on Black politics, *In the Shadow of Du Bois* is an intervention and critique of particular readings of Black politics. Here, Gooding-Williams reminds his readers that deeply engaging a rich theoretical tradition means grappling with both the resources *and* the risks that define this tradition. To do this, he engages a wide array of African American interlocutors whose work he subjects to



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additional critique and analysis. This engagement with contemporary theorists of the Afro-modern tradition highlights the fact that an anti-White supremacist politics doesn't require the turn to political expressivism. Instead, Gooding-Williams theorizes race politics by stressing practices of freedom and initiation—an Arendtian politics defined as "what some blacks do together" (p. 212).

By opting for a no-foundations vision of Black politics, Gooding-Williams resists the assumption that "black politics requires political unity"; his model of Black politics neither rules out the possibility of unity nor invests anything in promoting it (pp. 237–238). Citing the work of Eddie Glaude, Gooding-Williams envisions a participatory Black public sphere driven not by a "nostalgia for a less splintered and more homogenous 'black community'" but, rather, by a reoriented Black freedom movement capable of engaging present-day problems "imaginatively, intelligently, and in full view of African American political interests" (p. 241). This, to my mind, is the most powerful and necessary intervention made by *In the Shadow of Du Bois*; the book's approach to theorizing decenters Whiteness by focusing on the world-building capacities of Black politics.

While I am strongly disposed toward the no-foundations approach that Gooding-Williams articulates, might this emphasis on world-building fetishize the proliferation of the new? Can such an approach inadvertently return us to a liberal conception of the individual whose pluralist logic is far too inattentive to the racial past? Put somewhat differently, does the focus on "the current moment" run the risk of being insufficiently attentive to what Balfour describes as the tragic dimensions of America's racial history? Is this perhaps the political cost of emphasizing freedom?

That there is something forgetful and unjust in beginning anew—while an excess of history allows the past to overwhelm the present—is the existential challenge haunting theorizations of race and democracy in the twenty-first century. Indeed, this is what Nietzsche ([1874] 1983) described in *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* as the problem of history, declaring that "with an excess of history man again ceases to exist, and without that envelope of the unhistorical he would never have begun or dared to begin" (p. 64). Calling on mankind to employ history "for the sake of life and action," Nietzsche (1983) insists that human beings must struggle to sense "when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically" (pp. 59, 63). In their efforts to articulate a more critical engagement with history, one could argue that Gooding-Williams—in his desire to privilege new forms of becoming—emphasizes the need to selectively break the hold of the past over the present. By contrast, Balfour's work emphasizes our ongoing need to "feel historically," to recognize that we are all "the outcome of earlier generations . . . of their aberrations, passions, and errors, and indeed of their crimes" (Nietzsche 1983, p. 76). Here we see how the problem of history produces distinct dilemmas for each author: for some race conscious subjects (African Americans, Latinos, etc.), Gooding-Williams' call for new and proliferating forms of Black politics will be experienced as a form of racialized denial and disavowal—a failure to "feel historically." By contrast, Balfour's emphasis on America's crimes and "facing the worst" risks narrowing Black politics to a practice of injury over possibility.

## THEORIZING RACE WITH AND BEYOND DU BOIS

As a scholar of Latino politics in the United States, it's clear to me that the theoretical reach of these two books extends far beyond the study of Black politics. Both books offer insights that are needed for the larger study of U.S. race politics. In the



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case of Balfour, her discussion of what she calls "the global reach" of Du Bois's political imagination finds powerful resonance with the transnational impulse of Latino-studies scholarship. Like Du Bois, scholars currently seeking to understand the politics of immigration, sovereignty, and globalization share a common refusal to not be bound "physically or intellectually, by the limits of American nationhood" (Balfour 2011, pp. 116–117). Here, we can see a shared interest in cultivating practices of theorizing that press "beyond the national frame" (Balfour 2011, p. 116).

To my mind, one of the most significant theoretical contributions of Gooding-Williams' work is its attempt to rethink the relationship between Black identity and Black politics. I'm particularly compelled by his effort to envision race-conscious solidarities and identities that don't presume naturalized, prepolitical forms of group unity. In my own efforts to develop a nonfoundationalist account of Latino identity, I have considered how certain assumptions regarding Black politics have shaped the content and parameters of contemporary Latino politics. Because high levels of group cohesion and political unity are seen as characteristic of Black politics, Latino elites have often felt compelled to present themselves in similar terms, as a politically cohesive national minority group equivalent to African Americans. Animated by a potent combination of envy, inspiration, and resentment, Latino politics has often sought to echo African American politics by stressing group unity as the precondition for political agency and advancement (Beltrán 2010, p. 116). This means that as the logic of unity is unsettled in the Afro-modern tradition, the insights involved in rethinking the relationship between identity and politics are likely to have deep and lasting reverberations in the political thought of Latinos and other subaltern thinkers.

## CONCLUSION

In drawing on Nietzsche's (1983) observation that mankind is chained to its past and that "it is not possible to free oneself from this chain" (p. 76), both Balfour and Gooding-Williams have turned to Du Bois to consider the problem of what it means to employ history for the purposes of life. Read together, their work poses the question: Can we sustain an agonistic politics of beginning that also pushes back against American's long history of evasion and denial? Neither book answers this question definitively, but both reveal its central importance in the effort to forge a richer, more democratic future.

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