



Primary Source

The Superior Race (An Essay)

—W. E. Burghardt Du Bois

Citation:

Du Bois, W.E.B. 1923. "The Superior Race (An Essay)." *The Smart Set: A Magazine of Cleverness*, v.70, n.4 (April): 55-60.



Online Sources:

1. Du Bois's article can be viewed online: [start page](#) at Google Books. The entire Volume 70 of *The Smart Set* is accessible at Google Books: [About-This-Book](#) page.
2. Also, Hathi Trust Digital Library has a copy of *The Smart Set* issue: [start page](#) of Du Bois's essay (entire [Vol.70](#)).

Robert Williams' Notes:

1. The vast majority of this essay is contained verbatim in DuBois's 1940 book *Dusk of Dawn*, Chapter 6 ("The White World").
2. The newspaper *The Afro-American*, *Baltimore* printed an anonymously written article, entitled in bold letters "Negro Superior to White." It was subtitled: "DuBois Writing in Smart Set Magazine Says We Are More Beautiful Both in Body and Soul." The piece summarized DuBois' essay in *The Smart Set* and included several extensive quotations. The newspaper issue was dated 16 March 1923 (p.11, col.2). The article can be viewed [online](#) via Google News Archive ([search](#) page).
3. The text is presented below verbatim and in its entirety.

— Robert W. Williams, Ph.D. [[Bio](#)]

The Superior Race

(An Essay)

By *W. E. Burghardt Du Bois*

(Author of "The Suppression of the Slave Trade," "The Souls of Black Folk," "The Negro," "Darkwater," Etc.)

I

- [1] **W**HEN the obsession of his race consciousness leaves him, my white friend is quite companionable; otherwise he is impossible. He has a way of putting an excessive amount of pity in his look and of stating as a general and incontrovertible fact that it is "horrible" to be an Exception. By this he means me. He is more than certain that I prove the rule. He is not a bright person, but of that famous average, standardized and astonished at anything that even seems original. His thesis is simple: The world is composed of Race superimposed on Race; classes superimposed on classes; beneath the whole thing is "Our Family" in capitals, and under that is God. God seems to be a cousin, or at least a blood relative of the Van Diemens.
- [2] "Of course," he says, "you know Negroes are inferior."
- [3] I admit nothing of the sort, I maintain. In fact, having known with considerable intimacy, both male and female, the people of the British Isles, of Scandinavia, of Russia, of Germany, north and south, of the three ends of France and the two ends of Italy; specimens from the Balkans and black and white Spain; the three great races of Asia and the melange of Africa, without mentioning America, I sit here and maintain that black folk are much the superior of white.
- [4] "You are either joking or mad," he says.
- [5] Both and neither. This race talk is, of course, a joke, and frequently it has driven me insane and probably will permanently in the future; and yet, seriously and soberly, we black folk are the salvation of mankind.
- [6] He regards me with puzzled astonishment and says confidentially:
- [7] "Do you know that sometimes I am half afraid that you really believe this? At other times I see clearly the inferiority complex."
- [8] The former after lunch, I reply, and the latter before.
- [9] "Very well," he says, "let's lunch."
- [10] Where? I ask quizzically, we being at the time in the roaring Forties.
- [11] "Why -- oh, well! -- their refusal to serve you lunch at least does not prove your superiority."

[12] Nor yet theirs, I answer; but never mind, come with me to Second Avenue.

[13] We start again with the salad.

[14] "Now, superiority consists of what?" he argues.

[15] Life is, I remark, (1) Beauty and health of body, (2) Mental clearness and creative genius, (3) Spiritual goodness and receptivity, (4) Social adaptability and constructiveness.

[16] "Not bad," he answers. "Not bad at all. Now, I contend that the white race conspicuously excels in one, two and four and is well abreast even in three."

[17] And I maintain that the black race excels in one, three and four and is well abreast in two."

[18] Sheer nonsense and pure balderdash! Compare the Venus of Milo and the Apollo Belvedere with a Harlem or Beale Street couple."

[19] With a Fifth Avenue Easter parade or a Newport Dance. In short, compare humanity at its best or worst with the Ideal, and humanity suffers. But black folk in most attributes of physical beauty, in line and height and curve, have the same norms as whites and differ only in small details of color, hair and curve of countenance. Now can there be any question but that as colors bronze, mahogany, coffee and gold are far lovelier than pink, gray and marble? Hair is a matter of taste. Some will have it drab and stringy and others in a gray, woven, unmoving mass. Most of us like it somewhere between, in tiny tendrils, smoking curls and sweeping curves. I have loved all these varieties in my day. I prefer the crinkly kind, almost wavy, in black brown and glistening. In faces I hate straight features; needles and razors may be sharp -- but beautiful, never.

[20] "All that is personal opinion. I prefer the colors of heaven and day: sunlight hair and blue eyes, and straight noses and thin lips, and that incomparable air of haughty aloofness and aristocracy."

[21] And I, on the contrary, am the child of twilight and night, and choose intricately curly hair, black eyes, full and luscious features, and that air of humility and wonder which streams from moonlight. Add to this, voices that caress instead of rasp, glances that appeal rather than repel, and a sinuous liveness of movement to replace Anglo-Saxon stalking -- there you have my ideal. Of course you can bury any human body in dirt and misery and make it horrible. I have seen the East End of London."

[22] "Beauty seems to be simply opinion, if you put it that way."

[23] To be sure. But whose opinion?

[24] "Bother beauty. Here we shall never agree. But, after all, I doubt if it makes much difference. The real point is Brains: clear thinking, pure reason, mathematical precision and creative genius. Now, without *blague*, stand and acknowledge that here the white race is supreme."

[25] Quite the contrary. I know no attribute in which the white race has more conspicuously failed. This is white and European civilization; and as a system of culture it is idiotic, addle-brained, unreasoning, topsy-turvy, without precision, and its genius chiefly runs to marvelous contrivances for enslaving the many and enriching the few. I see absolutely no proof that the average ability of the white man's brain to think clearly is any greater than that of the yellow man or of the black man. If we take even that doubtful but widely heralded test, the frequency of individual creative genius (when a real racial test should be the frequency of ordinary common sense) -- if we take the Genius as the savior of mankind, it is only possible for the white race to prove its own incontestable superiority by appointing both judge and jury and summoning only its own witnesses.

[26] I freely admit that, according to white writers, white teachers, white historians and white molders of public opinion, nothing ever happened in the world of any importance that could not or should not be labeled "white." How silly. I place black iron welding and village democracy and yellow printing and state building side by side with white representative government and the steam engine, and unhesitatingly give the palm to the first. I hand the first vast conception of the solar system to the Africanized Egyptians, the creation of Art to the Chinese, and then let Europe rave over the Factory system.

[27] "But is not well-being more widely diffused among white folk than among yellow and black, and general intelligence more common?"

[28] Momentarily true; and why? Ask the geography of Europe, the African Slave Trade and the Imperial Industrialization of the nineteenth-century white man. Turn the thing around and let mountain and sea protect and isolate a continuous tradition of culture among yellow and black for one thousand years, while simultaneously they bleed the world of its brawn and wealth, and you will have exactly what we have today, under another name and color.

[29] "Precisely. Then, at least, the white race is more advanced and no more blameworthy than others because, as I insist, its native intelligence is greater. It is germ plasm -- seed -- that I am talking about. Do you believe in heredity?"

[30] Not blindly; but I should be mildly surprised to see a dog born of a cat.

[31] "Exactly; or a genius born of a fool."

[32] No, no; on the contrary, I rather expect fools of geniuses and geniuses of fools. And while I stoutly maintain that

cattiness and dogginess are as far apart as the East from the West, on the other hand I just as strongly believe that the human ass and superman have much in common and can often, if not always, spawn each other.

[33] "Is it possible that you have never heard of the Jukes, or of the man who married first an idiot and then a prune?"

[34] It is not possible; they have been served up to me ad infinitum. But they are nothing. I know greater wonders: Lincoln from Nancy Hanks, Dumas from a black beast of burden, Kant from a saddler, and Jesus Christ from a manger.

[35] "All of which, instead of disproving, is exact and definite proof of the persistence of good blood."

[36] Precisely, and of the catholicity of its tastes; the method of proof is this: When anything good occurs, it is proof of good blood; when anything bad occurs, it is proof of bad blood. Very well. Now good and bad, native endowment and native deficiency, do not follow racial lines. There is good stock in all races and the outcropping of bad individuals, too; and there has been absolutely no proof that the white race has any larger share of the gifted strains of human heritage than the black race or the yellow race. To be sure, good seed proves itself in the flower and fruit, but the failure of seed to sprout is no proof that it is not good. It may be proof simply of the absence of manure -- or its excessive presence.

[37] Granted, that when time began, there was hidden in a Seed that tiny speck that spelled the world's salvation, do you think today it would manifest itself crudely and baldly in a dash of skin color and a crinkle of hair? Is the subtle mystery of life and consciousness and of ability portrayed in any such slapdash and obvious marks of difference?

[38] "Go out upon the street; choose ten white men and ten colored men. Which can best carry on and preserve American civilization?"

[39] The whites.

[40] "Well, then!"

[41] You evidently consider that a compliment. Let it pass. Go out upon the street and choose ten men and ten women. Which could best run a Ford car? The men, of course; but -- hold. Fly out into the sky and look down upon ten children of Podunk and ten children of Chicago. Which would know most about elevated railroads, baseball, zoology and movies?

[42] "The point is visible, but beyond that, outside of mere experience and education, and harking back to native gift and intelligence, on your honor, which has most, white folk or black folk?"

[43] There you have me deep in the shadows, beyond the benign guidance of words. Just what is gift and intelligence,

especially of the native sort? And when we compare the gift of one human soul with that of another, are we not seeking to measure incommensurable things; trying to lump things like sunlight and music and love? And if a certain shadowy Over-soul can really compare the incomparable with some transcendental yardstick, may we not here emerge into a super-equality of man? At least this I can quite believe.

[44] "But it is a pious belief, not more."

[45] Not more; but a pious belief outweighs an impious unbelief.

II

[46] ADMITTING that the problem of native human endowment is obscure, there is no corresponding obscurity in spiritual values. Goodness and unselfishness; simplicity and honor; tolerance, susceptibility to beauty in form, color and music; courage to look truth in the face; courage to live and suffer in patience and humility, and forgiveness and in hope; eagerness to turn, not simply the other cheek, but the face and the bowed back; capacity to love. In all these mighty things, the greatest things in the world, where do black folk and white folk stand?

[47] Why, man of mine, you would not have the courage to live one hour as a black man in America, or as a Negro in the whole wide world. Ah, yes, I know what you whisper to such accusation. You say dryly that if we had good sense, we would not live either; and that the fact that we do submit to life as it is and yet laugh and dance and dream is but another, proof that we are idiots.

[48] This is the truly marvelous way in which you prove your superiority by admitting that our love of life can only be intelligently explained on the hypothesis of inferiority. What finer tribute is possible to our courage?

[49] What great works of Art have we made? Very few. The Pyramids, Luqsor, the Bronzes of Benin, the Spears of the Bongo, "When Malinda Sings" and the Sorrow Song she is always singing. Oh, yes, and the love of her dancing.

[50] But art is not simply works of art; it is the spirit that knows Beauty, that has music in its soul and the color of sunsets in its headkerchiefs; that can dance on a flaming world and make the world dance, too. Such is the soul of the Negro.

[51] Why, do you know the two finest things in the industry of the West, finer than factory, shop or ship? One is the black laborers' Saturday off. Neither the whip of the driver, nor starvation wage, nor the disgust of the Yankee, nor the call of the cotton crop, has yet convinced the common black variety of plantation laborer that one day in the week is enough for rest and play. He wants two days. And, from California to Texas, from Florida to Trinidad, he takes two days while the planter screams and curses. They have beaten the English slavey, the French and German peasants and the North Italian contadini into twelve-hour, six-day slaves. They crushed the

Chinese and Indian coolie into a twenty-four-hour beast of burden; they have even made the American, free, white and twenty-one, believe that daily toil is one of the Ten Commandments. But not the Negro. From Monday to Friday the field hand is a slave; then for forty-eight golden hours he is free, and through these same forty-eight hours he may yet free the dumb, driven cattle of the world.

[52] Then the second thing, laughter. This race has the greatest of the gifts of God, laughter. It dances and sings; it is humble; it longs to learn; it loves men; it loves women. It is frankly, baldly, deliciously human in an artificial and hypocritical land. If you will hear men laugh, go to Guinea, "Black Bottom," "Niggertown," Harlem. If you want to feel humor too exquisite and subtle for translation, sit invisibly among a gang of Negro workers. The white world has its gibes and cruel caricatures; it has its loud guffaws, but to the black world alone belongs the delicious chuckle.

[53] "But the State; the modern industrial State. Wealth of work, wealth of commerce, factory and mine, skyscrapers; New York, Chicago, Johannesburg, Lyons and Liverpool."

[54] This is the best expression of the civilization in which the white race finds itself today. This is what the white world means by culture.

[55] "Does it not excel the black and yellow race here?"

[56] It does. But the excellence here raises no envy; only regrets. If this vast Frankenstein monster really served its makers; if it were their minister and not their master, god and king; if their machines gave us rest and leisure, instead of the drab uniformity of uninteresting drudgery; if their factories gave us gracious community of thought and feeling; beauty enshrined, free and joyous; if their work veiled them with tender sympathy at human distress and wide tolerance and understanding -- then, all hail, White Imperial Industry. But it does not. It is a Beast! Its creators even do not understand it, cannot curb or guide it. They, themselves, are but hideous, groping higher Hands, doing their bit to oil the raging, devastating machinery which kills men to make cloth, prostitutes women to rear buildings and eats little children.

[57] Is this superiority? It is madness. We are the supermen who sit idly by and laugh and look at civilization. We, who frankly want the bodies of our mates and conjure no blush to our bronze cheeks when we own it. We, who exalt the Lynched above the Lyncher and the Worker above the Owner and the Crucified above Imperial Rome.

[58] "But why have you black and yellow men done nothing better or even as good in the history of the world?"

[59] We have, often.

[60] "I never heard of it."

[61] Lions have no historians.

[62] "It is idiotic even to discuss it. Look around and see the pageantry of the world. It belongs to white men; it is the expression of white power; it is the product of white brains. Who can have the effrontery to stand for a moment and compare with this white triumph, yellow and brown anarchy and black savagery?"

[63] You are obsessed by the swiftness of the gliding of the sled at the bottom of the hill. You say: What tremendous power must have caused its speed, and how wonderful is Speed. You think of the rider as the originator and inventor of that vast power. You admire his poise and *sang froid*, his utter self-absorption. You say: Surely here is the Son of God and he shall reign forever and forever.

Redolent of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*

[64] You are wrong, quite wrong. Away back on the level stretches of the mountain tops in the forests, amid drifts and driftwood, this sled was slowly and painfully pushed on its little hesitating start. It took power, but the power of sweating, courageous men, not of demigods. As the sled slowly started and gained momentum, it was the Law of Being that gave it speed, and the grace of God that steered its lone, scared passengers. Those passengers, white, black, red and yellow, deserve credit for their balance and pluck. But many times it was sheer good luck that the made road did not land the white man in the gutter, as it had others so many times before, and as it may him yet. He has gone farther than others because of others whose very falling made hard ways iced and smooth for him to traverse. His triumph is a triumph not of himself alone, but of humankind, from the pusher in the primeval forests to the last flier through the winds of the twentieth century.

III

[65] AND so to leave our parable and come to reality. Great as has been the human advance in the last one thousand years, it is, so far as native human ability, so far as intellectual gift and moral courage are concerned, nothing as compared with any one of ten and more millenniums before, far back in the forests of tropical Africa and in hot India, where brown and black humankind first fought climate and disease and bugs and beasts; where man dared simply to live and propagate himself. There was the hardest and greatest struggle in all the human world. If in sheer exhaustion or in desperate self-defense during this last moment of civilization he has rested, half inert and blinded with the sweat of his efforts, it is only the silly onlooker who sees but the passing moment of time, who can think of him as subhuman and inferior.

[66] All this is Truth, but unknown unapprehended Truth. Indeed, the greatest and most immediate danger of white culture, perhaps least sensed, is its fear of the Truth. Its childish belief in the efficacy of lies as a method of human uplift. The lie is defensible; it has been used widely and often profitably among humankind. But it may be doubted if ever before in the world so many intelligent people believed in it

Fear of the truth: a theme DuBois used in earlier works, including those of a social-scientific nature.

so deeply. We deliberately and continuously deceive not simply others, but ourselves as to the truth about them, us and the world. We have raised Propaganda to capital "P" and elaborated an art, almost a science of how one may make the world believe what is not true, provided the untruth is a widely wished-for thing like the probable extermination of Negroes, the failure of the Chinese Republic, the incapacity of India for self-rule, the failure of Russian Revolution. When in other days the world lied, it was to a world that expected lies and consciously defended them; when the world lies today it is to a world that pretends to be true.

Regarding the "probable extermination of Negroes", perhaps Du Bois was referencing Frederick Hoffman's *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro. Publications of the American Economic Association*, v.11, n.1-3 (1896):1-329 [Internet Archive: [download](#) page].

[67] "In other words, according to you, white folk are about the meanest and lowest on earth."

[68] They are human, even as you and I.

[69] "Why don't you leave them then? Get out, go to Africa or to the North Pole; shake the dust of their hospitality from off your feet?"

[70] "There are abundant reasons. First, they have annexed the earth and hold it by transient but real power. Thus by running away, I shall not only not escape them, but succeed in hiding myself in out of the way places where they can work their deviltry on me without photograph, telegraph or telephone. But even more important than this: I am as bad as they are. In fact, I am related to them and they have much that belongs to me -- this land, for instance, for which my fathers starved and fought; I share their sins; in fine, I am related to them.

[71] "By blood?"

[72] By blood.

[73] "Then you are railing at yourself. You are not black; you are no Negro."

[74] And you? Yellow blood and black has deluged Europe in days past even more than America yesterday. You are not white, as the measurements of your head will show.

[75] "What then becomes of all your argument, if there are no races and we are all so horribly mixed as you maliciously charge?"

[76] Oh, my friend, can you not see that I am laughing at you? Do you suppose this world of men is simply a great layer cake with superimposed slices of inferior and superior races, interlaid with mud?

[77] No, no. Human beings are infinite in variety, and when they are agglutinated in groups, great and small, the groups differ as though they, too, had integrating souls. But they have not. The soul is still individual if it is free; the group is a social, sometimes an historical fact. And all that I really have been trying to say is that a certain group that I know and to which I belong, as contrasted with the group you know and to

which you belong, and in which you fanatically and glorifyingly believe, bears in its bosom just now the spiritual hope of this land because of the persons who compose it and not by divine command.

[78] "But what is this group; and how do you differentiate it; and how can you call it 'black' when you admit it is not black?"

[79] I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction: the black man is a person who must ride "Jim Crow" in Georgia.

[End of DuBois' original text.]



Please consider a contribution to the upkeep of <webdubois.org>. PayPal offers a secure way for you to help me with my goal to find and present more works by and about W.E.B. Du Bois. Thank you.
Robert Williams

[Home](#) ▪ [About](#) ▪ [Research](#) ▪ [Sources](#) ▪ [Search](#)

© 2004-2013 [Robert W. Williams](#) ▪ [Email](#) ▪ [Site map](#) ▪ 1 Jan. 2013