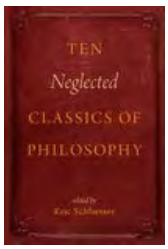

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CHAPTER

9 W. E. B. Du Bois's "Whither Now and Why"

Chike Jeffers

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Abstract

W.E.B. Du Bois's 1960 essay, "Whither Now and Why," is a neglected but brilliant sequel to his 1897 essay, "The Conservation of Races," which inspired much of the pioneering work in philosophy of race. In both works DuBois stresses perpetuation of black racial identity and cultural difference; a race should predominantly be understood as a kind of cultural group. Discrimination must end, but cultural identity must remain. In "Whither Now" his position evolves to state the need for education of black children in socialism, but he also states that historical consciousness necessary for social progress mandates that all people, but especially African Americans, recognize Africa and the American Negro's distinct identity and cultural contributions to world civilization in ancient and modern times. For Dubois postracial thinking was dangerous if it went beyond dismantling an unfair American social hierarchy to blotting out voluntary education in cultural diversity and a pan-African cultural identity.

Keywords: W.E.B. Du Bois, postracial, diversity, Africa, pan-African, socialism, negro, philosophy of race

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W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), perhaps the most important figure in the history of African American thought, reflected on and wrote eloquently about issues of race, culture, and justice over a very long period of time—indeed, we are fortunate to be able to read through roughly three-quarters of a century's worth of powerful intellectual work on his part. The significance of his work for research in the social sciences and humanities has been increasingly recognized over the years since his death, and his influence has helped to shape many theoretical trends and debates. In the case of philosophy, criticisms and defenses of an early essay of his, "The Conservation of Races" (1897), can be said to have played a major role in first stimulating and then sustaining the development of philosophy of race as a recognized field in the discipline over the past few decades.[1]

p. 223 I propose in this chapter to discuss an essay from very late in Du Bois's career, "Whither Now and Why" (1960). While sixty-three years separate "Conservation," which Du Bois had written and delivered as a speech by the time he was twenty-nine, and "Whither," delivered as a speech when he was ninety-two, I find it illuminating to regard the latter as a kind of neglected but brilliant sequel to the former.[2] I hope this

chapter encourages people to give "Whither" at least some of the attention that has been lavished upon "Conservation," thus enabling deeper engagement with the Du Boisian point of view—its challenging elements, its nuances, its tensions, and its potential fruitfulness.

I begin by highlighting the themes common to these two essays and then point out their relevance to questions raised by today's talk of the possibility of a "postracial" world. Du Bois, in sharp contrast with such discourse, encourages the indefinite perpetuation of black racial identity in the future even as we work to eliminate racism as soon as possible. He offers us in "Whither" a conception of racial difference as involving, above all, cultural difference, and he defends cultural difference as deeply valuable. He does not, however, treat "race" and "culture" as wholly synonymous. In fact, I find it a particularly interesting challenge to contemporary race theory that he calls for not just recognition but *appreciation* of the physical and biological aspects of racial membership, even as he insists on the fundamentally social nature of race.

p. 224 Distinct from but connected to Du Bois's thoughts on race in "Whither" is his critique of capitalism in the essay. I discuss the way in which he connects his belief in the need for socialism to the goal of preserving racial identity. Finally, I confront some of what readers are likely to find most controversial or even disturbing within the essay: Du Bois's view that the future flourishing of the race requires that black people's mating practices be regulated by organized thought.

1. From "Conservation" to "Whither"

Let us first review some of the content and significance of the older essay. Du Bois wrote "Conservation" for and presented it at the first meeting of the American Negro Academy, a learned society founded by Alexander Crummell, on March 5, 1897, in Washington, DC. To an extent often unacknowledged in philosophical discussions, Du Bois clearly intends and structures the essay as a defense of the ANA's existence and a definition of its purpose. He envisions the Academy helping to generate and then standing at the center of an organized proliferation of African American institutions: "Negro colleges, Negro newspapers, Negro business organizations, a Negro school of literature and art, and an intellectual clearing house, for all these products of the Negro mind, which we may call a Negro Academy" (Du Bois 1996a, 44). We find this practical vision, however, at what we might call the essay's climax (and so his subsequent recommendations concerning how the ANA might go about playing its central role may be seen as a sort of denouement). Preceding this, and thus forming the bulk of the essay, is the theoretical background justifying this plan of action.

The issue Du Bois sets out to investigate is the one that continues to be discussed and debated by
p. 225 philosophers today: the question of ↳ "the real meaning of race" (39). He suggests that African Americans in his time often worry when hearing of such discussions as it is so common for these discussions to have negative implications about their status as human beings. There is a temptation, as a result, to "deprecate and minimize race distinctions" (38). Du Bois also suggests that, in addition to and presumably in connection with emphasizing the unity of humanity, African Americans discussing race tend to focus on the wrongs of discrimination. He announces his intention, by contrast, to seek to better inform efforts to deal with discrimination by looking at race from a broader perspective: "It is necessary in planning our movements, in guiding our future development, that at times we rise above the pressing, but smaller questions of separate schools and cars, wage-discrimination and lynch law, to survey the whole question of race in human philosophy and to lay, on a basis of broad knowledge and careful insight, those large lines of policy and higher ideals which may form our guiding lines and boundaries in the practical difficulties of everyday" (39).

Du Bois then makes the move that has made the essay seem so prophetic and fascinating to philosophers of race in the present: he denies that research in the natural sciences has been able to fully illuminate the

significance of racial difference and claims that we must instead take up the perspective of "the historian and sociologist" (40). From that perspective, a race may be defined as "a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life" (40). In contemporary terms, we can say that Du Bois thus holds that a race should be understood primarily as a kind of cultural group.

Having claimed that races as groups are defined in large part by their striving for certain ideals, Du Bois
p. 226 goes on to argue that it is through the expression of these ideals that civilization is advanced. ↳ Each race is ultimately striving to develop its particular message that will further develop humankind as a whole. In a part of the essay that directly connects it to the famous discussion of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois considers an objection to this picture and its implications for African Americans:

> Here, then, is the dilemma, and it is a puzzling one, I admit. No Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed, at some time in life, to find himself at these crossroads; has failed to ask himself at some time: what, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates black and white America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? Does my black blood place upon me any more obligation to assert my nationality than German, or Irish or Italian blood would? (43)

Du Bois eventually answers with a powerful defense of the value of cultural hybridity. He proclaims his people American not only by birth and citizenship but also by virtue of their political ideals, language, and religion. Beyond that, however, "we are Negroes": part of the larger black African world that has already begun its special contribution by giving to America, among other things, its only distinctive music (44). African Americans, he claims, must continue this process of contributing, and they must therefore recognize that the problem of racial discrimination ought not to be addressed by pressing for the elimination of racial difference: "as a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race
p. 227 unity to the realization of that broader humanity which freely ↳ recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities for development" (44). It is on this basis that he advocates for the aforementioned proliferation of black institutions so that the black message to humanity may be expressed, with the guidance of the ANA as a source of policy in matters both cultural and political.

Fast forward now from March 5, 1897, to April 2, 1960, when Du Bois delivered "Whither Now and Why" to the twenty-fifth Conference of the Association of Social Science Teachers, held at the historically black college Johnson C. Smith University, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Speaking in the wake of the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the intensified activities of civil rights organizations, Du Bois begins by admitting that legal equality for African Americans is certainly coming and, indeed, it is coming more swiftly than he ever imagined it would. Contrary to what many would assume, though, this does not mean "an end to the so-called Negro problems, but a beginning of even more difficult problems of race and culture" (Du Bois 2001, 193). He explains that

> what we now must ask ourselves is when we become equal American citizens what will be our aims and ideals. Are we to assume that we will simply adopt the ideals of Americans and become what they are or want to be and that we will have in this process no ideals of our own?
>
> That would mean that we would cease to be Negroes as such and become white in action if not completely in color. We would take on the culture of white Americans doing as they do and thinking as they think. (193–194)

Du Bois deems such an outcome "[m]anifestly" unsatisfactory (194).

p. 228 Already one can see here the striking consistency in Du Bois's perspective across the decades, a consistency that is highlighted rather than hidden by the ways that he explicitly responds in the two essays to two very different social contexts. In 1897, he begins by acknowledging the pervasive unfairness and horrendous brutality of racial distinctions under Jim Crow law but then argues that African Americans must take a broader perspective on racial difference in order to recognize the positive power of the cultural diversity associated with it. In 1960, responding to a changing situation, he begins by acknowledging that the brave fight against Jim Crow has begun to succeed in dislodging the system and that therefore at least some of the unfair treatment African Americans have suffered will soon end. Nevertheless, he goes on to express deep concern and wariness about the possibility that this will be taken as a new sign that the world ought to be rid of racial difference and thus also black cultural difference.

So, echoing the commitment in "Conservation" to pursuing the combination of equality of opportunity with the social acceptance of difference, Du Bois explains in "Whither" that his goal has never been to "settle the question of racial equality in America by the process of getting rid of the Negro race" but that he has rather aimed at "the possibility of black folk and their cultural patterns existing in America without discrimination; and on terms of equality" (195). What African Americans must do, then, is "lay down a line of thought and action which will accomplish two things: the utter disappearance of color discrimination in American life and the preservation of African history and culture as a valuable contribution to modern civilization as it was to medieval and ancient civilization" (196). As in "Conservation," this vision of the way forward leads to practical conclusions about the need to build up and maintain black institutions ("Negro
p. 229 communities, Negro ↳ private schools, Negro colleges will and must be organized and supported") (197).

In attempting to demonstrate that themes in "Conservation" carry over to "Whither," though, I do not mean to suggest that the latter is like the former in all respects. For one thing, the claim that African Americans share political ideals with other Americans in "Conservation," while it is not repudiated as a descriptive claim in "Whither," is certainly treated as negative from a normative perspective, given not only Du Bois's commitment to socialism but also his hope that African Americans might eventually help lead the country in a socialist direction. Perhaps the most interesting shift between the two essays, though, is the way that Du Bois reconceptualizes the relations between different parts of the black world. Speaking in 1897, he links the duty of African Americans to preserve their racial identity to their position as natural leaders of the black world. He calls them "the advance guard of the Negro people" who must "take their just place in the van of Pan-Negroism" (Du Bois 1996a, 42, 43). He argues that they should understand themselves as "members of a vast historic race that from the very dawn of creation has slept, but half awakening in the dark forests of its African fatherland" but they should know that, among its members, they are "the first fruits of this new nation" (44). Note the complex claim about black people's relationship with modernity here: black people count as both a sleeping "historic race" but also as an awakening "new nation." The idea we seem to get here about the importance of being African American is that, given their exposure to Western civilization in its most progressive form, African Americans have a worldly worthiness to lead that the slumbering Africans on their home continent have not yet had the opportunity to attain. African Americans therefore have the duty to guide the race forward.

p. 230 By the time of "Whither," however, this relationship has apparently reversed itself in his perspective. Speaking in the year that would see no less than seventeen African countries gain independence from colonial rule, Du Bois now views Africa as leading and African Americans as unable to take up and perhaps willingly abdicating a Pan-African leadership role: "Today when the African people are arising to settle their own problems we are in the peculiar position of being a group of persons of Negro descent who not only cannot help the Africans but in most cases do not want to" (Du Bois 2001, 194). Reflecting on school desegregation, he worries that the lack of exposure to their history and culture African American children are likely to experience in integrated schools may make it the case that "connection to the rising African

world will be impossible" (197). African Americans are thus, in his view, in danger of being left behind, and there is no longer the implication that being so deeply ensconced in the West gives them the advantage over those on the continent.

Consider, too, in connection with this, the difference in perspective indicated by Du Bois's claim that the sort of historical consciousness necessary for the social progress he wishes to see requires black people and others to recognize Africa's contributions to world civilization in ancient and medieval times as precedents for the participation of black people in constructing modern civilization. We see here an even clearer rejection of his previous Eurocentric depiction of Africa as asleep. Instead of viewing Africa as having been marginal to or completely outside the world's past development as before, Du Bois now shows awareness that there is a much more dynamic story to be told concerning Africa's place in world history.[3]

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2. Toward a Racial Future

In his recent book *The Problem of the Future World: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Race Concept at Midcentury*, Eric Porter calls for more thinking about and with the later Du Bois. One of his major reasons for doing so is his understanding of Du Bois as responding in the 1940s and 1950s to a "*postracial moment*" (Porter 2010, 3). Porter is referring here to the ways in which developments such as the efforts of anthropologists like Ashley Montagu and Ruth Benedict and reactions to the genocidal implications of Nazi racial theory led in this era to greater consideration of the possibility of jettisoning the idea of race. Du Bois, Porter tells us, demonstrates in his work of this period a healthy ambivalence about the undermining of racial thinking by scientific research. Porter suggests we should be similarly ambivalent as we chart paths forward in the "postracial moment" of the present: "Du Bois's project signals the way that an antiracist intellectual project must be attuned to the potential racist power of both affirmations and disaffirmations of racial difference" (58).

Indeed, once we notice the connections between "Conservation" and "Whither" mentioned in the last section, it becomes clear that Du Bois concerned himself throughout his long career with the dangers of what we now call postracialism.[4] As is well known, in the wake of the election of Barack Obama as president
p. 232 of the United States, talk of getting beyond race became common in discourse ↳ on race over the past few years, especially in North America. It is important to ask, when considering manifestations of this element of contemporary discourse, what the state of affairs being projected is, whether those who believe that it is presently real or coming soon could be right, whether it is even possible that it could ever come about, and, finally, whether it is actually desirable that it come about. While it is not always clear that those who speak positively of a "postracial" or, relatedly, a "color-blind" world intend to go this far, it is possible for anyone who views race as a sociohistorical phenomenon that only contingently came into being over the course of human history to envision a world that is literally postracial; that is, a state of affairs in which race is not merely treated as insignificant but has ceased to exist. It is obvious that such a state of affairs has not already come about, and it does not seem to be on the horizon either. If we identify racial distinctions with social hierarchies, though, it is also obviously desirable that it should come about someday and that it is our duty to work toward that day (even if doing so involves, at present, fighting against those who encourage us to treat distinctions of race as presently unreal or insignificant).

From "Conservation" to "Whither," however, Du Bois has argued that we should *not* wholly identify race with social hierarchy. Instead, we should recognize that, besides hierarchy, racial difference involves cultural diversity. For black people to let go of racial distinctions, according to Du Bois in "Whither," would mean, among other things, for them to "not try to develop Negro music and Art and Literature as distinctive and different" (Du Bois 2001, 194). A useful source to consider aside from "Whither" in exploring how Du Bois understood the relationship between race and culture late in his career is "The Talented Tenth

Memorial Address," delivered as a lecture to the elite fraternity for black professionals, Sigma Pi Phi (also known as the Boulé), on August 12, 1948. Although he speaks in the lecture of developments in biology and
p. 233 sociology ↳ having helped to reconstruct his idea of race over time, he does not depart much, if at all, from "Conservation" when he says of African Americans that they represent "not simply a physical entity: a black people, or a people descended from black folk" but rather "what all races really are, a cultural group" (Du Bois 1996b, 163).

Indeed, the main thing that changes from 1897 to 1948 is that, in Du Bois's work as in intellectual writing in general, "culture" *as a term* undergoes a semantic shift from being synonymous with "civilization" and thus connoting a higher rather than lower form of social life to the anthropological meaning we associate with it today, according to which *all* social life is cultural. Du Bois claims in "Conservation" that black people are "a nation stored with wonderful *possibilities* of culture," thus using it in the civilizational sense (Du Bois 1996a, 43; emphasis mine). Even here, though, his usage of "culture" in the singular is not meant to suggest that there is but one unitary civilized path, for he goes on to argue that the truth of his claim implies that African Americans must avoid "a servile imitation of Anglo-Saxon culture" and pursue instead "a stalwart originality which shall unswervingly follow Negro ideals" (43). He thus advocates appreciating differences in "culture" in the anthropological sense of the term. By 1948, the gradual semantic shift that has been going on leads him to complain: "It is too bad that we have to use the word 'cultural' for so many meanings" (Du Bois 1996b, 163–164). Nevertheless, as used in "modern scientific thought" and applied to African Americans, he takes it to signify that "15,000,000 men and women who for three centuries have shared common experiences and common suffering, and have worked all those days and nights together for their own survival and progress" have developed a "complex of habits and manners," a complex that Du Bois believes "must not be lost" (164). This is his reason for advocating that African Americans cultivate "not pride of biological race, but pride in a cultural group" (164).

p. 234 Some may object, whether or not they take a stand on the value of such pride, that it ought be understood as a form of ethnic pride, not racial pride, for African Americans are but one ethnic group within the larger racial group of people of black African descent. Accepting that there is such a thing as African American culture that has arisen out of the unique experiences of people of African descent in the United States is much easier than accepting that black people as a whole, as a race spanning different continents and comprising an extremely diverse set of peoples, compose a cultural group. Du Bois, however, places his concerns for his estimated 15 million people in the United States in the context of his concern for what he estimates to be "at least 250,000,000 Negroes and Negroids" all over the world, claiming that for them to disappear "culturally" would be a "deep loss to themselves and humanity" (165). The indispensable connection he sees between African American cultural preservation and the idea of cultural allegiance to the larger black world is even clearer in "Whither," where he treats it as a central problem that for African Americans to assimilate would mean that they "would cease to acknowledge any greater tie with Africa than with England or Germany" (Du Bois 2001, 194). Rejecting this as unacceptable, he refuses to support any vision of racial equality in America that will involve his people becoming detached from "the whole cultural history of Africans in the world" (195).

This Pan-Africanist scope in cultural identification is, in my view, thoroughly defensible. It is built on the same foundation as Du Bois's argument for African American cultural pride: a sense of historical memory. While the "habits and manners" developed in America involve much novel creation, it must be remembered that the newness of African American culture results from the syncretism and originality of transplanted
p. 235 Africans.[5] Pan-Africanist ↳ cultural identification constructs historical memory such that no sharp and final break separating enslaved ancestors in the diaspora from their origins in Africa is recognized. This places the African American story within the context of a larger dispersal of Africans through the transatlantic slave trade, creating a frame within which cultural connections and similarities to other diasporic African peoples can also be appreciated.

While it is not uncommon for a focus on the diversity of ethnicities, nationalities, and regional differences among black people inside and outside of Africa to lead people to assume that "black culture" must be a meaningless category, such an assumption fails to recognize the usefulness of talking about cultural formations of different types and different levels of generality. We may talk of Somali culture and Korean culture (ethnic categories), Nigerian culture and Swiss culture (multiethnic countries), Afro-Caribbean culture and Eastern European culture (involving multinational regions). At an even higher level of generality but nevertheless of great utility in understanding the modern world is a category like *Western culture*, which pulls together and cuts across various major regions in all hemispheres of the earth. *Black* or *Pan-African culture* is likewise a discernible formation at the global level, overlapping with but definitely distinct from Western culture, and so dedication to the preservation of a Pan-African cultural identity, as Du Bois promotes, is coherent and justifiable.[6]

Indeed, part of what is important about "Whither," I believe, is that we see the culmination of progress in
p. 236 Du Bois's ability to ↳ express the reasonable grounds for encouraging commitment to black cultural nationalism. In "Conservation," he proclaims: "We are that people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy" (Du Bois 1996a, 44). While rhetorically powerful, this specification of the black gift to civilization—music, storytelling, emotion, laughter—is theoretically problematic. When cultural characteristics are associated with racial identities, there is always the worry that we may be dealing with a case of racial essentialism; that is, the treatment of a certain set of mental and behavioral traits as the natural inheritance of members of a race. The fact that Du Bois attempts to construct a sociohistorical account of race in "Conservation" does not automatically alleviate the concern that his description of the black gift may propagate essentialist notions of what it is to be black. What is most problematic, I would argue, is not the venturing of a description but the failure to provide an account of how these characteristics come about. In the absence of such an account, it is all too easy to suspect that Du Bois is tacitly rooting these talents and special sensitivities in the blood, so to speak. There then arises the further worry that, to the extent that he associates blackness with artistry, imaginativeness, emotion, and spontaneity, on the one hand, and whiteness with economic acumen, on the other hand, he inadvertently reinforces a tradition of stereotyping black people as by nature more entertaining and fun but also less intelligent.

As early as 1903's *The Souls of Black Folk*, though, we see Du Bois evolving in the direction of always historically contextualizing cultural claims. Consider his account of the church, which identifies it as "the most characteristic expression of African character" in African American life but also explains its centrality
p. 237 by noting that the structure of life on the plantation made it the case that "as ↳ a social institution it antedated by many decades the monogamic Negro home" (Du Bois 1997, 150, 152). Consider his commentary on the gift of black music in the book's last chapter, which charts a development in stages from "primitive African music" through black acculturation, with its "blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land," to the influence of black music on white music (188, 189). These depictions of cultural transformation ensure that black culture is presented as dynamic rather than static, a product of social and historical conditions rather than mystically related to unchanging biological impulses.

With this evolution in mind, recall that in "Whither," Du Bois advocates striving for "the preservation of African history and culture as a valuable contribution to modern civilization as it was to medieval and ancient civilization." The reference to "culture" here is, in my view, helpfully vague, as it sends us back to the medieval and ancient past and forward into future modernity with open minds concerning what may count as African cultural contributions. What is most notable, though, is the idea that the preservation of *knowledge of history* can itself be the cultural gift that black people give. Indeed, when Du Bois expresses concerns over assimilation in integrated schools, he talks most about ignorance of the past. Speaking about what he has already seen or heard of in the North, he writes:

> Negro children educated in integrated schools and northern colleges often know nothing of Negro history. Know nothing of Negro leadership and doubt if there ever have been leaders in Africa, the West Indies and the United States who equal white folk.
>
> (Du Bois 2001, 194)

Rectifying this involves, obviously, increasing the level of historical consciousness among black people, and
p. 238 Du Bois takes the view ↳ that such increase benefits not only black people but all people, as the preservation and celebration of black history by black people helps to make it possible that it will be recognized and appreciated by others as well.

This position counts, I believe, as a thoroughly antiessentialist approach to the preservation of black culture. No stereotyped image is presented as authoritatively determining what counts as authentically black. Instead of this, Du Bois recommends the cultivation among black people of curiosity concerning their past and present, familiarity with the diversity of their histories and cultures, and pride in gaining such knowledge in spite of the social dominance of racist narratives that deny that black people have accomplished anything of note.

I strongly endorse the form of black cultural nationalism promoted in "Whither." While avoiding the promotion of a narrow and essentialized vision of black cultural identity, Du Bois nevertheless makes it clear that black culture ought to be valued and defended rather than diminished and abandoned. This position on black culture, it should be noted, is compatible with recognizing that blackness as an identity was originally a colonial imposition on enslaved Africans in the Americas and colonized Africans on the continent. Before the impact of European imperialism, there was, of course, little reason for Africans of various ethnic origins to consider being black—or "African"—a key component of their cultural identities. Blackness is thus born of oppression. It is also, however, an identity subsequently reshaped and revalued by those who came to inhabit it. Whether through drawing on traditional African cultures, mixing and recombining African ways with European ways, or creating totally new customs, black people have made black identity an impressive source of cultural value in the modern world.

Du Bois takes the position that this should continue; that is, that black culture should continue to be a
p. 239 source of value going forward ↳ into the future. This means rejecting the idea that we should seek to transcend race. I concur with Du Bois on this point. As Lucius Outlaw has eloquently put it, "for many of us the continued existence of discernible racial/ethnic communities of meaning is highly desirable, *even if, in the very next instant, racism and invidious ethnocentrism in every form and manifestation were to disappear forever*" (Outlaw 1996, 34). The cultural aspect of racial difference can survive in a world in which racism has been defeated, and I stand with Du Bois, Outlaw, and others, like Kathryn Gines, in not merely recognizing this as a possibility but also viewing it as the most preferable outcome (Gines 2014).

There are various reasons, though, why someone might worry about the coherence of this position and its implications for life in a postracist world. Some may acknowledge that cultural diversity is good and ought to be preserved but wonder, if cultural difference is what matters here, why should we not stop talking about race and simply speak directly about culture? In her book, *The Imperative of Integration*, Elizabeth Anderson writes:

> Certainly, cultural meanings and practices that originated in black communities have immeasurably enriched American culture. But only a spurious association of culture with ancestry can support the thought that racial self-segregation is needed to preserve or develop diverse cultural meanings and practices. Whites and Asians can, and do, play jazz.
>
> (Anderson 2010, 187)

Anderson's comments lead us in a direction very different from the one in which Du Bois leads us in "Whither." While I reaffirm below my support of the Du Boisian position, we should not deny the important truth Anderson is expressing: race and culture may be closely related, but they are not the same thing. As
p. 240 Tommie ↳ Shelby has said while criticizing black cultural nationalism, "not all persons designated as *racially* black self-identify as *culturally* black" (Shelby 2005, 167). To be designated as racially black is to belong to a group distinguished by "certain visible, inherited physical characteristics and a particular biological ancestry" (207). Having this appearance and ancestry (or merely the ancestry, as one may lack the appearance and still count as black) does not necessitate having any particular cultural affiliations.[7] It is reasonable to wonder whether the Du Boisian position suggests otherwise and envisions a future in which racial distinctions not only live on but remain in some ways oppressive because those born black will be pressured to accept a certain cultural identity whether they want to or not (while on the other hand, those not born black will not be recognized as eligible to participate in the culture despite the fact that, as Anderson argues, they are clearly capable of doing so).

Perhaps the easiest way to avoid such bad implications would be to accept that Du Bois's argument is strongest if interpreted as advocating only that a certain culture live on, not that that culture must be
p. 241 connected with people of a certain appearance and ancestry.[8] ↳ I think, however, that the fact that Du Bois is clearly firmly committed to the latter claim poses a useful challenge for philosophers of race. Du Bois, from "Conservation" to "Whither," argues that races are fundamentally social and aims to place emphasis above all on the cultural dimension of race, but as it turns out, for him it is centrally important to the preservation of black culture that the physical and biological aspects of being black be preserved as well. Indeed, when arguing in "Whither" that a failure to conserve black racial difference in the post–civil rights era would be manifestly unsatisfactory, the very first reason he offers is this one: "Physically it would mean that we would be integrated with Americans losing first of all, the physical evidence of color and hair and racial type" (Du Bois 2001, 194). How is it manifest that this would be an important loss? Is this focus on physique evidence, perhaps, that Du Bois actually takes races to be fundamentally natural rather than social and that he views racial cultures as ultimately arising out of natural processes?

While the perception of tension here is understandable, note first that there is no actual contradiction in believing that races are social groups and believing that the loss of certain physical distinctions would lead to the dissipation of these social groups. On a sociohistorical account of race, differences in appearance and ancestry are best understood as necessary but not sufficient for racial distinctions, as only when these differences become socially meaningful do we have races. Du Bois, when encouraging the preservation of the physical elements of blackness, is best understood not as encouraging the preservation of a natural kind but as encouraging the perpetuation of a social practice of racial identification, understanding the conditions of this practice to include the existence of certain physical differences and understanding the existence of this practice to require the recognition of these physical differences as socially significant.

p. 242 But if Du Bois values culture and culture can be detached from appearance and ancestry, why perpetuate racial identification? I think a number of things can be said in answer to this, all of which I think Du Bois actually believed, and all of which are plausible to me as well. Firstly, it may be *possible* that black culture could survive even if black people as a distinct group ceased to exist, but it is certainly *unlikely*. Valuing the culture therefore makes it quite sensible to value the continued existence of the people. Secondly, I think Du Bois probably thought the loss of physical blackness would be an *aesthetic* loss to the world. Black is beautiful, as the empowering slogan goes, or rather, to put it less succinctly, black physical features have been partly constitutive of ways of being beautiful among humans, and to lose black physical features would be to lose those ways of being beautiful. Finally, it is doubtful that one can responsibly ponder in the present the value of a future world without black people without taking into account how *anti-black racism* has shaped most thinking about the value of black people. Anti-black racism leads us to view the absence of blackness as good, coding blackness as deficient not only on the aesthetic level (e.g., as ugly) but also on the

intellectual or cognitive level (e.g., as less intelligent) and the moral or behavioral level (e.g., as lazy, as dangerous, and so on). To desire the continued existence of black people is, of course, to reject the idea that the world would be better off without black people. It is thus to consciously combat the unconscious desire for the absence of blackness that anti-black racism causes even black people themselves to feel. It is to acknowledge that black people and many of their ways of looking, thinking, and doing are valuable and worth keeping around.

It must be said, though, that in a postracist world in which black culture lives on, many black people will nevertheless be black in a merely ethnic rather than robustly cultural sense. What I mean is that Du Bois
p. 243 certainly does not intend to suggest that black people ↳ should be coercively compelled to identify with black culture and to procreate with other black people. If it is reasonable to expect that there will thus be many black people who will decline to identify as culturally black and many children of mixed ancestry who will lack any exposure to black culture, then we can say of these people that they will be associated by appearance and ancestry with a racial culture in which they do not participate, just as many whom we count as ethnically Jewish—that is, Jewish by descent—do not practice the Jewish faith or, in some cases, do anything that is culturally Jewish.[9] When envisioning black people organizing to preserve and cultivate black culture, Du Bois writes:

> This racial organization will be voluntary and not compulsory. It will not be discriminatory. It will be carried on according to definite object and ideal, and will be open to all who share this ideal. And of course that ideal must always be in accord with the greater ideals of mankind. But what American Negroes must remember is that voluntary organization for great ends is far different from compulsory segregation for evil purposes.
>
> (Du Bois 2001, 197)

This emphasis on voluntary participation is important.

Also, in saying that this self-organizing will aim to accord with the greater ideals of humankind, I believe one of the things that Du Bois is expressing is his dedication to cultural exchange, something he promotes from "Conservation" onward. We can now acknowledge, then, that just as black culture will not be forced onto all black people, nonblack people will not be deprived of it, as their being influenced by the gift of black
p. 244 culture is part of the point of ↳ preserving and cultivating it for Du Bois. Whether it would make sense to call nonblack people who participate in black cultural community "culturally black" is something he does not discuss, but this is perhaps unimportant. What matters is that it is not an objectionable vision of the postracist world to imagine significant numbers of black people maintaining a sense of cultural community, partly through processes of biological reproduction, as long as all black people who participate in this community do so voluntarily, and respectful participation in the culture by nonblack people is welcomed as well.

3. Socialism and the Preservation of Race

I have tried to suggest in section 2 that "Whither" ought to receive more attention today because the portion of it expressing a commitment to the continued existence of black people and black culture exemplifies a position that should be seen as a live option in theorizing about race today. "Whither" contains a bold and eloquent antiracist plea for a racial future that I think anyone concerned with race and racism ought to examine. What do we think we should be working toward: a world without races? A world with races as cultures? A world in which races remain important as more than just cultures? This seems to me to be a crucial question, and if I am right about that, then reading "Whither" is extremely useful as a way of pressing ourselves to answer this question.

The material I have discussed above, though, takes up only half of the very short essay that "Whither" is. Having argued for voluntary self-organization, Du Bois goes on to specifically discuss "the building of Negro families" and the "question of what a Negro child is to do in life" (197) As he explores the question of
p. 245 how to orient ↳ the black child, he is led to confront the issue of cultural difference in a new way. He claims that a healthy development of African American culture will require willingness to teach children goals and ideals at odds with their country's prevailing sentiments: "In this matter of life vocation we Negroes have got to inculcate in the minds of our children many objects to which white America today is not only opposed but bitterly fights" (198). This commences a series of critical reflections on capitalism and expressions of praise for socialism that take up the rest of the essay.

By contrast with my goal in the previous section, my primary aim in discussing the part of "Whither" that focuses on socialism will not be to promote and defend the Du Boisian position but to raise some interpretive questions. It is not that I lack sympathy for the commitment to socialism that Du Bois espouses. I am quite sympathetic, even as I recognize and lament the limitations of perspective that led him to put so much faith in the Communist governments of Eastern Europe and China at the time.[10] Nevertheless, it is not completely clear how tight the connections between the two halves of the essay are, and especially if my claim for the great philosophical importance of the first half is granted, it becomes naturally interesting to investigate the question of how to make sense of the essay as a whole.

One way to clarify the point of the second half is to recall the context and purpose of Du Bois's remarks; that is, the fact that he was addressing a conference of black social studies teachers. He encourages them to
p. 246 consider carefully how they describe the functions of different dimensions of society to their students, ↳ especially as they influence how students think about different career paths. What is the purpose of medicine? "Not simply to cure disease and treat accidents, but to prevent disease and protect health," Du Bois says, criticizing the American Medical Association for fighting against "every effort to bring free government-supported social medicine to the service of the people" (198). He asks similar questions and makes similar critiques regarding dentistry, law, business, telecommunications, energy, and insurance. He raises questions about the extent to which "democracy has almost disappeared" in the United States in light of not only the ongoing problem of black disfranchisement but the general issue of low voter turnout and the connection between the high cost of elections and the strong influence of wealthy corporations over politics (202).

Black educators must teach their students the truth about all of these matters, Du Bois says, and in his stirring closing message to these social studies teachers, he enjoins the cultivation of freedom of thought by any means necessary:

> I appeal to the members of this organization, first to teach the truth as they see it even if they lose their jobs. To study socialism and communism and the philosophy of Karl Marx and his successors. To travel in the Soviet Union and China and then to dare take a stand as they honestly believe whether for or against communism. To refuse to listen to American propaganda without also listening to the propaganda of communism and to give up teaching and go to digging ditches before bowing to the new American slavery of thought. Above all to do everything possible to stop war and preparation for war which is the policy of the present rulers of this nation and their method of stopping socialism by force when they cannot stop it by work nor reason. (203)

p. 247 This passionate battle cry against McCarthyism and Cold War politics in general should impress us all the more as we remember the extent to which Du Bois became isolated from the civil rights movement as a result of his stance.[11] If understanding context helps us make sense of and appreciate what Du Bois says in the second half of "Whither," though, it is still not enough to show how exactly these thoughts on capitalism and socialism are connected to his thoughts on the perpetuation of black racial identity in the first half.

The third paragraph from the end of the essay is, I believe, the place to look in order to make progress. Consider the pair of sentences ending the paragraph:

> Socialism will grow in the United States if we restore the democracy of which we have boasted so long and done so little. Here is where Negroes may and must lead. (203)

Understanding how "Whither" fits together as a whole requires, in my view, understanding why Du Bois is not content with encouraging African Americans to become more open to the path of socialism but rather goes so far as to designate them distinctively able and ethically bound to lead the country down that path.

It seems to me that Du Bois wishes to treat marginality as opportunity. African American cultural distinctness is a result, in part, of the fact that African Americans were kept separate by American racism. Now, as a legally enforced way of diminishing black worth, segregation must be overcome: "We must accept equality or die" (196). What is the worth of the polity into which African Americans are seeking entry,
p. 248 though? It once was inspiring, suggests Du Bois: "There was a time when as leader of a new ↳ democracy, as believers in a new tolerance of religion, and as a people basing their life on equality of opportunity, in the ownership of land and property, the United States of America stood first in the hopes of mankind" (200). During his recent experience traveling in Europe and Asia, however, he found that "no other country was so disliked and hated" (201). This time abroad also gave him the sense that "the world was going socialist, that most of the people of the world, Europe, Asia and Africa were either socialists or communists" (201).

Here is where the idea of African American leadership toward socialism comes in. If African Americans can retain their distinct identity—that is, if they can avoid becoming "white in action if not completely in color"—while still fighting for equality, then they will be in a position to point in the direction of necessary change. As Du Bois puts it in "The Talented Tenth Memorial Address": "Cooperation then, with the forward-looking forces of civilization in the world, can be carried out in this land by Negroes, quite as well as by any other large coherent American group" (Du Bois 1996b, 166).[12] The persistence of a distinct black racial identity can facilitate for African Americans a sense of peoplehood that lends itself to working with other peoples on the international stage. International engagement in the context of a world turning toward socialism will in turn encourage leadership toward the goal of socialism at home, or so Du Bois hopes.

There are some intriguing tensions and mysterious moves in the paragraph of "Whither" in which Du Bois says that African Americans may and must lead. He says this about teaching youth about the failings of
p. 249 capitalist America: ↳

> If all this is true, it must be taught to our youth. It must be taught by teachers and instructors and professors and in that case we must face the fact that these teachers may lose their jobs. They can only be supported and employed if the bulk of American Negroes support institutions like the private Negro colleges. If the Negro or white colleges are going to depend on the gifts of the rich for support they cannot teach the truth. If they are supported tomorrow, Negroes must give not a tenth, but a quarter of their income to support education and social organization and teachers must sacrifice to the last penny. This impoverishment of the truth seekers can only be avoided by eventually making the state bear the burden of education and this is socialism. We must then vote for socialism. (202–203)

Let me first point out the notable tension at work both here and elsewhere in the essay. Du Bois appears to suggest that it would be ideal if African Americans could rely on the state to provide a proper education but that, because of nonideal circumstances, they may for the time being have to rely on themselves. Something like this suggestion also occurs earlier in the essay, when he is lamenting the ignorance of black history among children in integrated schools. Speaking about what will happen when all schools are integrated, he writes:

> Negro parents and Negro Parent-Teacher Associations will have to at least temporarily, take on and carry the burden which they have hitherto left to the public schools. The child in the family, in specific organizations or in social life must learn what he will not learn in school until the public schools vastly improve. (197)

The tension here is between the implication that African Americans ought not to have to rely on themselves
p. 250 for the kind of education ↳ required and the fact that self-reliance in institution building is clearly conducive to the survival of black culture as distinct. This tension is by no means irresolvable, but those who oppose the idea of perpetuating racial identity indefinitely might take comfort in the moments where Du Bois seems to suggest that the needs of African Americans ought ultimately to be met by American, not African American, institutions.

While I find this tension interesting, I find the passage's articulation of how socialism is the solution to problems of education confusing. Du Bois talks of the state bearing the burden of education as socialism in a way that could mislead someone into thinking that publicly funded education was not common in his apparently nonsocialist context. When he talks about the need to support black private colleges as spaces for dissent, he implicitly acknowledges, I take it, that they provide potentially more autonomous and thus safer spaces for such deviation than black state colleges.[13] Government funding for education is therefore not, in itself, a solution to the problem he describes. It is presumably change in who governs and in the ethos informing public education that would make public schools hospitable for critiques of capitalism.

Perhaps this is mere quibbling, as the phrase "[w]e must then vote for socialism" certainly points to the importance of change in who governs. I mention it, however, because it seems as if everything at stake in the essay comes together in this paragraph: the perpetuation of black racial identity, the need for socialism, the importance of education. It is therefore useful to critically consider how exactly these themes are
p. 251 integrated and ponder the extent to which the values he is endorsing should be treated as a package deal. ↳ Is there any necessary connection between the idea that blackness can and should live on in a postracist world and the idea that any future world ought to be a less capitalistic one? I am doubtful that there is.

4. Should We Be Afraid of Du Boisian Planning?

I wish to close this chapter by briefly discussing a portion of "Whither" that is challenging, particularly because it might be seen as playing directly into the hands of those who would treat all talk of the preservation of racial difference as reprehensible. Having made the distinction between compulsory segregation and voluntary organization and endorsed the latter, Du Bois says:

> Especially and first there has got to be a deliberate effort made toward the building of Negro families. Our family organization has been left almost entirely to chance. How, when and where, the Negro boy and girl is going to meet and mate has been given no organized thought and in many cases the whole process has been deliberately ignored. Beyond that comes the primary question of what a Negro child is to do in life. This has been taught only incidentally and accidentally. The primary basis and end of life has not been guided by proper tuition in social sciences, in economics or in ethics, outside and beyond school; in the family and in religious organizations. (197–198)

Note first that it seems plausible to draw a connection between the concern in this passage with leaving family life and career choice up to chance, incident, and accident and the concern in the part of the essay
p. 252 that focuses on socialism about leaving things in general up to ↳ market forces. The question of what sorts of planning are appropriate to economic distribution is, of course, controversial. Once we are talking about

socially planning the formation of families, many would say we have gone from controversial into downright scary territory.

What Du Bois says about career choice, when detached from the part about building families, can be interpreted in ways that make it relatively uncontroversial: what could be bad about those who are in a position to influence youth exposing them to information garnered from social scientific, economic, and ethical studies? Let me focus, then, on the issue of family construction. Why, we might ask, do we need "organized thought" to address exactly how, when, and where black boys and girls will meet? How will conclusions reached through such thought be brought to bear on the lives of young black people? Through what forms of social control could they be brought to bear? These questions are important to judging Du Bois even without asking about how his vision excludes relationships between those of the same gender and interracial relationships.

The worry that there is a eugenicist tone in Du Bois's remarks is not a needless one. Looking back once more at "The Talented Tenth Memorial Address," we find Du Bois speaking there of the need to promote "the rehabilitation of the indispensable family group, by deliberate planning of marriages, with mates selected for heredity, physique, health and brains, with less insistence on color, comeliness or romantic sex lure, mis-called love" (Du Bois 1996b, 175).[14] The opposition to colorism (i.e., preference for lighter skin) that would be impressive in another context is, of course, greatly overshadowed here by the highly disturbing
p. 253 call for the breeding of ↳ superior black people. People like me who admire Du Bois should not shield our eyes and pretend this type of thing is not there, and neither should we downplay how very problematic it is.

That being said, I do not take problematic passages such as these to somehow completely derail the project of racial preservation that I have joined Du Bois in defending. Organized mate selection is absolutely *not* essential to the view, much less organized mate selection governed by the goal of propagating specific desirable traits. To say that it is desirable that black people and black culture live on is to say that it is desirable that many black people choose black partners when having children and that it is desirable that the children of these relationships as well as children of mixed relationships be taught to value their cultural heritage as people of African descent. Encouraging these things happening does not require planning how young people will meet and marry. Indeed, given Du Bois's insistence upon the voluntary nature of black self-organization, we may even see it as an extension of his own principle to resist his call for the widespread deliberate planning of marriages, especially marriage planning of the eugenicist type described in "The Talented Tenth Memorial Address."

While resisting this call, however, it does not hurt to consider how we might spin his expression of concern over the conditions of reproduction into something more acceptable and positive. When Du Bois says there is a need for organized thought about meeting and mating, we might charitably interpret this as a demand that black people treat openness and thoughtfulness about sex and its place in life as key cultural goals; that is, aspirations regarding how the culture will evolve. In our present context, there is endless concern among black people in North America and elsewhere about the number of babies born outside of marriage and/or raised by single parents, especially single mothers. Does a progressive and realistic vision of black parenting
p. 254 involve by necessity a steady rise in ↳ marriage rates? What range of arrangements for the conception and parenting of children can be considered good for children? The fact that there is little consensus concerning answers to these questions suggests that organized thought of some kind may be a good idea.[15]

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Notes

1. The article that began this pattern of criticisms and defenses is Appiah 1985. For a recent contribution to the debate, featuring discussion of the literature that came in the wake of Appiah's article, see Jeffers 2013.
2. I am very grateful to Lucius Outlaw for introducing me to the essay back in 2005, when I was a graduate student writing to him about ideas for my dissertation. The present chapter is, in fact, marked in a number of ways by his influence. To mention just one more, this chapter was written with the benefit of having been able to read a copy of his remarks on "Whither Now and Why" in the keynote address ("If Not *Raciality* …?: Bio-Social Groupings, Philosophical Anthropology, Social Ontology") that he gave at the 2013 California Roundtable on Philosophy of Race. I thank him for sharing this with me.
3. Appiah has recently provided a useful discussion of this aspect of Du Bois's intellectual growth (see Appiah 2014, ch. 4).
4. It is thus very appropriate that the topic that a recent issue of the *Du Bois Review* was devoted to was called "Race in a 'Postracial' Epoch." Among its articles, the piece by Kathryn Gines notably cites Du Bois's position in "Conservation" as a previous articulation of the view it defends: "Du Bois's conservationist cautionary note remains applicable in the post-Obama times in which we currently find ourselves and his position is as relevant to contemporary postracial rhetoric as it was over a century ago to rhetoric about universal human brotherhood" (Gines 2014, 78).
5. For an interesting look at how specific African cultures may have affected African American identity formation, see Gomez 1998.
6. Aimé Césaire made a similar comparison between Western and black culture, speaking of French, Italian, and other national cultures as parts of "European civilization" and claiming that, in the same way, "one can speak of a great family of African cultures, which deserve the name of Negro-African civilization," a family of cultures that, through "the misadventures of history," has come to exceed the boundaries of the continent of Africa (Césaire 2010, 128).
7. As Shelby explains, the category of people who are racially black contains both "(1) those persons who have certain easily identifiable, inherited physical traits (such as dark skin, tightly curled or 'kinky' hair, a broad flat nose, and thick lips) and who are descendants of peoples from sub-Saharan Africa; and (2) those persons who, while not meeting or only ambiguously satisfying the somatic criteria, are descendants of Africans who are widely presumed to have had those physical characteristics" (208). For another insightful discussion of the fact that being racially black does not necessitate cultural blackness, see Taylor 2005.
8. An interesting step in this direction can be found in an essay by Anita Allen on interracial marriage. Responding to the idea that interracial marriage is bad for the survival of black culture, Allen argues that even if "there came to be fewer people in the United States with distinctively visible African features and ancestries because of interracial procreation," that "would not alone signal the end of an African-American community or culture." It seems, though, that she is taking appearance to be dispensable more than ancestry as she writes: "African-American culture and community will die out, not if blacks become tan or beige, but instead, if blacks cease to identify with one another on the basis of common interests and heritage" (Allen 2000, 195).
9. For a useful comparison of race and ethnicity and the way they share a focus on descent, see Taylor 2013, 52–55.
10. Du Bois mentions and discusses his 1958 visit to eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union, and China in "Whither" (200–202). For more information on this trip and discussion of the ways in which Du Bois failed to see or acknowledge the oppressive aspects of the systems he praised, see Lewis 2000, 559–564.
11. On this process, see the last two chapters of Lewis 2000 (496–571).

12. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth Memorial Address,” 166.
13. For his thoughts on the differences between black state colleges and black private colleges, compare “The Future of the Negro State University” (1941) and “The Future and Function of the Private Negro College” (1946) (Du Bois 2001, 169–192).
14. Du Bois adds that “youth should marry young and have a limited number of healthy children” (ibid.).
15. Robert Gooding-Williams and I also call for the treatment of comments by Du Bois on sexual matters as stimulation toward philosophical thought on black sexual norms. See Gooding-Williams and Jeffers 2013, 523.