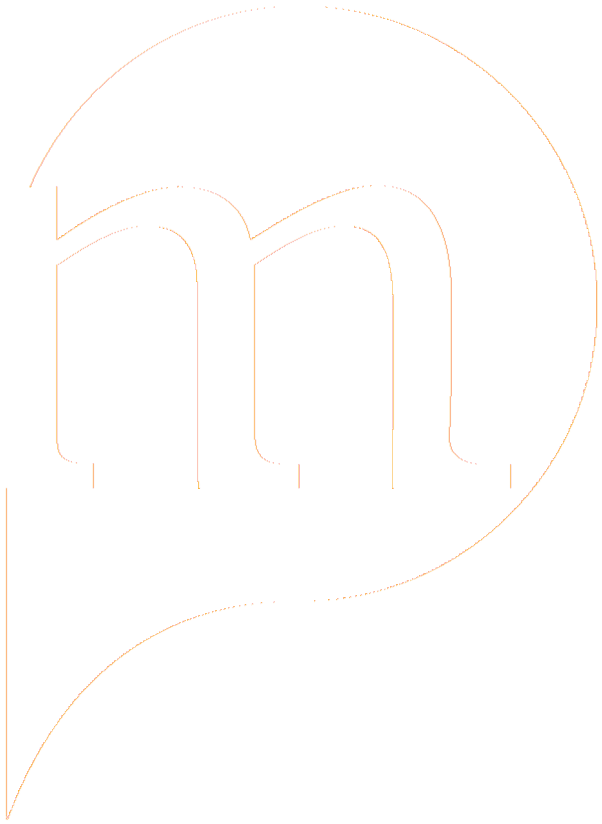

Black Folk by the Numbers: Quantification in Du Bois

*Sarah Wilson**

Ought's a ought, figger's a figger; all for de white man, none for de nigger.

Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men

W.E.B. Du Bois has been so central to the theorizing of blackness that it is surprising to find that a fundamental element of his style has been overlooked by scholars: there has been no account of the numbers that show up everywhere in Du Bois's writings.[1] One of the most famous and emblematic phrases in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), his account of "the Negro" in "this American world," is framed as an inescapable numeric pattern: "One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (364–65). This most influential of African-American tropes is an account of a struggle made explicitly quantitative: one and two are the central and repeated terms of this passage, trumping *American*, *Negro*, *soul*, and *body*. Perhaps these numbers have gone without comment because until very recently literary scholars have understood numbers as falling outside their domain (the as-yet unpublished work of Steven Connor of the University of Cambridge is one example of new work being done on the topic). Yet, as Alain Badiou has recently claimed, "number must be thought," because "we live in the era of number's despotism," number governing our accounts of the political even in the human sciences (1). In truth, neither omission *nor* attack fills the need for a rhetorical analysis of number, for treating number as absolutely different from other languages submits to its "despotism."

*Sarah Wilson is associate professor of English at the University of Toronto and author of *Melting-Pot Modernism* (2010).

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Such approaches naturalize the divide between quantification and letters, rather than treating it as the constructed and historically specific estrangement that it is.

While Badiou's task is to challenge the regime of number, my more modest ambition is to build a literary history of ideas that grapples with what it means to write and read under the regime of number. Du Bois's fundamental but often overlooked quantitative bent is a perfect place from which to pursue such a project. Indeed, as a sociologist he participated actively in the intellectual turn by which Badiou sees number as having invaded the conception of "communitarian bonds" over the course of the nineteenth century (2). Susan Mizruchi has shown that Du Bois had a lasting, complicated relation with the European quantitative sociology that he studied at the University of Berlin at the end of the nineteenth century.[2] Still, the use of numbers in Du Bois's creative, rather than explicitly sociological, works bespeaks something more than the lingering effects of his graduate training. In the case of his articulation of double consciousness, for example, he does not only deploy one and two for their precision. Number has a more general use for him as a literary device, one he uses as frequently as symbol, and arguably more successfully than character. In other words, a number in Du Bois's work is every bit as dense in its significance as would be a classical reference or a few bars from a spiritual.

In what follows, I will show that through his literary uses of numbers, Du Bois insists upon a particular concept of personhood.[3] Personhood here is distinct from what he means when using the term *humanity* (which Lloyd Pratt has helpfully elucidated); it is a status not trans-temporal but contingent, constructed, mediated (often by the state), historically sensitive, and hard-fought—this last especially so in light of how the slave trade exposed the heterogeneous, sometimes incommensurable accounts of personhood in the Atlantic world, as Peter Jaros has argued.[4] Jeannine DeLombard has recently shown how recognitions of black personhood manifested first in accounts of black criminality; personhood available in the eyes of the criminal law translated only with difficulty into that status with associated rights and privileges, distinct from what was meant by "human being" or even "man" in antebellum US letters (6–7). Yet as I'll suggest below, the assertion of personhood proved indispensable to Du Bois's interventions into an increasingly sclerotic political culture.[5]

According to Sharon Cameron, "The word *person* confers status . . . value, even equality; it establishes intelligibility within a political and legal system. . . . It does not, however, presume anything of substance" (viii). At the turn of the twentieth century, the expansive legislative definition of persons (as corporations, companies, associations, firms, partnerships, societies, and joint-stock companies,

as well as individuals) passed by legislation in 1871 had been underlined by a series of court cases (starting with the 1866 *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad*).[6] Like anything else defined by statute, personhood existed through and for codification; it was not a "natural" category. Number bespeaks the context of state management in which personhood was legislated and asserted. African-American assertions of rights in the wake of the Fourteenth Amendment mobilized both the civil protections of personhood and its peculiar insubstantiality. In other words, number did not rationalize otherwise natural entities so much as it enabled the imagination of the entities that interested Du Bois, and the assertion of that freedom that historian Gregory Downs argues Reconstruction showed "is only possible within the state" (49).

In the wake of Emancipation, representatives of the state struggled to understand the newly freed through lenses other than the anecdotal (Frankel 56). According to Teresa Goddu, through the 1830s antislavery had "leveraged the discourse of numeracy" to build its cultural credibility (130); in the post-Civil War period, as Maurice Lee has shown, even Frederick Douglass turned from heroic individuality towards statistical logic in his arguments for equal opportunity (101–07). Thinking about numbers, therefore, indispensably complements the literary histories of the state being constructed of late by scholars of US writing such as Amanda Claybaugh, Sean McCann, Lisi Schoenbach, Eric Slauter, Michael Szalay, and Brook Thomas.[7] In Du Bois's writing, numbers impart a whiff of the interpretive tools of the state, rendering both the artifice and the real promise of personhood in literary form.[8]

Even as he used numbers to evoke a very particular set of social conditions, Du Bois was unwilling to consign number to the limited status of sociological tool. Take his essay "Criteria of Negro Art," published in *The Crisis* in October 1926, as example. "Who shall describe Beauty?" he queries, then answers: "I remember tonight four beautiful things" (995). The close juxtaposition of enumeration and aesthetic judgment is so unconventional as to be calculated to draw attention: an enumerative definition eschews the elaboration of principles and instead seeks connections between instances. Du Bois's four beautiful things are the Cathedral at Cologne, a village of the Veys in West Africa, a room containing the Venus de Milo, and a phrase of music in the American South. Why enumerate, especially when he goes on to note the "infinite" variety of beauty (995)? Perhaps number allows him to posit an equivalence between these unlike forms, an equivalence that has a political as well as an aesthetic value; as Russ Castronovo has shown, Du Bois's essay was part of a multifaceted effort at *The Crisis* to show that "beauty was instrumental to social justice" (110). But why choose four—for its balance? Its economy? It is a sufficient and yet not terribly large number, suggesting (as Du

Bois does elsewhere in "Criteria") that an unjust world has limited the instances of beauty, which ought to be far more widespread. This four is separated by the numbers he used to evoke double consciousness by 23 years, but the nature of number is such that together these figures pose the question of what links one to two, to four—and what role that link has to play in a Du Boisian conception of writing.

1. Large Numbers

The difference between one and two in *The Souls of Black Folk* can seem very small or very large, depending on what other numbers are understood to be in play. Readings of Du Boisian "two-ness" have usually emphasized the gap between the unity presumed to inhere in "one" (either the abstract "one" who "feels" this double consciousness, or the one body forced to contain it) and the "two" that signals an entry into multiplicity, and so stands in an analogical relation to *three*, *four*, *etc*., while being utterly different from *one*.[9] In a way that "one" can never be, this "two" is implicitly a "large number," in the sense used by the nineteenth-century French mathematician Siméon Denis Poisson in his studies of probability. Poisson's work focused on calculating probabilities for situations in which reliability or predictability is not uniform: that is, the "large number" is made up of varying, nonhomogeneous constituents (qtd. In Hacking 101).[10] By virtue not only of his twoness, but also of the difference of his constituent parts, Du Bois's figure is always already statistical. He is subject to the disciplinary regimes associated with statistics: as Du Bois puts it, white sociologists "gleefully count his bastards and his prostitutes" (*Souls* 368). But in addition, he exists conceptually in and as a mass in a way that other Americans do not. That the black subject is implicitly a mass formation explains, in part, why Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935) so often privileges the theory of class struggle to explain what went on in the years following the Civil War; or why numbers appear in close proximity to the term "person" or "persons" so frequently in *The Souls of Black Folk*'s "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece," where Du Bois meditates on the exploitative labor relations of the cotton country. The nineteenth-century collectivism that Adolph Reed identifies at the basis of Du Bois's outlook is robustly present in this statistical orientation.[11]

The history of the Atlantic slave trade is a place to begin understanding what kind of human abstraction is entailed in this quantified mass. Or so Ian Baucom claims in *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005), which uses events aboard the slave ship *Zong* in 1781 to expose the horror

embedded in systems of exchange. For Baucom, the murder of slave cargo, 133 individuals thrown overboard to enable a recovery of investment from the ship's insurers, bespeaks the injustice implicit in this system's faith in exchangeability. But scenes from the *Zong* do not simply emblematize the willingness to exchange human beings for cash. Insurance proposes to insulate against loss by finding equivalences between terms and thereby overlooking the specificity of loss—in the case of the *Zong*, by compensating shipowners in cash for the value of a "typical" human cargo, times 132 drowned slaves. Insurance also works by reaching across domains to pool funds and manage exposure, balancing losses in one category against stability in another, diffusing throughout a system the abstract exchangeability of value, and along with it, the brutal logic of the *Zong*. The events aboard the *Zong* are exemplary rather than aberrant; indeed, they announce the historical arrival of a regime of the exemplary. In Baucom's words, we can trace "an inauguration of a long twentieth century" of nonsingular events and beings to the *Zong*; in this era finance capital dominates the imagining of value, understanding value as something that can be computed, which can be adequately and appropriately expressed by "132" (167). This is what Marx, in *Capital*, terms "the mass of cheap human material (*taillable à merci et miséricorde*)," playing on the dual meanings of "*taillable*" as both tax-paying (serfs) and that which can be cut, divided (475).

If the quantified mass is, in this context, closely tied to histories of violence and sacrifice, it is even more important that we understand why Du Bois refuses to relinquish it. Instructive here is "Of the Dawn of Freedom," the chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* that represents Du Bois's early work on the history of Reconstruction. On the one hand, the chapter uses figurative descriptions of the *unnumbered* "masses" of fugitives and the newly emancipated, "that dark human cloud that clung like remorse" at the rear of Union forces (375). On the other hand, it leans heavily on numbers to represent the series of "systems of control" and "strange little governments" (375) that culminate in the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau. In Du Bois's admiring account, the Bureau "erected a government of millions of men," "at a stroke of the pen" (378). Over four years, it treated "over half a million patients," distributed "twenty-one million free rations . . . at a cost of over four million dollars," transported "thirty thousand black men" back to farms, and oversaw the writing of labor contracts—"fifty thousand in a single State" (384). "Of the Dawn of Freedom" is only one of the many histories of the Freedmen's Bureau and of Reconstruction that Du Bois would write over the course of his career, and like those that followed, it emphasizes the conditions of governance and state support that reinforced early expressions of African-American political agency. It lays this emphasis

through the repeated use of numbers, often in accord with Baucom's connection between the logic of numbering and the systemic sacrifice of human singularity in the Atlantic world. Yet in "Of the Dawn of Freedom," there is no position through which the singularity whose sacrifice Baucom documents can be recuperated: the "dark human cloud that clings like remorse" to advancing human forces is just as much associated with loss as are the persons and contracts subjected to numbering. For Du Bois number is no more associated with violence than are other systems of representation and may even pose questions of value and loss more clearly.

"Of the Dawn of Freedom" marks Du Bois as exceptional for his time in his unwillingness to write off Reconstruction governance as a catastrophic miscarriage of representation. Responding to allegations of widespread fraud and corruption in the Reconstruction era, Du Bois quantifies inputs and lists the outputs, drawing up a kind of balance sheet of the Freedmen's Bureau: "For some fifteen million dollars, beside the sums spent before 1865, and the dole of benevolent societies, this Bureau set going a system of free labor, established a beginning of peasant proprietorship, secured the recognition of black freedmen before courts of law, and founded the free common school in the South" (*Souls* 387). What Du Bois describes in these passages is the transformation of the freedmen into a "population," in Foucauldian terms; the last sentence above specifically casts the transformation of ex-slaves and Southern society in terms of costs and benefits, a statistical balancing of loss and gain that, in his 1978 lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault associates with modern governmentality.[12] There are useful parallels to be drawn between Du Bois's post-Reconstruction interest in social welfare and Foucault's post-1968 discussions of technologies of governmental risk-management, such as social security programs. Both thinkers turn to the state's use of quantification to appraise the power "in play" in a society.[13] Indeed, numbers especially represent what is in play in Du Bois because they are the basis of a practice of administrative self-correction—in the sense that changing census figures, for example, drive changes in congressional apportionment. Earlier apportionments were not rejected as failures, or disavowed as mistakes, in light of new numbers but were simply corrected. In the words of "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," numbers thus perform the "concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic" offered by the "Negro Problem" (*Souls*, 370). The data of the Freedmen's Bureau show the administration put to the test, yet rather than undergoing correction, it was terminated in 1872.

When "Of the Dawn of Freedom" turns to the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment (understood in one sense as taking the place of the Bureau) and the closing of the Freedmen's Bureau, numbers recede. Granted voting rights but deprived of the institutions of state

support that characterized the first four years after Emancipation, the freedmen enter a new, less statist stage of Reconstruction. Du Bois tropes that moment of governmental retrenchment by the return of "a figure veiled and bowed" and the forecast that the "problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (*Souls* 391). In this case, Du Bois's turn to the veiled figure puts symbolism explicitly into tension with quantification. Given that the phrase "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" both begins and concludes "Of the Dawn of Freedom," and anticipating the argument that he develops in his later book-length history of Reconstruction, Du Bois might be read as suggesting that sidelining the specifically economic dimensions of Emancipation implicit in the view of the freedmen as a "population" actually *produces* the "color-line" as the problem of the twentieth century (*Souls* 372, 391). That is, Du Bois hints that closing the Freedmen's Bureau resulted in mistaking questions of socioeconomic positioning as questions of racial identity.

The "heavy heritage" of the turn of the century is the incomplete work of the Bureau, with the recognition that the twentieth century shows the 1870 view of "Negro suffrage as a final answer to all present perplexities" to be naive (*Souls* 390). We might associate the vote with the symbolic figures in "Of the Dawn of Freedom"—the veiled sitter in the King's Highway, the gray-haired gentleman with hate in his eyes, the dark awful-faced mother—for they all abstract but keep the emphasis on the individual, rather than using abstraction to aggregate.[14] In the cultural imagination, the vote (uncorrupted) is always one, and always counts for one, and never represents a large number. Du Bois would not dispense with the vote, but when he describes support for universal suffrage in "Of the Sons of Master and Man," he represents the ballot as the means by which individuals claim "the right to have a voice in the policy of the state" (*Souls* 482). He remains oriented toward the state as means of assuring "the greatest good to the greatest number" (482).[15]

For Du Bois, the acquisition of the vote uncannily prefigures the failure of Reconstruction, insofar as it shifts questions of the freedom of the Freedmen from the scale of "population" to the scale of the individual. As Kevin Gaines has shown, turn-of-the-century uplift discourse stressed the importance of the black individual's acceptance of middle-class values and viewed the progress of the race as the success of individuated "strivers" and their immediate families. Du Bois's early sociological study *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) was the product of a collaboration between the University of Pennsylvania and the College Settlement Association and was necessarily tangled up in the individuating value judgments of uplift discourse (in which "population" comes to represent deviants, as

opposed to the individuating bourgeois). He did not stint in his moral disapproval of the lower "grades" of black Philadelphians. Yet this tendency was in tension with his drive to quantify, to analyze in terms of persons and populations. Attempts to assign individual responsibility for social outcomes contrast sharply with the critique of responsibility implicit in the welfare state—a critique that Bruce Robbins has summarized as "it's not your fault." According to Robbins,

> The truth about responsibility is that it is dependent on too many other people, too many interlocking histories, many of them invisible to any individual observer. . . . in a complex modern social system—neither the word *bureaucracy* nor the word *capitalism* is quite adequate—responsibility is never fully present, always more or less deferred. (90)

The welfare state intervenes on the assumption that no *individual* can be understood as bearing exclusive responsibility for his or her own predicament, much less the predicaments of others. Numbers, and the state-mediated account of personhood that they embed, thus provide a simple account of the post-Emancipation predicament (it's not individual), as well as a much more complex one (it can only be understood through an appreciation of many interlocking people, institutions, and histories).

We may well understand an expression often taken to signify Du Bois's elitism (and thus presumably his allegiance to uplift-era ideas of individual responsibility) differently in the context of these number-enabled critiques of individualist responsibility. Rather than being (in Ross Posnock's Jamesian formulation) an "unclassified residuum," the "talented tenth" of "exceptional men" that Du Bois proposed would save the race in his 1903 essay of that title is simply a statistical expression of the end of the distribution; these "exceptional men" represent the larger black "population" in that they yield a slice of the natural variation one expects of any population. Whatever their special responsibilities may be, members of the talented tenth ought not to be read as responsible for their own exceptional status, and thus their virtues are not their own so much as they express the virtues of the group as a whole. In "Criteria of Negro Art," Du Bois writes that in the world at large, "it is only the accident, the remnant, that gets the chance to make the most of itself" (999). This language is mathematical ("the remnant"), statistical ("the accident"), impersonal ("it", "itself"), even as it purports to discuss successful black artists. If it is "the tidal waves of chance" that make exceptional African Americans, then their success is best viewed through the lens of probability (999). Du Bois's insistence on regarding turn-of-the-century questions of race

as questions of population means even art is an expression of the quantified mass, and thus also the basis of state policy.

2. Full Numbers

The "one" and "two" of Du Bois's formulation of double consciousness need not merely be taken as evoking polarities (singularity and multiplicity). One and two also represent "natural" numbers, and as such they raise the possibility that quantification was fundamental to the distinct African-American identity that Kenneth Warren has located in the Jim Crow era.[16] The world of full numbers contrasts with the rule of "three-fifths" by which slaves counted toward political representation in pre-Civil War calculations. We might then put Du Bois's use of "ones" and "twos" alongside "40 acres and a mule"—or Booker T. Washington's 1895 promise that black and white Americans might remain socially "separate as the five fingers, and yet one as the hand" in matters economic—as positive assertions of the African American as an abstract but full numerical unit or quantum, equal in weight to the abstract unit represented by any other US citizen. Even before the modernist avant-garde-associated West African masks and sculptures with abstraction, then, major African-American thinkers were using quantification to associate blackness and abstraction for very different aesthetic purposes.[17]

In Du Bois's era, Henri Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* ([1888]; translated as *Time and Free Will* [1910]) offered the example of a flock of sheep to argue that numbering ultimately aims to produce a "sum" or to represent a "collection of units." Thus, at some level, to number always means to "agree in that case to neglect their individual differences and to take into account only what they have in common" (Bergson 76). In both Bergson's and Baucom's accounts of numbering, individual variation disappears in favor of the regularity required to conceive of commonality—and that, by extension, is also required to pursue a common welfare. We might conceive of number, in a peculiar twist, as performing essential work in expressing equality synchronously with difference. Whitman's "Song of Myself," for example, while dotted with phrases like a "thousand acres," "millions of suns," and the "twenty-ninth bather," uses these enumerations to establish the kinds of "equal terms" required for his own project of literary egalitarianism (Larson 98–102).

Whitman's twenty-ninth bather is an excellent example of a figure both differentiated from and grouped with a whole represented by a series of numbers. Mary Poovey's work on the constitution of a "social body" in mid-nineteenth-century British literature notes that the rise of such "technologies of representation" as the census and

statistics "simultaneously brought groups that had rarely mixed into physical proximity with each other and represented them as belonging to the same, increasingly undifferentiated whole" (4). Such a quantitative strategy can be reductive (for example, Whitman's "twenty-ninth" doesn't suggest anything about the actual relation imagined in Section 11 of "Song of Myself"). It contrasts starkly with the individualizing detail of literary character, another favored "technology of representation" of the era. Yet in Du Bois's writing this critical commonplace does not hold. Quantitative expressions such as "double consciousness" and the "talented tenth" reward the kind of critical attention that one might reserve for creatures of rare, deep complication, while characters such as Bles Alwyn and Princess Kautilya are treated like ciphers. Du Bois's fictional characters are flat, in E. M. Forster's memorable term, as if precisely the further dimensions of interiority and unpredictability that Forster esteemed are anathema to Du Bois's aesthetic project. Alex Woloch has argued that nineteenth-century novels are filled with flat characters because they work through the consequences of focusing narratives around protagonists, single remarkable individuals who dominate a character-system, thereby staging an asymmetry whose social consequences are as clear as its formal ones.[18] Du Bois's novels, with their anemic and unjustifiable protagonists, struggle as novels as they struggle against this asymmetrical system, attempting to imagine an "increasingly undifferentiated whole" through a technology (literary character) unsuited to do so.[19]

Yet as Deidre Lynch has pointed out, the equation of person with character was not logically necessary but developed over time; it is precisely this unstable fusion of person and character that Du Bois avoids when he reserves for number a special capacity to represent persons.[20] Sidestepping both the moral and the physiognomical (and so also physiological) implications of character, Du Bois enters into the system of exchange that Lauren Berlant has associated with personhood in its Constitutional sense: "The American subject is privileged to suppress the fact of his historical situation in the abstract 'person': but then, in return, the nation provides a kind of prophylaxis for the person, as it promises to protect his privileges and his local body in return for loyalty to the state" (110). Du Bois's entire aesthetic project operates under the shadow of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, and number allowed him to underline again and again the transactional nature of the personhood asserted therein.

Quantification thus represents a vibrant literary strategy for Du Bois, as it does not, say, for William Faulkner in the ledger-book sequences of *Go Down, Moses* (1942). The McCaslin brothers of that novel carry on a dialogue through the pages of the family ledger, Uncle Buddy, in particular using those pages to subvert the purely

quantitative accounting of slaves and instead embed a history of the intimate relations that extend, violently, across the color line in the McCaslin family.[21] Du Bois, however, turns accounting into a vehicle for independence from the habits of thought embedded in the very intimate relations Faulkner's novel insists upon.[22] Even when Du Bois writes on intimate topics, he insists upon their embeddedness in a public realm—we might think here of the funeral procession of his son described in "Of the Passing of the First-Born," a public display through which private grief is jarringly reset by a depersonalizing racial epithet used by onlookers. His grand history, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935), ends its number-crammed progress with a final chapter, "The Propaganda of History," in which Du Bois chronicles the difficulties of researching and publishing on Reconstruction in the early twentieth-century US. He denounces contemporary editorial practice in Civil War and Reconstruction history as distorted by "reasons of courtesy and philanthropy," and he anatomizes the "chorus of agreement" on Reconstruction as advanced by the tight-knit Dunning school of historians out of Columbia (714, 717). For Du Bois, all of this intimacy adds up to collusion: "we have in fifty years, by libel, innuendo, and silence, so completely misstated and obliterated the history of the Negro in America and his relation to its work and government that today it is almost unknown" (723). Du Bois has had enough of the "intimate" relations of American nationality, its family secrets and internecine warfare. In opposition to this fraught intimacy he claims the transparency of personhood, with all of its rights and protections in the eyes of the state.

According to Du Bois, his contemporaries' habits of intimate, rather than quantitative, accounting have had the particular effect of occluding African-American histories available from other sources:

> Nearly all recent books on Reconstruction agree with each other in discarding the government reports and substituting selected diaries, letters, and gossip. Yet . . . government records are an historic source of wide and unrivaled authenticity. There is the report of the select Committee of Fifteen, which delved painstakingly into the situation all over the South and called all kinds and conditions of men to testify; there are the report of Carl Schurz and the twelve volumes of reports made on the Ku Klux conspiracy; and above all, the *Congressional Globe*. None who has not read page by page the *Congressional Globe*, especially the sessions of the 39th Congress, can possibly have any idea of what the problems of Reconstruction facing the United States were in 1865–66. Then there were the reports of the Freedmen's Bureau and the executive and other documentary reports of government officials, especially in the war

> and treasury departments, which give the historian the only groundwork upon which he can build a real and truthful picture. (723)

In this account, Du Bois does not cast the state as center of authority and paternal guarantor of coherence; the kind of "authenticity" that these sources provide enables a varied and multivoiced narrative. The Committee of Fifteen, 12 reports on Ku Klux activities, pages and pages of the *Congressional Globe*, even the 39th Congress (destined to give way to the 40th): number and more generally quantity undermine Dunning-school paternalism, McCaslin-style conspiracies of silence, and instead advance an antiauthoritarian (though friendly to expertise) version of truth. In part the official evidence that Du Bois esteems is important because other forms of evidence about the period were systematically purged. He notes that black testimony about the period went largely uncollected and unpreserved and that in many cases the records of black political activity in Reconstruction governments faced active destruction at the hands of later Southern state governments. Yet it is also the case that the record he insists upon is that of African Americans as a "population," "full" only in the sense of being a synthetic record compiled and abstracted for the purposes of administration.

Alain Desrosières has noted that in the US more than in other countries, statistics were associated with argumentation rather than with fixed truths despite their association with the state (192). Du Bois had been making the argument about the value of statistics in political advocacy since the turn of the twentieth century. In "The Twelfth Census and the Negro Problems," he contends that "So far the census reports are almost our sole source of information as to the condition of the Negro population in general," for only the government had the range and will to collect information on such a scale, and despite their manifest flaws, the results of the census must form the basis of any more specific understandings of African-American life (305–06). As part of this effort, Du Bois contributed several reports to the Department of Labor, though, as Maria Farland has shown, this relation was always strained.[23] Nevertheless, Du Bois's dry statistical reports commit to a state project of fuller representation "in general." *The Souls of Black Folk*, which appeared in a moment newly convinced that the work of counting was never complete (the census bureau became a permanent entity only in 1902), integrates that statist commitment to fullness of representation with its range of other literary devices.

A representative cartoon from the pre-Reconstruction era, "The Great Tribulation," printed in the Saturday Evening Post of August 18, 1860, shows the census-taker intrusively gathering information in areas previously considered "intimate" (Anderson 59). "I jist want to know how many of yez is deaf, dumb, blind, insane and idiotic—

likewise how many convicts there is in the family—what all your ages are, especially the old woman and the young ladies—and how many dollars the old gentleman is worth!" asserts the census marshal, occasioning a "tremendous sensation" around the table of a well-dressed family. For the creation of government reports and more especially for the census, the privileged tool for vote allocation and thus the governance of the South, intimate and private details were translated into public figures. Numbers, then, carry with them a whiff of that almost alchemical process by which the private becomes public, and the personal becomes social. At the moment of collection, the census marshal obliquely suggests the work of social leveling that this new collection of numbers may enable. The unsophisticated questioner, still wearing his hat and speaking in rough, unpolished dialect, has found a way into a protected space of privilege. He assails that privilege by his social penetration, as well as by the threat that the details he collects will mix promiscuously with details from which they "ought" to remain separated. In making certain things newly transparent, the transition to quantification implicitly (though often only theoretically) desegregates.

Numbers . . . carry with them a whiff of that almost alchemical process by which the private becomes public, and the personal becomes social.

During and after Reconstruction, of course, this kind of "Great Tribulation" was even more pronounced, since state-gathered numbers were used to remake the society of the peculiar domestic institution in the South. Du Bois's claim that official records evoke "authenticity" signifies doubly for the larger question of what "ought" to be. One the one hand, he argues that these are the records that scholars ought to consult, since at the very least they balance the partial nature of the gossip that historians have been privileging. On the other hand, and more generally, these reports make present broader social questions—of what ought to be done, what is authentically owed to the causes of truth and equality, as well as to the African-American "population." Here we see two warring impulses in one body. The first is represented by "Ought's an ought," the African-American folk rhyme that Zora Neale Hurston cites in *Mules and Men* (1935) (and which serves as epigraph), in which both number and obligation are rendered as ultimately arbitrary, subject to just the kind of wordplay and deformation through which folktales undermine notions of authenticity and authority. The second, meanwhile, is strictly social-scientific, founded on state documents and committed to the earnest evaluation of the state's responsibility for its most vulnerable persons.[24]

According to Du Bois, the numbers of black folk most definitely belong on a balance sheet, though the sheet itself may be shocking. Nor do any of Du Bois's rhetorical gestures foreclose quantification. When he closes the essay "Of the Meaning of Progress" by asking, "How many heartfuls of sorrow shall balance a bushel of wheat?" he suggests that heartfuls of sorrow have been valued too cheaply to this

day and that the exchange is something worth interrogating, not that heartfuls have no relation to a measure of wheat (*Souls* 414). "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece" alleges that the "keynote of the Black Belt is debt; not commercial credit, but debt in the sense of continued inability on the part of the mass of the population to make income cover expense" (*Souls* 457). At the most basic level, Du Bois points out that the system is rigged so as to keep the numbers on the balance sheet from lining up and thus keep the freedmen insolvent. But he also notes that the overthrow of slavery effectively made cotton-belt owners insolvent. Part of the negotiations entailed in readmitting the secessionist states to the Union involved their repudiation of war debts—states were required to default on foreign creditors in order to reclaim their political standing. The Black Belt is similarly a complex relay of insolvencies and unbalanced balance sheets. At state, landowner, and sharecropper levels, the balance sheet is present, but rapid social change made values shift. Freedmen, once assets, now represent their owners' liabilities, but those liabilities were controlled in turn by the owners' manipulation of the value of items required by tenant farmers, such as provisions and materials. In other words, the slippery world of Hurston's folk rhyme was not an altogether unrealistic depiction of the account books of the post-Civil War era. Yet for Du Bois "heartfuls" and bushels are not incompatible measures; the fluctuating values of sorrow and wheat make the question of "how many" a serious and difficult one. Through such statements, Du Bois demands that human suffering be taken into consideration in economic and political plans. And the first way to answer questions framed as "how many" must be with numbers.

A question juxtaposing "how many" with the notion of "balance" in this historical context brings to mind the promise of "40 acres and a mule" as state reparations redressing the impoverishment of the freedmen. In "Of the Dawn of Freedom," Du Bois both refuses to specify the fierce opposition with which this plan was met and represents the failure of the plan as a refusal to specify: the "Commissioner of the Freedman's Bureau had to go to South Carolina and tell the weeping Freedmen, after their years of toil, that their land was not theirs, that there was a mistake—somewhere" (*Souls* 385). Nancy Cohen notes that Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner introduced the doomed bills associated with "40 acres and a mule" at a time when redistribution was politically toxic; in 1867, the *Nation* explicitly linked the idea of property confiscation in the South with conflict over the eight-hour day in the North, proclaiming both to be signs of the rise of a European-style laboring class (69). Given the centrality of exact numbers to this debate (not only 40 acres but the eight-hour day), the vagueness of Du Bois's phrase, "mistake—somewhere," mimics the legislators' evasiveness when presented with clear state responsibilities.

Relatedly, in *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois explains the collapse of that program as a national failure to recognize the potential of state action. Faced with a social and economic upheaval that he compares to the French Revolution and to twentieth-century conflicts in Russia, Spain, India, and China, "We [modern Americans] were worried when the beginnings of this experiment cost Eighteen Millions of Dollars, and quite aghast when a debt of Two Hundred and Twenty-Five Millions was involved, including waste and theft. We apparently expected that this social upheaval was going to be accomplished with peace, honesty and efficiency" (*Black Reconstruction* 708). These hyperbolic, capitalized figures represent the nation's unwillingness to confront the numbers, its desire to read the moral "ought" as equaling the digit "aught." As Du Bois parodically recounts the political failure of will, his capitalization reflects the inability to assimilate these numbers. Nations, world-defining revolutions, and costly debts all get capitalized, because they exert the same weight. For Du Bois, the numbers aren't yet huge enough since they still fall short of the "major national program" that a Reconstruction committed to full equality would entail (708). But he does not simply enumerate the dollars side of the balance sheet. He adds to the equation "four million slaves . . . in the midst of nine million bitter enemies," those (ex-) slaves now counting as full and enumerable beings, despite being outnumbered (708). Furthermore, in posing the question of what it means to be persons in the minority, he underlines the quantitative component of the question "how does it feel to be a problem" in terms that would resonate through the twentieth century (*Souls* 363).

Precisely because after the failure of Reconstruction the personhood of African Americans was increasingly precarious, Du Bois was resolute about using quantification. Numbers by their very nature propose a system by which units can only be understood in relation to one another, and Du Bois saw both aesthetic and social potential in this system. He drew on his European quantitative training, intuiting that his arguments were poised between an era of words and an era of numbers, saturating the ostensibly neutral tools of calculation with the intellectual history of slavery and emancipation. He thus crafted an insistently quantitative language of personhood that conjoined the carefully emptied-out personhood of republican theory and a fundamentally relational, and socialized, form. Du Bois, however, was never so naive as to believe that numbers were entirely neutral, entirely biddable. As William J. Maxwell has shown, he had every reason to understand how being a "person" under state power was a position of constraint and that African Americans in particular faced ongoing and pernicious casting as objects of administration.[25] Yet for a writer who in his novels remained tied to conventional representational strategies—who did not appear to revolutionize literary representation even as he hoped to

revolutionize society—quantification provided expressive tools enabling him to project social and intellectual rearrangements. Numbers offer a means of analyzing existing orders and expressing alternative ones. In Du Bois's hands, they also became a way of crafting an aesthetic of the many—various and yet commensurable.

Reading the history of Du Bois's ideas—indeed, of most ideas—in all of its rhetorical richness requires disputing the intellectual compartmentalization severing the study of letters from that of numbers. Like so many others, this divide is a historical artifact, more fecund as an object of investigation than as a means of conducting investigations. It is precisely by crossing and recrossing the quantification line that Du Bois pits literature against the advance of social and intellectual segregation at the end of the nineteenth century.

Notes

1. This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Many thanks also to R. Darren Gobert, Deidre Lynch, William J. Maxwell, and Spencer Morrison.

2. See Mizruchi, *The Science of Sacrifice : American Literature and Modern Social Theory* (1998).

3. On Du Bois's place in a broader context of anxiety surrounding questions of personhood, see Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (1995).

4. See Pratt, *The Strangers Book: The Human of African American Literature* (2015) and Jaros, "Good Names: Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa," *The Eighteenth Century* 54.1 (2013): 1–23.

5. See, relatedly (in its interest in terminologies used to refer to political actors in relation to governmental paternalism), Thomas, "Of Mules and Men."

6. For a discussion of some of the theoretical ramifications of this legislation, see Barbara Johnson, "Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law," *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 10.2 (1998): 549–74.

7. See Amanda Claybaugh, "Bureaucracy in America: De Forest's Paperwork," *Studies in American Fiction* 37.2 (2010): 203–23; Sean McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (2008); Lisi Schoenbach, "A Jamesian State: *The American Scene* and 'the Working of Democratic Institutions,'" *The Henry James Review* 30.2 (2009): 162–79; Eric Thomas Slauter, *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution* (2009); Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (2000); Brook Thomas, "Of Mules and Men, Fathers and Husbands, Schools and Suffrage: African American Manhood and the Paradox of Paternalism in Law and Literature after Emancipation," *Arizona Quarterly* 70.1 (2014): 1–27 and "Ruiz de Burton, Railroads, Reconstruction," *ELH* 80.3 (2013): 871–95.

8. See Mark Seltzer's *Bodies and Machines* (1992) and Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (1987) on the forms of personhood associated with naturalism and statistics, and in particular their corporatist component; see Oren Izenberg's *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (2011) on twentieth-century poetry as a "wish to reground the concept and the value of *the person*" (1).

9. For two illuminating discussions in this vein, see Shamoon Zamir, *Dark Voices: W.E.B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888–1903* (1995) and Winifred Siemerling, "W.E.B. Du Bois, Hegel, and the Staging of Alterity," *Callaloo* 24.1 (2001): 325–33.

10. Ian Hacking explains the phenomenon as follows: "Jacques Bernoulli's famous theorem . . . applied to repeated drawings, with replacement, of balls from an urn with black and white balls. Let the proportion of black balls in the urn be *p*. We take this to be the probability of drawing a black ball. Draw a ball, note its colour, replace it and shake the contents. We can consider a sequence of many such draws, and the relative frequency with which black is drawn on such a sequence. We can ask, what is the probability that the relative frequency is within some small 'error' *e* of *p*? Bernoulli could answer, and that answer became well known. But suppose one is considering a population of urns in which the proportion of black balls varies from urn to urn? We choose an urn at random, and then draw a ball at random. Once again, in repeated urn/ball draws, there will be a relative frequency with which black is drawn. Let *q* be the overall proportion of black balls in the urns. Can we make any statement about the probability that the relative frequency of drawing black, in urn/ball selections, is within some small 'error' of *q*? Yes. The precise statement is what Poisson called the law of large numbers" (101).

11. See Reed, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (1997).

12. See *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78* (2007).

13. On this side of Foucault, see Michael C. Behrent, "Accidents Happen: François Ewald, the 'Antirevolutionary' Foucault, and the Intellectual Politics of the French Welfare State," *The Journal of Modern History* 82.3 (2010): 585–624.

14. On the association of numbers and aggregation in the nineteenth-century context, see Adams. On the association of numbers and aggregation in the nineteenth-century context, see Maeve E. Adams, "Numbers and Narratives: Epistemologies of Aggregation in British Statistics and Social Realism, Ca. 1790-1880," *Statistics and the Public Sphere : Numbers and the People in Modern Britain, C. 1800–2000* (2011), ed. Tom. Crook and Glen O'Hara, 103–20.

15. For a precise outline of Du Bois's evolving position on suffrage, see David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (1993).

16. See *What Was African American Literature?* (2011).

17. On Du Bois and spatial/geometrical abstraction, see Nancy Bentley, "The Fourth Dimension: Kinlessness and African American Narrative," *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 270–92. On the modernist connection, see Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (1994).

18. See *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003).

19. In this vein, see Daniel Stout's reading of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* as "an attempt to come to terms with a world whose interest in groups produced its thoroughgoing indifference to individuals" (Stout 30). See "Nothing Personal: The Decapitation of Character in A Tale of Two Cities," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 41.1 (2007): 29–52.

20. See Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (1998) and Jonathan Lamb, "'Lay Aside My Character': The Personate Novel and Beyond," *The Eighteenth Century* 52.3 (2011): 271–87.

21. On this sequence, see Erik Dussere, *Balancing the Books: Faulkner, Morrison, and the Economies of Slavery* (2003), 18–28.

22. Here I draw on Theodore M. Porter's description of quantification as a "technology of distance. . . . [that] has long been almost synonymous with rigor and universality. Since the rules for collecting and manipulating numbers are widely shared, they can easily be transported across oceans and continents and used to co-ordinate activities or settle disputes. Perhaps most crucially, reliance on numbers and quantitative manipulation minimizes the need for intimate knowledge and personal trust. Quantification is well suited for communication that goes beyond the boundaries of locality and community. A highly disciplined discourse helps to produce knowledge independent of the particular people who make it." (ix). See *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (1995).

23. See Farland, "W. E. B. Du Bois, Anthropometric Science, and the Limits of Racial Uplift," *American Quarterly* 58 (2006): 1017–44.

24. In most cases, the federal government, by preserving the records of this period, tacitly accepted a custodial relationship for this population and the responsibilities it entailed. The bankruptcy of the government-founded Freedman's Savings Bank in 1874 did suggest that even at a state level numbers might be something one "played" rather than one trusted, however.

25. See Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* (2015).

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