

# Interracial Homosocial Bonds and Interracial Heterosexual Romance in W. E. B. Du Bois's *Darkwater*

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**Abstract:** *The present essay examines W. E. B. Du Bois's multi-genre work, Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil (1920) and maintains that the author's failure to see the realization of his vision for an intra-class and interracial working-class coalition in early twentieth-century United States turns him to interracial heterosexual romance for its symbolic fulfillment in the book. Observing Darkwater's rhetorical innovation, the essay contends that its sociological segments on contemporary white male workers' violence enacted against their black counterparts are thematically closely related to its romantic story, "The Princess of the Hither Isles." Thus, this essay suggests that Du Bois's frustration over the destruction of interracial working-class male bonds encourages him to seek an alternative discursive space in which he is allowed to map out his sexualized and gendered vision of anti-racist solidarity. I also note Du Bois's anxiety-ridden negotiation of male discourses as a black man who simultaneously occupies disempowered racial and empowered gendered positions.*

**Keywords:** *Du Bois, Darkwater, interracial working-class male bond, heterosexual interracial romance, black femininity*

## Introduction

W. E. B. Du Bois's *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920) has been understood as an account of the interconnections of Jim Crow America, capital accumulation, and global imperialism in the early twentieth century. Several scholars and critics have explored the multi-genre book – a collection of stylistically incompatible textual forms, including autobiography, essay,

allegory, and fiction<sup>1</sup> – and many of whom have focused on its critique of American racism and capitalism, as well as its international politics. Indeed, *Darkwater* is one of “Du Bois’s most ambitious” efforts to explore “racial conflicts within the United States through transnational networks of imperial power” (Kaplan 173). In recent times, feminist critics have focused on Du Bois’s politics of juxtaposition that associates the “Negro question” and “woman question” within the text, highlighting the book’s imbrication of race, gender, and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Alys Eve Weinbaum, along with other feminist scholars, has demonstrated that the figuration of interracial heterosexual desire is central to *Darkwater*’s critique of American racism and global imperialism. In her influential essay, “Interracial Romance and Black Internationalism” (2007), Weinbaum contends that short stories highlighting interracial romance such as “Comet” and “The Princess of Hither Isle” in *Darkwater* suggest interracial heterosexual union as a symbolic solution to U.S. domestic white supremacy and global imperialism (103). Considering the traits of romance as a literary genre, Weinbaum argues that the romantic stories in *Darkwater* demonstrate the Du Boisian discursive practice that seeks to dissolve racial antagonism through “the idiom of heterosexual union and interracial reproduction” (105).<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Weinbaum’s argument, my essay asserts that Du Bois’s failure to see the realization of his vision for an intra-class and interracial working-class coalition in early twentieth-century United States turns him to interracial heterosexual romance for its symbolic fulfillment in *Darkwater*. Subsequently, this essay investigates the masculinist bias in Du Bois’s race-gender-class politics as reflected in the book.

First, looking closer at “The Souls of White Folk,” “Of Work and Wealth,” and “The Servant in the House,” the three most important non-fictional writings on contemporary racialized class dynamic in *Darkwater*, I address Du Bois’s examination of white working-class male workers’ hostility and violence toward black men in early twentieth-century United

1 As a sequel to his first multi-genre book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *Darkwater* is one of Du Bois’s most “formally innovative” works (Kaplan 173).

2 On Du Bois’s exploration of the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in *Darkwater* and his other works, see Vilashini Cooppan 35–68; Joy James 69–95, Celena Simpson 48–63, and Shirley Moody Turner 47–68.

3 Building on Doris Summer’s notion that romance combines erotics with politics, Weinbaum notes that romance as a literary genre has the “capacity to depict and resolve social, historical, and political conflict through resolution of narrative tensions” (100). She adds that Du Bois’s romantic stories employ “erotics of politics in which naturalized heterosexual love can be used to express, and often diffuse, tensions among antagonistic forces” (100).

States. In the three essays, he demonstrates how the frustrated intra-class solidarity between “new immigrant” workers<sup>4</sup> and black working-class men represents a failed critique of capitalism in the years after World War I. I also examine Du Bois’s *gendered* view of labor as reflected in the essays, which should be considered to discredit his anti-racist cultural politics.

Furthermore, this paper contends that the accounts of the violence of “new immigrants” against black workers in *Darkwater*’s non-fictional pieces closely relate to the romantic tale, “The Princess of the Hither Isles,” the most provocative story in the book. Recognizing Du Bois’s frustration following the destruction of interracial working-class male bonds, which occurred through interracial, intra-class violence, I maintain that in *Darkwater*, the failed class consciousness of white workers forces Du Bois to rely on the mythological space of “The Princess of the Hither Isles” as an alternative discursive space in which he is allowed to map out his sexualized and gendered vision of interracial anti-racist solidarity. In doing so, this essay also elucidates his discursive strategy to *normalize* black men’s interracial heterosexuality and to re-establish their male privilege in Jim Crow America.

Finally, this paper highlights Du Bois’s anxiety-ridden negotiation of male discourses as a *black man* who simultaneously occupies disempowered racial and empowered gendered positions. Focusing on “The Damnation of Women,” Du Bois’s signal statement on the “woman question” in *Darkwater*, I examine his masculinist bias regarding black female sexuality, which again decidedly undermines his anti-racist discursive practice expressed in the book. Essentially, this paper aims to examine Du Bois’s racial and gender politics from the perspective of his vision of intra-class and interracial working-class coalition as well as investigate its masculinist structures as reflected in *Darkwater*.

### **The Broken Dream of Interracial Male Bonding**

In the first part of *Darkwater*’s second chapter, “The Souls of White Folk,” Du Bois recognizes the interracial conflict and violence among working-

4 “New immigrants” refer to immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who overtook the streams from Northern and Western Europe as the century turned and furnished the great majority of the more than fourteen million newcomers, who came to the United States in the first two decades of the twentieth century (Roediger 4).

class people in early twentieth-century United States as reflecting a failure of class consciousness by the white working class. In this piece, he traces the historical process through which non-Anglo-Saxon white workers assimilated the culture of Jim Crow, and how this inflated and reinforced white supremacy led to not only domestic race riots but also global imperialism. "The Souls of White Folk" concludes that global white supremacy, originating from Jim Crow America, is a *modern* phenomenon, setting the tone for its author's pessimistic view of America's interracial working-class fraternity in the 1910s that permeates *Darkwater*.

Before exploring "The Souls of White Folk" in detail, gaining a sense of Du Bois's general notion of race in the 1910s would be useful. According to Matthew Pratt Guterl, soon after the Great War, American racial discourse was transformed into "a simplistic, color-coded system" (312). In that representative system of American "soft imperialism," racial dynamics changed as non-Anglo European immigrants, such as those of Italian and Polish descent, began to be identified with Anglo-Saxon whites. For economic reasons, and with the support of modern American imperialistic capitalism, which benefited from the labor force's color-coded stratification, race relations shifted in favor of incorporating a broader set of European immigrants into the racial categories of whiteness while denying the entry of those of African American descent (Guterl 312).

Du Bois, aware of the fluid nature of whiteness, argues that African Americans can be both allies and enemies of the non-Anglo-European Americans, that is, the "new immigrants." In "Americanization," his August 1922 *Crisis* opinion piece, Du Bois excoriates "a renewal of the Anglo-Saxon cult" and deplors "the disfranchisement of Negro, Jew, Irishman, Italian, Hungarian, Asiatic and South Sea Islander" (154). He goes on to propose an intra-class and interracial working-class coalition, specifically, "[t]he great alliance between the darker people [...] and the working class everywhere" against "privilege as represented by New England and Old England" (154). However, in his 1925 article, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," he offers a contrasting scenario in which white supremacism expels black workers from the working-class coalition. The "northern lords of industries of the white land," Du Bois points out, could "import cheap white labor from Europe" and "encourage the color line in industry" to maximize their profits (412). The white working-class bond, including not only Anglo-Saxon workers but also the "new immigrants," which was facilitated by industrialists, marginalized black working people and rendered them the

Other of the laboring classes (412). A salient point is that Du Bois was well aware that “aliens became white over the bodies of black Americans,” in line with the needs of American capitalism, which was being sustained by the racially stratified labor force (Roediger 95). That whiteness was an unstable and permeable identity is well illustrated in “The Souls of White Folk,” the second chapter of *Darkwater*:

[S]he [America] is at times heartily ashamed even of the larger number of “new” white people whom her democracy has admitted to place and power. Against this surging forward of Irish and German, of Russian Jew, Slav and “dago” her social bars have not availed, but against Negroes she can and does take her unflinching and immovable stand, backed by this new public policy of Europe. She trains her immigrants to this despising of “niggers” from the day of their landing, and they carry and send the news back to the submerged classes in the fatherlands. (508–09)

As this passage suggests, “new immigrants” did not assimilate into American society without friction. Contemporary Americans regarded these “new immigrants” as incompatible with the nature of Anglo-Saxon civilization (“heartily ashamed”). The “she” in the passage does not only include authorities and industrialists, but also Anglo-Saxon workers who collectively believed in the racial inferiority of “new immigrants.” Organized labor in the early twentieth century racialized these “new immigrants” and such racialization reinforced their “inbetweenness” at the workplace, in politics, and in unions (Roediger 78). For example, in 1905, Samuel Gompers, a key figure in the American labor movement, declared that white American working-class people “are not going to let their standard of living be destroyed by negroes [...] or any others” (qtd. in Roediger 87). Of course, the “any others” in Gompers’s speech refer to “new immigrants” from Southern and Eastern Europe (Saxton 115). Five years before the publication of *Darkwater*, Du Bois had already noted that Anglo-Saxon workers “were flattered by popular appeals to their inherited superiority to ‘Dagoes,’ ‘Chinks,’ ‘Japs,’ and ‘Niggers’” (*The Negro* 141). Yet, in *Darkwater*, Du Bois clarifies that the “new immigrants,” unlike African Americans, can avoid the “social bars” (508). As David Roediger maintains, the “new immigrants” were marginalized, “but not in the same way as African Americans or immigrants of color,” and so “could claim whiteness via naturalization and naturalization via whiteness” (121). Indeed, they had more access to unionized and skilled work than African Americans. The liminal European groups could become white in the presence of black bodies.

If “The Souls of White Folk” is a general view of how race and class intersect in the process of constructing the racial segregation ideology in 1910s America, “Of Work and Wealth,” the first part of *Darkwater*’s fourth chapter, localizes the race-classed symbolic and physical violence as a specific single historical event: the 1917 Race Riot in East St. Louis. Du Bois suggests that the riots represent a failure of class consciousness on the part of the “new immigrants,” who sought to gain white privilege by sacrificing their potential alliance with black workers. In this piece, Du Bois terms these “new immigrants” as “the Unwise Men,” in that the working class division across the color line benefited industrialists by enforcing a segmented and politically disorganized labor movement (525). Owing to the U.S. government’s new restrictive policy on immigration<sup>5</sup> and its demand for workers during the Great War, these “new immigrants” were allowed significant bargaining power and a decent standard of living. As a result, they “saw in their dream the vision of a day when labor [...] should come into its own” (527). Northern industrialists responded to the rising power of these “new immigrants” by recruiting black workers from the South who would work for less money (528). Accordingly, the “new immigrant” workers’ fear of the “definite death of their rising dreams” complicated the dynamics of race and class relations between themselves and the “dark workers” (528).

Du Bois delineates the etiology of their fears and their attendant hate for black workers in his discussion of the riot:

Black men poured in and red anger flamed in the hearts of the white workers. The anger was against the wielders of the thunderbolts [Northern industrialists], but here it was impotent because employers stood with the hand of the government before their faces; [...] and finally the anger of the mass of white workers was turned toward these new black interlopers, who seemed to come to spoil their last dream of a great monopoly of common labor. (530)

This passage paints a picture of labor dynamics in early twentieth-century United States. With the massive migration of black Americans into the North, the “monopoly of common labor” that the “new immigrants” enjoyed was broken down. Their anger, which should have been directed at Northern capitalists, was required to be directed elsewhere, because they had no organized power to resist the alliance of capital and the state. They finally

5 For example, the Immigration Act of 1917 barred immigration from the Asia-Pacific zone.

turned their frustration and anger toward the “new black interlopers.” The “Unwise Men” blamed the “blackness” for their own economic hardships.

Instead of critiquing capitalism’s alliance of the state and the industrialists, the “Unwise Men” translated socio-economic relations into physiological forms, a prejudice that materialized in the 1917 Race Riot. Their failed critique of capitalism resulted in their racialization of black workers, which Du Bois terms “the modern economic paradox” and suggests is figured in the race riot in East St. Louis (528): “It was here that they entered the Shadow of Hell, where suddenly from a fight for wage and protection against industrial oppression East St. Louis became the center of the oldest and nastiest form of human oppression, — race hatred” (530). The race riot in East St. Louis demonstrates, in Robyn Wiegman’s words, “how a class-conscious social vision can work in complicity with white primacy” (93).

However, Du Bois’s critique of the contemporary white working class invites a question of his *gendered* labor politics, which is portrayed well in “Of Work and Wealth,” and another sociological essay, “The Servant in the House,” *Darkwater*’s fifth chapter. In “Of Work and Wealth,” Du Bois notes that one of the most interesting cases for the racialization of contemporary black workers was their representation as “scabs” in white worker discourse (529). According to Roediger, in the history of the U.S. mainstream labor movement, “scabbing” was equated with “turning nigger” (92). Union leaders warned their workers against “slavelike” behavior, instructing new workers in the ways that race and slavery were implicated in “unmanned servility” (92). White workers racialized their black counterparts by *feminizing* them. If conventional homosocial bonding occurs over the bodies of women, then white male working-class bonding occurs over the feminized bodies of black male workers.

Du Bois highlights this point and explores it further in “The Servant in the House.” There he recollects a summer spent waiting tables at a Minnesota resort after graduating from Fisk University with a Harvard scholarship (538). Serving white guests with other black men in the resort, they were “treated like furniture,” according to Du Bois (539). He notes that it was also “heartbreaking” to see an “intelligent and deft” black man playing “the clown, — crouching, grinning” while serving “a crowd of men” (539). “The Servant in the House” includes another interesting episode showing Du Bois’s frustration at black men’s racialized association with the forms of feminized domestic labor. The episode is about a white woman who, after listening to Du Bois’s speech on the disfranchisement of blacks, complains

to him: “Do you know where I can get a good colored cook? [...] Why – won’t Negroes – work! [...] I had given money for years to Hampton and Tuskegee and yet I can’t get decent servants. [...] They all want to be lawyers and doctors” (538). As the white woman blames black *men*<sup>6</sup> for not taking racialized jobs befitting them, her complaint quickly slips from race to labor and then gender. She equates blackness with specific jobs, such as domestic labor, outraged that black men might aspire to higher social positions in the field of law or medicine. What requires emphasis is Du Bois’s *gendered* understanding of such racialized labor; instead of criticizing the white woman’s prejudice, he assumes that domestic work undermines black manhood. His gendered view of labor is well demonstrated in the description of his family history: “I speak and speak bitterly as a servant and a servant’s son, for my mother spent five or more years of her life as a menial; my father’s family escaped, although grandfather as a boat steward had to fight hard to be a *man* and not a lackey. He fought and won” (538; emphasis added). Du Bois’s “bitterness” is caused by his being “a servant and a servant’s son.” His grandfather, meanwhile, struggled “to be a man” and “won.” The “servant” and “lackey” are positions that emasculate black men. Recollecting his experiences with work in his youth, Du Bois further clarifies the imbrication of labor, race, and gender:

The surrounding Irish had two chances, the factory and the kitchen, and most of them took the factory, with all its dirt and noise and low wage. The factory was closed to us. [...] Slowly they [black children] dribbled off, — a waiter here, a cook there, help for a few weeks in Mrs. Blank’s kitchen when she had summer boarders.

Instinctively I hated such work from my birth. I loathed it and shrank from it. Why? I could not have said. [...] Its temptations in wage and comfort would soon have answered my scruples [...].

I mowed lawns on contract, did “chores” that left me my own man, sold papers, and peddled tea – anything to escape the shadow of the awful thing that lurked to grip my soul. (538)

Black labor offers good “wage and comfort,” but these “temptations” sap black manhood. These emasculating “temptations” contrast sharply with the manly working conditions of the Irish. While black men give way to the “temptations” of “wage and comfort” by working “in the kitchen,” Irish men choose “the factory” for “all its dirt and noise and low wage.” By inserting

6 Given that the white woman also blames the “Negroes” for “want”[ing] “ladies,” we can assume that she is specifically referring to black *men* in her conversation with Du Bois (538).



gender as an intermediary, Du Bois explores the way that labor is divided along the color line. The conflation of raced and gendered labor renders African Americans the Others of organized labor: “[t]he labor movement turned their backs on those black men [...]. Negroes are servants; servants are Negroes. They shut the door of escape to factory” (541).

A problem arises in this exploration of how white racist discourse functions to feminize black male labor: Du Bois internalizes the white male discourse of body and labor even as he critiques it. His gendered understanding of labor invites us to ask whether or not his lamentation emerges from his frustration over black men’s expulsion from the interracial *male* bond, rather than from their expulsion from the progressive class consciousness against the alliance of the state and capital.

### **Interracial Heterosexual Romance in a Mythical Space: “The Princess of the Hither Isles”**

*Darkwater* was published in 1920, when African Americans were still haunted by traumatic memories of massive interracial violence such as the 1917 Race Riot in East St. Louis. Accordingly, the text does not present readers with any sanguine vision of interracial working-class fraternity. Black men’s exclusion from the interracial homosocial bond led Du Bois to seek an alternative model of interracial unity. I suggest this model is expressed in the romantic tale of an interracial heterosexual couple, “The Princess of the Hither Isles” in *Darkwater*. However, the contemporary history of racial violence did not allow him any *realistic* discursive space to unfold his literary imagination of the interracial romance; therefore, Du Bois was forced to seek a *fantastical* space that was free from the brutality of interracial violence. The interracial romance in *Darkwater* is thus portrayed in a *mythical* setting, namely, a legendary kingdom in “The Princess of the Hither Isles.” This setting demonstrates how Du Bois displaces his vision of an interracial male bond onto an interracial heterosexual union in a mythical space to achieve his ends.

In this fable, the white king of “Yonder Kingdom,” reveals his contempt for “Niggers and dagoes” who work in his gold mine (521). Here Du Bois consciously couples these two racial minorities. According to Roediger, in early twentieth-century United States, Italian Americans were often associated with African Americans (46). For instance, in some Southern educational systems, Italian immigrants were assigned to African American

schools. Louisiana's Italian American sugar workers were called "niggers" by their employers (47).

However, in "The Princess of the Hither Isles," Du Bois offers a provocative affiliation between a "black" male beggar and the white princess, instead of presenting the coalition between "Niggers and dagoes," who are being exploited by the white king. The white princess resists the king's sexual advances and chooses an alliance with the black beggar by offering him her heart: "[S]he bared the white flowers of her breast and snatching forth her own red heart held it with one hand aloft while with the other she gathered close her robe and poised herself" (523). This is the most erotic and politically radical scene in *Darkwater*. First, the interracial heterosexual alliance reflects the history of the broken male bond between black workers and "new immigrants." By figuring the cross-gender affiliation rather than that between the "black" and "brown" beggars or "dagoes," Du Bois implicitly critiques the failed class consciousness of "new immigrants," which was expressed in the 1917 Race Riot. Second, the princess offering her bleeding heart is unequivocally sexual. The "red heart" she takes from "the white flowers of her breast" suggests her virginity, an offer accompanied by "bleeding," also commonly associated with losing virginity. This striking symbolism is further intensified because the white princess *initiates* this symbolic interracial sex. After witnessing this "blasphemy," the furious king cuts off her "little, white, heart-holding hand" (523). In this regard, "The Princess of the Hither Isles" parodies the dominant lynching narrative. In the normative lynching story, the self-perceived righteous white men punish (in many cases castrate) a black rapist. Conversely, in this fable, the white king punishes the white woman for her consensual interracial (symbolic) sex with the black beggar. The myth of the black rapist, specifically, the racist trope of the obsessive lust of the black man for the white woman, is thereby replaced by a story of a consensual interracial romance, which, the fable suggests, powerful white men fear the most.

In her anti-lynching polemic, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), Ida B. Wells refutes the typical lynching scenario. However, she does so by describing the white woman as a seductress who provokes the black man into having consensual sex with her. Through her extensive research on alleged rape cases, Wells discovered that white families frequently covered up consensual sexual relationships between black men and white women "with the rhetoric of rape" (Smith 130). Yet, Du Bois's

strategy to debunk the white lynching discourse in “The Princess of The Hither Isles” differs from that of Wells; the former offers a martyr figure and the latter presents the figure of a femme fatale, although both female figures willingly engage in sexual intercourse with black men. In “The Princess of The Hither Isles,” Du Bois undeniably explodes the myth of the black rapist along with that of the white seductress by affording the white princess sexual autonomy that marks her political allegiance. In essence, her acceptance of the black man as her sexual partner sanctifies her status as a martyr. After all, “The Princess of the Hither Isles” illustrates this type of figuration as a strategy that ultimately legitimizes black male interracial sexuality.

The white princess’ sexual agency is closely associated with her political agency. As Eric Sundquist denotes, the white king is modeled on the notorious King Leopold of Belgium (59). Many contemporary readers thus read the story as an allegory of interracial political affiliation in which a black man and a white woman are united in front of a white male imperialist, rather than functioning simply as an example of heterosexual romance. In any case, Du Bois evidently endows the white woman with both political and sexual agency, which she might exercise against white male supremacists. Nevertheless, Du Bois also clearly praises the white woman in order to applaud her embodied interracial romance, rather than to critique her circumscription by white patriarchy. The romantic fable thus illustrates the manner in which Du Bois presents the political and sexual alliance of a black man and a white woman as his alternative utopian vision of anti-racist unity in order to re-establish black male privilege in early twentieth-century United States. How, then, does Du Bois choose to present a black woman’s political and sexual agency?

### **Du Bois’s View of Black Femininity**

Chapter Seven of *Darkwater*, “The Damnation of Women,” portrays how Du Bois offers the black woman political and sexual agency. In this piece, he distinguishes her political agency from her sexual one, and attempts to foreclose the possibility that the black woman might have a positive, productive, and romantic relationship with a white man. Specifically, Du Bois forecloses the possibility that the black woman could have a consensual sexual relationship with a white man, asserting her denial as a form of political agency that allies her with the black man. To examine Du

Bois's representation of black women's agency, it is necessary to address his critique of two dominant stereotypes of them. Here is Du Bois's citation of Alexander Crummell's recollection of his sister under slavery:

In her girlhood all the delicate tenderness of her sex had been rudely outraged. In the field, in the rude cabin, in the press-room, in the factory she was thrown into the companionship of coarse and ignorant men. No chance was given her for delicate reserve or tender modesty. From her childhood she was the doomed victim of the grossest passion. All the virtues of her sex were utterly ignored. If the instinct of chastity asserted itself, then she had to fight like a tiger for the ownership and possession of her own person and oftentimes had to suffer pain and lacerations for the virtuous self-assertion. When she reached maturity, all the tender instincts of her womanhood were ruthlessly violated. At the age of marriage, — always prematurely anticipated under slavery — she was mated as the stock of the plantation were mated, not to be the companion of a loved and chosen husband, but to be the breeder of human cattle for the field or the auction block. (qtd. in *Darkwater* 568–69)

The life of Crummell's sister epitomizes for Du Bois the way racism imposes its physical and discursive violence on the body of the black woman under slavery and racial segregation. Since her girlhood, Crummell's sister has been the victim of white men's sexual violence. "In the field, in the rude cabin, in the press-room, in the factory," indeed, in every area of life, her sexuality is exploited ruthlessly. Thus, her "virtuous self-assertion" requires her "fight[ing] like a tiger" and "suffer[ing] pain and lacerations." The black woman is given no chance for "delicate reserve or tender modesty." Without any legal rights over her own body, she is forced to marry for the purpose of maximizing the benefits of white slave owners. The hyper-exploitation of the female body, whether sexual or not, interacts with the racist discourses about the racialized black body.

The material exploitation of the black female body, which produces both "the doomed victim of the grossest passion" and "the breeder of human cattle," draws attention to two seemingly contradictory racist discourses about black women. The first is that they are sexually available and promiscuous. This Jezebel myth, describing a black woman as "a free-floating libido that threatened white domesticity and white male virtue" (Scruggs 155), is the opposite discourse of the ideal of white womanhood, one resting on piety and sexual purity. This myth also erases black women's victimization by white men's "grossest passion" and justifies white sexual violence by suggesting that the promiscuous nature of a black woman desires such violation. On account of such racist discourse, white men's culpability was displaced by black women's criminality; the crime of rape

was displaced by reciprocal sex at best, or black women's seduction at worst. To use Sandra Gunning's words, the black woman could never be raped because she was "the female equivalent of the black rapist" (10).

The second discourse is that black women are masculine workhorses and lack the characteristics of ideal femininity, which, too, counters the ideal image of contemporary womanhood. Du Bois asserts that black women are not women for white men because those men have "the devilish decree that no woman is a woman who is not by present standards a beautiful woman" (575). He adds that the dominant white culture describes black women as "Not being expected to be merely ornamental, they have girded themselves for work, instead of adorning their bodies" (575). As Hazel Carby indicates, "[s]trength and ability to bear fatigue, argued to be so distasteful a presence in a white woman, were positive features to be emphasized in the promotion and selling of a black female field hand at a slave auction" (25). In Du Bois's words, black women are just "the breeder[s] of human cattle" (569). Even if they were forced to serve as household heads, these black women were "destined to become labeled black matriarchs" (Carby 39). Opposing this myth of Sapphire, Du Bois responds in two ways. First, he explains that black women "are asked to be no more beautiful than God made them, but they are asked to be efficient, to be strong, fertile, muscled, and able to work" (575). Racist social structures are designed so that black males cannot support their families because they are scantily paid or forced to move according to white labor demands. Furthermore, black women themselves "covered up all public suggestions of sexuality, even sexual abuse," hoping that "a desexualized persona might provide the[m] protection" from white men's sexual exploitation (Brown 144). Second, by asking "What is beauty?" Du Bois critiques the "present standards" of female beauty (575). This question begins his further exploration of black femininity and sexuality in Jim Crow America.

Challenging to the denigrating stereotypes of African American women, Du Bois's notion of black femininity centers on idealizing motherhood. He problematically describes racial differences in familial terms: "The father and his worship is Asia; Europe is the precocious, self-centered, forward-striving child, but the land of the mother is and was Africa" (566). Risking essentializing and perhaps feminizing Africa, Du Bois idealizes black motherhood. This is understandable, given "[t]he crushing weight of slavery [that] fell on black women" (567). Specifically, working against the existent interplay between white sexual exploitation of black women

and the negative discourse employed to describe these women, he tries to *normalize* black womanhood by offering a positive discourse derived from his own very conscious idealization of black motherhood. As a result, the Du Boisian ideal of black motherhood seems virtually identical to contemporary ideal womanhood given it emphasizes domesticity and fealty to patriarchal authority.

Du Bois offers another model of black womanhood, which also mirrors the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. He mentions the “strong, primitive types of Negro womanhood” (572) and suggests that these types are materialized in “Harriet Tubman” (571). He describes Tubman as nearly the figure of a war hero and “one of the most important agents of the Underground Railroad and a leader of fugitive slaves” (571). Du Bois accepts that Tubman was a vital agent of the struggle for racial justice and even points out that male officers respected her (571). Thus, the argument that Du Bois does not recognize black women’s political agency is unconvincing.<sup>7</sup>

However, Du Bois’s representation of black women’s political agency remains somewhat problematic given it denies them sexual autonomy, or as in the case of his description of Tubman’s heroism, overlooks such autonomy altogether. Du Bois excludes any prospect of a positive, romantic, interracial union based on mutual understanding and desire between a white man and a black woman in his discussions of black womanhood. The only possible scenario he recognizes is rape. Otherwise, he mobilizes the figure of the black prostitute for his discussion of black womanhood. Undoubtedly, in “The Damnation of Women” in which he lauds Harriet Tubman’s heroic contribution to abolition, Du Bois splits a black female figure into a debased prostitute and saintly Madonna regarding interracial intimacy, the Madonna–whore complex: “It [slavery] has birthed the haunting prostitute, the brawler, and the beast of burden; but it has also given the world an efficient womanhood, whose strength lies in its freedom and whose chastity was won in the teeth of temptation and not in prison and swaddling clothes” (569). Clearly, “the haunting prostitute” does not belong to the type of black womanhood of which Du Bois approves. The “efficient womanhood,” which requires resisting white men’s “temptation,” is the only desirable choice that Du Bois offers for black women. Interestingly, Du Bois’s division of black women resembles Southern male planters’ categorization of women.

7 For example, in her discussion of “The Damnation of Women,” Joy James focuses only on Du Bois’s idealization of black motherhood and overlooks his endorsement of Tubman’s heroism and political agency (74).

According to Catherine Clinton, Southern planters split women into two types: ladies, usually “white and chaste,” and prostitutes, consisting of black women and “white trash,” who were suspected to be having sexual relationships with black men (204). White women who consorted with black men were declared to be “sluts” and remained “permanent outcasts” (210). The planters’ Manichean notion of women does not bestow the values of womanhood onto any white woman romantically involved with black men. Similarly, Du Bois stigmatizes a black woman associated with white men as “the haunting prostitute.” Accordingly, his notion of “efficient womanhood” is significantly informed by the white male discourse in that he implicitly blames black women even when they voluntarily engage in romantic relationships with white men. Black women’s bodies prove the receptacles of white male desire in Du Bois’s figuration, and only women strong enough to resist white men’s “temptation” achieve the ideal of black womanhood: the “efficient womanhood.” Indeed, black men’s control of black women’s sexuality is central to the Du Boisian ideal of black femininity.

### **Coda**

As mentioned earlier, *Darkwater* demonstrates that Du Bois’s class politics is enabled by the juxtaposition of questions of race and gender. His book offers a compelling view of the shift in perceptions of whiteness and its ideological implications for American working-class racial identification in the 1910s. Du Bois’s criticism of the association between dispossession and racial differentiation in early twentieth-century America is quite remarkable given it gravitates toward *intersectional* approaches to the racialized fragmentation of class and its attendant systemization of capitalism. His examination of the historical interconnections of race and class in U.S. capitalism in the years after World War I is the most profound insight found in *Darkwater*, “one of Du Bois’s most important books at the time” (Kaplan 183).

However, the book’s race-class politics proves to be limited, given his exclusive discursive identification with masculine ideals. As illustrated, owing to his gendered view of labor and problematic perception of female sexuality in *Darkwater*, Du Bois’s otherwise powerful critical assessment of the connection of racialization and class marginalization loses its ethical underpinning. Ultimately, *Darkwater* reinforces the black man’s

patriarchal authority within black communities and privileges his interracial heterosexuality. Du Bois's book fails to challenge the intersecting regime of sexism and racism.



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