Postcolonial Theory
and the African American Experience

by

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A century and a quarter ago deportation of the free Negroes might have been feasible; a half century later that was not a practical undertaking; today the deportation or exodus of the Negro American population is an utter impossibility... Nor is there any place to which to take them. There are no more "vacant" places on earth.

James Weldon Johnson, Executive Sec., NAACP, 1934.

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Retiring from the NAACP in 1930 to devote himself to writing, James Weldon Johnson, the composer of the Negro hymn, "Lift Every Voice And Sing," surveyed the international and domestic scenes and pronounced that "the world [was] in a state of semi-chaos."[1] For Johnson, the condition of "Negro Americans," during the opening decades of the 20th Century could not be separated from other geo-political realities. The impoverished condition of major European nations following WWI, the persistent communist and fascist threats, the race and labor riots in northern cities at home, the anti-colonial stirrings abroad, and the Great Depression provide the proper context for appraising the course of Black political action.

The solution to "the race problem" would not be found in the "exodus method" because there was nowhere to go. Johnson states, "[Negro Americans] and the white people may as well make up our minds definitely that we, the same as they, are in this country to stay" (Johnson 148-149). The Negro problem is the White man's burden, and the White man's burden is the Negro's problem.[23] The resolution of this conundrum of Black and White relations is tied to the destiny of America and her place among other nations. Black people in America, however, reserve the right to determine the course of their response to America's race problem. "White America," Johnson explains, "will simply have to sustain a situation that is of its own making, not ours."[4]

Johnson assigns the blame of America's racial problem to Whites and, by so doing, drains the counter-actions of Blacks of any moral valuation. That is, Johnson places the question of Black response to White racism outside of the moral realm. Even acts of physical violence on the part of oppressed Blacks cannot be judged immoral. For him, it is simply a matter of a practical response to an unpleasant situation. "The resort to force," states Johnson, "remains and will doubtless always remain the rightful recourse of oppressed peoples." He reminds us that America "was established upon that right."[5] For Johnson, Black response to White oppression must be judged for its "soundness" and not "on any moral or pacific grounds." Physical force is to be rejected because it "would be futile." Johnson writes, "We would be justified in taking up arms or anything we could lay hands on and fighting for the common rights we are entitled to and denied, if we had a chance to win. But I know and we all know there is not a chance."[6] The chance of a successful armed revolt by Black Americans is diminished by the sheer numerical imbalance: there are simply many more Whites than Blacks. [7]

The continuing debates concerning the character and content of resistance to acts of White supremacy ideology reveal the degree to which Black Americans perceive their condition as being that of a colonized people.[8] However, postcolonial theorists tend not to consider the experiences of African Americans when exploring matters of imperialism. This oversight has left postcolonial theorists without recourse to the African American experience as a resource for understanding and possibly resolving the knotty problem of positionality. Moreover, this omission allows for the false reading of the Western imperialist impulse as distinct from Black chattel slavery in America and Jim and Jane Crowism.[9]

In this paper I suggest that debates within the African American community over the direction of organized resistance to US racism reveal the degree to which African Americans understood their struggle to be connected with those on the Mother Continent and the African Diaspora. I examine the relationship between White attitudes toward Blacks in terms of the laws passed to prescribe (e.g., the United States Constitutions counted Blacks as 3/5 persons) and describe the status of Blacks within the modern nation-state.

Next I argue that White attitudes towards Blacks constitute an international discourse among European peoples. And this international discourse reinforces White supremacy ideology even as it modifies White racist behavior. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that both colonialism and African American oppression share a common progenitor - White supremacy ideology - and that the African American experience offers postcolonial theorists fertile material for exposing and surmounting the oppressive nature of modern western discourse.

Scholars who make use of W.E.B. Du Bois' prescient pronouncement that the problem facing the 20th Century was the "color line" often do so without appreciating the context of its penning. Un-contextualized quoting of Du Bois, and other major African American figures, obscures the predicament of Black people in America by casting it against the narrow backdrop of a quest for enfranchisement.[10] This tendency comes from the practice of reading the Black American experience between the lines of the U.S. Constitution (which defines the rights and responsibilities of citizenship) and its accompanying Bill of Rights (which restricts the scope of governmental powers). For example, historians are nearly unanimous about the date when the American system of slavery ended. Such rare scholarly agreement is owed to the fact that on December 18, 1865, following a narrow passage in the House of Representatives, three-quarters of the states ratified the Thirteenth Amendment making slavery illegal within the United States. When the history of slavery is embellished by the passing of the Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments it easily collapses into a tale about the enfranchisement of Black Americans. Here the cry of the enslaved for liberation is translated into a mere clamor for American citizenship.

The passing of Constitutional Amendments did not resolve the problem of Black-White relations in America, although it appeared to ameliorate them. In a real sense, the problem of Black-White relations is "extra-constitutional," because the attitudes, motivations, and policies of America are, in part, shaped by its place/relationship within the international community. That is, Black-White relations in America reflect a particular manifestation of the pandemonium of White supremacy ideology. Certainly, some of the physical tortures and psychic violence endemic to a system of chattel slavery were abated through legislative acts and progressive persons acting contrary to prevailing conventions and customs; however, the struggle for genuine Black social equality continued. The state of race relations in America is, in part, an extra-constitutional matter in that the attitudes and motivations which shape and drive so much of America's social policy history are related to America's standing within the international community. The point, here, is that no nation is an island unto itself. While each nation may duly claim the right of sovereignty, this should not be construed as an assertion of radical autonomy. State sovereignty is relational. For instance, the colonists' Declaration of Independence (1776) from British rule would have meant little had the French decided not to recognize it and support the rebellion.

The nature of U.S. Black-White relations is related to modern Western discourses of culture/civilization and Western economic relations with Africans. Winthrop Jordan, in *White over Black* (1968), convincingly suggests the evolution of White America's attitudes toward Blacks beginning in 1550 when the first English voyagers touched upon the shores of West Africa. Jordan writes, "Initially… English contact with Africans did not take place primarily in a context which prejudged the Negro as a slave, at least not as a slave of Englishmen. Rather, Englishmen met Negroes merely as another sort of men."[11]

Jordan also tells us that while the Englishmen were aware of the obvious physical and cultural distinctions between the Africans and themselves, their perceptions of these distinctions were related to the "circumstances of contact in Africa." Moreover, the "previously accumulated traditions concerning that strange and distant continent, and certain special qualities of English society on the eve of its expansion into the New World" conspired against a positive appreciation of the African (Jordan 1968: 4).

The Englishmen's first impressions of the African cannot be separated from geo-political developments occurring throughout the Western world. Like the Portuguese and Spanish before them, Englishmen would use Africans as a source of labor for an expanding empire and as a psychological mirror to envision their own White character. Jordan contends, "As with skin color, English reporting of African customs constituted an exercise in self-inspection by means of comparison . . . Thus the Englishman's ethnocentrism tended to distort his perception of African culture" (Jordan 1968: 25). Further on, Jordan asserts, "The English errand into Africa was not a new or a perfect community but a business trip" (Jordan 1968: 27).

The trading of African bodies for "iron bars, firearms, liquor, beads, cloth, and other European products" required the participation of African leaders (Ginzberg & Eichner 1993: 13). The need for labor in Great Britain's North American colonies and the lucrative-ness of the maritime trade industry may explain why colonists saw nothing incongruent with exchanging commodities for servantry. After all, as Ginzberg and Eichner remind us, before 1776, close to 80 percent of the millions of persons who arrived in the colonies were under some form of servitude.[12] However, the question asked by Ginzberg and Eichner remains, "Why was it that the Negro alone, of the many peoples who came to these shores, failed to win the full rights and privileges of citizenship?" (Ginzberg & Eichner 1993: 13)

Prior to the arrival of the first Negroes, the colonists of Virginia had established the practice of indentured servitude that financed the promotion and transportation of labor reserves to the colony. "There was nothing in British history to suggest that her colonies would adopt the institutions of slavery" (Ginzberg and Eichner 1993: 12).[13] The institution of slavery was not an inevitable development. So why did it happen?

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Clearly, a simple economic reason for the development of the slave system will fail to convince the propertyless, religiously sympathetic, politically weak colonist. .[14] The enslavement of Negroes in America was due to a sort of absentmindedness or, as Jordan contends, to an "unthinking decision."[15] "No one had in mind to establish the institution of Negro slavery" (Jordan 1968: 44). "Yet in less than a century the foundations of a peculiar institution had been laid" (Jordan 1968: 44).

The record of slavery's initial stages is incomplete; not enough extant materials remain for us to trace its complete genealogy. The available evidence (e.g., personal dairies, court records, labor laws, etc.), however, signals a shift in the attitudes of the English towards the Negro. During this "transition period," various "social, religious, and economic factors were at work, stamping the Negro indelibly with the status of slave property" (Ginzberg & Eichner 1993: 13). The Transatlantic Slave Trade so debased the African that "once he became fully the slave it is not hard to see why white men looked down upon him" (Jordan 1968: 44).

The position of Blacks in America was, from the very beginning of the Republic, linked to the racial attitudes that White Americans shared with others in the world-community. The truth of this claim is born out in the case of Dred Scott v. John F. A. Sandford (1857). Here the Supreme Court addressed the issue of Black citizenship within the U.S. Constitution. The specific question before the court was whether or not individual property rights are protected regardless of locale or competing state laws (Bell 1973: 1-2). Having been taken into Illinois (a free state) and to northern Louisiana (also free) before being returned home to Missouri (a slave state), Scott sued for his freedom on the ground that residence on free soil had liberated him (Franklin/Moss 1994: 195).[16] The Court ruled that Scott was not a citizen of the State "in the sense in which the word citizen is used in the Constitution" (Bell 1973: 3). And, therefore, the Court denied him the "privilege of suing in a court" (Bell 1973: 2).[17]

In writing the majority opinion (7 to 2) of the Court, Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney argued that the framers of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution of the United States did not mean for "the class of persons who had been imported as slaves, nor their descendants, whether they become free or not," to be acknowledged as part of the people referred to in those documents (Bell 1973: 6). More telling for our discussion here is the Chief Justice's assessment of the Founding Fathers' understanding of the rights of Blacks on the basis of their humanity. Justice Taney wrote:

It is difficult at this day to realize the state of public opinion in relation to that unfortunate race, which prevailed in the civilized and enlightened portions of the world at the time of the Declaration of Independence, and when the Constitution of the United States was framed and adopted. But the public history of every European nation displays it in a manner too plain to be mistaken (Bell 1973: 6).

What exactly was the international "state of public opinion" toward Blacks? Taney informs us that the Blacks were nearly universally thought to be of "an inferior order...and unfit to associate with the white race." (Bell 1973: 6). In fact, Blacks where held to be "so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." (Bell 1973: 6) This opinion toward Blacks was "regarded as an axiom in morals as well as in politics." (Bell 1973: 6) Chief Justice Taney concludes by stating that no other nation was as "fixed or more uniformly acted" upon this attitude toward Blacks than the "English Government and English people." (Bell 1973: 6) And this attitude also prevailed in the British colonies.

This Western belief in Black inferiority was still alive when, "three months after he signed the [Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln] became the first and last American president to officially deport native-born Americans for racial reasons" (Bennett Jr., 2000: 553). Lincoln sent "450 African-Americans...to an island off the coast of Haiti to establish the first Lincoln colony." (Bennett Jr., 2000: 553) Lerone Bennett, Jr., reports that the "whole affair ended in a comic-opera disaster, with scores of casualties and the survivors covered with bugs and suffering from various illnesses." (Bennett Jr., 2000: 553) Just seven years had passed since the Dred Scott case. It appears that neither Presidential Proclamation nor Constitutional Amendment could modify the popular opinion of White Americans concerning the status of the souls of Black folk.

Again, it would be a mistake to read progress in Black-White relations merely through legislative decrees. We do well to note that in 1807, the British Parliament passed an act that prohibited British subjects from engaging in the slave trade. And in 1811, slave trading was made a felony punishable by exile to a penal colony. Emancipation became part of a general reform movement in Britain in the 1830s, and Parliament abolished slavery in 1833, instituting an apprenticeship program for ex-slaves, an arrangement that lasted until 1838. France and Denmark followed Britain's example in 1848, and the Netherlands did so in 1863. In every case, emancipation resulted from the combined pressure of political reformers, humanitarian idealists, and believers in more efficient methods of production—a coalition that overwhelmed opposition from the colonial owners.[18]

While these abolitionist acts might suggest a shift in the international community's attitude toward Black people, closer examination reveals the shift to be more about acceptable White behavior toward what they saw as the "black savage." In discussing the differences between the attitudes that the Englishmen held toward Africans and those concerning American Indians, Jordan notes:

Despite the fascination and self-instruction Englishmen derived from expatiating upon the savage behavior of Africans, they never felt that savagery was as important a quality in Africans as it was in American Indians (Jordan 1968: 27).

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Jordan explains that "from the beginning...the Negro's savagery was muted by the Negro's color." (Jordan 1968: 27) The American Indians, however, did not "have the appearance of being radically distinct from Europeans." (Jordan 1968: 27) To the English, the Negro seemed to be a radically different kind of man (Jordan 1968: 27-28). It is this radical sense of being different - the sharpness of the "Othering" - that survived even the most eloquent expression of judicial restraints on the behavior of White folk toward Black folk. "Not only was his skin black, but other parts of his anatomy, such as his lips and nose, were noticeably peculiar" and "these physical differences then became the basis for asserting other differences" (Ginzberg and Eichner 1993: 13).

Such observable phenotypic differences became the basis for the racialization of Negroes. As Barbara J. Fields argues, race functions as an ideology created by Whites in order to make sense of their engagement with Blacks. The racing of Blacks, however, didn't emerge simultaneously with the slave system. But only when the percentage of free Whites reached a critical mass in relations to enslaved Blacks did the need for an ideology that viewed the latter as racially inferior arise. The racial inferiority of Blacks was invented, according to Fields, to reconcile the fact that in the newly founded republic that was based on radical concepts of liberty and natural rights, some people were denied these rights (Fields 1990: 95).[19]

The case of Dred Scott, a light-skinned mulatto, illustrates the power of racial ideology to trump biology. Despite his White ancestry, Scott failed the "one drop rule" and consequentially was designated as Black and denied his freedom.[20] It is this same racialization that allowed European powers to carve up the African continent and parcel it among themselves without the input of Africans.

The carving of Africa occurred on a wintery Saturday in November 1884, four years before the Brazilian Senate would outlaw slavery, when "nineteen plenipotentiaries, with fifteen assistants, representing fourteen great and lesser Powers,...took their seats at the horseshoe table" in the home of Prince Otto von Bismarck (Pakenham 1991: 239). It was the opening day of the Berlin West Africa Conference. The reason for the conference was clear. The European nation's "Scramble for Africa" - the "undignified rush...to build empires in Africa" - was about to peak. The struggle among European nations for control over Africa's resources and the flow of trade throughout the continent made the balance of world power unstable. This was especially the case for Britain and France, the two "Great Powers" (Parkenham 1991: 240). The ensuing competition "helped to poison the political climate in Europe, brought Britain to the brink of a war with France, and precipitated a struggle with the Boers,...the bloodiest [English]war since 1815" (Parkenham 1991: xxi).

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The Great Powers gathered, at the request of Bismarck (the master statesman), to decide on the rules for the Scramble. The rules were simple: "free trade for the Congo, free navigation on the Niger, and agreement on the formalities for future annexations of territory - meaning a set of rules acceptable to all countries" (Parkenham 1991: 241).

The successful expeditions of Livingstone, Speke, and Stanley into the "heart of darkness" - the interior of the African continent - revealed the richness of its soil, vast natural resources, and available Black hands for labor. But the conquest of Africa and her Black people would be tempered by formal agreements couched in the language of free trade and respect for the sovereignty of White nation-states. The point here is that just nineteen years after having abolished slavery with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, America took her seat at Bismarck's horseshoe table and watched as her international peers prepared to carve up the heart of the dark continent.

Although not particularly keen on the idea of launching her own colonial campaign in Africa, America's presence at the table suggests that it is proper for us to cast the domestic nature of Black-White relations in the United States, at any given moment, in the light of contemporary geo-political realities. This also suggests that intra-national attitudes and opinions regarding the status of Black humanity, relative to that of White humanity, are better understood within the context of an inter-national discourse about the sovereignty of nation-states. [21] That is to say, the imperial gaze is struck at the point where ideologies of White racial superiority and "romantic nationalism" intersect. (Parkenham 1991: xxii) The experience of Black people in the Jim/Jane Crowed American South, and the experience of Black Algerians under French rule result from the same confluence of legitimized racial repression and White jingoism that was negotiated in an "internationalized" market-place-of-ideas.

By not relating the African American struggle to the content of modern Western discourse, with its rhetoric of nation-state, constitution, law, and national sovereignty, postcolonial theorists fail to connect American manifestations of White supremacy ideology to European imperialist projects. Cornel West asserts that the very mode of modern Western discourse "secretes" a notion of supremacy. In his seminal, though under-appreciated, *Prophesy Deliverance! (1982)*, West reminds us that "the notion that black people are human beings is a relative new discovery in the West" (West 1982: 47)

West argues that the African American "encounter with the modern world has been shaped first and foremost by the doctrine of white supremacy." (West 1982: 47) I would extend this perspective to all Africans. The potency of this doctrine is demonstrated in "institutional practices and enacted in everyday folkways under varying circumstances and evolving conditions." (West 1982: 47) For West, the idea of White supremacy is constitutive of modern discourse and, as such, presupposes a certain hierarchical ordering of its subjects.

If we take West's claim seriously, then, explanations for slavery and other forms of racial oppression based on labor demands, political interests, or psychologies of "Othering" fail to be satisfactory. Such explanations are useful; but they appeal to natural characteristics that, in the end, cannot account for the uniqueness of the invention of the idea of White racial superiority. The missing variable in these explanations is the structure of modern discourse. "Modern Discourse *at its inception*," writes West, "produced forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity as well as aesthetic and cultural ideas which require the constitution of the idea of white supremacy" (West 1982: 47).[22] The logical structure of Western discourse renders certain ideas "incomprehensible and unintelligible." (West 1982: 47)

The logic of modern discourse is a "discourse of exclusion" that renders notions of "black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity" illogical. West agues

The authority of science, undergirded by a modern philosophical discourse guided by Greek ocular metaphors and Cartesian notions, promotes and encourages the activities of observing, comparing, measuring, and ordering the physical characteristics of human bodies (West 1982: 48).

It is the confluence of scientific authority, obsession with Greco-Roman standards of beauty, and intellectual egocentrism that mark the boundaries of modern discourse. Early in the 20th Century, the equality of Black humanity was outside these boundaries, it was a barbarous act to even imagine such an idea. West states, "the intellectual legitimacy of the idea of white supremacy...was pervasive" (West 1982: 61).

Of course, White supremacy ideology was not confined to modes of discourse; but it found expression in the enslavement and colonization of African peoples. However, the histories of African peoples are replete with episodes of their radical rejection of White people's attempted negation and marginalization of their personhood. Plantation uprisings, wars for independence, the creation of Jazz music, the advent of Black philosophy and displays of athletic acumen all testify against the logical structure of modern discourse.

Indeed, African American enslavement is linked to African colonialism because they are both manifestations of a discourse that is polluted with the logic of White supremacy ideology. So when Du Bois declared that the problem of the twentieth-century would be that of the color line he was articulating the acute reality of White supremacy ideology. At the dawning of the 20th Century, the first century in American history not to have known the peculiar institution of slavery, America was still hostile to the idea of respect for the dignity of Black humanity. "The enslavement of Africans," West asserts, "served as the linchpin of American democracy" (West 1994: 156).

Indeed, "the much-heralded stability and continuity of American democracy was predicated upon black oppression and degradation" (West 1994: 156).[23] For West, "the distinctive American feature [is] the basic racial divide of black and white peoples" (Race Matters, 1994 157). West's declaration of America's historic "racial divide" echoes W.E.B. Du Bois' decree.

David Levering Lewis, in *W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a Race*, situates Du Bois' pronouncement of the "color line" problem within the context of a debate between African American leaders regarding the best course of action for the uplifting of the race. There was general agreement that education was crucial for improving the lot of both the race and the individual; it also was a good way of matching the Negro's genius to that of Whites. However, there were sharp divisions as to what would be the nature of that education. On the one hand, there were those who aligned themselves with Booker T. Washington's philosophy of Negro improvement. The "Bookerites," as they were called, supported the Tuskegee University model of an educational curriculum aimed at training Blacks for work in the Southern economy. The Bookerites thought that the Negroes' education should focus on mastering agriculture, mechanics, construction, etc. – e.g., offer a practical education. Politically, these people held that Blacks should not stress issues of social integration with Whites, but devote their energies, time, and talents to carving out a niche for themselves in Southern life and economy. Washington used the analogy of a hand to explain his vision of Black and White social relations. He said that in social matters Blacks and Whites should be as separate as fingers on a hand, but in times of national crisis they should come together to form a fist.[24]

On the other hand, there were the anti-Bookerites, or "civil rights radicals," who fought against limiting Negro education to practical training. Moreover, "a national organization for protest, the Afro-American Council, functioned irregularly for nearly two decades" before falling under Washington's control. Additionally, "a small group of Negro intellectuals, led by Du Bois, formed the Niagara Movement to oppose Washington's program – which, they insisted, had failed to stem the tide of racial proscription."[25] They pushed for a broad curriculum where the humanities and professional studies such as law were taught. Politically, they were concerned with "civil rights" and challenging moves to disenfranchise Negroes.

However, Lewis tells us that there was a third group— the White philanthropists. The Southern Education Board (SEB) was founded in 1901 and the "prodigiously endowed" General Education Board (GEB) came into existence the next year (Lewis 1993: 266).   These boards were heavily endowed. For instance, between 1905 and 1909, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., gave "a head-spinning $52 million" to the GEB (Lewis 1993: 266). "The impact of the board was unprecedented as it substituted for a nonexistent federal department of education"(Lewis 1993: 267).

The board distributed funds to "historically white colleges and universities" and "to those serving African-Americans." (Lewis 1993: 267) The philosophy of the GEB favored the Bookerites. In fact, Washington was appointed the "salaried field agent of the SEB." (Lewis 1993: 267) His position with the SEB and "special relationship to Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt" made Washington "the supreme gatekeeper of rewards" and the "disciplinarian of truant African-Americans." (Lewis 1993: 268)

Lewis writes that while Du Bois disagreed with Washington's willingness to compromise civil rights for educational training, he "understood that to attack Washington was to mistake shadow for substance." (Lewis 1993: 275) The real enemy was "the white people who ordained that an entire race should remain indefinitely subordinate." (Lewis 1993: 275) Lewis tells us that ninety-nine lynchings took place in 1901 alone. Behind the disfranchisement and victimization of African-Americans, "Du Bois saw a metaphysic of oppression that was cause and effect." (Lewis 1993: 275) Here Lewis writes "It was, then, the ethos, science, and propaganda of racial dehumanization as much as Bookerite compromises that unsettled and finally drove Du Bois into the ranks of so-called civil rights radicals." (Lewis 1993: 275-6) Lewis continues:

It was grim enough that his people were being lynched in the South and ghettoized in the North, but there now loomed the even more horrendous prospect that such brutalities could cease to be deplored (however formally or hypocritically) as un-American and become, in the regime of the emergent ideology, officially sanctioned instruments of racial subjugation. (Lewis 1993: 276)

According to Lewis, Du Bois was disturbed by the lack of general out-rage against the brutality and public display of desecrated Black bodies. Instead of causing revulsion, the "strange fruit that hung from southern trees" seemed to promote celebration among Whites.[26] Pieces of tarred-and-feathered Black bodies were taken as souvenirs or put on display in the local market. Du Bois surmised that the emerging scientific method of inquiry prevalent in the academy was granting a certain type of authority to this hideous and flagrant treatment of Blacks.[27]

Some Whites applied the authority of science to their view of the Negro as being "between the great apes and hominids." (Lewis 1993: 276) Biologists, psychologists, and physicians gave credence to the rising "national white consensus" that "African-Americans were inferior human beings whose predicament was three parts their own making and two parts the consequence of misguided white philanthropy" (Lewis 1993: 276). It was in such a national climate where the sheer viciousness of modern discourse appeared to have lured even its targets into support (note William Hannibal Thomas' book, *Dial of The American Negro*, 1901), that Du Bois "resolved to write of the genius, humanity, and enviable destiny of his race with such passion, eloquence, and penetration that claims of African-American inferiority would be sent reeling, never to recover full legitimacy and vitality, despite their enormous resiliency" (Lewis 1993: 277).

When *The Souls of Black Folk* was released in 1903, it challenged prevailing views of the nature of Black and White interactions. It presented a new interpretation of a three hundred year relationship between European and African peoples. "It was one of those events epochally dividing history into a before and after," notes Lewis (Lewis 1993: 277). It was a radical retort to the White supremacy ideology that informs the logic of modern discourse. The book was a rude insertion of a different discursive note – what Cornel West calls a "Blue note" – that reflected the intelligence and dignity of those whom Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) calls a "Blues People."[28] Lewis writes,

The tone is calmly portentous, as the author settles the reader into his tale of "the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning to the Twentieth Century." Elucidating that meaning, Du Bois pens again the incomparable phrase that leaps from the page into indelible memory: "This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader, for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (Lewis 1993: 279).

By connecting Du Bois's "color line" pronouncement with the very structural logic of modern discourse we begin to see how the European encounter with Africa was guided, in part, by modalities of expression and ways of interpreting the world. Moreover, we are less likely to mistake the "enemy" for its shadowy manifestation (i.e., institutional slavery or colonialism) rather, than, its organic authorization (i.e., the ability of modern discourse to articulate "Truth"). In their own way, Du Bois, Johnson, and West argue against a simple domestic reading of the African American experience. Instead they place the whole American experience in dialogue with European imperialism. They read the experiences of African peoples — and that of racially oppressed people the world over — as one sorrowful saga of the "underside of modern discourse" (West 1982: 48).[29]

Including the African American experience into the panorama of postcolonial theory exposes the full spectacle of Western aggression against humanity. Indeed, there are lessons to be learned here. For example, the debate among African American leaders over the proper response to racial oppression complicates the role of the postcolonial cultural critic and issues of "positionality." Leela Ganhdi, *Postcolonial Theory* (1998), states that "the problem of 'positionality'...devolves upon the progressive intellectual the task of continually resisting the institutional procedures of co-opting — such an intellectual must relentlessly negotiate the possibility of being...'outside in the teaching machine' (Ganhdi 1998: 59). This is, of course, the very enigma of American racism that Du Bois expressed as the Negro's "double consciousness," the sense of being both Black and American. Here Du Bois is speaking of an "interior positionality," or a psychological duality. This is akin to the effects of colonialism on the Algerian self-conception described by Frantz Fanon in his 1967 book, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

However, the African American experience allows for a deeper interrogation of the issue of "positionality" by calling into question the implicit assumption of a true galvanizing center. For example, the American Civil War can be read as a crisis of modern discourse, a crack in the internal logic of White supremacy. Here, the discourse of White abolitionists (e.g., William L. Garrison, John Brown, Wendell Phillips, etc.) speaks of the inability of modern discourse to mute discordant bids for truth.

The point is that White supremacy has always been a contested notion, even among those who would be its immediate beneficiaries. The subject of slavery in America reveals a glitch in the structure of modern discourse — it requires socio-political negotiation. The glitch in modern discourse is that while it denies the rationality of certain ideas (e.g., equality of Black humanity), it cannot command adherence to its own conclusions (e.g., many Whites reject the notion of White superiority) — our negotiation of the structure of modern discourse has socio-political implications (e.g., can we attempt to subvert the modern language structure?).

Gandhi states that the problem of positionality "becomes urgent when we reconsider Foucault's and [Gayatri] Spivak's warnings about the centre's parasitic relationship to the margin." However, the African American experience teaches us that the "centre" is not unitary but it is fractionalized. In fact, the centre is not a safe place for anyone because it feeds upon itself — it is utilitarian and not democratic – always acting in its own best interest. It is in this context that we can interpret the meaning that Howard Zinn applies to John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859. Zinn states that Brown "was hanged, with federal complicity, for attempting to do by small-scale violence what Lincoln would do by large-scale violence several years later— end slavery" (Zinn 1995: 167). Postcolonial theorists could learn a great deal from a closer examination of the African American colonial experience.

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[1] James Weldon Johnson, "Negro Americans, What Now?", in Francis L. Broderick and August Meier, eds. *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century.* Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965, p. 148.

[2] Ibid, pp. 148-9.

[3] See Winthrop D. Jordan's *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*, 1974.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid, p. 149.

[6] Ibid.

[7] It should be noted that where Blacks comprised a significant percentage of the population, the tendency to revolt was greater.   This fact was not lost on the Black population in America. As Johnson observed, "the situation of the African natives is...the reverse...on the point of comparative numerical strength." What is missing here is the degree to which early Black Americans saw themselves allies in struggle with other African Disporians against white Europeans. Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (1998), presents court testimony from the trail of Denmark Vesey that confirms the "diasporic content" of his 1822 insurrection in Charleston, South Carolina. I need not argue the case that enslaved Black Americans resisted White domination; however, I want to highlight the degree to which such resistance reveals their sense of connection to other Africans.

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[8] See Hugh Hawkins work, *Booker T. Washington and His Critics: Black Leadership in Crisis* (1962, 1974), for a good overview of the various opinions and programs for Black liberation. August Meier, *Negro Thought In America, 1880-1915* (1963, 1966, 1969), connects the Southern race system with the "New Imperialism" of the late 19th Century. Also, the recent discussions over reparation for slavery have polarized Black leadership. Randall Robinson, *The Debt: What America Owes To Blacks* (2000), argues that reparations are owed to the "Black World."

[9] Cornel West adds the uniquely American phenomena of lynching to this list. An excellent treatment of lynching (caution: very graphic) is *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Twin Palms Publishers. 2000).

[10] Here I have in mind scholars such as Dinesh D'Souza, Shelby Steele, and John McWhorter who argue that the successful passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 marked the "End of Racism" and Black enfranchisement into the national character as equals.

[11] Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1968, p. 3.

[12] Russell R. Menard, "Indentured Servitude," puts this percentage at "one-half to two-thirds." See, *The Reader's Companion To American History*, eds. Eric Foner & John A. Garraty, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999. p.542.

[13] The only legal case recorded in England prior to 1670 regarding slavery was that of a Mr. Cartwright who was brought into court for beating a slave he had purchased in Russia. The judge ruled "that England was too pure an Air for Slaves to breath in" (Ginzberg & Eichner 11; Helen T. Catterall, *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, Carnegie Institute, Washington, D.C., 1929, Vol. I, p.9.).

[14] See Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade (1980),* for an economic argument for the slave trade p. 53-85.

[15] Basil Davidson, *The African Slave Trade*, says that the slave trade began with "at first a trickle" of blacks being sold "and then a flood" (Davis 53-63).

[16] He lived at Fort Snelling military in northern Louisiana – at that time part of the Wisconsin Territory. See Paul Finkelman, *Dred Scott v. Sandford: A Brief History with Documents.* Massachusetts: Bedford Books. 1997. p. 2.

[17] The issue of the constitutionality of the Missouri Compromise and the right of Congress to regulate the territories lie at the center of this case. In a real sense, the Scott's status is of secondary concern given the sectional disputes that are raging (Finkelman, Dred Scott v. Sandford).

[18] Basil Davis interrogates Dr. Eric Williams's controversial thesis that the very success of slave trade was its own demise. In additions to an emerging industrial based economy, Davis allows for the raise of "new moral and political attitudes" as factors in the diminution of slavery (Davis 85).

[19] In Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), the Supreme Court upheld the practice of segregation to be constitutional.

[20] The "one drop rule" held that a drop of Black blood made a person Black. For an excellent discussion of the paradox of the one drop rule, see Scott L. Malcomson's *One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race* (2000), p. 356.

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[21] John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery To Freedom* (1994), informs us that American ministers to Haiti and Liberia have traditionally been black. The authors write, "For an America that would like to boast of having the most enlightened policy in the world, the problem of color at home served to check the liberalism of that policy in the empire of darker peoples" (308). Recent examples of how international politics affects US Black and White relations can be seen in the South Africa divestment movement of the 1960s and the Anti-Apartheid movement in the 1980s. In 1985, The Congressional Black Caucus sponsored a "March Against Apartheid" in Washington, D.C. . They helped override the president's veto of sanctions against South Africa (Franklin & Moss 560).

[22] According to West, the controlling metaphors, notions, categories and norms that govern modern discourse were formed during the Age of Genius – 17th Century (West 50).

[23] West, like Barbara J. Fields, argues that racial ideology is of greater importance to Whites than to Blacks. West asserts, "Without the presence of black people in America, European-Americans would not be 'white'- they would be only Irish, Italians, Poles, Welsh, and others…" (*Race Matters* 156)

[24] See Booker T. Washington's Platform of Accommodation in Francis L. Broderick and August Meier, eds. *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965, p. 6

[25] Francis L. Broderick and August Meier, eds. *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965, pp. xx-xxi.

[26] Billie "Lady Day" Holiday recorded the antilynching song "Strange Fruit" in 1939. See Kirk W. Fuoss's article, "Lynching Performance, Theatres of Violence" (1999), for an excellent treatment of lynchings as "performance-saturated events."

[27] See West's "A Genealogy Of Modern Racism" for a good discussion on racism in the enlightenment (*Prophesy* 47-65).

[28] LeRoi Jones. *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed From it*. New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks. 1963.

[29] For instance, in his paper, "The Conservation Of Races" (1897), W.E.B. Du Bois argues that the Negro, like other races, has a special gift to offer the world. This paper represents his youthful belief in the ability of knowledge to remove the negative attitudes of Whites toward Blacks. That is he held that Whites could be persuaded, via a demonstration of the Negro's ability to achieve in all areas, that they were wrong in their assumptions about the limits of Black genius. Additionally, Kathleen Pfeiffer is convincing in her arguing for reading James Weldon Johnson's semi-fictional work, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), and his autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), as "resounding denunciations of racial categorization in America" (Pfeiffer 416). In particular, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* suggests that passing as a theme challenges the racial construction of one's own identity while revealing the intersection of race, individuality and nationalism. Pfeiffer concludes, "through his racial vacillation, the Ex-Colored Man locates his self-invention in an identity which is both sympathetic to many races and independent of any single racial affiliation" (Pfeiffer 416). Lastly, West has been criticized for participating in forms of popular cultural product. In particular, the release of his CD "*Sketches of My Culture*" has generated a lot of heat. In an "In Depth" interview on C-Span Cable Channel, West defended the project as "Danceable Education."

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Using the medium of song, West raps about the "real frontlines." He says, "Lots of brothers and sisters have the wrong conception of the frontline. They believe that the frontline is gang banging on the streets." West asks his listeners to join him in lifting "up the bloodstained banner for justice and freedom." He wants them to see the Black struggle in relation to the struggle of "Mexican workers, Colombian peasants, [and] Iraqi babies" (*Sketches track* 5). Upon examination, the CD depicts a master educator and gifted public intellectual at work. Here West identifies himself with the tradition of African American cultural producers; while at the same time he brings both moral and political critique to bear upon its expressions. He attempts to draw African Americans into a larger cultural framework.