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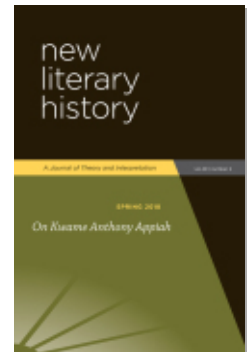
"Du Bois" / "Race"

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## “Du Bois” / “Race”

Robert Gooding-Williams

Contemporary philosophers have devoted considerable attention to W. E. B. Du Bois's definition of race in “The Conservation of Races” (1897). Indeed, they have given more attention to Du Bois's definition of race in that essay than to his treatment of any other philosophical issue elsewhere in his writings. Nearly all that attention can be traced to Kwame Anthony Appiah's controversial, early engagement with Du Bois in “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race” (1985), an expanded version of which Appiah published as the second chapter of *In My Father's House* (1992). “Du Bois” and “race” belong together in the lexicon of Appiah's evolving philosophical thought because beginning with that early engagement, Du Bois has consistently served Appiah as a touchstone for measuring the significance of his own important contributions to the philosophy of race.<sup>1</sup>

Du Bois's definition proposes that race need not be conceptualized in biological terms, and that a group of human beings counts as a culturally (and spiritually) distinct race just if the members of the group have a common history, common traditions and impulses, and common strivings.<sup>2</sup> Appiah's critique of Du Bois in “The Uncompleted Argument” argues for three key claims: (1) that Du Bois's definition of race in sociohistorical terms (in terms of common history, traditions, impulses, and strivings) fails to state criteria sufficient to individuate the eight culturally distinct races he identifies; (2) that, notwithstanding Du Bois's intention to conceptualize race in sociohistorical terms, the criteria he in fact uses to individuate culturally distinct races comprise a physical, biological component—specifically, the idea of a common ancestry; and (3) that, notwithstanding his ongoing, post-“Conservation” efforts to substitute “a sociohistorical conception of race for the biological one,” the logic of his argument “leads naturally to the final repudiation of race as a term of difference.”<sup>3</sup> Appiah endorses this conclusion, stating that “the truth is that there are no races,” and that “the notion [of race] that Du Bois required, and that underlies the more hateful racisms of the modern era, refers to nothing in the world at all.”<sup>4</sup>

For the most part, philosophical criticism of Appiah's early reading of Du Bois targeted his analysis of Du Bois's definition of—as well as his antirealism about—race. Appiah, partially in response to these criticisms, returns to Du Bois and to the theme of race in "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections" (1996).<sup>5</sup> The essay consists of two parts. In the first, Appiah still denies that races exist, arguing that no matter which of two very different and competing philosophical explanations of the meaning of our race talk we adopt (the ideational account, which explains the meaning of our race talk in terms of our thoughts about race; or the referential account, which explains the meaning of our race talk in terms of the things we refer to when we speak of "races"), we are compelled to accept that there are no races. In the second part, Appiah reexamines Du Bois's sociohistorical turn in the philosophy of race, suggesting that what Du Bois may have been "after" was not the notion of race, "but the idea of racial identity," an idea that Appiah himself endorses.<sup>6</sup>

*Against* races but *for* racial identities, Appiah now casts Du Bois's sociohistorical turn in an appealing light. For Appiah, however, a racial identity is *not* a cultural or spiritual entity of the sort Du Bois discusses in "The Conservation of Races." Rather, Appiah proposes that two individuals may well share a racial identity without having a common culture.

In "Race, Culture, Identity," Appiah argues that an individual has a racial identity only if she is subject to a label, "L" (e.g., "black" or "white"), which is associated with descriptive criteria for applying the label. Not any label will do, however, for there must also exist a "history of associating possessors of the label with an inherited racial essence (even if some who use the label no longer believe in racial essences.)" Finally, having a racial identity requires that one sometimes rely on the label under which one falls to identify as an L—that is, to shape one's life plans to accord with the normative expectations and scripts that come with the label (e.g., the expectation that blacks not embarrass their race).<sup>7</sup>

Appiah's elaboration of a theory of racial identity in "Race, Culture, Identity" quelled the controversy around his interpretation of Du Bois in "The Uncompleted Argument." As Paul C. Taylor has persuasively argued, much of the complaint about that interpretation was driven by Appiah's eliminativist thesis that we should abandon race talk (in other words, we should repudiate race as a term of difference) for the reason that there are no races. For many readers of Appiah, Taylor argues, the critical issue raised by Appiah's early reading of Du Bois was that racial eliminativism both reinforced and was reinforced by the then (late 1980s/early 1990s) increasing prominence of a color-blind racial

ideology, which tended to animate conservative opposition to antiracist politics. By conceding that racial identities exist, even if races do not, Appiah allayed some of his critics' concerns that his racial eliminativism left no conceptual space for criticizing the ideal of color-blindness.<sup>8</sup>

In several works published after “Race, Culture, Identity,” Appiah employs a general account of social identity that builds on his earlier work on racial identity. In *The Ethics of Identity* (2005), for example, he argues that having the sort of social identity that matters for ethical and political life not only involves the availability of labels, the criteria for applying labels, and the tendency to identify as someone to whom a label applies (again, to identify as an L), but, additionally, the tendency to be treated as the sort of person to whom that label applies (to be treated as an L).<sup>9</sup> And in *The Honor Code* (2010), he shows that social identities determine what codes of honor require of us, adding that “we may both gain and lose honor through the successes and failures of those with whom we share an identity.”<sup>10</sup>

*Lines of Descent*, Appiah's most recent book-length treatment of social identity, is likewise an extended reevaluation of Du Bois's philosophy of race. In “The Uncompleted Argument,” Appiah represents his “repudiation of race as a term of difference” as completing an argument that Du Bois “never quite managed to complete.”<sup>11</sup> In *Lines of Descent*, he similarly represents his account of social and specifically racial identities as completing a line of thought that, again, Du Bois undertook but left underdeveloped: while “Du Bois's social constructionism . . . urges us to move from thinking of the Negro race as a natural, biological kind to thinking of it as composed of people who share a socially made identity,” Appiah believes that Du Bois never “fully made this move,” encouraging us “to make [it] without him.”<sup>12</sup>

Even if Appiah's Du Bois, like Appiah himself, sees how to understand the Negro race as a group sharing a social identity that is nominal (it requires labels), normative (it depends on norms of identification and norms of treatment), and subjective (it shapes conscious acts of identification), he needs something more for his political purposes. For Du Bois, on this view, a philosophically respectable, rationally defensible account of race in terms of an “identity schema” is inadequate to the task of uniting and mobilizing the dark masses.<sup>13</sup> Rather, “political potency” requires a “counter-Enlightenment” sensibility that might embrace the “mystical spell of a shared memory and some pulsating sense of a common destiny.” Put differently, it requires an account of the sort that Du Bois initially proposed in “The Conservation of Races,” but for which, “The Uncompleted Argument” already suggests, he never found rational

support.<sup>14</sup> Appiah's Du Bois could never be fully *for* racial identities because he could never be fully *against* races. Appiah completes Du Bois, he suggests, by explaining why we should be both.

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## NOTES

1 See W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *The Problem of the Color Line At the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays*, ed. Nahum Dimitri Chandler (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2015), 51–65; Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 21–37; and Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).

2 Robert Gooding-Williams, "W. E. B. Du Bois," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/dubois/>.

3 Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument," 34–35.

4 Appiah, *In My Father's House*, 45.

5 Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 30–105.

6 Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," 81.

7 Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," 81–82, 92, 96. For the sake of consistency with Appiah's later formulations, I have substituted "L" where he uses "R" in "Race, Culture, Identity."

8 Paul C. Taylor, "Bare Ontology and Social Death," *Philosophical Papers* 42, no. 3 (2013): 369–89.

9 Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 65–71.

10 Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: Norton, 2010), 64.

11 Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument," 35.

12 Appiah, *Lines of Descent: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014), 158.

13 Appiah, *Lines of Descent*, 162.

14 Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument," 34; Appiah, *Lines of Descent*, 162–3.