

“Or what is it you buy so dear/with your pain and with your fear?": Black Reconstruction and the Tragedy of Allegiance to Whiteness

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Abstract: We argue that *Black Reconstruction* remains the most important work of United States history published in the 20th Century. It is unmatched for its scope, which insists on understanding Reconstruction in a longer timeline than conventionally done, and for its clarity of purpose. It exposes how allegiance to white reunification with the South led northern white historians to promote racist interpretations of what Reconstruction sought to accomplish, by whom, and to what degree its goals were democratic and profoundly viable. By situating the end of racial, chattel slavery in the United States in multiple processes of democratic reform that included the mass self-direction of enslaved people, Du Bois invalidated decades of historiography that continued to deny the capacity of Black intellectual leadership. Du Bois further demonstrated how, in emerging from chattel slavery, Black people joined already existing networks led by free Black people and their white allies providing resources and political commitment to building and sustain Black equality and securing the rights guaranteed in the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution in the post-war United States. Its expansive research base, its rigorous

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methodology, and its conclusions laid the basis for subsequent generations to continue the project of studying relationships between racism and the limits of class-for-itself organizing in the US; the failure of US labor to intervene against American imperial expansion and militarism; and the ongoing willingness to retain allegiance to racial rather than class aspirations, even when not named as such.

Keywords: Black Reconstruction; whiteness; working-class history.

2025 MARKS THE 90th anniversary of the publication of W.E.B. Du Bois's unparalleled work, *Black Reconstruction in America, An Essay Toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*. This staggering and original work of history was reviewed only in 2022 in the *American Historical Review* (AHR), the leading venue for historians in the United States, as part of a package of apologies and corrections for past oversights and errors. It is not wrong to say that the book and its arguments were suppressed by a convergence of white gatekeepers from the historical profession who defended those Du Bois sought to expose – he did – and unseat – he did not. Though never severed from those roots, the justifications for this continued silencing were certainly various across the decades and are not now fully knowable. But it is safe to say that the flagship journal of historians in the US ignored – in an ongoing way - what is perhaps the most significant book of US history in its century. That in 1910, AHR had published Du Bois's article, "Reconstruction and its Benefits," a revised version of his 1909 paper delivered at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting, suggests that his ideas were already marked for annihilation by its powerful readers long before *Black Reconstruction* was published. Notably, in 1910 Du Bois had asked that the AHR retain his capitalization of the letter "N" in the word "Negro"; then editor J. Franklin Jameson Refused. This would be the first and the only article authored by a Black scholar that the AHR published for nearly 70 more years.

We begin with this anecdote to underline the extent to which our admiration of Du Bois centers on our admiration for his determination and fortitude as well as for his research and ideas. That Du Bois was the first African American student to be granted a PhD by Harvard University, that his 1895 dissertation, "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870," was the first written by a Black scholar that Harvard published, in 1896, and many other details drawn from his remarkable biography are widely-circulated. What we cannot know, but want to pause to honor, is how doggedly, how unflinchingly, and with how much exasperation and repetition Du Bois must have had to fight over quotidian, seemingly small but in fact hugely consequential matters – such as the capitalization of the "n" in Negro.¹

1 PARFAIT, Claire. Rewriting History: The Publication of W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). *Book History*, v. 12, p. 266-294, 2009.

Scholars who have written about *Black Reconstruction* point out that it did not fail to attract favorable notice from reviewers, some of them academic historians and sociologists, especially in the popular press. Published by Harcourt Brace, and Company in 1935, it attracted considerable attention in newspapers and periodicals. Harcourt, Brace promoted *Black Reconstruction* widely, as it was reputed to do for all of its authors. The sales numbers Harcourt reported to Du Bois when the press sold out the book's first edition suggest that the publisher must have sent out about 150 of a 2150 press run as review copies.²

Because of Du Bois's stature as a scholar and an advocate for Black freedom and equality, *Black Reconstruction* enjoyed the great advantage of provoking serious responses, including critical ones, especially from the left, and more particularly from Black radical intellectuals. Abram Harris and other independent socialist Black writers offered appreciation of the gravity of the analysis in *Black Reconstruction*, alongside critique.³ A substantial reflection of the effectiveness of Du Bois's analysis in *Black Reconstruction* was that the then-influential Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) felt the need to publish their own book in response to it. In 1937 and in answer to Du Bois, Jewish CPUSA organizer Sol Auerbach, writing as James S. Allen, offered *Reconstruction: The Battle for Liberation, 1865-1876*. Allen's book presented an alternative to Du Bois's emphasis on the working-class character of Reconstruction, and therefore to its radically transformative potential. The CPUSA instead emphasized that the US Civil War and Reconstruction was more aptly characterized as simply a “bourgeois revolution” than Du Bois had concluded.⁴

These footholds for the book, even via critical readings, and for appreciation of the stature of its aging author, mattered mightily in the coming years of the Cold War when the US state put Du Bois on trial for waging what he called a “battle for peace” and when academic historians failed to support, to defend, and to read him. During the worst of the 1950s Du Bois could still attract Black and radical audiences, helping to ensure that *Black Reconstruction* would be available to subsequent generations – the New Left, Black revolutionary thinkers, and historians turning away from professional conventions as they began to write social history from the bottom up.⁵

Any accounting for the impact and staying power of *Black Reconstruction* must begin with its urgency, rigor, and boldness. It is a big book for reasons far beyond its length. Du Bois's magnum opus teems with ideas, sharply drawn characters, patient exposition, and even poetry, reflected both in the lyrics Du Bois insistently quotes and in those passages where his own writing exceeds the boundaries of prose. Du Bois staked a claim that the story he told marked

2 Ibidem.

3 HARRIS, Abram L. Reconstruction and the Negro. **New Republic**, 7 Aug. 1935.

4 ALLEN, James. **Reconstruction: The Battle for Liberation, 1865-1876**. New York: International Publishers, 1937.

5 DU BOIS, W. E. B. **In Battle for Peace**. New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1952. SAXTON, Alexander. **The Great Midland**. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997 (original 1948). ROEDIGER, David. The Making of a Historian: An Interview with Sterling Stuckey. **Journal of African American History**, v. 99, p. 88-105, Winter-Spring, 2014. MARHO – The Radical Historians Organization. Interview with David Montgomery. In: **Visions of History**. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983, p. 17 and the materials cited in n.1 above. ALLEN, James., **Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy, 1865-1876**. New York: International Publishers, 1937.

the culmination of “the most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history,” that it was “an upheaval of humanity, like the Reformation and the French Revolution,” and that it included “a tragedy that beggared the Greek!”⁶ Indeed, with its insistence on foregrounding the power of collective action, and human frailty, *Black Reconstruction* stands as a rare and leading example of what can happen when a historian writes what the literary and cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams called “social tragedy.”⁷

The superb historian of empire Moon-Ho Jung began his recent tribute to the book by enthusing, “In my estimation, *Black Reconstruction* is the greatest book that the US historical profession has ever produced.” He followed this with, “Reconstruction was many things to Du Bois, but it was that epic struggle between the dictatorship of capital (plutocracy) and the dictatorship of labor (democracy) that held worldwide significance... Plutocracy prevailed. For Du Bois that marked the lasting tragedy of Reconstruction, the inability of Americans to grasp its national and worldwide implications.”⁸

Jung’s words speak to our experiences in reading this book and our shared senses of its stature and meaning. We are therefore most honored to have an opportunity to contribute to this special issue of the journal *Mundos do Trabalho* coinciding with the first publishing of *Black Reconstruction* in Portuguese, and to consider its impact on our work over the decades. Within constraints of space, we hope to suggest how such impact extended to others writing about the history of Reconstruction, as well as to dynamics and histories moving beyond that slice of US history. We do so around three general topics: First, the framing of Reconstruction as a drama within a working-class history deeply complicated by race and shaped by the decisive self-activity of the enslaved in securing emancipation as a general strike. Second, the ways in which Du Bois’s incisive and rich passages on the position and consciousness of white workers animated the emergence after 1990 of the critical study of whiteness as an area of inquiry within and beyond labor history. And third, an appreciation of Du Bois’s insistence that while slavery in the United States was many things, it must be overridingly studied as a modern labor system, and one that was nationally and globally networked. Du Bois’s focus on the significance of labor and empire to an understanding of the struggle against white supremacy and for socialism drives our studies of the managerial practices of slave owners and the use of “management by race” in 20th century industrial workplaces. Likewise, the linkages US firms made between so-called scientific management and the claim that their managers, engineers, and manufacturers possessed expert knowledge about how race –

6 DU BOIS, op. cit., 1988, p. 727.

7 WILLIAMS, Raymond. *Modern Tragedy*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006. p. 149 and passim.

8 JUNG, Moon-Ho. Black Reconstruction and Empire. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, v. 112, n. 3, p. 465-471, Summer 2013. Of course, none of this is to imply that Black Reconstruction in America is beyond critique. The best examples of how the areas Du Bois elides can be addressed without losing track of the book’s force are WEINBAUM, Alys Eve. Gendering the General Strike: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Black Reconstruction and Black Feminism’s “Propaganda of History”. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, v. 112, n. 3, p. 437-463, Summer 2013; and in the same volume, GLYMPH, Thavolia. Du Bois’s Black Reconstruction and Slave Women’s War for Freedom. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, v. 112, n. 3, p. 489-505, Summer 2013.

theirs and all others! – should best structure modern, industrial production, has shaped our assessment of US economic empire.

The three initial chapters of *Black Reconstruction* introduce the cast of characters of the theatrical book to follow. In those chapters “The White Worker” nestles between its predecessor, “The Black Worker” and its successor, “The Planter.” This sequence and that middle chapter of the three could hardly have been more innovative. As the historian and campaigner against working-class identification with whiteness Noel Ignatiev wrote in 2003, “Among scholars it was W.E.B. Du Bois who first called attention to the problem of the white worker.”⁹ In exhilarating moments, a recognition of shared interests and acknowledgment of the heroism and humanity of those emancipating themselves pull white workers towards possible alliance with Black workers. Their tragedy lies in being likewise pulled by panic over competition with Black labor, by the habits of race-thinking especially as it distorted ideas about gendered and sexual relations across the color line, and by the power of bosses and other elites in securing loyalty of even poor whites; these practices and so many others tug white workers in the other direction. Not inexorably and not only, the latter tug won. “Victories” won through allegiance to whiteness buttressed the interests of property and kept white workers from lastingly embracing the possibilities of what Du Bois called “proletarian” initiatives in the South, similarly leading them to exclude African American workers from labor organizations in the North.¹⁰

So bitter was this dynamic, the complications born of mass immigration to the US North, and the influence of the migration to the West of non-slaveholding, anti-slavery Southern whites who were nonetheless committed to racial hierarchy and inequality, that Du Bois’s “white worker” chapter concludes bleakly, albeit eloquently. Du Bois laments that at the very moment when humanity might have been set free from the “lower lust for mere meat” and enabled to “dream and sing,” that a commitment to “color caste”—one “founded and retained by capitalism [...] forwarded and approved by white labor... resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over.” That commitment conditioned whites not just to settle for much less but also to believe that Black people should share none of it. When he returned to this set of issues halfway through the book, Du Bois emphasized the dire impact of the trajectory of white labor in the US on the rest of the world, writing “When white laborers were convinced that the degradation of Negro Labor was more fundamental than the uplift of white labor, the end was in sight.”¹¹ Du Bois gave the poet Percy Blythe Shelley practically the last sad words of “The White Worker” chapter: “Or what is it ye buy so dear/With your pain and with your fear?”¹²

The most direct impact on our work and on scholarship critically studying whiteness in the US comes near the conclusion of *Black Reconstruction*. Here, Du Bois expanded on what

9 IGNATIEV, Noel. “Whiteness and Class Struggle”. *Historical Materialism*, 11:4, p. 227, 2004.

10 ROEDIGER, David. *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All*. London; New York: Verso Books, 2014. p. 119-25; and DU BOIS, op. cit., 1988, p. 381, 17-31 and 727.

11 DU BOIS, op. cit., 1988, p. 347.

12 Ibidem, p. 12, 30, and 17-31.

specific allures he believed led the consciousness of the white worker to so privilege what they believed whiteness offered them, that they so forget the possibilities of acting collectively as workers in fleshing out a classwide identity and place in turbulent times. He famously — although the phrase did not attract attention when the book appeared — posited that “the white group of laborers,” while low-waged, were also “compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage.” The public dimensions of this payoff included access to the best schools and parks, the ability to participate in choosing leaders and therefore at times enjoying favorable “personal treatment” from courts and police who were “drawn from their ranks.” They could demand “public deference” from African Americans. All this had “but small effect on their economic situation” but practices of Jim Crow segregation enabled rulers to cement their own leadership by rewarding white workers for building alliances that crossed class lines. The appeals were psychological and irrational, though with a narrow and perverse logic that found material expression “[Policing slaves] gave [the poor white] work and some authority as overseer, slave driver, and member of the patrol system. But above and beyond this, it fed his vanity because it associated him with the masters.”¹³ Nearing the conclusion of his narrative, Du Bois summarized the cruel calculus that shaped white reality. “Every problem of labor advance in the South,” he wrote “was skillfully turned by demagogues into a matter of inter-racial jealousy.”¹⁴

In the late 1980s David Roediger returned to *Black Reconstruction* after having studied it two decades before with his mentor, the eminent scholar of slavery and of Du Bois, Sterling Stuckey. The narrow context for the rereading was to try to contextualize the conservative, rightward turn white workers in the US, who formerly voted Democratic, made in response to racially charged appeals from Ronald Reagan and other Republicans. Even as trade unions were attacked by Reagan, the political drift of these so-called “Reagan Democrats” seemed to demand an explanation that included, but also supplemented, political economy. “Public and psychological wage” leapt from the page to provide a point of departure. The resulting book, on the origins of the “white worker” identity in the antebellum North, carried the title *The Wages of Whiteness* and was indebted to Du Bois in countless other ways, right down to its tone that understood white worker’s decisions within a social tragedy. The book, rather slight but seemingly perfectly timed, so circulated that “public and psychological wage” and “wages of whiteness” came to be used interchangeably, with some writers making the latter seem to have been Du Bois’s phrase. No writer could ask for a nicer nor a more salubrious confusion!¹⁵

Here we want to make two limited points, about the intellectual history of the critical study of whiteness in relation to working-class history and about Marxism, both explored in much

13 Ibidem, p. 12.

14 Ibidem, p. 700-01.

15 ROEDIGER, David. **The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class.** London; New York: Verso Books, 1991. On the happy confusions, see, for example, REED, Adolph Jr. Du Bois and the “Wages of Whiteness”: What He Meant, What He Didn’t.... **nonsite.org**, 29 June 2017, and MYERS, Ella. Beyond the Wages of Whiteness: Du Bois on the Irrationality of Antiblack Racism. Items: **Insights from the Social Sciences**, 21 Mar. 2017, at <https://items.ssrc.org/reading-racial-conflict/beyond-the-wages-of-whiteness-du-bois-on-the-irrationality-of-antiblack-racism/>.

greater detail in other writings.¹⁶ The first concerns how we apprehend Du Bois’s use of the word *psychological* in his famous phrasing. It is to be taken seriously, not, as *Wages of Whiteness* might sometimes have implied, as merely a stand-in for *mental* or perceived nor to promote the then oft-promoted Marxist idea that workers could sometimes possess false consciousness. As the growing literature on Du Bois and psychoanalysis shows, the time in which he was finishing *Black Reconstruction* not only saw the author move back to earlier encounters with Marxism but also to begin a serious engagement with Freudian ideas. His 1940 autobiography *Dusk of Dawn* dated as about 1930 the time when

the meaning and implications of the new psychology had begun slowly to penetrate my thought. My own study of psychology [...] had pre-dated the Freudian era, but it prepared me for it. I now began to realize that in the fight against race prejudice, we were not facing simply the rational, conscious determination of white folk to oppress us; we were facing the age-long complexes sunk now largely to unconscious habit and irrational urge [...].¹⁷

He would not have coined “psychological wage” casually. Fifty-plus years later, given how hostile labor and other historians remained to psychoanalytic insights, it would have been good for *Wages of Whiteness* to have claimed the imprimatur of Du Bois on that score. As it stood, the book’s modest forays into seeing white worker’s racism as partly resulting from projection and partly from desire for and envy of perceived and real aspects of Black life, owed as much to the Frankfurt School as to Freud. Its engagement with psychoanalysis was encouraged by only one academic labor historian, George Rawick, and a handful of others, including the radical political scientist Michael Rogin and members of the Chicago Surrealist Group.¹⁸

The recent past’s study of whiteness began as an area of inquiry, of course, led by enslaved and Indigenous people analyzing their oppressors even as they were being forced to navigate the pernicious, inhumane and often sadistic expressions of white power.¹⁹ Our second point concerns how, in the 1990s academic research on whiteness took inspiration from that history, causing research and discussion to bubble up in such a way as to produce a specialization that came to be called Critical Study of Whiteness. Historians producing such work were not only overwhelmingly interested in labor’s past and in white worker’s continued allegiances to race. They were also engaged by a Marxism decisively influenced by Du Bois and specifically by *Black Reconstruction*. Alexander Saxton, whose *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* was arguably

16 ROEDIGER, David. Accounting for the Wages of Whiteness: U.S. Marxism and the Critical History of Race. In: HUND, Wulf; ROEDIGER, David; KRIKLER, Jeremy (org.). **The Wages of Whiteness and Racist Symbolic Capital**. Berlin: LIT, 2011. p. 9-36; and, autobiographically, in ROEDIGER, David. **An Ordinary White: My Antiracist Education**. New York: Fordham University Press, 2025. p. 138-70.

17 DU BOIS, W. E. B. **Dusk of Dawn**. Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2009, originally 1940. p. 295-96; see also SULLIVAN, Shannon. On Revealing Whiteness: A Reply to Critics. **Journal of Speculative Philosophy**, v. 21, p. 231-232, 2007. COVIELLO, Peter. Intimacy and Affliction. **Modern Language Quarterly**, v. 64, p. 2-37, 2003. ZWARG, Christina. Du Bois on Trauma: Psychoanalysis and the Would-Be Black Savant. **Cultural Critique**, v. 51, p. 1-39, 2002; and MYERS, Ella. Beyond the Wages of Whiteness.

18 ROEDIGER, op. cit., 2011, p. 25-30; see also HARTMAN, Andrew. The Rise and Fall of Whiteness Studies. **Race and Class**, v. 46, p. 35, Oct. 2004. Dave was an active member of the Chicago Surrealist Group from the late 1970s through the 1990s.

19 WARRIOR, Robert. Lone Wolf and Du Bois for a New Century. In: MILES, Tiya; HOLLAND, Sharon. **Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds**. Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2006. p. 181-196.

the best early 1990s work on whiteness, shared with Du Bois Great Barrington, Massachusetts as a hometown, though he credited faraway Communist booksellers with introducing him to *Black Reconstruction*.²⁰

The towering works of the middle 1990s, two volumes Theodore Allen published under the title *The Invention of the White Race*, reflected the influence of *Black Reconstruction* at many turns, developing ideas first expressed in revolutionary pamphlets of the 1960s. Allen had also come to know *Black Reconstruction* through the Communist movement and introduced Noel Ignatin, his sometimes collaborator on agitational pamphlets, to it. Ignatin, later calling himself Noel Ignatiev, in turn produced another seminal mid-90s work, *How the Irish Became White*. Also in the 1990s, the leading, foundational work on whiteness in legal history, Cheryl Harris's "Whiteness as Property," called on *Black Reconstruction* for central insights, particularly on the "public and psychological wage."²¹ Harris's article featured a heart wrenching opening discussion of the risk to their physical lives and the wounding to their psychic and soulful existences that "passing as white" laid plain for any Black worker who tried it. Far from being an easy, transactional tactic picked up in hope of easy access to higher wages, greater mobility or greater social stature or authority, Harris demonstrates the lethality of the hold on the value of whiteness that its "real" and intended owners fought to defend. When upheld in courts of law as more valuable, white identity became a material asset not just in fact but in law.

What those studies of the emergence and expansion of white racial identity shared was an emphasis on labor and (private) property – workers and the conditions in which they lived and struggled in the United States over time. It would not be correct to say that such a specific focus on the United States was a limitation, though the transnational, global and anti-colonial directions suggested by so much in *Black Reconstruction* had not yet been embraced with a similar rigor. In earlier work, Du Bois had already demonstrated his understanding of the imperial economic order on the one hand and the global importance of the color line on the other – from his 1895 dissertation and then first book, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, in 1896, through *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1905, *The Souls of White Folk* originally published in 1910, revised and reprinted in *Darkwater* in 1920, and the stunning short *Atlantic Monthly* article "The African Roots of War" in 1915. But what *Black Reconstruction* indisputably added to his analysis was the center role Du Bois assigned to "The Black Worker" in the (presumptively) white US working class and the (intentionally) white trade unions, South and North.²²

20 SAXTON, Alexander. **The Rise and Fall of the White Republic**: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America. New York: Verso, 2003, originally 1990. SAXTON, op. cit., 1997, xxiv; ALLEN, Theodore. **The Invention of the White Race**. 2 vol. (1: Racial Oppression and Social Control; 2: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America). New York: Verso, 1994 and 1997.

21 IGNATIEV, Noel. **How the Irish Became White**. New York: Routledge, 1995. HARRIS, Cheryl. "Whiteness as Property". **Harvard Law Review**, 106, 1741-742, June 1993.

22 DU BOIS, W. E. B. **The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870**. New York: Longman's, Green and Co., 1896. Idem, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A. G. McClurg, 1903. Idem, *The Souls of White Folk*. In: DU BOIS, W. E. B. **Darkwater**. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1920. Idem, *The African Roots of War*. **The Atlantic Monthly**, 707-714, 1915.

For Du Bois, the specifics of how the expanded, multi-racial US working class he forced academics and others to confront was linked to the fate of labor internationally leads to a final section on the meaning of Du Bois’s work for our own. Derived from his assessment that the problems laborers faced were globally shared even if not simultaneously experienced, we see the nuanced, simple but far from simplistic facets of the Marxism Du Bois deployed in *Black Reconstruction* as suggesting a methodology for the study of racialized labor. Notably, that opening chapter is titled “The Black Worker.” Not “The Slave” or “The Enslaved Worker,” but “The Black Worker.” This small but meaningful shift reminds us that for all its failures and ultimately betrayals in the name of white supremacist so-called “redemption,” Black people participated in changing the conditions of their own lives during Reconstruction. Though their future was far from certain, and danger was ever-present, had enslaved people by the millions not taken their lives – and thus history – into their own hands, Du Bois could never have written, “When Northern armies entered the South they became armies of emancipation. It was the last thing they planned to be.” Only through the withdrawal of their labor did the mass of enslaved Black people create the context in which the North that “did not propose to attack property. It did not propose to free slaves” was forced to confront a changed reality on the ground.²³

As they mounted political defenses of their own wealth and power in the face of challenges, Du Bois observed that Southern planters continually and necessarily “insisted on the efficiency of Negro labor for ordinary toil” and on its “essential equality of conditions with the labor of Europe.” Yet due to their interest in maintaining control of Black labor in ways as similar to slavery as could be achieved, planters simultaneously screamed their belief that “higher intelligence was impossible for the Negro”.²⁴ It is in the space of that contradiction that our work on how southern theories of the management of labor emerged. In arguing that the language of modern management in the South was deployed to maintain first slavery, then white supremacy and Jim Crow we mean to interrupt standard framings of US labor and business history. Despite being the country that invented the most widely embraced systems of management and production, Taylorism, or scientific management, and Fordism, the development of modern management technique in the United States was imbricated from the beginning in the idea that white elite “expertise” about the races was key to the successful management of laborers. The practices, developed by planters and through debates among, about how best to manage slaves were voluminous and extended from the extraction of labor to the social and biological reproduction of enslaved laborers. Southern journals such as *The Planter* featured sustained debate among slave owners, telling lies and telling truths about how their knowledge of the best ways to manage slaves was *the* key to their wealth and power. Another such journal, *The American Cotton Planter*, itself featured on its masthead an industrious Black worker,

23 DU BOIS, op. cit., 1988, p. 55.

24 ESCH, Elizabeth; ROEDIGER, David. **The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in US History.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. p. 22.

a screw press for packing cotton, a steamboat, and the railroad – underscoring its ties to industry even as it also declared the publication’s commitment to “plantation economy.”²⁵ It was the restoration of white elite power to oversee, enclose, and contain all aspects of Black labor and social life that made possible the so-called redemption of the South.

Attempting to reconcile the tensions that inhered to the industrializing world of agricultural production, southern planters pronounced in debates with one another by relying on claims allegedly backed by science about: what was the correct amount of physical punishment, or the correct amount of time, or the correct amount of food, or the correct amount of isolation, or the correct amount of religion to that limit or ensure maximum productivity from the people they owned as chattel. Our reading of those debates as being fundamentally about management is not merely our own interpretation. Planters and masters defended slavery by claiming the status of the command race; part of their power was expressed through their claims also to *command expert knowledge about all of the races*. Antebellum journal and newspaper articles filled page after page with the “masters’ ... race saturated discourse of management [that] presented a way to frame the extraction and production that large slaveholders depended on.”²⁶

Yet, “the managerial prescriptions offered by masters might as easily be taken as evidence of their lack of control, and consequent desire to invent, through a biomanagerial discourse, what could not really exist.”²⁷ Even “studies” these white elites endorsed revealed deep fissures in masters’s attempts at scientific or even pragmatic defenses of their economic order. As Du Bois elegantly but no less agonizingly portrayed, theirs was an order that never functioned without reliance on isolation, sheer brutality, the threat of sale and family separation, and the infliction of pain of every conceivable kind. Justification for the use of such violence – even when called managing – found its strongest arguments via claims about the permanent fact of Black subordination to white racial superiority. Such arguments reflect the tautological nature of racism, a feedback loop whose founding assertions – the denial of African and Black capacity and humanity – are proven by the continued existence of white supremacy - was another phrase for the same thing.

In 2013, Ferruccio Gambino reflected on the meaning of *Black Reconstruction* for the revolutionary student movement in Italy and Europe on what he called “the eve of 1969” he wrote: Du Bois’s move seemed to be in tune with the anticolonial revolts in Asia and Africa in the 1920s more than with the interclass politics of the popular fronts, the alliance with colonial powers, and the abandonment of the anticolonial struggles, positions officially adopted by the Third International in the same year as the publication of *Black Reconstruction*. In other words, Du Bois[’s] book was a milestone of historiography for all those whose history had been denied or stolen.²⁸

25 Ibidem.

26 Ibidem.

27 Ibidem.

28 GAMBINO, Ferruccio. Reading Black Reconstruction on the Eve of 1969. **South Atlantic Quarterly**, 112, n. 3, 530, Summer 2013.

We concur. In so doing we want to acknowledge the generosity of spirit and leadership that those who have led and chronicled various Black movements for freedom in the US, have consistently modeled, historically and today. We have found sustenance in hard times in the enormity of the project Du Bois set for himself: to conceptualize his argument in *Black Reconstruction*, to uncover evidence both broad and deep supporting his claim, and then to write nearly 500,000 words locating it in time and place. The method and vision Du Bois espoused in this work have led others and ourselves to commit to the idea and practice of a kind of anti-racist historical method, a sensibility or even an ethic that remains inspired by the beauty and the unexpected vision produced by mass self-activity and autonomy, and the unsurpassable power of genuine solidarity. We do so over, against, and alongside theories of power and class-for-itself organization, whose practitioner’s adherence to these ideas as absolute models can sometimes lose sight of reality. No better argument exists for seeing how history is made in unpredictable and unexpected ways, often by unexpected people, than *Black Reconstruction*. Du Bois said Reconstruction was a “splendid failure” because it “did not fail where it was expected to.” We attempt to convey the eloquence and significance of this simple commitment to Black self-organization when we each teach this book, watching our students become inspired by its plainspoken and moral clarity, and its incisive political economic analysis keeps its purpose alive. Perhaps maybe now more than ever, it reminds us how important it is to carry on that legacy.

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