Undomesticated Matters: An Epistemology of Race, Kinship, and Nation

(The following is an excerpt from an article-in-progress. The article begins with several sections I have left out here in favor of concision: first, a discussion of forgetting as the basis of nation in Ernst Renan and of loyalty (Treue) as the basis society in Georg Simmel, and the ways in which these theories are interrelated; followed by a new interpretation of Wagner’s Lohengrin as a legitimation of the suppression of inquiry in the interest of consolidating a national community.)

iii. The problem of knowledge

In 1936, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of his lifelong fascination with Wagner’s opera Lohengrin, which he reported having attended “six or eight times, under many circumstances, in different languages and lands” (Newspaper Columns I:130). Du Bois identified two poles around which the opera revolved, those of “Trust” or “Faith” and of “Joy,” declaring of the opera,

It is a hymn of Faith. Something in this world man must trust. Not everything – but something. One cannot live and doubt everybody and everything. Somewhere in this world, and not beyond it, there is Trust, and somehow Trust leads to Joy. (130)

While Du Bois consistently praised Wagner as a great artist, and was a frequent attendee at performances of his work, this passage expresses deep ambivalence towards the matter Du Bois discovers in the opera. What, after all, is the valence of the modal “must” in that second sentence? Is Du Bois urging trust upon his readers as a route to joy? Or is he stating the conditions of life and death: the person who, rightly or wrongly, doubts everything, will not survive, so that trust becomes a forced choice? Is Du Bois then merely stating his interpretation of the opera or also agreeing with its stance? There would appear to be great doubt after all expressed in the line “somehow Trust leads to Joy,” a reading of the role of faith within the opera
that Du Bois may find he cannot share. In this last sentence, Du Bois in fact paraphrases a line that Elsa sings to Ortrud within the opera in the scene preceding her wedding, “You have after all never experienced the joy (Glück) / that is only given us in faith (Glauben)” (174, my translation). Elsa promises herself this particular joy in her marriage, in this world, and yet she is not to find it. Given how well Du Bois clearly knew the libretto from which he paraphrased this line, it is symptomatic that in his column and also in the short story I will turn to in a moment, he misquotes a more central line in the opera, sung during what is known as the Wedding March.

Where the Wagner text has the populace attending the wedding sing, “Treulich geführt ziehet dahin [Go (you plural) where you are faithfully led]” (184), Du Bois instead quotes (in German) “Freudig gefuert [sic], ziehet dahin! [Go (you plural) where you are joyously led] (Newspaper Columns 130).” Following the logic of Elsa’s declaration and his own interpretation laid out in the column, Du Bois has converted Trust, which in the opera is trust betrayed, to Joy. This joy is certainly not reached in the opera by either Elsa or Lohengrin, but is perhaps experienced by the community that closes itself around an exclusionary solidarity in the wake of Elsa’s expulsion and Lohengrin’s departure. This Volk does indeed go with blind loyalty where it is led, and does so insisting upon such loyalty from followers even while it has been betrayed by leaders. Their joy is available only to those accepted by the collective and, we might find, is ethically suspect. It is the joy of loyalty, the emotion Georg Simmel diagnosed as inhering in the collective interknittedness that creates society.

The newspaper article cited above was not the only time Du Bois referred to Lohengrin. Du Bois also (mis)quotes this line from the Wedding March in his short story, “The Coming of John,” the only piece of fiction within his early sociological masterpiece, the 1903 The Souls of Black Folk, which appeared five years before Simmel’s Sociology. I will argue that the opera
serves in the story neither primarily as a promise of a world of high culture beyond the reach of African Americans (Sundquist 522) nor as the portrayal of a heroic model of sacrifice embodied by Lohengrin that inspires the character John Jones (Gooding-Williams 120, Wald 185, Lemke 40, Berman 127), but rather as a diagnosis of the state of society in which Jones finds himself trapped, a society in which honestly asking who one is and where one comes from – questions that in the American context inevitably point towards sexual violence, enslavement, and the Middle Passage – stands under interdiction on possible pain of death. Moreover, the interdiction applies equally, regardless of the identity of the questioner or the questioned, since the forbidden answer lies both in intimate genealogical relations and in white dependencies on Black labor, both material and emotional labor, that cut across the constructed and policed boundaries of Black and white. The transfer or truncation of knowledge therefore stands at the center of the story.

In “The Coming of John,” the ruling white class not only seeks to keep the Black population uneducated, but white figures also imposes blinders on themselves and each other. For example, we see within the text the explicit barring of the articulation of specific historical knowledge when the white Judge Henderson closes the Black school because the Black teacher John Jones has been offering instruction on the French Revolution. In addition, however, there is a second layer of interdicted knowledge whose suppression has been so successful that it never rises to the level of explicit articulation in the story at all. This knowledge can only be gleaned from the way lived practices embody and thus also reveal history. If we needed a clue as to what knowledge we as readers are searching for in this second category, we could do worse than to begin with Elsa’s questions: Who are you, where do you come from, what is your kind [Art]? The divergence between the silent transmission of genealogical history, on the one hand, and the
visible and audible suppression of visible and audible civic history and participation, on the other, would seem to reflect the foundational division of liberalism into a private and a public realm, or here, a private and a public form of violence, which has recently been explored by Shatema Threadcraft. This division hence also reflects a gender divide in the kinds of violence perpetrated against African Americans. And yet, the story also powerfully illustrates the illusory nature of this division, which involved not only exclusions, but also rights and protections, rights and protections that were in any case withheld from African Americans.

To trace the circulation and blockages of knowledge in the story, we first need to examine the fragmentation and doublings that characterize it, most evident in the set of Döppelgänger who form the eponymous characters: John Jones, who is Black, and his white childhood playmate, John Henderson, the son of the powerful Judge Henderson. The characters live in the same space, and yet are divided by what Du Bois elsewhere refers to as a veil. Du Bois used the figure of the veil throughout The Souls of Black Folk and his other writings for what he also called the color line, the demarcation between black and white (359, 368). However, the veil is also a circumstance within which Black folk live. The veil, in other words, is amalgamated with a vale, a location associated with mourning in translations of Psalm 84:6. Du Bois’s veil is both a covering and a spatialized condition created by it, both a shade and a shadow-world. Priscialla Wald has noted the uncanniness of this shadowy existence for the American nation as a whole, its ongoing presence as a reminder of its crimes that the nation can “neither assimilate nor successfully suppress” (175). The Black world as Du Bois portrays it is coincident with the white world through intimate intertwining of the kind Simmel described as constructive of a society – economic, social, and sexual – while its separateness from both the civic and domestic spheres of the white world is maintained through a denial of recognition from
white to Black. The veil, I will argue, is genealogically diaphanous and yet impervious to kinship. The transfer of knowledge across the veil is asymmetrical in its flow, with Black Americans openly exposed to vitriolic white attitudes and often having access to the private lives and thoughts of white employers in domestic situations. White Americans are conditioned to close themselves to recognition and empathy, but still use domestic contacts to gather information. Black vision across the veil, this “second-sight,” (364) creates the phenomenon Du Bois famously labelled double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the emergence of a false consciousness in which African Americans are forced to see themselves through the distorted prejudices of a white majority (364). While double-consciousness has rightfully played a large role in interpretations of “The Coming of John,” we are more concerned here with a less-recognized temporal doubling in the form of a generational cycle of repetition that extends the race relations created by slavery into the future. The chief question posed by the story, indeed of Du Bois’s own life-work, lies in exploring how American society might achieve a condition of knowing in common, and whether shared knowledge might lift the veil, synthesizing the multiple divergent worlds into one. The goal, as Robert Gooding-Williams notes, would not be to eliminate the diversity of cultures, but to diffuse the viciousness of a false consciousness created by prejudice and to create a society of reciprocal recognition and equal opportunity. Such a potential seems to be encapsulated in the Biblical reference of the title; John may not succeed, but he remains, at least potentially, a forerunner to a more successful messiah. And yet, the story gives no sign that the hoped-for future will arrive.

iv. The State of Knowledge in “The Coming of John”
“The Coming of John” begins on the campus of a school for Black boys and at one level chronicles the education of John Jones and his attempt to establish his adulthood, “to find his place in the world” (531), a phrase here deployed with the deep ambivalence associated with white demands that Black Americans “know their place.” It can therefore be read as a mini-
Bildungsroman, although one that works through its character to indict the surrounding world. The most explicit transmission of knowledge in the story occurs through formal education. First in a preparatory school and then in college, Jones learns astronomy, Greek, and history, among other subjects. Significantly, it is also while at school, and not before, that Jones comes to recognize the deep prejudice and injustice towards African-Americans and himself as a member of that group. A clear relationship is drawn between school learning and social awareness. It is only through this awakening that Jones could be said to be “gifted with second sight” (364). In a world where knowledge is not fungible as power, such sight engenders despair, but without therefore eliciting a preference for delusion. Returned to Altamaha after graduating from college, Jones answers affirmatively his sister’s question “does it make everyone unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?” and also affirmatively when she continues “are you glad you studied?” (530). Jones’s education not only embitters him towards the white members of his community, but also estranges him from its Black members, with whom he no longer shares an emotional cultural background. In Altamaha, Jones is forced to agree to Judge Henderson’s terms in return for permission to open the school, namely not “to put fool ideas of rising and equality into these folks’ heads, and make them discontented and unhappy” (532). Knowledge is thus firmly linked to emotional lives, and emotion is projected to influence social action. In accord with Ernst Renan’s focus on managing memory and forgetting as a way to mold desire and affect in the interest of a cohesive nation, the Judge focuses in his ban on the
feelings of pupils, here, the forecasted unhappiness of Black children taught the truth about inequality. The concern is self-serving, but not disingenuous – disciplining affect is indeed central to maintaining the contemporary power dynamics. The crackdown on instruction clearly signals historical knowledge as a threat.

When Jones is lynched at the end of the story, his school lessons are not the immediate cause. Rather, the circumstances draw together public and private, emotion and knowledge, and historical iteration. Immediately after being ejected from his schoolhouse, John J. stumbles upon his childhood friend John Henderson sexually assaulting his sister Jennie Jones, and “struck [John Henderson] with all the pent-up hatred of his great black arm” (534). If the cumulative violence of John John’s response demonstrates the inextricability of civic lessons and intimate abuse, we should still be interested in the source of John Henderson’s violence. Although it would be accurate to diagnose it as the outgrowth of privilege, boredom, and a lack of reciprocal recognition, such an answer is still insufficient. Rather, the scene embodies and enacts history in a cycle of repetition. As readers, we see this history only in half-spoken allusions and in reiterated performance familiar from Judith Butler’s analysis of gender.

Only untangling the network of actions next to half-spoken gestures unfolds an account of the past that makes of the two Johns not just doubles, but half-brothers, and of the sexual assaulter and the assaulted, half-brother and sister.

During the time that passes in the story while both Johns are away at school, we hear that Jones’s “mother grew gray, and sister went up to the Judge’s kitchen to work” (523). The two markers of passing time could be unrelated to each other, but the suggestion lies close to the surface that mother has been replaced by daughter in the same kitchen in a generational cycle. Such a domestic relationship between Peggy Jones and the Judge’s family would explain why
the two Johns grew up playing in the same yard. It would also justify Judge Henderson’s identification of John J. to his own now-grown son John H. as “little black John, Peggy’s son – your old play-fellow,” (533), a portrayal that draws John J.’s mother Peggy into the household. But there are more clues to be followed; the narrator describes John J as John H’s “darker name-sake.” The comparative darker, in place of an absolute dark suggests a relationship between the two children. Moreover, the idea of a name-sake is not confined to the narrator; John Henderson refers to John Jones later in life as “a little Negro named after me” (526). Surely, it is more likely that this idea of a namesake is a displacement, and that both Johns share a common source for their names in Judge Henderson, the only named character in the story whose first name is withheld.

A black father for John Jones does make a brief appearance in the story, but one that only increases the uncertainty surrounding the question of paternity while illustrating the way that repetition is promoted. Judge Henderson includes John Jones’s father in the unequal domestic circle when he reminds Jones that his father “belonged to my brother, and he was a good N--” (531-32). The Judge’s admonition to John to emulate his father’s disposition raises the specter of a specific injustice borne with patience that the Judge would have been aware of and thought worthy of acknowledging. In the process, the Judge, however unmerited the demand, solicits loyalty in the form of belonging and gratitude, calling on Simmel’s Treue to serve its role as defender of continuity. When John Henderson assumes that Jennie Jones is sexually available to him, the behavior does not stand in isolation, but conjures up the actions of the previous generation, when Peggy Jones was Judge Henderson’s kitchen maid. Peggy Jones remains largely silent throughout the story, but not inactive. Her decision to send her son to a college-preparatory school and then on to college, a decision unique among the Black population of her
generation in Altamaha, decisively breaks a chain of transmission and opens the theoretical possibility of an alternate future. The story’s deep pessimism is expressed by the way this potential is truncated in the closing of the school, in the treatment of Jennie, in J. Jones’s act of killing, and his being killed. One might therefore be tempted to read the story within the ambit of what Frank Wilderson has recently termed Afro-pessimism, the idea that, “through Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world’s semantic field—regardless of cultural and national discrepancies… is sutured by anti-Black solidarity. Unlike the solution-oriented, interest-based, or hybridity-dependent scholarship so fashionable today, Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness… as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions” (R, W&B 58). Interventions in the social fabric only elicit new constraints to restabilize the relative positions, just as we see in the story. To better analyze the balance of promise and pessimism in the story, we need to turn to its own reflections on the question of efficacy and potential, which are framed through the references to Lohengrin.

The opera Lohengrin makes two appearances in the text, bookending Jones’s adult life as an educator. First, after he has completed college, Jones views part of the opera at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York before being expelled for brushing the arm of a white woman on the armrest. In reaction to this experience, he ends his hesitation to return to his small, poor hometown and open a school for Black children. The allusion to Lohengrin recurs as Jones, awaiting the lynch mob at the end of the story, hums the music from the Wedding March. The second allusion needs to be read as a commentary both on the opera and on the decision it facilitated. Unlike many other critics, I propose that the initial decision entails a rejection of the seduction of the opera’s identification with the figure of Lohengrin in favor of an embrace of the dangerous position of truth-teller and truth-seeker, embodied not only by Elsa within the opera,
but also by the Biblical Queen Esther, a figure Jones cites as he considers his future in the aftermath of his curtailed opera visit. These two models represent two possible outcomes: Elsa fails in her bid to make the truth meaningful and her failure mediates the consolidation of a nation based on ignorance and exclusion; Esther succeeds in averting the massacre of her people, ushers in a culturally diverse society, and is celebrated as a heroine. With these two examples before him, Jones sets out to serve his people. His return to the music of *Lohengrin* before his murder signals a recognition that his world is still Elsa’s world rather than Esther’s.

The opera reveals to John J. a hidden world all but inaccessible to African Americans, “a world so different from his, so strangely more beautiful than anything he had known” (526). This withheld opportunity unites the setting of opera house itself with the shining image of Lohengrin within the opera, an identification that is fostered by Wagner’s double staging of the opera’s events: nearly every scene of the opera plays out before a Brabantian audience within the piece, whose allegiance with Lohengrin and solidarity as nation is explicitly solicited. The opera’s audience is thus a projected extension of the Brabantian people whose affects are solicited for the same cause of German national unity. For Jones, however, the music issues an impossible invitation to a barred realm: “Who had called him to be the slave and butt of all? And if he had called, what right had he to call when a world like this lay open before men?” (527) Jones agonizes just before being physically evicted from the Met. The eviction provides an answer to his first question – it is his *Doppelgänger* John Henderson who, even in this northern city far from their birthplace, has been able to exercise this control over him. The recognition of his position in society in the context of a projected higher beauty elicits from him a longing for a “master-work, some life-service, hard, – aye, bitter hard, but without the cringing and sickening servility” (527). The term “master-work,” contrasted with cringing servility,
names the dichotomy that fundamentally and destructively structures American life, and he
longs, here, for a moment, to occupy the place of the shining, white knight, the master. After his
eviction from the performance, however, he recognizes this desire not only as an impossibility,
but also as a unfulfilling solution that depends on the maintenance of the structures of injustice.
Instead, John J. accepts an alternative, not a “master-work,” but a “life-work” (528), an
expression Du Bois also uses elsewhere in Souls to describe the struggle of determined African
Americans against the discriminatory norms of society (433, 516).²² Jones understands his
decision through a Biblical quotation from the Book of Esther, a figure who resolved to save her
people, the Jews, from a planned massacre, by risking the wrath of her husband the King and
entering his chamber unbidden: “‘I will go in to the King, which is not according to the law; and
if I perish, I perish.’”²³ If the truth that Elsa seeks in Lohengrin is the truth of her husband’s
background and identity, the counterposed risk that Esther assumes is that of revealing her own
background and identity as a Jew, a member of a people the King has been falsely persuaded is
treachery and deserving of death. The King’s enlightenment is a result of revealed
genealogical and political knowledge. Enlightenment in Lohengrin, on the other hand, is the
crime of treachery on Elsa’s part as a result of which she dies.

In having John quote Esther, Du Bois also transfers a self-quotation into the thoughts of
his character. Du Bois himself cited this passage in a journal entry written on his twenty-fifth
birthday, which he celebrated as a Master’s student at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in
Berlin, now the Humboldt University (Du Bois, Against Racism, 29). It was in Berlin that Du
Bois had become acquainted with Wagner, and while the composer is not mentioned by name in
the entry, Du Bois explores his feelings in language that his character will mimic. Like John in
the story, although with less bitterness on this particular day, Du Bois contemplated how he
could best make a difference in the life of his people and came to the conclusion that he must resist the “wild sehnsucht [longing] for Eternity that makes my heart sick now and then,” a longing remarkably similar to that John feels when he hears the “infinite beauty of the wail of the Swan” and “a deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise with that clear music out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled” (Writings, 526-27). The task Du Bois set himself was to embrace a worldly task in spite of this longing, not as part of its attainment, a task that identifies him at this particular moment in his life with Elsa, with Esther, and with the John, the character he will later create, combining into one goal the determination, on the one hand, to “work for the rise of the Negro people” (29) and, on the other, “be the Truth what it may …[to] seek it, on the pure assumption that it is worth seeking and Heaven nor Hell, God, nor Devil shall turn me from my purpose till I die” (Against Racism 28). The meta-truth revealed through “The Coming of John” is the recognition that suppressing history consolidates white power, and that history is always immediate and personal because it flows through present action. There is no relief from pessimism within “The Coming of John,” but the story does not stand in isolation. The conviction that truth will contribute to justice that motivated Du Bois at twenty-five has been tempered ten years later in The Souls of Black Folk. There is still some hope manifested in this brilliant combination of sociology, history, autobiography, musical analysis, and fiction that uses its multiple registers in an attempt to transmit knowledge through heart and ear and mind at once.

v. The persistence of the dynamic

The diagnosis of delusion as the heart of white power in the United State that I tease out of this short story is hardly a new theme. Robin DiAngelo has recently and almost too tactfully
referred to this phenomenon under the now well-known name of white fragility, a term that highlights the distress and existential angst that white people experience when asked to confront the truth of racial relations in this country and the way in which benefit derives to them from it. DeAngelo is following in a depressingly long line of diagnosticians of this stubborn fact. James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*, written in 1963, portrays the way that Black Americans “dismiss white people as the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing” (102). While Baldwin valued Black freedom from the “delusion” (86) and “mythology” (101) to which whites are subject, he recognizes that the advantage of knowledge is as yet unrealized materially, culturally, socially. Only if white Americans come to understand their own history can they be released from their entrapment within it (8), and only if they are free can Blacks also be free (10). The problem, Baldwin notes, is that white history is the history of an ongoing crime that they “do not know […] and do not want to know […]” (5).

Du Bois himself moved from the moderate hopes in *The Souls of Black Folk* to incandescent and incisive rage in his 1920 “The Souls of White Folk.” There Du Bois describes his relationship to white people as clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language…I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge makes them now embarrassed, now furious! They deny my right to live and be and call me misbirth! *Writings* 923

The entwinement of Black and white here is mutual but in no way reciprocal. White language and thought is Black flesh, impinges on, creates, and injures Black bodies. Whites also have flesh, entrails, which Blacks, approaching never face to face, but only obliquely, perceive by undressing them of the subterfuge they assume for themselves and each other. In language that Baldwin will echo, Du Bois registers a kind of condescension that the Black community feels
towards these benighted whites, a “pity for a people imprisoned and enthralled, hampered and made miserable for such a cause, for such a phantasy!” (926) He is under no misconceptions about the consequences of this white delusion, however, in the form of murder, torture, rape, and enslavement, not only of African Americans, but of brown and black people around the world.

There is also a cost to the white world, which Du Bois also made manifest in the double deaths of “The Coming of John.” This multidirectional cost writ large forms the recent historical context of Du Bois’s essay, namely the First World War, a war fought between colonizers over the right to exploit the dark peoples of the world not only for profit (934-35), but as fuel for its delusions about its own supremacy.

In this essay, Du Bois turns to the commonplace expression “‘knowledge is power’” not as a universal truth, but as a contingent cultural formation that fails to hold true in his present. Rather, the illusion of white virtue and of whiteness as a virtue defends itself brutally against knowledge (926). In Sociology, Simmel had little to say about cultural structures that approximate the role of race in American society, but he does include a short excursus on the foreigner or stranger (Fremder) which is enlightening in its distance. The stranger, Simmel argues, is an integral element of society itself, an “organic member of the group” (605), the internal counterpoint against which an exclusionary group cohesion is generated. This foreigner attains a kind of “objectivity” within society through access a view of it that is simultaneously internal and estranged (602), a vantage point that has been compared to Du Bois’s double consciousness. Simmel notes that the foreigner functions as a safe repository of secrets, (Simmel 602), a phenomenon James Baldwin also observes in American race relations:

    I have seen and heard and endured the secrets of desperate white men and women, which they knew were safe with me, because even if I should speak, no one would believe me. And they would not believe me precisely because they would know that what I said was true. Baldwin, 53-54
Baldwin here turns Simmel inside out, speaking from the perspective of the excluded group, a group Simmel depicts only from within the social consciousness of the majority. From this perspective that inhabits simultaneously margin and center, both Baldwin and Du Bois illuminate the ways in which being true to excludes and repels the presence of truth within the dominant group. Both the intimate relationship, and yet also the distance, between in-group and out-group is generated through the lack of reciprocity and recognition noted above, through the presumed non-being of the listener in the eyes of the speaker. As if in direct dialogue with Simmel, however, and with cutting through Simmel’s scholarly rhetoric, Du Bois rejects the categorization of Black as foreign, as a stranger, in a passage we have already encountered: “I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language” (923, emphasis added).

Simmel ends his long treatise with a discussion of the reciprocity between psychology and institutionality that creates the conditions of life in a society, and yet he does not tease out the effects of that dynamic on the lives of those who are projected into the space of the Stranger. Indeed, in this same excursus, Simmel throws out a single sentence (604) about a different kind of “other,” one who is no “organic member of the group,” not part of the tug and pull of society’s fabric but its obverse, not stranger, but barbarian, a situation: “in which the general qualities that one deems purely authentically and merely human are directly denied to the other. But here ‘stranger’ has no positive meaning; the relationship to the stranger is a non-relationship” (604). Simmel, with his focus on interknittedness, has few words to waste on such a figure of disconnection. He does not consider what happens when these two forms of otherness coincide, as they do in American race relations as diagnosed by Du Bois and Baldwin, as well as in different ways in more recent work by Hortence Spillers, Orlando Patterson, Sharon Patricia
Holland, Frank Wilderson III, and Warren Calvin, each of whom depicts from distinct viewpoints the white concept of the human as built against the obverse of the Black. Their analyses originate beyond the limits of Simmel’s imagination in a place where interweaving in the form of economic interdependence or sexual intimacy exist side by side with an imaginary of absolute rupture, of absolute negativity. This social dynamic entails a self-production of the hegemonic group through illusory disentanglement and through denial, a process that only functions as long as it unceasingly abjects that with which it is always already fundamentally intertwined. Du Bois and Baldwin in their hopeful moments, also suggest that for the dynamic to function, society must actively forget this process and prevent knowledge of it from registering at the level of motivation for action. Awareness of the dynamic, one might conclude, could then potentially undo it.

vi. Coda: Sibling Action

In previous work, I have diagnosed a sibling action – an active logic at work within any epistemological system that constructs a genealogy as its legitimating foundation. These fields prominently included population classifications such as those of race theory in which purported scientific knowledge, affect, and hierarchy coincided. I wrote there about the foundations of race theory:

We must recognize the overwhelming significance of pervasive sexual mixing – on both the politics of sex and the politics of race – for a culture that organized the world through genealogy. The nebulous boundaries of race were made manifest as an ongoing provocation in the form of close kinships simultaneously recognized and unacknowledged. Incest and miscegenation were the twin fears of the nineteenth century not because they formed the inner and outer limits of a pool of acceptable sexual partners, but because they so often coincided. In slave-holding and colonial settings the racial line divided sibling from sibling and cousin from cousin, while simultaneously rendering one set sexually available to the other along a boundary in need of constant buttressing. (21)
Kinship is not something pre-existent that can be recognized, but rather something a culture constructs. The relatedness I have teased out of “The Coming of John” falls outside of acknowledged kinship formations. Its existence is hardly revelatory in the history of American race relations, but depressingly commonplace. My goal here is not to plead for a widening of kinship relations in hopes that such recognition would change ethical imperatives. Calls to expand or universalize kinship have never paid promising dividends, but on the contrary, as Wilderson has noted, instead have more firmly negativized its exterior. Rather, I am interested in the ways that blind praxes, the reproduction of relational behaviors, enact loyalty to a social system in ways that exceed its own articulations. And I hang suspended between the undeniable desire to believe that knowledge can unbend and reforge the semantics that make the world, the language that is flesh, on the one hand, and, on the other, the history of its failure to do so that this article, like so many others, unfolds.

1 While the line that Du Bois quotes directly in the column replaces loyalty/Treue with Joy/Freude, the line Du Bois paraphrases through the English words “joy” and “trust” actually uses a different set of words – Glück/happiness and Glauben/belief.

2 Charles Nero reads the substitution of loyalty or faith with joy as an elevation on Du Bois’s part of the former above the latter (264). Russell Berman assumes a mistake based on similarity in sound compounded by the fame of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” (134n33).

3 Simmel was a faculty member at the Friedrich Wilhelm University of Berlin (now Humboldt University) when Du Bois studied there from 1892-4. It is not clear if the two met or knew each other, but Du Bois attended lectures with Simmel’s colleagues, Gustav Schmoller, Adolf Wagner, and Heinrich von Trieschke and later mentioned having attended lectures given by Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Lenz as well. He also checked off a course by Georg Simmel in a course catalog from the 1892-1893 academic year, as well as courses by Rudolf von Gneist and Max Sering (See Barken, “Du Bois and the Kaiserrreich” 161; Barken, “Berlin Days” 83; Morris xviii and 17; and Berman 125). Du Bois and Simmel later published in the same journal, edited by Weber (Morris 159).

4 Although without the spelling mistake: “Freudig geführt, ziehet dahin” (535).

5 See Aldon Morris for a study of Du Bois’s foundational but long-undervalued role in the development of the field of sociology. Morris locates Du Bois and Simmel in two competing camps that consisted prominently of Du Bois and Max Weber, on one side, and Georg Simmel and Robert Park on the other. Weber and Simmel were colleagues and interlocutors at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin where both Du Bois and Park studied. However, Morris is particularly concerned with difference between Du Bois and Park on racial hierarchies. David Levering Lewis, on the other hand, notes that Du Bois was most strongly influenced by the empirical methods of Max Schmoller and Adolf Wagner rather than the universal systematizing of Weber and Simmel, in spite of Du Bois’s own susceptibility to universalizing (141-149). In this article, I am not arguing that Du Bois adopts Simmel’s structural approach, but rather that a number of thinkers including Richard Wagner, Renan, Simmel, and Du Bois recognized an involuted relationship between loyalty, knowledge, and national social cohesion, while coming to different conclusions about its costs, its merits, and its management.
Gooding-Williams presents the most persuasive version of this interpretation, reading *Lohengrin* as the tragic depiction of “the impossibility of a lasting union between what is supernatural and what is earthly” (120). In the racial adaptation of this dynamic, the white world will always withdraw itself from the African American world (122). While Jones might minimally resemble Lohengrin in seeing himself as dedicated to active service, this reading depends problematically on sanctifying either the white or the Black world. Moreover, the understanding of Lohengrin as Jones’s inspiration sits uneasily with Gooding-Williams’s conclusion, with which I agree, that for Du Bois hope for the future can only lie in white Americans recognizing their guilt and “acknowledge[ing] their essential connectedness to black Americans” (127). This connectedness is counter to the opera’s message as Gooding-Williams decodes it, and knowledge in the opera is the goal only of Elsa, not of Lohengrin.

Lemke also identifies *Titure* as the central facet connecting Wagner’s opera to Du Bois’s story. However, she focuses on Elsa as “an absolutely faithless human being” (44) in contrast to Lohengrin, and emphasizes Du Bois’s praise for Wagner. While Lemke recognizes that Du Bois’s attitude towards loyalty is not uniformly positive, she sees its role in the story primarily in Jones’s failure to maintain close enough ties to the spiritual mindset of his own people. This estrangement results in his inability to serve as a leader and is central to its pessimism (45). Russell Berman goes so far as to identify Lohengrin as a “model of Black activism” for Du Bois (128), who he imagines would welcome the proscription of inquiry into “place of origin, personal identity, and family background” as ushering in a “utopia of equality” (129). The imputation to Du Bois of an ideal of abstract humanism stands in tension with Du Bois’s repeatedly stated goal of braiding together different strands of human striving rather than blending them. Elsewhere in *Souls*, he proclaims that the African American “would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world” (365).

Threadcraft’s work demonstrates the parallel between withholding protections for civil involvement by Black men, which reaches its culmination in lynching or police killings, on the one hand, and withholding protections for domestic privacy and exclusivity to Black women subject to rape, on the other. Threadcraft does not advocate for an extension of the division of spheres to the African American community, but powerfully argues that benefits accorded to white women even within its constraints have been denied to Black women. Other scholars have also pointed to the retraction of the civic/domestic divide for African Americans. Hortence Spillers has argued that the enslaved were barred from domesticity and its accompanying kinship relations and gendering (72). For Saidiya Hartman, on the other hand, the enslaved person “is invariably relegated to the nonpolitical side of” the public/private divide (65). It is noteworthy that Hartman and Spillers each uses a negative descriptor here to indicate that the enslaved are barred from each of the two spheres, respectively, rather than that they inhabit one or another sphere. Moreover, Spillers and Hartman, among many others, each delineate the ways that emancipation failed to enact a transition of the Black subject into white paradigms of liberalism.

Du Bois closes his opening passage, “The Forethought,” by declaring himself “bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil” (360). See Charles Mills on the geography of racial thinking, in which “those associated with the jungle will take the jungle with them even when they are brought to more civilized regions” (48).

The color-line casts the “shadow of the Veil” that demarcates the specialized conditions of life for African Americans (507). The Biblical connections between vales/veils and shadows are made explicit in multiple references to the “Valley of the Shadow of Death” (505, 517-18, among others). Du Bois also uses the figure of the shadow to describe the psychological despair of African Americans (367), as well as the conditions of their lives under prejudice (363, 368), and within the Veil (407, 507), and as a figure for the past (esp. 447).

Sharon Holland has analyzed the place of African Americans in the white American imaginary as the ghostly and unruly dead (Raising the Dead 23).

The “problem of the color line” (Du Bois 359) as inhering specifically in a refusal of recognition has been analyzed insightfully by Robert Gooding-Williams (esp. 66-96), who connects it back to Hegel. See also Judy 223 and Berman for more on Du Bois’s connection to Hegelian thought.

See Gooding-Williams’s illuminating discussion of double-consciousness and the concept of synthesis (esp. 86-88, 155).

Jennie goes on to assert that she wishes for this kind of unhappiness and thinks that she possesses some of it, evidence that, for Du Bois, school learning is not the only way to acquire an understanding of social injustice.

This estrangement combines with the unremitting oppositions of the white governance of the town to undermine Jones’s hope of being a leader of his people, as Priscilla Wald (176-192) and Gooding-Williams (96-129) have argued. Lemke’s identification of this estrangement with a lack of loyalty, linking “The Coming of John” to *Lohengrin*, seems misplaced, as Jones remains committed to the good of his people in both intention and effort even if he is no longer fits into the community easily.
Current legislators instead focus on the feelings of white children as subject to bruising through guilt and shame, but both strategies are equally directed towards preventing a reckoning with the past that would upset the status quo.

Frank Wilderson, for example, notes that the visual spectacle of the deaths of Black men at the hands of police has been supplemented with fictional portrayals of the rape of Black women in films about slavery and claims that these images, in spite of the outrage they also cause among a significant number of white viewers, reinforce violence against African Americans by signaling that particular bodies are appropriately subject to such violence (Afropessimism).

As Sharon Patricia Holland notes, “incest is frequently miscegenation in the Southern imaginary” (Erotic Life of Racism 5). See also my Sibling Action 176-183.

Threadcraft, in particular, critiques Du Bois for a worrisome emphasis on masculinity, a pathologizing of African American female sexuality, and even a certain ambivalence towards rape, which he decries but also credits with the generation of a certain Black female strength (Threadcraft esp. 94-95). For a summary of other critical views on Du Bois and feminism, see Threadcraft 89-95. While I agree with Threadcraft on a problematic attitude towards gender in Du Bois, I argue here that “The Coming of John” does make a powerful case for dismantling the illusion that sexual and civic abuse and injustice are discrete forms of discrimination.

Although neither is aware of it until Jones’s leaves the opera house, the woman in question is John Henderson’s date. There is a kind of foreshadowing here that reverses the oblivious gesture and inappropriate reaction into a sexual assault and double retribution that end of the story.

Both the Lohengrin and the Esther intertext situate John Jones in a position analogous to a woman, complicating the gender dynamics of Souls, as Charles Nero has discussed in a reading leaning on the Esther citation and Du Bois’s elevation of submission as a form of service (266-70). Nero also notes that Jones’s identification with the Wedding March feminizes him, but he does not specifically associate his role with that of Elsa (263-64). This reading does not invalidate Shatema Threadcraft’s concern that Du Bois tacitly supported the model of divided spheres and was more focused on redressing inequality for Black men in the public sphere than for Black women, who experienced racist violence in sexualized forms.

R.A. Judy also notes this moment as a pivotal one for Jones’s development, as he recognizes “duty as action,” and moves from knowing what he must do to actually doing it (245).

Secondary works

Hortence Spillers’s and Orlando Patterson’s groundbreaking critical work in the 1980s also focused on the way that a symbolic “American grammar” (Spillers) created conditions that Patterson labels “social death” for the enslaved and fails to lose its power to mold social being after emancipation.

See, for example, Morris 144-147. There is no clear evidence of influence from Du Bois’s earlier to Simmel’s later concept.

Simmel himself, although raised Christian, was the child of two converts from Judaism and suffered discrimination in his career as a result. Nonetheless, or perhaps in cautious reaction to this imposed positionality, the image of the stranger that he evokes conforms to European stereotypes of Jews without attempting to speak from within the marginalized group. See Thomas Kemple for more on the intersections of Simmel’s biography with his work.

I do not mean to elide the significant distinctions among these figures. Beginning in the 1980s, Spillers and Patterson interrogate the way that an epistemology of living personhood is constructed against the non-personhood or social death of the enslaved. Building on this work, Sharon Patricia Holland places the emancipated African American, whose “transmutation from enslaved to freed subject never quite occurred at the level of the imagination” (Raising the Dead 15), in the space of the national imaginary surrounding death as discussed by Benedict Anderson (13-40). Frank B. Wilderson III has formulated the ontological construction of the modern world around this dichotomy, which erects the human (white) through counterpart with the non-human (Black), first in Red, White & Black (esp. 17-23). Calvin Warren diagnoses the denial of ontology to “black being” (14). Wilderson and Warren both argue for the irresponsibility of touting “humanist affect” (Warren 3) that cannot prove effective (Wilderson R, W, & B 55). What joins these theorists is the insistence on the ontology of the semantic, the ontology created by a curtailed knowledge, which we also see in both Du Bois and Baldwin.