

The Radical Nature of the Du Boisian Metanarrative and Economic Reparations

Joseph N. Evans, Ph.D.
Pastor, Mount Carmel Baptist Church
Washington, D.C.

Abstract: *This essay's purpose is to explore the radical nature and trajectory of the Du Boisian prophetic tradition. A significant part of this tradition is its metanarrative's form and function, which is first located in W. E. B. Du Bois' writings and secondly located in seminal writings and sermons of Martin Luther King Jr. The Du Boisian metanarrative is focused on economic justice, which here is economic reparations.*

I believe in God, who made of one blood all nations that on earth do dwell. I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers varying through time and opportunity, in form and gift and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and the possibility of infinite development.

I believe in the Devil and his angels, who wantonly work to narrow opportunity of struggling human beings, especially black; who spit in the faces of the fallen, strike them that cannot strike again, believe the worst and work to prove it, hating the image which their Maker stamped on a brother's soul.

W.E.B. Du Bois¹

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

Martin Luther King Jr.²

Elsewhere, I have argued that the Du Boisian metanarrative is defined as the common pathology shared among the socio-marginalized whom Eurocentrism and its claims of cultural and racial superiority oppress. Herein, I am concerned with the central actions of black experiences through which people of African descent understand those experiences. This points toward people of African descent and how they construct their metanarratives by drawing meaningful threads between the central actions of their experiences and thereby weave their stories.³ In turn, the Du Boisian metanarrative is further defined as an autonomous alternative narrative. By autonomous, I mean that the Du Boisian metanarrative empowers preachers in the Du Boisian prophetic tradition to make truth claims independent from the Eurocentric metanarrative. Secondly, I mean that storytellers intentionally craft a narrative motivated to tell

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Credo," in *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (New York: Dover, 1999), 1.

² See James Washington, ed., "I Have a Dream," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 217.

³ Joseph Evans, *Lifting the Veil Over Eurocentrism: The Du Boisian Hermeneutic of Double Consciousness* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2014), 161–168.

stories that are commonly understood and accepted by specific groups of people—thus a metanarrative. Autonomy and alternative are significant characteristics of the Du Boisian metanarrative. In this way, those who employ this metanarrative are empowered to create conversational distance from the dominant culture’s narrative form and instead support a homiletic that is crafted and shaped specifically to demand economic reparations for people of African descent.⁴

The aforementioned storytellers are Du Boisian preachers, men and women radicalized by the gospel and yearning to make visible the ethical principles of the Kingdom of God. The Du Boisian metanarrative informs these preachers, which adds synergy to the Du Boisian prophetic tradition. Oftentimes, this metanarrative differs from the traditional Eurocentric metanarrative that claims hegemonic-authorial claims over texts, political events, and human right’s movements such as “Black Lives Matter.” Another example is that the Du Boisian metanarrative serves as a way to begin a causal critique of people of African descent’s historic and current struggle with economic inequality, oppression, and marginalization. Because of its autonomy, it exposes hegemonies that hide economic injustice beneath manipulations of race, exploitations of economics, and unimaginative politics. This unholy trinity is morally and legally unjustifiable. In comparison, the Du Boisian metanarrative shapes a homiletic that provides agency for preachers to demand economic reparations for people of African descent. This Du Boisian metanarrative explores a relationship between language constructs, its symbols, and how this relationship aids storytellers’ abilities to persuade. As mentioned, these storytellers are preachers in the Du Boisian prophetic tradition called to be radically prophetic. This means preachers speak boldly in religious language and employ religious symbols in order to point out economic injustice and point toward economic justice, which here is defined as reparations.⁵

The Du Boisian metanarrative upsets the equilibrium of the establishment’s status quo. It emerges and confronts the limitations that the predominantly Eurocentric metanarrative continues to posit. That is, biased storylines support hegemonic claims that suppress other hermeneutic, theological, and rhetorical truth claims; these storylines, I contend, inform Eurocentric homiletics. I further contend that these hegemonic claims support global economic oppression against people of color. (From this point forward, I will refer to people of color as people of African descent.) Furthermore, I contend that the Du Boisian metanarrative functions in religious rhetoric and homiletic form in writings and sermons can be demonstrated. Later, I point toward and compare some of King’s writings and sermons alongside its forerunner’s work, which are cited in the Du Bois’ writings.

Like Du Bois, King was an economic reparationist. Of course King and Du Bois were not the only religionists who have made public demands for economic reparations.⁶ However, many

⁴ See Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann and Anthony P. Lombardo, “Framing Reparations Claims: Differences between the African and Jewish Social Movements for Reparations,” in *African Studies Review* Vol. 50. No. 1 (April, 2007), 27–48; “Moreover, the principal actor promoting discussion of historical reparations as a new norm of justice was the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, which organized the Durban Conference” that addressed global reparations for people of African descent and people of color, 30.

⁵ Jonathon S. Kahn, “Divine Discontent as Religious Faith,” in *Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8–14.

⁶ Wyatt Tee Walker, “Case for Reparations” in *Style Weekly* (November 26, 2008) In his essay, Walker writes, “Now that Barack Obama has been elected as the first black president of the United States, he should seriously consider reparations for African-Americans. The issue has generated a lot of critical commentary from white and black pundits, some worrying that reparations would further erode race relations in the United States. The idea of reparations, however, is non-negotiable. Jews received reparations for their Holocaust. Native Americans received reparations for their genocide at the hands of Europeans. Japanese Americans received reparations for their

preachers and homileticians are not aware that many of King's published writings and sermons are concerned with economic restitution. Christian thinkers on the political and theological left and right may find consensus that Martin Luther King Jr. was a brilliant theologian and preacher. They may also agree that his works are a part of our American lexicon and religious canon (theology, ethics, and homiletics). However, they may not agree with King's adaptation of the Du Boisian metanarrative and how he employs it to persuade.⁷ Clearly King's hermeneutic does not rely upon the Eurocentric *hermeneutic canon*.⁸ His hermeneutic is informed by the alternative metanarrative that supports and complements the Du Boisian prophetic tradition. When considered in this way, it is conceded that some preachers and homileticians who are informed by Eurocentric claims may contest and even resist this essay's principle claim: Martin Luther King Jr.'s demand for economic reparations was prophetic and informed by the Du Boisian metanarrative.

Stated another way, King's prophetic rhetoric and alternative metanarrative are informed by and belong to the Du Boisian prophetic tradition.⁹ Prophetic rhetoric is filled with political and psychological symbolism.¹⁰ In short, rhetoric that addresses economic reparations is political and psychological symbolic language. What is more, this species of rhetoric (that argues for economic reparations) employs language and strategies that point toward people of African descent's historical endurance of suffering caused by Eurocentric economic injustice. Of import here, this alternative metanarrative is adaptable and agile for supporting homiletic claims that are informed by economic reparations rhetoric. Beyond this, the Du Boisian metanarrative empowers preachers and listeners to experience psychological and spiritual catharsis. In this way, the Du Boisian metanarrative is grounded in what is called elsewhere psychospiritual phenomena.¹¹ Moreover, this metanarrative is a catalyst for shaping an effective homiletic that causes debate in the psyche of diverse congregants and cultural stakeholders. Also at stake, this

treatment during World War II. Slavery for African-Americans is our Holocaust, yet we have not received restitution." In this editorial, Walker's rhetoric is similar to King's "I Have a Dream" where he demands economic reparations. "In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the 'unalienable Rights' of 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.' It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'" See *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 102; and for commentary on "I Have a Dream," see Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Word that Moved America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 94.

⁷ Jacqueline Bacon, *The Humblest May Stand Forth: Rhetoric, Empowerment and Abolition* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2002), 60–63. Bacon sees narrative as a form of persuasion. This means that narrative is also a species of rhetoric, as she explains: "[Frederick] Douglass's rhetoric goes beyond personal testimony, and he often presents strong arguments against slavery in narrative form . . . his framing of persuasion of narration can be seen as a reaction to the perspectives of antebellum society," 60.

⁸ John McClure, *Otherwise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Preaching* (Saint Louis Chalice, 2001), ix. See also Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Pulpit Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 15.

⁹ Joseph Evans, *Lifting the Veil Over Eurocentrism*, 162.

¹⁰ Harryette Mullen, "African Signs and Spirit Writing," in *African American Literary Theory: African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 626.

¹² Joseph Evans, *Lifting the Veil Over Eurocentrism*, 19.

Du Boisian prophetic tradition seeks to transcend Westernized institutionalized impasses that hinder solutions to economic equality.

We can decipher many causes of such institutionalized impasses. First, those who employ this metanarrative must concede that Westernized-Eurocentric economic policies and political polarization historically and currently resist and confront its claims. This impasse occurs because a demand for the abolishment of economic inequality is inherent in the debate, which is the continuation of the 19th century's abolitionist's movement against racial inequality. In essence, economic inequality is rooted in racial and political inequality. To achieve the laudatory goal of eradicating racial, economic, and political inequality, the Du Boisian preachers' goal is to craft a homiletic that bears the burden of confronting hegemonic policies that indeed protect racial, economic, and political inequality.

A second cause of resistance to an economic reparations debate is it threatens the hegemonic status quo.¹² Public economic reparations' debate further brings into question the West's "tried and true" economic system, namely capitalism, which is a Eurocentric invention and the West's most self-serving justification for economic inequality—thus the status quo. In addition, the economic reparation debate challenges religious and public opinion. Ultimately, economic reparations awarded to people of African descent changes global, racial, economic, and political balances, which might lead to an eschatological fulfillment of economic justice.¹³

A third cause of resistance is perhaps the most difficult impasse. This difficult impasse is supported by the manipulation of those whose egos are massaged by Eurocentrism's claims. Here, the Eurocentric metanarrative speaks as *ex-cathedra*—that is, above contradiction and therefore its storytellers, narratives, and adherents avoid critique from dissenting voices. Thus, the Du Boisian metanarrative is necessary in order to critique truth claims asserted by the Eurocentric metanarrative. Keep in mind, the Eurocentric metanarrative is the lens through which many preachers gaze when making homiletical claims. As an example, many preachers who preach in this tradition employ heroic illustrations and biased applications to ground biblical texts under their consideration. In contrast and furthermore, the Du Boisian metanarrative is necessary because an antithetical metanarrative functions against claims of moral superiority and legal immunity from all immoral acts against people of African descent. Thus the Eurocentric metanarrative creates exclusive cultural constructs that lead to racial, economic, and political advantages for Western culture's people of non-color—who are, in fact, globally in the minority.

A fourth cause of resistance is located in the dominant culture's belief system which largely controls private and public institutional spheres that form and shape the contours of debates in the private and public square. Economic reparation arguments are not new; they have

¹² Hilary Beckles, *Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide* (Barbados: University of the West Indies Press, 2013), 176. Beckles writes, "The United States had already declared non-participation in objection of the word 'reparation' appearing on the draft agenda [Durban Conference on reparations that occurred in 2007]. The European Union and 'Western' countries threatened to remove themselves for the same reason. Colin Powell, the US secretary of state, and Condoleezza Rice, national security advisor, both African Americans, were bullish about the matter, stating that the world must not tell the United States how to handle its racial past and present." See also "Rice Says US Blacks Should Not Be Paid for Slavery," in *Daily Observer*, Monday September 10, 2001.

¹³ See Jesse J. Holland, "The United States Should Consider Reparations for African American Descendants of Slavery, A United Nation's Working Group said on Friday," *U.S. News and World Report*, [January 29, 2016], accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2016-01-29/un-working-group-suggests-us-work-on-racial-reconciliation>.

been made for more than a century.¹⁴ Since then economic reparations have been and remain moral and legal arguments.¹⁵ What then does this essay suggest to be different? There is a small but open window of opportunity that depends on a growing groundswell of global opinion among people of African descent who share a common moral outrage caused by economic inequality. Still, a complete study of economic reparations is too broad for this essay and therefore ethical and editorial choices have been made. Notwithstanding, those who preach in the Du Boisian prophetic tradition need a homiletic that confronts this single most significant 21st century's opponent, which is economic inequality. Those who preach in the Du Boisian prophetic tradition demand abolishment of economic inequality through economic reparations for people of African descent.

This essay therefore explores an alternative metanarrative that homiletically empowers preachers to argue for economic reparations for people of African descent. A homiletic "how to do" list is not included here, but a homiletic for economic reparations must be employed in order to create conversational distance from Eurocentric exclusive heroic truth claims. Critical memory also is important to narrative development. I discuss this caveat later in this essay. For immediate consideration, it is important to note that I follow a historical line; that is, the discussion of narrative follows Du Bois from 1903 to 1940. Between these years, Du Bois writes among others, *The Souls of Black Folk*, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out" in *The New Negro, Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* and *Dusk of Dawn* (the latter two books are autobiographical). It is because of Du Bois' writings, sociopolitical, socio-religious criticism, and activism that I credited Du Bois for challenging the hegemonic grip of Eurocentrism. I include in his canon the invention of this metanarrative and a similar hermeneutic of double consciousness—thus the Du Boisian prophetic tradition. My effort, here, is to focus on how Du Bois shapes his metanarrative, which I apply to economic reparations.

The Du Boisian Narrative: "Something to be pitied"

W.E.B. Du Bois made his career mark early and he remains a preeminent archetype for scholar activists. His pivotal work, *The Souls of Black Folk* was published in 1903. At the time, it was largely and negatively criticized by the vanguards of the establishment's institutional spheres.¹⁶ This reception occurred, in part, because the vanguard understood well that Du Bois had introduced a new Negro aesthetic that created conversational distance from the normative Eurocentric dominant metanarrative that degraded the Negro masses. Later you will see Du Bois' new Negro aesthetic is located in "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," an essay that appears in a groundbreaking work edited by a Howard University professor, Alain Locke—*The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (1925). Here, Du Bois demonstrates his understanding of Eurocentric institutional spheres that inform Westernized culture and canon. He further demonstrates that he understands that liberation for people of African descent must be a global effort, now known as pan-Africanism.¹⁷ Du Bois' focus in *Souls* begins to develop an alternative

¹⁴ Mary Francis Berry, *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 4. "By the early twentieth century (more accurately 1899), her organization (Callie House), the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association, according to federal officials, would swell to about 300,000, determined black people petitioning a government that barely recognized their existence and demanding a law ordering reparations for slavery."

¹⁵ See Rhoda E. Howard-Hassermann and Anthony P. Lombardo, "Framing Reparation's Claims," 32–33.

¹⁶ See Henry Gates, "Introduction" in *Souls*, xvi.

¹⁷ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century 1919–1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 45–52.

Negro narrative; a story that is told autonomously and independent of Eurocentric myths and truth claims. Du Bois' metanarrative empowers people of African descent to tell their own story.

The Du Boisian metanarrative stands in stark contrast with the dominant cultural metanarrative which has exhausted blacks and whites globally with its heroic figures who share similar DNA with godlike figures found in Greek and Roman mythologies. Indeed the Eurocentric metanarrative distorts the past and continues to mask its role in the destruction of other peoples. Today these mythologies are believed widely. It further seems that the metanarrative which employs these mythologies passionately reinforces stereotypical-mythical views of past and current people of African descent's accomplishments. By implication this gloomy depiction predicts a gloomy future for the accomplishments of otherwise intellectuals.¹⁸ There are few academic scholars of African descent in the academy's halls, which includes the halls of religion. Ralph Ellison's prophetic claim remains contemporary in his protean work *The Invisible Man*.¹⁹

Du Bois began his metanarrative with critical memory development. He highlights three salient phases of critical memory, namely: the pathological, the therapeutic, and the disturbances of blocked memory.²⁰ Du Bois includes these phases in his metanarrative development because he wants to form his metanarrative as an affirmation of people of African descent. To do so, first he addresses the psychological effects that Eurocentrism has on the flawed dominant cultural metanarrative that continues to support dominant cultural hegemonies. In short, the dominant cultural hegemonies continue to have a grip on the Negro masses' psyche (people of African descent). The following excerpt captures the bruised psyche of the American Negro:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All nevertheless flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?²¹

This passage from "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in *Souls* speaks volumes. Those who fought at Mechanicville are outraged by Southern hegemonies. Apparently Du Bois does not want his readers to confuse these characters with embittered Southerners over the Civil War's outcome and the emancipation of people of African descent. Indeed it appears that Du Bois is speaking of Northern people (or possibly someone from another region of the country). More than likely however; the character in this essay is representative of a Yankee Civil War veteran. An assumption is made here that Du Bois wants his readers to see themselves, namely Northern liberals, the majority of people who were predominantly the first readers of *Souls*, as duplicitous in the newly emancipated Negro's degradation. They too are aligned with Eurocentric values that reinforce deeply flawed cultural advantages.

¹⁸ John McClure, *Otherwise Preaching*, 2001. The reference here to McClure's work is to emphasis that otherwise means something or someone who thinks outside of the proverbial house looking for truth claims beyond traditional and conventional institutional spheres.

¹⁹ Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (New York, Random House, 1952).

²⁰ Paul Ricouer, *Memory, History Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 57.

²¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Spiritual Strivings" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 2005), 1–2.

Whether it is among so called sympathizers or hard-shell critics, it is clear that Du Bois shares with his audience his daily humiliation. That is, he has offered his readers a glimpse into his psyche, his double consciousness as something to be pitied:

After the Egyptian, and the Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity of the other world. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.²²

In the first excerpt, “How does it feel to be a problem?” Du Bois points toward this relentless pathology as something to be pitied. People of non-color ask a similar contemporary question about people of African descent. The former may not be aware that this question alone resurfaces as a burning negative self-image embedded inside the Negro psyche. A second example, “Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil?” is for the interrogator a kind of catharsis. Du Bois understands that aligning with the oppressed indeed is therapeutic purging. A third example is the disturbance of blocked memory. It appears that Du Bois guards his inner feelings from humiliating memories of the past as well as present acts of continual physical and psychological terrorism. Thus Du Bois responds to his past and present memories similarly as does his interrogator. Both block their unpleasant memories. On the one hand, the oppressor attempts to block memories of the benefactors of slavery, Jim and Jane Crow and apartheid; and on the other, the oppressed attempts to block memories of seething and lingering dehumanization and strangely both are possessed by double consciousness.

Indeed, in the second excerpt, I have located critical memory as double consciousness in these three phases. The first phase is pathological memory: “...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, of the other world.”²³ Here Du Bois points toward pathology that informs people of African descent's collective cultural worldview. Commonly held experiences and storylines are important for Du Bois' metanarrative development. For blacks, it signs something to be pitied. It also indicates Du Bois' intention is to create a heroic Negro, “gifted with a second-sight.” Another example of memory as pathology is Du Bois' expression of double consciousness: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”²⁴ Here, Du Bois focuses on “something to be pitied” pathology. A third example is the disturbances of blocked memories. “One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”²⁵ signifies a daily coping mechanism to survive. This is an example of what previously has been

²² Ibid., 3.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

characterized as disturbance of blocked memory. Double consciousness is an emotional response to socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and socio-psychological marginalization. It is important not to lose sight of critical memory development, which is an important characteristic of the Du Boisian metanarrative formation.

The Du Boisian metanarrative however continues to evolve. Du Bois published “The Negro Mind Reaches Out” in the groundbreaking work *The New Negro* in 1925. Here Du Bois continues to develop his metanarrative as an alternative, the antithesis metanarrative. Ironically, Du Bois suggests that his metanarrative functions in multiple places where people of African descent are located geographically. This paradigm shift is located in the following passage where Du Bois alleges that a deliberate effort has been made to keep people of African descent struggling to survive racism in social isolation. Racism then is a part of a larger global construct that is economic and unjust:

Once upon a time in my younger years and in the dawn of this century I wrote: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” It was a pert and singing phrase which I then liked and which since I have often rehearsed to my soul and asked:—how far is this prophecy or speculation? To-day in the last years of the century's first quarter, let us examine the matter again, especially in the memory of that great event of these great years, the World War. Fruit of the bitter rivalries of economic imperialism, the roots of the catastrophe were in Africa, deeply entwined at bottom with the problems of the color line. And of the legacy left, the problems the world inherits hold the same fatal seed; world dissension and catastrophe still lurk in the unsolved problems of race relations. What then is the world view that the consideration of this question offers? Most men would agree that our present problem of problems was not the Color Problem, but what we call labor, the problem of allocating work and income in the tremendous and increasingly intricate world-embracing industrial machine that our civilization built...²⁶

This is a clear example of critical memory development. Here it is employed to express how people of African descent are affected by global conflict. The so-called Great War was believed to end all wars, but instead it further reinforced conditions associated with post colonialism. This truth claim further reinforces memory as pathological, the first phase of psychological phenomenon associated with memory. Thus the Eurocentric storyline emerges. In *Souls* to which Du Bois alludes, he focused on racism, the primary scourge of the earth. Here, seventeen years later, Du Bois permits his readers to observe his critical thought-evolution.

Du Bois describes the results of the Great War in this way: “And of the legacy left, the problems the world inherits hold the same fatal seed; world dissension and catastrophe still lurk in the unsolved problems of race relations.”²⁷ Du Bois claims racism still plagues people of African descent. The Great War unearthed another gravely looming problem that involves the color-line, a problem “...we call labor, the problem of allocating work and income in the tremendous and increasingly intricate world-embracing industrial machine that our civilization built.”²⁸ Herein, Du Bois’ metanarrative makes a distinct connection between racism and global economic injustice. In what follows, Du Bois suggests that study of the Negro problem has been

²⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Negro Mind Reaches Out,” in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 385.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

too narrow in its scope: “Our good will is too often confined to that labor which we see and feel and exercise around us, rather than directed to the periphery of the vast circle, where unseen and inarticulate, the determining factors are at work.”²⁹ He defines Eurocentrism as the guardian of Empire: “Modern imperialism and modern industrialism are one and the same system; root and branch of the same tree. The race problem is on the other side of the labor problem. . . . With nearly every great European empire to-day walks its dark colonial shadow.”³⁰

During that same period, Du Bois publishes *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*. Writing in essay form, Du Bois forcefully confronts race and economic inequalities that he locates in labor disputes. Du Bois intends to make his readers aware that race and labor disputes are unjust economics and a global threat to people of African descent. The following excerpt is chosen from “The Hands of Ethiopia” in order for readers to appreciate further the global scope of the Du Boisian narrative:

One cannot ignore the extraordinary fact that a world campaign [is] beginning with the slave-trade and ending with the refusal to capitalize the word “Negro,” leading through a passionate defense of slavery by attributing every bestiality to blacks and finally culminating in the unconsciously trained millions of honest, modern men into the belief that black folk are sub-human. . . . Those who do believe in men, who know what black men have done in human history, who have taken pains to follow even superficially the story of the rise of the Negro in Africa, the West Indies, and the Americas of our day know that our modern contempt of Negroes rests upon no scientific foundation worth a moment’s attention. It is nothing more than a vicious habit of mind.³¹

What is important here, Du Bois “blames” Western plutocrats and oligarchs, those guardians, investors and benefactors of this “world campaign” as instigators of psychological terrorism enacted against people of African descent. This kind of terrorism is evidenced in the slave trade, which I purport is symbolically akin to recent police brutality in Florida, Baltimore, Chicago, and San Bernardino and other documented places around the world. Secondly, psychological terrorism includes those who refuse to respect the dignity of people of African descent, and here referring to them as “negro instead of Negro.” The campaign then reinforces an artificial storyline of superiority, which is Eurocentrism. This artificial storyline has denied the storyline of black accomplishment in Africa, the Caribbean, and America.

Du Bois’ *Darkwater* locates a final but disturbing example. It describes the East St. Louis race riots of 1917. Du Bois meticulously tells a graphic and compelling story about racial discrimination among blacks and whites. According to Du Bois, whites are afraid of free market capitalism and economic competition from blacks, who have migrated outside the *Jim Crow* South, to look for jobs and democratic justice. What is made obvious in the following passage is that an inherent social relationship exists between race, labor, and economics that indicate political hegemonies:

[After the Great War] Then the world changed; the civilization, built for culture, rebuilt itself for willful murder in Europe, Asia, America, and the Southern Seas. . . . The wants of common men were forgotten before the groan of giants. War brought subtle changes.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 385-386.

³¹ Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (New York: Dover Publications, 1999), 41.

Wages stood still while prices fattened. It was not that the white worker was threatened with starvation, but it was what was, after all, a more important question,—whether or not he should lose his front-room and victrola and even his dream Ford car.³²

In his essay “Of Work and Wealth,” Du Bois provides an amazingly accurate portrayal of an emerging white Middle America (the proletariat). An economic civilization, he writes, that was built for culture, became a changed culture and that happened because the culture became inseparable from its motivated economic interest. The people at the lower rungs of the economic ladder are conditioned to be satisfied with economic inequality, referenced here as a living room with a Victrola phonograph and the pathetic hopes of owning a Ford—the American car.

In 1940, Du Bois publishes *Dusk of Dawn*, which was the second of three autobiographies. Again, he has mastered essay in form. The following excerpt dramatizes Du Boisian metanarrative development. It is a brief look at what motivates and informs his invention, making it useful for homiletic consideration for Du Boisian preachers.

I think it was in Africa that I came more clearly to see the close connection between race and wealth. The fact that even in the minds of the most dogmatic supporters of race theories and believers in the inferiority of colored folks to white, there was a conscious or unconscious determination to increase their incomes by taking full advantage of this belief. And then gradually this thought was metamorphosed into a realization that the income bearing value of race prejudice was the cause and not the result of theories of race inferiority; that particularly in the United States the income of the Cotton Kingdom based on black slavery caused the passionate belief in Negro inferiority and the determination to enforce it even by arms.³³

Du Bois describes racism as a psychological pathology. It is motivated by selfishness which remains recognizable in post colonized Africa and beyond. Economic inequality then is not based on motivations and native intelligence but instead, it is grounded in psychologically racist classifications. It is simply irrational; it is morphed into the collective psyche of people influenced and conditioned by Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism’s tentacles have reached into the United States, and as I remind Du Boisian preachers and homileticians, “the Cotton Kingdom based on black slavery caused the passionate belief in Negro inferiority and the determination to enforce it even by arms.”³⁴

I have concluded that at the root of the Eurocentric metanarrative is an aggressive and imposed psychological terrorism. It imposes terrorism upon collective Negro and black psyches that are nearly if not permanently damaged. If this assertion is accurate, it sheds light on what motivated Du Bois to invent his metanarrative as an alternative to its antagonist, namely the Eurocentric metanarrative, its stories of heroism, traditions, and mythologies. Still, a natural question rises among thoughtful people: If we cannot believe the accuracies of Eurocentric cultural stories, why should we believe Eurocentric truth claims about Scripture, the nature of liberation, the person of God, or the identity of Jesus of Nazareth? This matters to preachers, those who proclaim biblical texts—the believability of their proclamations. What follows is an

³² Ibid., 50.

³³ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward An Autobiography of A Race Concept* (Piscataway, NJ, 1984), 129–130.

³⁴ Ibid., 129.

attempt to locate truth claims supported by the Du Boisian metanarrative in the writings and preaching of Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr., the Epitome of the Du Boisian Prophetic Tradition

An integral part of this metanarrative discussion is a consideration of epideictic rhetoric.³⁵ This species of rhetoric is more commonly known as “praise and blame.” It is important for preachers and homileticians to note that the Du Boisian metanarrative tells a persuasive story, which is the central focus of rhetoric.³⁶ I now turn to locate the Du Boisian metanarrative (and rhetoric) in King’s writings and sermons that focus on economic justice, particularly where he demands economic reparations. It is clear that King’s major writings employ our metanarrative as a species of rhetoric to craft arguments that shape his homiletic.

Martin Luther King Jr. was the epitome of the Du Boisian prophetic tradition. His brief public career was meteoric, courageous, and yes, prophetic. Here at the outset, I will argue that King understood the significance and importance of the Du Boisian metanarrative and he embraced it. The following excerpt from “Honor Dr. Du Bois” was an essay that first appeared in *Freedomways*, “a quarterly review of the freedom movement, [it] was a leading proactive journal edited by black Americans from the 1960s to the 1980s.”³⁷ Of Dr. Du Bois, King writes:

One idea [Du Bois] insistently taught was that Black people have been kept in oppression and deprivation by a poisonous fog of lies that depicted them as inferior, born deficient, and deservedly doomed to servitude to the grave. So assiduously has this poison been injected into the mind of America that its disease has infected not only whites but many Negroes. So long as the lie was believed the brutality and criminality of conduct toward the Negro was easy for the conscience to bear. The twisted logic ran: if the black man was inferior he was not oppressed – his place in society was appropriate to his meager talent and intellect.³⁸

King aligns with the Du Boisian prophetic tradition and metanarrative. If we return to phases of critical memory, we will notice that King has described an emotionally destructive pathology. Today many preachers see this visible parallel. That is, the Eurocentric metanarrative is seared psychologically into the brainwashed minds of many people of non-color and African descent. Many believe they have been commissioned to commit “brutality and criminality of conduct” against people of African descent.³⁹ Possessed with “twisted logic,” some believe that people of African descent can be forced back into a mythical parochial “place in society.”⁴⁰ King’s words however, serve as a testament. He intentionally appropriates and employs the Du Boisian metanarrative into his orality, written words, and activism. What is more, this brief passage sheds light for interpreters of King’s metanarrative and homiletic. Interpreters will notice that King is radicalized by the Du Boisian prophetic tradition.

King in fact adapts several aspects of the Du Boisian metanarrative into his philosophical point of departure. His metanarrative persuades and provides space to tell a pathological and

³⁵ Aristotle, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, ed. Lane Cooper (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1932), xxx.

³⁶ Jacqueline Bacon, *The Humblest May Stand Forth*, 60–63.

³⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., *The Radical King: Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon, 2015), 113.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

therapeutic story that gets around the dominant culture's collective disturbances of blocked memories. King understands Westernized culture and the Eurocentric metanarrative are constructs namely of race, economics, and politics. Like Du Bois, he sees them as a single thread. In the following passage, King further amplifies this premise when he comments on Du Bois' magisterial book, *Black Reconstruction*:

To understand why his study of the Reconstruction was a monumental achievement it is necessary to see it in context. White historians had for a century crudely distorted the Negro's role in the Reconstruction years. It was conscious and deliberate manipulation of history and the stakes were high. The Reconstruction period was a period in which black men had a small measure of freedom of action. If, as white historians tell it, Negroes wallowed in corruption, opportunism, displayed spectacular stupidity, were wanton, evil and ignorant, their case was made. They would have proved that freedom was dangerous in the hands of inferior beings. One generation after another of Americans were assiduously taught these falsehoods and the collective mind of America became poisoned with racism and stunted with myths.⁴¹

Notice that King "blames" white historians of conscious, deliberate, manipulation, and distortion; but notice also why! The stakes are high. It is obvious that economic reparations for people of African descent points toward what Du Bois and King discovered: Eurocentric intellectual dishonesty. Dishonesty is employed to retain sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic advantages. Unavoidable is King's indictment; he "blames" white historians, members of the Eurocentric establishment, vanguards of the Westernized canon, and guardians of the establishment's status quo for creating deliberate mythologies about themselves and casting themselves as superior to people of African descent. Intentionally then, we see that oligarchs through Eurocentric claims continue to mislead generations of Americans who are "assiduously taught these falsehoods and the collective mind of America [black, white, and all others] became poisoned with racism and stunted with myths."⁴²

This brief summary helps Du Boisian preachers and homileticians appreciate King's understanding and employment of the Du Boisian metanarrative. This understanding is significant for preachers who do, and who will argue for economic equality. These preachers hold that an alternative narrative is important to make rhetorical strategies that inform a homiletic crafted and shaped to reinforce biblical truth claims for economic reparations. As mentioned earlier, like Du Bois, King was an economic reparationist. It is my intention then to focus on King's economic reparations argument, which I believe is the thesis for the "I Have a Dream" speech:

One hundred years later the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of vast oceans of material wealth. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. . . . In a real sense we come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic

⁴¹ Ibid., 116. See also Jonathon S. Kahn, "Divine Discontent as Religious Faith," in *Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*, 8–10. See also Edward Blum, "Rethinking Du Bois: Rethinking Race and Religion," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 11; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

⁴² Ibid.

wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.⁴³

King was a master of sacred rhetoric and had few peers (Howard Thurman, Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Vernon Johns, and Gardner Taylor are among the privileged few). Du Boisian preachers and homileticians will immediately notice that King sets the boundaries for his rhetorical discourse when he repeats. “One hundred years later the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty. . . . One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society.”⁴⁴ This is effective, in part, because King employs critical memory from the Du Boisian metanarrative. In this way, King discloses that because of psychological and economic terrorism, people of African descent possess negative self-image pathology. This pathology results from constant forms of oppression, such as *Jim and Jane Crow* laws and other sociopolitical gerrymanders. This refrain also marks time passed and distance traveled by people of African descent without attaining democratic equality. Adroitly, King then transitions to the present and frames his thesis: “In a real sense we come to our nation’s capital to cash a check.”⁴⁵

Some may interpret this now famous phrase only as metaphoric, but at close reading, it can be taken quite literally to signify that people of African American descent have come to the nation’s capital to demand economic reparations. King’s metanarrative is supported by rhetoric that follows historic and conventional lines. King grounds his argument in constitutional and legal rights that are guaranteed to all Americans. “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.” King expands his thesis argument. Economic reparations is also a moral mandate: “This [promissory] note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” King aligns the Civil rights movement with his personal convictions and activism with those convictions and activism represented in the content of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. By implication, the emotional and psychological yearnings are shared universal yearnings of all people. In short, like the white masses the Negro masses too are human.⁴⁶

King moves from “praising” the American declaration of freedom and equality to “blaming” the Eurocentric establishment for defaulting on said promises that all men and women

⁴³ James Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope*, 217.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “I Have a Dream” in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World* ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 101–106.

are democratically equal regardless of their ethnicities or orientations. His emphasis however is placed on the racial, economic, and politically deprived status of people of African descent, “America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’” King then speaks in the Du Bosian prophetic tradition when he remarks, “We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.” What is of import here, King demands economic equality, that is, economic reparations. As civil and racial pressures continued to increase, King became more prophetic and his Du Boisian metanarrative became more edgy and complex.⁴⁷

On April 4, 1967, King preaches one of his most controversial sermons, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” White liberal and conservative politicians knew King was speaking against American empire. Indeed this position is a significant part of his sermon but King speaks beyond Eurocentric in-house interests. King is concerned with implications associated with race, economics, and politics. King’s rhetorical strategy must be placed into context; he is burdened with America’s unwillingness to eradicate America’s poverty. Secondly, King is burdened by the escalation of the war. He knows that increased numbers of socio-marginalized people would die on bloodstained international soil, and people of African descent would disproportionately suffer the largest casualties and experience disproportionate fatalities. These factors would affect the Negro masses, emotionally, economically, and politically at home and abroad, including diasporic people of African descent. In short, the Vietnam War was an act of genocide against people of color and people of African descent; it was a global act of racial, economic, and political exploitation that continues to hinder the world’s populations. At the center of this mess is the United States; and its policies mirror Eurocentrism.

Since I am a preacher by trade, I suppose it not surprising that I have several reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision. There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a real promise of hope for the poor – both black and white – through the Poverty Program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the build-up in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonical destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.

Perhaps the more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them 8,000 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia and East Harlem.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” in *The Radical King*, 203–204.

King is Du Boisian here and shapes the contours of his metanarrative around race, economics, and politics as Du Bois does prominently in *Dusk of Dawn*. Du Boisian preachers and homiletics should notice that King deconstructs the purpose behind the war's escalation. First, the war increases plutocratic economic profit margins while continuing to decrease possibilities of abolishing economic inequality. This cycle is a vicious one. Poor blacks were dying disproportionately for their country that has denied them basic democratic rights guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.⁴⁹

In 1968, King further demonstrates clearly that he understands the Du Boisian metanarrative helps conscientious citizens. Similarly Du Boisian preachers employ this Du Boisian invention to compare and contrast truth claims in light of the Eurocentric metanarrative. He writes: "Racism is no mere American phenomenon. Its vicious grasp knows no geographical boundaries. In fact, racism and its perennial ally—economic exploitation—provide the key to understanding most of the international complications of this generation."⁵⁰ As Du Bois has before him, King unmasks Eurocentrism:

I am now convinced that the simplest approach will prove to be the most effective – the solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now widely discussed measure: the guaranteed income. . . . The problem [i.e., race, economics, and politics] indicates that our emphasis must be two-fold. We must create full employment or we must create incomes. People must be made consumers by one method or the other. Once they are placed in this position, we need to be concerned that the potential of the individual is not wasted. New forms of work that enhance the social good will have to be devised for those for whom traditional jobs are not available.⁵¹

Some have suggested that King was engaged in democratic socialism. Of course this charge seems pedantic and reveals hegemonic insecurities. More accurately, King shared Du Bois' prophetic worldview and metanarrative, which I have argued here has informed King. Realized eschatology or the radicalized Kingdom of God—The Beloved Community—influenced both of them. With this understanding, it is obvious that King sought solutions to eradicate economic inequality. For King, and many others, the eradication rests in economic reparations. Those who preach in the Du Boisian prophetic tradition and employ the Du Boisian metanarrative should not neglect King's last publication, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* The manuscript was completed in 1967. It was published in June of 1967. Recently, the book's content has entered into our world consciousness. His prophetic voice called for guaranteed income and full employment.

Conclusion

As a final note, I hope this essay demonstrates that I will continue to explore and develop the trajectory of the Du Boisian prophetic tradition. Until I am able to present theoretically the parts as a whole, it will continue to evolve toward a complete homiletic. In the meantime, I will continue to develop different aspects of the tradition. This essay establishes metanarrative as

⁴⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., on April 4, 1968, one year to the day after this sermon, was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on a balcony of the Lorraine Hotel.

⁵⁰ Martin Luther King Jr., "The World House," in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 173.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 162–163.

persuasion, which belongs to species of rhetoric. I contend that W. E. B. Du Bois provides Du Boisian preachers and homileticians a way forward to address the 21st century's single most significant and important moral issue—economic reparations.