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**"'Irrational Zigzags':  
Cosmopolitanism in African  
American Intellectual History"**

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**''Irrational Zigzags':  
Cosmopolitanism in African American Intellectual  
History''**

*Ross Posnock*

Beyond the particular aim suggested in this paper's title, I have a more general intention as well: to recover three words that have been under eclipse during the reign of postmodernism. The three words are the intellectual, the cosmopolitan, and the universal. They have been under suspicion because of postmodernism's well-known bias in favor of the local, the particular, and the relative, evident in the prestige accorded the "organic" (Gramsci) and the "specific" (Foucault) intellectual. But postmodernism is waning (at least in the US academy) and waning too is its tribal conception of politics fixated on identity. This atomized, essentialist politics has always co-existed uneasily with postmodern theory's preference for a dispersed self of pastiche. Whether postmodernism's successor will be called post-identity, post-ethnic, trans-or post-national, or trans-American (to note some contenders), it will express a left-liberal skepticism of cultural pluralism, better known as identity politics. This skepticism is particularly salutary for the study of African American intellectual history, especially the history of black intellectuals. For here identity politics (practiced by whites and blacks alike) has long dominated, fixated on racial difference and the question of what and who is authentically black. The demand of authenticity is always conformist and enforces homogenous norms, for instance rigid masculinism and rooted regionalism, while suppressing the cosmopolitan recognition that one lives as a mixed-up self in a mixed-up world where ancestral imperatives do not exert a preordained authority.

Cultural purism has been rejected by a growing chorus of thinkers busy writing postmodernism's obituary. Universalism, according to

the social theorist Jeffrey Alexander, has now become the positive half of a binary whose other (polluted) term is nationalism, a dualism poised to replace the postmodern and modern as the defining binary code of the present. Anthony Appiah, Julia Kristeva, Tvetzan Todorov, Edward Said, Martha Nussbaum, Alain Finkielkraut, are among those who have engaged the possibilities and the limits of the postmodern politics of difference.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they have chosen cosmopolitanism. There is a striking symmetry to this development: the century's end returns us to the century's beginning. For, as we shall see later, cosmopolitanism, universalism, and the intellectual emerged as a nexus at a particularly significant historical moment a century ago, in 1898. The Dreyfus Affair is a catalyst in the effort to find alternatives to the ideology of "authenticity," an effort that generates a cluster of terms to designate what violates the authentic and is deemed deracinated and artificial: the cosmopolitan, universal, and the intellectual. My paper begins with a brief glimpse at the uneasy status of the cosmopolitan in American culture.

The anxieties aroused by cosmopolitanism are vividly on display in a recent essay by Eric Lott, anxieties discernible beneath the surface pugnacity of his critique. He describes cosmopolitanism as "an imagination of the end of politics in and through culture," a "selling out to the apolitics of complexity." Culture is said to be a "refuge of wish-fulfillment and democratic fantasy" for Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray and, more recently, Appiah and David Hollinger, whose book *Postethnic America* (134-135) is Lott's main target. The postethnic ideal, according to Lott, merely ends up "reinstall[ing] a consensus nationalism redolent of exceptionalist and Cold-War" whitewashings of race and ethnicity (117). Not for Lott such tepid fare. Instead, he seems stirred by the separatist simplicities of black nationalism, an affiliation he gestures to rather than declares, first in an epigraph from Baraka (for decades an implacable foe of cosmopolitanism) and, later, praise of the "transformative--revolutionary--power in the black arts."

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1 For references to these authors' works see bibliography.

By the end Lott fondly imagines hearing in the sound of Louis Armstrong's trumpet the stirrings of an "independent black struggle for socialism" (135). "Wish-fulfillment" indeed. Art that might be expressing anything else rouses Lott to belittle the cultural as the virtual negation of the political.

Lott's enforced dichotomies are most objectionable because they foreclose consideration of a distinguished black American lineage of cosmopolitanism which came into being circa 1900 precisely by refusing to segregate culture from politics. Indeed this refusal, as I will show, makes possible the very category modern intellectual, of which the first American instance is arguably the black intellectual. Because Lott's critique of the cosmopolitan as apolitical is itself ahistorical, he merely affirms the received wisdom. Thus his goal of encouraging "radical alternatives to things as they are" is hobbled from the start. Black cosmopolitanism embodies a radical alternative that denaturalizes allegedly immutable norms, a fact that Lott's ridicule makes hard to discern. Indeed, cosmopolitanism of any color has often elicited disdain, which is to say that Lott's attitude is deep in the American grain, for it reflects and updates a long standing unease regarding threats to neat categories and fixed identity.

Cosmopolitans, in Lott's portrayal, are concerned to "protect the gentle sphere of culture from the rough usages of politics," whereas his own "commitment to a truly liberated U.S" regards culture not as an "antidote to politics" but its "handmaiden." By feminizing culture and masculinizing politics, Lott makes clear his virile impatience with sissified cosmopolitans in dainty retreat to the gentle sphere. This scenario has a whiff of the chauvinistic sexual politics of the Baraka of *Home* (1966). In *Home*, famous for such remarks as "Most American white men are trained to be fags," Baraka made the black intellectual (read cosmopolitan) synonymous with whiteness and with homosexuality, in short, with an abject betrayal of genuine blackness.

Cosmopolitanism is a disquieting presence not least because it contests the clarity and purity imagined to repose in what is deemed genuine or authentic. Consider the following brief exchange in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). "He's what's called a cosmopolite," Isabel Archer says of Ralph Touchett, her expatriate cousin, to her journalist friend Henrietta Stackpole, a stolid American literalist impatient with Ralph's suave elusiveness in response to her demand of identity (does he consider himself American or English). But Isabel's explanation only exacerbates Henrietta's moral qualms. Pondering "cosmopolite," Miss Stackpole, replies: "That means he's a little of everything and not much of any," as if by definition the cosmopolite evades definition (80-81). Henrietta's stern American moralism is uneasy that Ralph is all too comfortably adrift in the gentle sphere of culture.

Invoking "the kingdom of culture" in the opening pages of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois sounds an unmistakably cosmopolitan note. Yet comparatively few readers seem to hear it, despite his remarkable claim that to enter that kingdom as a "co-worker" is the very "end" of black striving. Though a famous phrase, "the kingdom of culture" is seldom discussed by critics, perhaps because it sounds too dissonant, as it threatens to complicate the image of Du Bois as a "Race Man." Yet in *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois is at pains to maximize the complicated. Thus he sets himself a double project: he works both within and beyond the "Veil," celebrating the "Negro soul" in the former, while preparing black Americans for the "chance to soar" "above the Veil" of Jim Crow America. Above is the "kingdom of culture" where souls walk "uncolored," enjoying leisure and "freedom for expansion and self-development" founded on the impartial universality of literary experience. Above the veil, he notes "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls." Such musings not only express the pleasure of aesthetic reverie but also have an accusatory edge: "Is this the life you grudge us, O

knightly America?" Du Bois pointedly asks, as if addressing the Henrietta Stackpoles made uneasy by those insouciant about knowing their place (*Souls* 438). Has Du Bois overdosed on Henry James, a Stackpole might wonder, and fancied himself free to wallow in the aristocratic privileges of leisure class dilettantism? How dare Du Bois flout the venerable genteel shibboleth that intellectual heritage is the private property of the white European and the Protestant American.

Part of the undeniable audacity of Du Bois's trumpeting of culture as the telos of black American effort (at a time when educated blacks comprised less than three percent of the black population) is implicit mockery both of Brahmin proprietary assumptions about culture and of Booker T. Washington's dominion of utilitarian toil. But Du Bois is doing more than scoring points against opponents. The "kingdom of culture" has a metaphoric power but he also wants it to be a political ideal of equality--to "make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed." Entering the "kingdom of culture" secures this possibility in a paradoxical but decisive way: by making irrelevant claims of particular identity, be they racial or national, Negro or American. The "kingdom of culture" has neither color nor country. Thus to the extent that all African Americans are striving to "rend the Veil" of segregation they aspire to be "co-workers in the kingdom."

The jousting between Ralph and Henrietta in *The Portrait of A Lady* has still more to tell us; indeed, this passage registers some of the meanings that remain attached virtually to any discussion of cosmopolitanism in American culture. First of all, the word arouses moral qualms, as if by definition the cosmopolite seems to lack sufficient patriotism and, by implication, democratic fellowship, and instead enjoys the aristocratic privileges of leisure class dilettantism--"he's a little of everything and not much of any," to recall Henrietta's dismissive words. Yet James's brief scene also discloses less familiar dimensions of the cosmopolite, as he turns the word in directions that, as we will see, have much in common with the distinctly under-

appreciated black American lineage of the cosmopolitan, a tradition embedded in a matrix of philosophical pragmatism.

Henry James's turning or troping of the cosmopolitan associates it with an interrogative spirit that punctures certitudes--"Where does home begin, Miss Stackpole?" asks Ralph. And his question prefigures the novel's more famous ones posed later, by Madame Merle to Isabel: "What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end?" (175). In its determination to interrogate conventional notions of boundary, of limit, and of identity, *The Portrait of a Lady* could be said to be imbued with a cosmopolitan spirit. For James, that spirit is skeptical of the logic of identity. This last phrase I borrow from William James to describe what the novelist and philosopher both despise--a mode of thinking--"vicious intellectualism" William called it--whose twin propositions are that "what a thing really is, is told us by its definition" and that reality "consists of essences, not of appearances" (William James, *Writings* 728).

For a literary embodiment of this transparency of self-identity one need look no further than the Isabel Archer of the first half of *The Portrait of a Lady*: "Her life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce; she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was." (54). Isabel, of course, will topple from this proud sovereignty of self-ownership, to be "ground in the mill of the conventional," as Ralph puts it. The skepticism of identity that Henry James inscribes in his understanding of cosmopolitanism complements another dimension of his cosmopolitanism, one he discloses in a famous declaration, made in a letter of 1867, that "to be an American is a great preparation for culture . . . we can deal freely with forms of civilization not our own, can pick and choose and assimilate and in short (aesthetically etc.) claim our property wherever we find it" (*Henry James Letters* 1: 77). In sum, Jamesian cosmopolitanism is not only anti-identitarian but anti-proprietary, insouciant regarding claims of ownership and the



drawing of boundaries, be they ontological or national. Cosmopolitanism, for James, turns out to be less a state of being than a mode of doing, less an identity than a double capacity: for eluding disciplinary social demands for legibility and for freewheeling appropriation of cultural goods. But it should be added that in his 1867 letter James also nationalizes and racializes this capacity, ascribing the flair for seizure to Americans' "exquisite qualities as a race."

Yet when James writes *The American Scene* (1907), his great book about his year long visit to the United States in 1904, his confident assumption of an entity called the American "race" has given way to an acute wariness regarding the possibility of imposing any definitive conclusions about his incessantly metamorphosing native land. James puts the word "American" in quotes and calls the country a "hotch-potch" and an "illegible word," for it blurs the "dividing line" between alien and native. Indeed, on Ellis Island he is startled to find that he must "share the sanctity of his American consciousness...with the inconceivable alien" (121-22, 124, 85). Over and over on his journey James makes the visceral discovery that to live in America is to be immersed in a "vortex of discordant ways of living and tastes, values and traditions" where experience "changes too rapidly for linguistic or political exactitude." I have been borrowing the words of Ralph Ellison from his crucial 1974 essay "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" (29).

Ellison is particularly germane here for, like Henry James, he is profoundly skeptical of "American" as a fixed, a priori graspable essence. Instead of an American identity, Ellison speaks of a uniquely American "freedom" to play what he calls the "appropriation game" whereby one improvises upon the given and "integrate[s] diverse elements" from a "whirlpool of odds and ends." And "through this process of cultural appropriation (and misappropriation)," says Ellison, "Englishmen, Europeans, Africans, and Asians became

Americans" (24, 28-29). In short, for Ellison, identity is inferred rather than a given, is not already in place but derived from a practice.

James and Ellison construct Americanness as a performative cosmopolitanism, a propensity for hybrid makings, a picking and choosing of cultural forms "wherever we find" them. This affinity I am suggesting between Ellison and Henry James as pragmatist critics of identity logic is more than coincidental and less than direct; the affinity begins to make sense in terms of intellectual history once we insert two figures who, respectively, conveyed pragmatism to the novelists. William James of course performed this function for Henry James. After reading *Pragmatism* (1907), Henry wrote to William that he was awed by the extent to which "All my life I have unconsciously pragmatized."

Mediating pragmatism for Ellison was Alain Locke, a self-described cosmopolite, the first black American Rhodes scholar, a Harvard Ph.d deeply influenced by William James and professor of philosophy at Howard University. Locke remains perhaps best-known as an impresario of the Harlem Renaissance and editor of *The New Negro* anthology (1925). Ellison regarded Locke as a particularly inspiring critic of cultural purism who helped Ellison and his friend Albert Murray see (in Ellison's words) that "all blacks are part white, and all whites part black" As early as 1916 Locke called race an "ethnic fiction," a "fetish of biological purity." In fact, Locke said, ethnic groups are "the products of countless interminglings... the results of infinite crossings" (Locke, *Race Contacts* 11)

Locke's thinking was evolving in 1908 when he heard William James in a lecture on radical pluralism evoke how experience, when "concretely taken, overflows its own definition . . . nature is but a name for excess; every point in her opens out and runs into the more." James was seeking to liberate us from the "vicious intellectualism" of the Western philosophic tradition that rules by imposing "names" that suppress "the more" (William James, *Writings* 728, 760). In effect,

William James's recovery of "overlap" in a fluid world where "all is shades and no boundaries," (760-761) offered Locke metaphors for understanding cosmopolitanism as "limitless" interchange and nourished his belief that "culture has no color" (Locke *Philosophy* 233). Locke, in turn, became the conduit of William James's pluralism to Ellison. Hence the decidedly Jamesian resonance of Ellison's evocations of American cultural "wholeness" as shifting "overlap" "always in cacaphonic motion" (20). In a 1974 tribute to Locke, Ellison says that Locke sensed above all that modern American culture was "the experience of human beings living in a world of turbulent transition" and it led him "to deal with Afro-American folklore and music from a background that included his studies with James and Royce" (Ellison, "Alain Locke," 21). In linking Locke, James and "turbulent transition," Ellison deftly, if elliptically, summarizes the pragmatist legacy bequeathed him.

Reiterating hopes he had first voiced in 1930, in 1944 Locke sought to offset "our traditional and excessive emphasis upon cultural difference" and identity with a counter-paradigm of "equivalence" and "reciprocity" (Locke, *Philosophy* 73). Deflating the possessiveness of identity claims, this new model would stress "commonality" as a way to end "the idea of race as a political instrument." This invidious use of race, said Locke in "The Contribution of Race to Culture" (1930) breeds exclusionary relations to culture, thus fueling history's "huge struggles for dominance and supremacy" (*Philosophy* 203) The premise of Locke's alternative to the imperialist, proprietary thrust of identity thinking is founded on a logic of disarming clarity: "culture-goods, once evolved, are no longer the exclusive property of the race or people that originated them. They belong to all who can use them; and belong most to those who can use them best" (206). Here, in his stress on use, Locke makes the pragmatist move of deflating the primacy of identity, a deflation with liberating consequences, the crucial one being "that there is no room for any consciously

maintained racialism in matters cultural." All "we should be sanely concerned about is freer participation and fuller collaboration" (233).

Locke's anti-proprietary thinking has not only a Jamesian provenance but is anticipated, less self-consciously, by a number of prominent 19th c black intellectuals including Frederick Douglas, Anna Julia Cooper, and Kelly Miller. A particularly striking antecedent is Alexander Crummell, the 19th century black minister and pan-Africanist. He believed that the civilizations of Greece and Rome were not monuments to originality and self-containment but rather pay tribute to man's capacity for "eclectic" imitation: "they seized upon all the spoils of time. They became cosmopolitan thieves," says Crummell in a phrase that Henry James would have loved. "They stole from every quarter," Crummell notes, "they pounced with eagle-eye, upon excellence, wherever discovered and seized upon it with rapacity" (Crummell, *Destiny* 201-202).

But overshadowing Locke, Crummell and earlier figures are the epochal enunciations about color and culture at the turn of the century by the prodigious W. E. B. Du Bois. In the opening pages of *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois states that the "end" of black striving is to become a "co-worker in the kingdom of culture." Surprisingly, this famous phrase is rarely discussed, perhaps because it complicates the image of Du Bois as a "Race Man." In *The Souls of Black Folk*, he actually sets himself a double project: he works both within and beyond the "Veil," celebrating the "Negro soul" in the former, while preparing black Americans for the "chance to soar" "above the Veil" of Jim Crow America. Above is the "kingdom of culture" where, notes Du Bois, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not" (Du Bois, *Souls* 437-438).

Du Bois dominates African American intellectual history and increasingly is being recognized as one of the handful of truly remarkable intellectuals of the twentieth century. We are really only beginning to take the measure of Du Bois and his achievements (such

scholars as Arnold Rampersad and Harold Cruse have made important contributions in this regard)<sup>2</sup> and it is not surprising that some of the latest contemporary theorizing about cosmopolitanism and universalism can be shown, as I will attempt to do shortly, to have already been incarnated in Du Bois's political and cultural practices. Du Bois has been ahead of us all the time, which is one reason why the experience of studying him is exciting but also humbling.

In his intricacies and double aims Du Bois embodies what he famously called "the strange experience" of being "a problem." Part of what made Du Bois "a problem" was his insistence that "unreconciled strivings" and "warring ideals" were less obstacles to surmount than sources of creative energy (*Souls* 363, 365). Few have lived more profoundly than Du Bois the truth of Emerson's great sentence: "the mind goes antagonizing on" (Emerson 483). Du Bois relishes, in his words, a "fiercely sunny" "strife" manifested in a penchant for simultaneity. Like Ellison, Du Bois understands overlap and appropriation as a condition of culture. With his preternatural receptivity to multiple cultural and disciplinary traditions, Du Bois responded to predecessors with exceptional energy and creativity, the source of which was his passionate feasting at the remarkable intellectual banquet that was his international education. His plasticity took the impress of a score of thinkers, and he inveterately turned them to his own complex purposes. What Crummell celebrated as cosmopolitan thievery aptly describes Du Bois's own lifelong intellectual practice.

Indeed, Crummell and William James might arguably be regarded as his principal mentors because they encouraged in Du Bois this propensity to remake and refashion. Beyond the transmission of particular intellectual doctrine, Crummell and James (to adapt Whit-

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<sup>2</sup> Rampersad's groundbreaking book on DuBois, the first to treat him as a literary artist as well as an activist, was published in 1976, nine years after Cruse's influential book on the political history of twentieth-century black intellectuals. Of the three major leaders, Washington, Du Bois, and Garvey, only Du Bois, argues Cruse, came close to synthesizing "integrationist and nationalist forces in politics, economics, and culture" (564).

man) taught Du Bois the freedom and the virtue of straying; in effect (if not in intention, at least Crummell's), they urged not veneration but their own overcoming. "He most honors my style," wrote Whitman, "who learns under it to destroy the teacher." As is well-known, Crummell's Pan Africanism, romantic racialism, and emphasis on creating an intellectual vanguard of race leadership all shaped Du Bois. And Jamesian accounts of consciousness, pluralism, agency, and anti-imperialism left their mark on his student. But Du Bois came to remake the legacies of both men. "God be praised" I "landed squarely in the arms of William James of Harvard" Du Bois would write in *Dusk of Dawn* (578). Yet he would turn from the political limitations of James's liberal individualism; indeed, some have argued that Du Bois influenced the social turn of James's late thought (Hutchinson, 36-37).

In his most Crummellian discourse, "The Conservation of Races" (1897), Du Bois regarded history as comprised of groups and races and decried "the individualistic philosophy of the Declaration of Independence" (*Writings* 817). But even by the end of this text (in speaking of "personal liberty...regardless of race") Du Bois began sounding a note he would play consistently in the new century --that American democratic modernity must at last make good on its promise to secure for all "the real freedom toward which the soul of man has always striven: the right to be different, to be individual and pursue personal aims and ideals" ("Evolving" 69). In other words, even as Du Bois was establishing his credentials in the late 1890s as a stern, moralizing race man in the manner of Crummell, he was also opening his Victorian stance to the beckoning new possibilities of modernity.<sup>3</sup> And after 1906, under the impact of Boasian anthropology, he began to revise his race essentialism.

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<sup>3</sup> In "The Conservation of Races" (1897) and the final chapter of *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) Du Bois urged the moral regeneration of the black masses. Wilson Moses has suggested that in these years, especially in 1897, Du Bois was attempting to win Crummell's "respect and affection" and to make a "declaration of solidarity with the men he had adopted as a father" (Moses 286).

The revisionary act of turning from and towards, is, as I show in *Color and Culture* (1998), the imperative of the Jamesian pragmatist. James's stress on revisionary action, like Crummell's equation of appropriation as the grounds of creation, encouraged in Du Bois a disposition skeptical of any intellectual or cultural edifice which claims absolute originality and purity. Such claims are inevitably exclusionary, in the service of erecting boundaries. Yet Crummell's racialism posited a belief in blacks' natural genius for imitation. Indeed, for Crummell, the potential greatness of African civilization is founded on the "fact" that black people are endowed with a "mobile and plastic nature, with a strong receptive faculty" (*Destiny* 201). Crummell's rigid racialism coexists with his enthusiasm for the heterogeneous and mimetic, a tension also found in Du Bois. But whereas Crummell leaves the contradiction unremarked, Du Bois uses it and others to stimulate his hyper-receptive "double consciousness"--his gift of "second-sight" (*Souls* 364).

Among the paradoxes that propel Du Bois, a pivotal one is his embrace of self-sacrifice, a pained sense of what he called his "group imprisonment within a group" (*Dusk of Dawn*, 650) while also seeking to develop a "higher and broader and more varied human culture," a cosmopolitan project he described in 1936 as the "main end of democracy" (*Writings* 1063-64). Du Bois identified profoundly with Africa (with results that Eric Sundquist has explored in rich detail), but he is also a passionate cosmopolitan with hopes, just prior to World War I, of building an "Internation" founded on an "interracial culture, broader and more catholic than" any currently existing in America ("Evolving" 58). But the war derailed his dream of establishing a "human unity." In 1933 he lamented that the ideal of the "Inter-nation, of Humanity, and the disappearance of 'race' from our vocabulary" has yet to become a reality.

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This seems very likely and explains the stridency of Du Bois's racialism at the time. It should be added that, in Moses's view, Du Bois remained throughout his career an "authoritarian mystic" in the Crummell mold and emphatically not a Jamesian pragmatist (289).

Although from the age of twenty-five Du Bois accepted the personal sacrifice involved in race work and pledged himself to the struggle for racial and political (civic and social) equality, he did not stop there; as an antirace man, Du Bois also sought to ventilate the psychic and intellectual constriction imposed by racial identity and to interrogate the very category of race. "What is a Negro anyhow? He is just human": this is the unsettling that "true Art" creates, he says at the end of a famous essay, as he suggests his ultimate aim to dispense with race classification (*Writings* 1002).

The phrase I used above--antirace race champion--is one I also use in *Color and Culture*, to describe a lineage that commences with Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins, and Charles Chesnutt and also includes Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. Although the phrase is admittedly inelegant it has the virtue of suggesting that as these figures engaged in a common struggle to assert the freedom of art while laboring for race uplift, they turned "unreconciled strivings" and "warring ideals" into sources of expressive energy and often into their subject matter. No one did this more self-consciously, even histrionically, at times, than Du Bois. His turbulent career is one of turnings and transitions, of going astray and taking chances. His political conduct deliberately courted risks (in 1917 and 1934, for instance) and his "sunny" "strife" became the spur of torrential productivity across a stunning range of genres and disciplines. Sociologist, historian, novelist, editor, essayist and poet, romantic racist as well as universalist, Du Bois spent nearly a century strategically adapting, revising, and resisting a panoply of stances--nationalist, assimilationist, integrationist, segregationist, pan-Africanist, Marxist socialist, and Communist.

Refusing to dispense solutions and formulas, Du Bois's political conduct seems most concerned to register what he once called the "turns and twists" of the "curious path" on which black Americans find themselves: "swept on by the current of the nineteenth" century world of modernity, "while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth



century" where caste segregation rules. This paradox is part, says Du Bois in 1903, "of the double life every Negro American must live" ("The Dilemma of the Negro" 180; *Souls* 502).

Given this defining condition of disequilibrium and doubleness, "seemingly irrational zigzags" became, for Du Bois, the very signature of historical responsibility. I borrow "irrational zigzags" from the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein who uses the phrase not to suggest a surrender to futility but to describe the double move of refusal and acceptance as the "only plausible reaction of the weak" to the dominant culture's deceptive "gift" of universalism. In *Geopolitics and Geoculture* (1991) Wallerstein writes that

"in an historical social system that is built on hierarchy and inequality, which is the case of the capitalist world economy, universalism as description or ideal or goal can only in the long run be universalism as ideology...But if this were all that universalism was, we would not be discussing it today. Universalism is a 'gift' of the powerful to the weak which confronts the latter with a double bind: to refuse the gift is to lose; to accept the gift is to lose. The only plausible reaction of the weak is neither to refuse nor to accept, or both to refuse and accept--in short, the path of the seemingly irrational zigzags (both cultural and political) of the weak that has characterized most of 19th and 20th century history" (217).

Wallerstein is one of a number of contemporary intellectuals who is rehabilitating the category of the universal.<sup>4</sup> Having been under house arrest during the postmodern and multiculturalist regime of relativism and localism, the universal has recently re-entered contemporary intellectual discourse but chastened, stripped of its hubristic disdain of particularism. In other words, rather than positing a view from nowhere nor erecting a color-blind ideal, nor simply reversing the

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, a number of feminist thinkers defend a chastened universalism. They include Naomi Schor, who reaffirms a "differentiated" universalism, and Seyla Benhabib, who argues for one that is "post-metaphysical." For a cogent summary of the return of universalism which notes the simultaneous reemergence of a "term with close ties to universalism,"--cosmopolitanism--see Amanda Anderson's essay .

postmodern fetish of the particular, universalism now tends to be conceived as reciprocally entwined with the particular.

Which is to say that contemporary understandings of universalism are catching up to Du Bois's. For Du Bois, universalism is neither "a mask worn by ethnocentrism" nor a code word for imperialism, as Tzvetan Todorov has remarked of contemporary abuses of the concept (387-388). Du Bois insisted on a dialectic between (unraced) universal and (raced) particular: "Failure to recognize the Universal in the Particular," he wrote in 1921, breeds "the menace of all group exclusiveness and segregation" (*Writings* 1194). The reality of particularity would be affirmed by the mediation of the universal and vice-versa, to borrow Etienne Balibar's recent formulation (175).

Like Balibar's, Wallerstein's zigzag formulation is a nuanced effort to avoid traditional dichotomies and instead to broach a double move in a space between affirmation and negation. Unwittingly, but unmistakably, Wallerstein has captured something of Du Bois's anti-race race zigzag, a complexity he generated by refusing to know his place within the boundaries and oppositions that undergird America's identitarian regime--Jim Crow. Du Bois's most characteristic moves are always double; for instance, in 1897-1898 he seems to refuse and accept the gift of universalism: he proclaims his Afrocentrism in "The Conservation of Races" and his Eurocentrism in "The Art and Art Galleries of Modern Europe" as he seeks to preserve cultural and group differences within a broader global context. But perhaps Du Bois's most crucial zigzag is also his least known--I refer to how he helped create a political public sphere, an achievement that made possible the very category modern intellectual. Confronting a social order that segregated mind from power, Du Bois made a double move that cut against false (and anti-democratic) alternatives that pitted art against politics.

I will begin to sketch the context of my remarks by noting that the very word "intellectuals" entered political discourse only a century

ago, in 1898 in France when Zola (like other professionals) left his study, interrupting his novelistic labors to enter the political maelstrom of the Dreyfus Affair. Zola and the Dreyfusards saw themselves as giving voice to humankind's sense of Justice and Humanity against the chauvinism and anti-Semitism of French nationalists. For intruding where they did not belong and for invoking universal values, the Dreyfusards were scorned as *deracines* and branded with the imprecation of *Les Intellectuels*.

Apart from their ultimate success in winning Dreyfus's freedom, the Dreyfusards' most valuable legacy was their challenge to a dichotomized configuration that kept mind and power, culture and politics, static and separate realms. As Jurgen Habermas has observed, the emergence of the modern intellectual depends on, and is simultaneous with, the making of a political public sphere. This space must be won against the opposition of two camps who share an anti-democratic bias: on the one hand, mandarin proponents of high culture who regard it as the private preserve of an elite; on the other an administrative class who designate politics as the sole province of experts. "Both sides fear from the intellectual a mixing of categories that would do better to remain separate" (Habermas 78). Thus from its historical origins, the modern intellectual is born of a crisis of categories and an assault on the exclusionary and proprietary.

Arguably Du Bois was the first modern American intellectual: a young social scientist with a love of art and literature (he would soon publish poetry and fiction) he had carefully observed the Dreyfus Affair unfold as he visited France in the 1890s. But my claim for Du Bois's priority is not to suggest his uniqueness; he also must be seen as participating in a transatlantic nexus that is worth pausing here to survey for it is generally unknown and unfamiliar.

*"Les Intellectuels"* was imported to America by William James, the leader of philosophical pragmatism and a Dreyfusard, who proudly inserted "intellectual" into American popular vocabulary in 1907. The

college-educated, he reasoned, are "the only permanent presence that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries," and "we ought to have our own class consciousness" (*Writings* 1246). But James's call for class consciousness" had been anticipated by another Dreyfusard, a former student of his at Harvard. In 1903 Du Bois called for a black "aristocracy of talent and character, which he dubbed "the Talented Tenth" (*Writings* 847).

William James understood "*Les Intellectuels*" as an honorific standing "for ideal interests solely": "*Les Intellectuels*! What prouder club-name could there be than this one, used ironically by the party . . . of every stupid prejudice and passion, during the anti-Dreyfus craze, to satirize the men in France who still retained some critical sense and judgment!" (*Writings* 1246). His student Du Bois had witnessed the craze close-up. "I followed the Dreyfus case," Du Bois noted in his *Autobiography*, and remarks that the year (1894) he traveled in France was the year Dreyfus was arrested and tried for treason (122, 127). In 1900 Du Bois was again in Paris when the scandal was raging anew, for the year before Dreyfus had been convicted a second time. Yet what remained to be created was a public sphere in which to be heard. In 1903 he calls for a "Talented Tenth," a critical mass of trained black professionals, business men, teachers, as well as "leaders of thought and missionaries of culture" (Du Bois *Writings* 861). This elite becomes the basis of Du Bois's effort to articulate a collective public voice for justice that culminates in 1910 with the formation of the interracial, multi-ethnic NAACP. A Dreyfusard logic informs the premise of both this group and the "Talented Tenth": an "educated person acting without a 'political mandate'" makes use of "the means of his profession outside the sphere of his profession--that is, in the political public sphere" (Habermas 73).

In France in 1898 *Les Intellectuels* were scorned for refusing to know their place and instead straying out of the study, the library and laboratory to pronounce upon political matters. As one anti-Dreyfusard noted of Zola: "the intervention of a novelist--even a

famous one--in a matter of military justice seems to me as out of place as the intervention, in a question concerning the origins of Romanticism, of a colonel in the police force" (qtd. Bredin 277).

Inevitable, then, is William James's esteem for these overreachers, the intellectuals. For they, along with pragmatists and black intellectuals, collectively embody a revolt against the ideology of authenticity by calling in question what it holds sacred--"neat schematisms with permanent and absolute distinctions, classifications with absolute pretensions, systems with pigeon holes . . . all [that is] 'classic,' clean, cut and dried, 'noble,' fixed, eternal" (qtd. Perry 2:700). This is James's enemies list, a summary of what he despised emotionally and philosophically. To counter it, James urged immersion in the "vulnerable" world of pragmatist pluralism, where one lives "without assurances or guarantees . . . for some part may go astray" (*Writings* 940). James honored what he called "wild facts, with no stall or pigeon-hole . . . which threaten to break up the accepted system" (*Will* 224).

In addition to the Dreyfus Affair, another spur to Du Bois's effort to organize a vanguard of intellectuals was the formation of the American Negro Academy in 1897 by Alexander Crummell in Washington, D.C. The first black learned society, at a time when less than three percent of the black population was educated, the Academy sought to inculcate race pride ("race feeling" in Crummell's words) by being a showcase for lectures and debate (Moss 11, 60). But particularism was not an end in itself. As Du Bois noted in his address "The Conservation of Races" (1897), the "Academy Creed" had a two-fold mission: to encourage "race solidarity" as a means to "the realization of . . . broader humanity." Specifically, Du Bois urged black Americans "to maintain their racial identity until . . . the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility." And in conclusion he insisted on "greater respect for personal liberty and worth, regardless of race" (*Writings* 822, 825-26). Six years later in *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois implicitly conceives the black intellectual (a "co-worker in the kingdom of culture") along

Dreyfusard lines as one who embodies and helps promote in others the "sovereign human soul" and the "higher individualism" of universal values (365, 437).

In sum, by 1903 the full transatlantic concatenation turns out to be not only the cosmopolitan, the universal, and the intellectual but pragmatism and the antirace race figure as well. These formations are historically entwined, indeed symbiotic in the case of Du Bois and James. Yet this remarkable constellation has often been overlooked. In particular, the entwinement of the universal and cosmopolitan with the black intellectual has flown under the radar of intellectual and cultural history.

What Les Intellectuels of 1898 heroically affirmed coincided with what Du Bois himself was seeking--ethical and cultural ideals unbounded by nation or race. That same year Du Bois spoke enthusiastically of how technological modernity dissolves boundaries in creating a transnationalism that makes "life broader." "For the first time in history," he told Fisk graduates, "there is one standard of human culture as well in New York as in London, in Capetown as in Paris, in Bombay as in Berlin" (*Writings* 831). He adds: "Is not this, then, a century worth living in"? If the "problem" of the twentieth century is the "problem of the color line," its amelioration would seem to lead (at least in part) to the freedom to enjoy cosmopolitan, international modernity. And Du Bois warns Fisk graduates that their relation to the new century will be fraught with peril if they fail to develop strategies that will take the ambiguity of their position--still within the veil while seeking to rend it--into account. One who failed to heed Du Bois's warning was his own John Jones, the black intellectual in the short story "The Coming of John" (the penultimate chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*). After his brief but intoxicating visit to New York where he tastes the pleasures of urban modernity, Jones seems permanently entranced as he returns to his little hometown in Georgia bent on uplifting his people. The calamity that befalls him upon returning can be understood as, in effect, his failure

to zigzag. Instead, Jones constructs his uplift project as a frontal assault on the religiosity of rural black culture and on the racism of the white Southern ruling class. The doom this brings suggests that "The Coming of John" is a cautionary tale for its creator.

Du Bois's 1903 call for a "Talented Tenth" elite is the basis of his effort to articulate a collective public voice for justice that culminates in 1910 with the formation of the interracial, multi-ethnic NAACP. A Dreyfusard logic informs the premise of both this group and the "Talented Tenth": an "educated person acting without a 'political mandate'" makes use of "the means of his profession outside the sphere of his profession--that is, in the political public sphere" (Habermas 73). One instrument that helped open a public space for discussion was *The Crisis*, a journal of politics and arts sponsored by the NAACP and edited by Du Bois. Implicitly, Du Bois was guided by the Dreyfusard ideal of protest against culture and politics conceived as private domains ruled by vested interests. For instance, Du Bois refused to fetishize (even while respecting) the autonomy of art. To inculcate in the masses' appreciation for the integrity of aesthetic experience was, to Du Bois, a political responsibility, not its evasion.

Instead of segregating culture from politics, Du Bois (and the intellectuals he influenced) sought to challenge two complementary and opposed projects of purification at work in the United States circa 1900: a WASP elite struggled to preserve the domain of culture from outsiders, while a technocratic vanguard, a managerial elite, professionalized and rationalized politics and knowledge.

In his double challenge Du Bois encompasses the antinomies of modernity: he is both a social scientist enunciating for his ethnos a collectivist vision grounded in administrative rationality and a critical public intellectual and man of culture, who, like William James, was deeply ambivalent about the ideology of efficiency trumpeted by Taylorism. Yet seeing Du Bois in his dynamic wholeness of

"cacaphonic motion" (to borrow Ellison's phrase) has proved to be a difficult critical task. Instead of appreciating that his "irrational zigzags" constitute the trajectory of his genius, critics tend to respect the divide between culture and politics and place him on one side at the expense of the other. Inadvertently, this dichotomous gesture evacuates the space of the modern intellectual.

For instance, in *The Future of the Race* (1996) Cornel West confines Du Bois to the temple of culture, turning him into a kind of black Matthew Arnold, an Enlightenment rationalist and stuffy highbrow uneasy with emotion and keeping an icy distance from the black masses. By West's Gramscian standards, Du Bois is a failed "organic intellectual." Another recent partial portrait of Du Bois, by Adolph Reed (*W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (1997)), embeds him on the opposite side, as a member of a managerial elite preoccupied with organization and the rationalization of the world. Because they render Du Bois static and monolithic, neither West nor Reed is able to explain Du Bois the intellectual, one whose refusal to know his place helped bring the political public sphere into being.

I want to conclude by returning to what eludes the oscillating polarities sketched above--Du Bois's zigzags. They enact, finally, nothing less than what "homo sapiens," (according to the anthropologist Paul Rabinow) has never found easy to achieve--the fraught and elusive "in-between" balancing act of the cosmopolitan (56). But did Du Bois ever find a way to bring his "kingdom of culture" down to earth? One may grant that he made cosmopolitanism his own idiosyncratic political practice but did he make it into a collective one?

The question whether cosmopolitanism is a workable political option is being debated these days by social and political theorists. The political scientist Rogers Smith, for one, in his recent book *Civic Ideals* (1997), charges contemporary left progressives (or "universalist



integrationists") and their ancestors (such as Du Bois, John Dewey, and Randolph Bourne) with a cosmopolitan vision that "risks utopian irrelevancy" for failing to attend to a primary political imperative -- "nation-building"--whereby a basis for a "compelling sense of membership" is devised and a sense of national loyalty and distinct civic identity is cultivated (473-474). Cosmopolitanism's celebration of multiple group affiliations or memberships is void of political potency says Smith, an idealism mocked by the obdurate reality of "ascriptive Americanism" and its power to define civic life by propagating illiberal "myths of U.S. civic identity" (formally encoded in citizenship laws) which assign people a place in a racial, gender, and cultural hierarchy. For Smith, "ascriptive Americanism," the "idiom of white supremacy," has been present since the birth of the republic, an irreducible element of the so-called "American creed." Smith's claim challenges such influential political scientists as De Tocqueville, Louis Hartz, and Gunnar Myrdal, all of whom, says Smith, have celebrated the "American creed" by sanitizing it, defining it as a solid core of liberal egalitarianism, the very "cement" of the nation. In this view white supremacy is merely epiphenomenal to this liberal core (19-21).

Even if one grants the considerable force of Rogers Smith's argument, one can still welcome a rehabilitated and chastened universalism and cosmopolitanism as more than "utopian irrelevancy" but instead as regulative ideals with the power to complicate monologic nationalism and postmodernism's parochializing grip. From the time Diogenes the Cynic proclaimed himself a "citizen of the world," cosmopolitanism has always been a fascination largely among intellectuals. Perhaps it is an idea and ideal that best functions as a conceptual corrective of a particular kind of intellectual, political and aesthetic error--the reductiveness of identity logic. Given the ample evidence of the destructive consequences, global and domestic, of reducing politics to identity, democratic cosmopolitanism merits a hearing that it has seldom been granted. What also awaits recognition

is one of the great victories over "ascriptive Americanism"--the black lineage of anti-proprietary cosmopolitanism and the genius of its irrational zigzags.

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