

Lingue e Letteratura

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W.E.B. Du Bois; Langston Hughes  
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**W.E.B. DU BOIS AND  
LANGSTON HUGHES**

TWO REMARKABLE MEN

Novalogos



# CONTENTS

Prologue: two remarkable men 7

## **Part One: W.E.B. Du Bois**

1. Du Bois as a proto-Afrofuturist writer: “The Comet” 17
  - 1.1 A forerunner of Afrofuturism
  - 1.2 “The Comet”, an emblematic story
2. Blackness in “The Song of the Smoke” 35
  - 2.1 Form and content
  - 2.2 Empowerment and historical revisionism
3. “The Great Near”: possible worlds in “The Princess Steel” 53
  - 3.1 Du Bois as a fiction writer
  - 3.2 “The Princess Steel”: an economic study

## **Part Two: Langston Hughes**

4. “Not South”: the Great Migration in “One-Way Ticket” 73
    - 4.1 Hughes’s ‘simple’ poetry and the blues form
    - 4.2 Lines “spoken by a friend”
    - 4.3 Shaping identity in the Harlem Renaissance
  5. “The Weary Blues”, catharsis and the healing power of poetry and music 93
    - 5.1 Poetry and music
    - 5.2 Blues catharsis and blues suicide
  6. Interplay, bebop and hip hop 109
    - 6.1 Interplay: poetry, music, audience
    - 6.2 From bebop to hip hop
- Epilogue: forerunners of a modern activism 129
- References 132



## Prologue: two remarkable men

Reconsidering the lives and literary achievements of two remarkable men such as William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) and Langston Hughes (1902-1967), it soon becomes apparent that, although they shared a common fight for the rights of oppressed African-American people, there are far more discontinuities than affinities between them. Besides the age difference and their divergent socio-cultural background, on reading their autobiographies one notices that renowned and militant scholar Du Bois could hardly be compared to easy-going and phlegmatic poet Hughes: Arnold Rampersad (1986, 298) meaningfully noted that men like Du Bois coalesced “their loves and hates, vanity and vulnerability, into their intellectual positions”; whereas Hughes “tried to keep his private emotions and his display of intellect far apart; moreover, his private emotions [...] seemed to be distressingly benign”.

The first meeting between them took place in 1921, when Hughes was merely nineteen and was predictably terrified to shake hands with the then fifty-three-year old Du Bois, at that time the greatest of black intellectuals. This happened at the headquarters of *The Crisis*,

the monthly magazine of the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP), founded in 1910 and edited by Du Bois. Apparently Du Bois received a good impression of the boy, who perhaps reminded him of his only son, whose early death was tenderly documented in his groundbreaking collection *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)<sup>1</sup>. Hughes was soon given the opportunity to publish his first poems in *The Crisis*: “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in June 1921, and later some others (including “Young Prostitute” and “Cabaret”) in the August 1923 issue, which marked the beginning of four decades of mutual respect and interest in each other’s achievements.

When Du Bois received a letter from a woman reader of *The Crisis* who complained of Hughes’s poems as being unfit for her daughter, he did not hesitate to defend him with a peremptory reply that reads simultaneously as an ethical lesson on education and a declaration of what poetry should be: “I think your attitude toward Mr. Hughes’ poems is absolutely wrong. I too have a daughter, but I am absolutely convinced that the last way to conquer evil is to hide the evil from youth”. This letter is indeed a plea for the liberty of the poet, whose art has to be boundless and unrestricted by any law of decorum. The poet should be justly condemned if “he makes evil seem more beautiful and good”, which was not the case of Hughes, as in “his strikingly beautiful poems [...] he talks about prostitutes frankly and if you think that your children do not know that there

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<sup>1</sup> Rampersad (1986, 53).



are prostitutes in the world you are deceiving yourself". Therefore, Du Bois supported and shared Hughes's honest depiction of Harlem cabarets: "he paints them with their sobs and tawdry evil and he paints evil as evil and that makes him a great poet and only great poets and prophets like Hughes can teach children where blind parents are simply trying to keep them from seeing"<sup>2</sup>.

Had Hughes known about these supportive arguments, he would have certainly been delighted, as he deemed Du Bois his most important model and herald of militancy through culture – he paid tribute by dedicating him "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in the 1926 book edition of *The Weary Blues*. The following telegram sent by Hughes on February 23, 1951, on the occasion of Du Bois's 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday, also gives us an idea of his admiration and gratitude: "Your book *Darkwater* greatly influenced my youth. I grew up on your editorials. As editor of *The Crisis* you published my first poem [...] I salute you as one of America's great men and the dean of

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<sup>2</sup> The other poems published in the August 1923 issue were "Prayer Meeting", "Poem", "Shadows", "Jazzonia", "Young Singer", "The Last Feast of Belshazzar" and "Winter Moon". More poems were later published in *The Crisis*: "The Childhood of Jimmy" and "Song for a Dark Girl" (May 1927); "Ma Lord" (June 1927); "Tapestry" (July 1927); "Freedom Seeker" and "Being Old" (October 1927); "Montmartre Beggar Woman" (November 1927); "Johannesburg Mines" (February 1928). See Aphteker (1997 [1973], 275-76, 374). Hughes dedicated "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", republished in the collection *The Weary Blues* (1926), to Du Bois. See Aphteker (1997 [1973], 275-76, 374); Hughes (2015 [1926]). Moreover, in 1941 Hughes published the article "Songs Called the Blues" in *Phylon*, an academic journal established by Du Bois in 1940.

Negro writers and scholars”<sup>3</sup>.

It should be pointed out, though, that this mutual admiration showed ups and downs throughout the years, the downs solely on Du Bois’s side. The old scholar was disappointed by Hughes’s abandonment of any radical commitment caused by his appearance before Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1953 and rendered obvious by his second autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), which omitted any reference to political activism. He was also disappointed by his own exclusion, again due to political pressures, from Hughes’s book *Famous American Negroes* (1954). However, although Hughes’s public praises of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* and of his latest work, notably the novel *The Ordeal of Mansart* (1957), were ignored by the dissatisfied Du Bois, they got back on better terms just before Du Bois’s death<sup>4</sup>.

Despite their multifaceted output, most criticism considers Du Bois mainly as a historian and a sociologist, and Hughes essentially as a poet. This is certainly correct, but there are some aspects of their literary production that so far have not received the critical attention they deserve. By examining these allegedly marginal facets of Du Bois’s and Hughes’s production, the essays collected here strive to bridge this critical gap. The volume is thus divided into two different, yet intercon-

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<sup>3</sup> Rampersad (1988, 190); Rampersad, Roessel (2015, 299).

<sup>4</sup> Rampersad (1988, 259-260; 325); Rampersad, Roessel (2015, 335). Du Bois had also publicly criticized Hughes for omitting Paul Robeson, then a black enemy for mainstream America, from his book *Famous Negro Music Makers* (1955).

nected, sections. The first part pays special attention to Du Bois's activity as a poet and short fiction writer. To this purpose, two short stories ("The Comet" and "The Princess Steel") and a poem ("The Song of the Smoke") shall be discussed. In the second part, Hughes's political mindset, interdisciplinary approach and crucial interest in blues and jazz are mostly considered, focusing in particular on an analysis of two poems ("One-Way Ticket" and "The Weary Blues") and on the role of interplay in his poetical readings.

It is no coincidence that the title of this book reads "two remarkable men" and not "two remarkable black men" or "African-American men". In his seminal 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", Hughes opposed the statement by a poet, probably Countee Cullen, who claimed that he did not want to be considered as a 'black' poet, but as just a 'poet'. Hughes regarded this wish as a symptom of absence of political commitment – a similar view, albeit from a totally different perspective, was put forward by George S. Schuyler with his controversial statement that "the Aframerican is merely a lampblackened Anglo-Saxon" in his essay "The Negro-Art Hokum" (1926)<sup>5</sup>. In fact, when referring to either Du Bois or Hughes, the adjective 'black' may be dropped not to diminish their political activism (which was an undeniable fact that in different ways considerably influenced modern and contemporary African-American political movements)

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<sup>5</sup> Hughes wrote "The Negro Art and the Racial Mountain" as a response to Schuyler's essay. See Hughes (1994 [1926]); Schuyler (1926).

but, on the contrary, to attribute a deeper importance and meaning to their varied contribution, which in many cases referred to (and crossed) not only the color line, but also class and gender lines, in an interdisciplinary and transnational guise.

Ultimately, as well as reconsidering their supposedly marginal literary activities, this book aims to trigger the message that both Du Bois and Hughes's contributions are still salient and topical today, several decades since their death. For example, the relevance of Du Bois's short fiction and its connection to a relatively recent phenomenon like Afrofuturism shall be taken into consideration; or the fact that Du Bois's poem "The Song of the Smoke" – similarly to some poems by Hughes, notably those from the collection *Ask Your Mama* – may be seen as proto-examples of hip hop lyrics conveying a new spirit of strength and assertiveness; or even the role of Hughes's minimal style in delivering a political message resulting in a communitarian ideological transformation. These elements unveil at the same time their modernity as well as the importance of their activism in order to eradicate racial thoughts. As we write these introductory notes, we are painfully reminded by the absurd killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis that institutional racism, in its most violent version, is still part and parcel of American society, leading white police officer Derek Chauvin to push his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes.

Some portions of the chapters have been previously published in a different form as follows and are included in the book by kind permission of the publishers:

“Du Bois as a proto-Afrofuturist writer: ‘The Comet’” as “W.E.B. Du Bois’s Proto-Afrofuturist Short Fiction: «The Comet»”, in *Il Tolomeo*, 18, 2016, 173-186 and as “The Languages of Afrofuturism” in *Lingue e Linguaggi*, 12, 2014, 83-96; “Blackness in ‘The Song of the Smoke’” as “Riappropriazione della ‘blackness’ in «The Song of the Smoke» di W.E.B. Du Bois”, in *Annali di Ca’ Foscari. Serie occidentale*, 51, 2017, 43-54; “‘The Great Near’: possible worlds in ‘The Princess Steel’” as “‘The Great Near’: mondi possibili in *The Princess Steel* di W.E.B. Du Bois”, in *Iperstoria*, 8, 2016, 186-192; “‘Not South’: the Great Migration in ‘One-Way Ticket’” as “‘Not South’: The Great Migration in Langston Hughes’s ‘One-Way Ticket’”, in *Le Simplegadi*, XVI, 18, 2018, 112-124; “‘The Weary Blues’, catharsis and the healing power of poetry and music” as “‘The Weary Blues’ by Langston Hughes: Catharsis and the Healing Power of Poetry and Music”, in Douglas Mark Ponton and Uwe Zagratzki (eds.), *Blues in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Myth, Self-Expression and Trans-Culturalism*, Wilmington, DE, Vernon Press, 2020, 101-111; “Interplay, bebop and hip hop” as “Langston Hughes: interplay, bebop & hip hop”, in Alessandra Calanchi (ed.), *Soundsapes. Listening to British and American Languages and Cultures, Linguae & – Rivista di lingue e culture moderne*, Vol. 19 (2020), n. 1, 103-118.



**PART ONE**

**W.E.B. DU BOIS**





## 1. Du Bois as a proto-Afrofuturist writer: “The Comet”

This chapter examines W.E.B. Du Bois’s short fiction in the light of the Afrofuturist movement, a transnational and interdisciplinary, theoretical and literary-cultural enterprise that has endeavored to rethink the history of Black civilization in order to imagine a different, better, future. Afrofuturism is based upon the unusual connection between the marginality of allegedly ‘primitive’ people of the African diaspora and modern technology and speculative science fiction. Using a wide range of different genres and media, the creative contribution of Afrofuturist writers, musicians, artists, filmmakers and critics challenges the stereotypical historical view routinely applied to the Black Atlantic experience and proposes counter-histories that reconsider the role of black people in Western society in the past and imagine alternative roles in the future<sup>1</sup>.

As is known, Du Bois’s groundbreaking contribution, spanning from the 1890s to 1963, the year of his

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<sup>1</sup> The term Afrofuturism was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in 1993. See Elia (2014) for an analysis of the development of Afrofuturism as a cultural phenomenon.

death, includes countless volumes, essays and articles, mainly about the sociology of interracial relations in America. In his *Autobiography*, Du Bois (1991 [1968], 148) pointed out that he was striving to carry out a systematic investigation of the history of race relations in order to analyze scientifically the so-called “Negro problem”. At the same time, he was aware that it was not possible to be a detached and impartial social scientist while blacks were still being lynched, hence his own enduring involvement in militant associations such as the Niagara Movement and the NAACP (*National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*). An elitist advocate for the so-called “Talented Tenth” and one of the leading harbingers of the African-American Civil Rights movement, Du Bois widened his vision to an ever-increasingly international perspective, foreseeing well in advance the importance of the critical issue of transnationalism that would become central in postcolonial criticism thanks to the contribution of scholars such as, to name just two, Julia Kristeva and Paul Gilroy<sup>2</sup>.

An exemplary figure for the African-American community, historian, sociologist, intellectual and political activist, Du Bois used fiction as a further instrument of social analysis. There is still a significant critical gap to be bridged as regards Du Bois’s output as a man of letters

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<sup>2</sup> By “Talented Tenth” Du Bois referred to an élite of African Americans (about one out of ten) who, thanks to their education and culture, could have led the African-American community towards the recognition of their rights. See Posnock (1997, 323-24); Kristeva (1993); Gilroy (1993). See also Elia (2015), whose main points are developed and expanded in this chapter.

– five novels and a few poems and short stories – that so far has received relatively limited attention from the critics as well as from the public<sup>3</sup>. As Herbert Aptheker (1985, ix) has noted, Du Bois, in a letter of March 1938 addressed to the editor Frank E. Taylor, about the possible publication of a book of poems, declared that those poems were amongst the best things ever written by himself also because – in Du Bois’s words – “this volume [...] touches the race problem in unusual ways” (Aptheker 1973-1978, 2, 361-62). In fact, Du Bois was a supporter of the Harlem Renaissance, whose intense cultural activity fostered the rediscovery and the promotion of African-American art and literature. He opposed the idea of an apolitical “art for art’s sake” and highlighted instead the importance of ethical and political responsibility of art and literature that should trigger a social change via political propaganda. As he stated in the essay “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), “all Art is propaganda and ever must be. [...] I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (Sundquist 1996, 304, 328)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> The only exception is Du Bois’s second novel *Dark Princess* (1928), on which many critics have focused throughout the years. For an overview of the criticism on Du Bois’s works of fiction see Rampersad (2001 [1979], 72-73).

<sup>4</sup> It is odd to note the overdue Italian reception of Du Bois’s œuvre. To our knowledge, only in 1975 was the volume *Du Bois e la Black Reconstruction* by Lauso Zagato published, followed by an essential collection of essays by Alessandro Portelli significantly entitled *La linea del colore* (1994) and by a notable essay by Scacchi (2002) on *Dark Princess*. Over a century since the publication of the original version, the long awaited first Italian translation of *The Souls of Black*

## 1.1 A forerunner of Afrofuturism

At a first glance, Afrofuturism may sound like an oxymoron. ‘Afro’ and ‘Futurism’ are likely to be considered as terms in opposition, the former once evoking images of primitivism and backwardness, the latter – ever since F. T. Marinetti’s definition in 1909 – celebrating instead speed and modernity. It is precisely to challenge this assumption that Afrofuturism works on a metaphorical level to reject a number of clichés that have commonly been referred to people of African descent.

As we have seen, Afrofuturism was first defined by Dery in 1993, but its features seem to have been already latent in several previous works in a wide range of media. Among the forerunners, a preeminent position is occupied by writers such as Du Bois, Ralph Ellison and Octavia E. Butler, musicians such as Sun Ra and George Clinton, and artists such as J. M. Basquiat. Es-hun (1998; 2003), Nelson (2001; 2002), Yaszek (2005; 2006) and Rabaka (2006), among others, set out to detect proto-Afrofuturist critical and poetical issues in their work in order to provide Afrofuturism with a canon, thus attributing authority and prestige to this cultural

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*Folk* was published in an important volume edited by Paola Boi in 2007, and afterwards more essays appeared, such as the remarkable contributions by Rauty (2008a, 2008b, 2012), Scacchi (2008) and Oboe (2008), the volume with an excellent introduction by Mezzadra (2010) and the following remarkable article on Du Bois and Fanon (Mezzadra 2013), and finally Elia (2015), my Italian parallel-text translation of the short story “The Comet”, completed by an introductory essay.

phenomenon. Moreover, Dery's definition of Afrofuturism triggered an interesting debate fostering a growing awareness of the importance of Afrofuturist musicians, artists, filmmakers and writers. Many of them learned the lesson taught by the precursors and applied it to contemporary society. They began declaring themselves as Afrofuturist, and in their works they provided a new language in order to tackle the increasingly complicated scenarios of racial discrimination<sup>5</sup>.

Within this framework, in the following pages we shall investigate the extent to which some of Du Bois's speculative fiction may be regarded as proto-Afrofuturist. Any mention of Black life in America – he wrote in 1924 in defense of Eugene O'Neill – had always caused “an ugly picture, a dirty allusion, a nasty comment or a pessimistic forecast” (Rampersad 2001 [1979], 75). In his enormous output, among the works of fiction there are five novels: *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), *Dark Princess* (1928) and the trilogy *The Black Flame*, consisting of *The Ordeal of Mansart* (1957), *Mansart Builds a School* (1959) and *Worlds of Color* (1961). In particular, his speculative fiction represented a further instrument of interpretation and social analysis: “I have used fiction to interpret those historical facts which otherwise would be not clear”, Du Bois wrote in the “Postscript” to *The Ordeal of Mansart* (Terry in Zamir 2008, 54).

Therefore, in order to attain a realistic representation of African-American life, it is paradoxical that Du Bois used imagination to reinterpret more correctly histori-

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<sup>5</sup> See Taylor-Stone (2014) and Yongo (2014).

cal situations that had either been distorted or had not been adequately considered by traditional narrations. To this purpose, the trilogy is emblematic of Du Bois's literary production exactly for the crucial overlapping of fiction and real life. Written when Du Bois was ninety, *The Black Flame* follows the life of the protagonist Manuel Mansart between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries and describes in fiction the trajectory of Du Bois's life and career, introducing several characters who convey peculiar aspects of his own personality, such as, for example, Sebastian Doyle, who "not only studied the Negro problem, he embodied the Negro problem. It was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. It made his world and filled his thought"; and professor James Burghardt, who, like Du Bois, used to teach at Atlanta University and claimed that "the Negro problem must no longer be regarded emotionally. It must be faced scientifically and solved by long, accurate and intense investigation", words that seem to have been uttered by Du Bois himself<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, Du Bois wrote several poems, like the famous "A Litany at Atlanta" (1906), and some short stories, notably "Of the Coming of John", collected in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and "The Comet" (1920).

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<sup>6</sup> This character shared Du Bois's mother's surname (Burghardt). See Gates Jr. in Du Bois (2007 [1920], xviii) and Edwards in Du Bois (2007 [1957, 1959, 1961]).

## 1.2 “The Comet”, an emblematic story

Published in the collection *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, characterized by a skillful balance of political militancy, art and literature, “The Comet” represents a remarkable and innovative example of fiction that, as we shall see, is simultaneously post-apocalyptic, speculative and proto-Afrofuturist<sup>7</sup>. In this story, only Jim, a young black man, and Julia, an upper-class young white woman, survive the deadly gases of a comet in an early twentieth-century New York. Du Bois employed this narrative device to speculate on whether racial prejudices could be erased in a world with only two survivors. Unlike the friendly comet described by H.G. Wells in his novel *In the Days of the Comet* (1906), Du Bois’s comet brings about a post-apocalyptic world used for speculation on racial discrimination. There are some passages in the story playing as a fictional counterpart of the critical issues Du Bois had elaborated in *The Souls of Black Folk*, namely the concepts of double consciousness, the color line and the veil. Let us see how these issues are reflected in this story and experienced by the protagonists<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> See Elia (2016b, 177 ff) and Rabaka (2007, 64-66), who highlighted the ways in which “The Comet” foreshadowed several themes of *Critical Race Theory*, namely the interlocking of racism with sexism and classism and the critique of modernity.

<sup>8</sup> Du Bois (1994 [1903], 2): “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. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-

At the beginning of the story, Jim is quite aware of his marginal role in the white society of that time. While sitting on the steps of the bank where he works, no one notices him, and he is – as Ralph Ellison would famously express it in 1952 – ‘invisible’. This is obviously because he is black, and also because, as Du Bois (1994 [1903], 1) had famously put it, “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line”. “How does it feel to be a problem?”, Jim seems to be asking himself. Jim is sent by the president of the bank down into the lower vaults to retrieve some old documents. While he is down there, there is a huge explosion. When Jim reappears on the surface, he discovers that everybody is dead. Strangely enough under these circumstances, he decides to go to a trendy restaurant he would never have

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reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”. See Du Bois (1920). As Du Bois (1903) put it: “This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line”. Du Bois considered the color line as a scale that divides people according to the color of their skin and generates prejudices. In fact, the metaphors of “double consciousness” and ‘veil’ had already been presented by Du Bois in the 1897 essay “Strivings of the Negro People”, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and republished with slight amendments later in *The Souls of Black Folk* with the title “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”; moreover, as Mezzadra (2010, 30) reminds us, the dilemma of the “color-line” had also emerged in 1897 in the conference *The Conservation of Races* and, three years later, at the first Pan-African Conference in July 1900, Du Bois for the first time uttered the famous sentence “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line”. It was Frederick Douglass, though, who first used this phrase in an 1881 article from *The North American Review*.



been allowed to enter before the catastrophe: “Yesterday, they would not have served me’, he whispered, as he forced the food down. Then he started up the street, – looking, peering, telephoning, ringing alarms; silent, silent all”<sup>9</sup>. Suddenly Jim hears a cry. It is Julia. Here Du Bois significantly describes the glamorous woman’s reaction when she realizes that Jim is black:

They stared a moment in silence. She had not noticed before that he was a Negro. He had not thought of her as white. She was a woman of perhaps twenty-five – rarely beautiful and richly gowned, with darkly-golden hair, and jewels. Yesterday, he thought with bitterness, she would scarcely have looked at him twice. He would have been dirt beneath her silken feet. She stared at him. Of all the sorts of men she had pictured as coming to her rescue she had not dreamed of one like him. Not that he was not human, but he dwelt in a world so far from hers, so infinitely far, that he seldom even entered her thought.

Julia’s and Jim’s worlds are far apart, separated as they are by both a vertical line (the color line) as well as by a horizontal line (the class line). Julia is the living embodiment of those higher-class women who were hardly aware of black people, because their social condition prevented them from meeting blacks. As Reiland Rab-

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<sup>9</sup> See Du Bois (1999 [1920], 149-160) for this and the following quotations from “The Comet”.

aka (2007, 70) has noted, this idea is reinforced by the recurring use of the verb “to stare”, which is a direct reference to the celebrated beginning of *The Souls of Black Folk*, which is worth mentioning again:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question. [...] 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; [...] Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. (Du Bois 1994 [1903], 1-2).

This “vast veil” is exactly what divides Julia from Jim, who thus experiences that peculiar sensation defined by Du Bois as double consciousness, the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others”<sup>10</sup>. For Julia, Jim is an alien: he is just a ‘nigger’, and thus he is ‘invisible’, a metaphor that was going to be used later by Ellison in *Invisible Man*. However, as Jim and Julia search the city only to discover that they are the only survivors, the woman’s behavior reveals a peculiar ambivalence towards Jim. At the beginning, Julia is impressed by Jim’s resolute attitude, but soon after, as a

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<sup>10</sup> Regarding Ralph Waldo Emerson’s influence on Du Bois’s “double consciousness” and Ralph Ellison’s subsequent variation, “double vision”, see Bloom (2001, 1-3). On the limits of double consciousness, see Gilroy (2010, 152-54).

result of her white supremacist upbringing, she ends up considering Jim as a dangerous alien rather than a potential savior. She wants to run away from him, no matter where. The racist psyche persists even when races no longer exist: “for the first time she seemed to realize that she was alone in the world with a stranger, with something more than a stranger, – with a man alien in blood and culture – unknown, perhaps unknowable. It was awful! She must escape – she must fly; he must not see her again. Who knew what awful thoughts –”. Here Du Bois seems to foreshadow Fanon’s ideas on the psychological aspects of racial discrimination. “Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened! [...] Mama, the nigger’s going to eat me up”, Fanon wrote in “The Fact of Blackness”, the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008 [1952], 84, 86), in which he denounced the absurdity of inborn racism. Despite Julia’s prejudices, Jim forgives her and gradually she seems to understand that Jim is not so dangerous. Formerly discriminated against in a white-led society, now Jim has become a sort of Adam, the first of a new humanity where blacks and whites should have the same rights and dignity. Julia seems even to resent the foolishness of human distinctions, as the following dialogue shows:

“Have you had to work hard?” she asked softly.

“Always”, he said.

“I have always been idle”, she said.

“I was rich”.

“I was poor”, he almost echoed.

[...] “Yes”, she said slowly; “and how foolish our

human distinctions seem – now”, looking down to the great dead city stretched below, swimming in unlightened shadows.

“Yes – I was not – human, yesterday”, he said.

This last assertion exposes Jim’s inferiority complex, what Fanon (2008 [1952], 4) would later describe as ‘epidermalization’ of this inferiority. The dialogue seems even to develop into a sort of romance between the two – in the end they are the only ones who could possibly repopulate the earth. Julia is now gazing at him again not in a negative or discriminatory way, but quite the opposite:

He turned and looked upon the lady, and found her gazing straight at him. Silently, immovably, they saw each other face to face – eye to eye. [...] Slowly, noiselessly, they moved toward each other – the heavens above, the seas around, the city grim and dead below.

The post-apocalyptic setting paradoxically stages a utopian vision of equality, wherein Julia’s attraction towards Jim is strategically used by Du Bois to address the fear of miscegenation that made interracial sex a taboo for the American society of that time<sup>11</sup>. If, up until the

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<sup>11</sup> Miscegenation was among the ‘don’ts’, i.e., things that were not to appear in motion pictures according to the Hays Code, a set of moral guidelines applied to U.S. films adopted in 1930. The anti-miscegenation laws were held to be unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of the United States as late as 1967.

catastrophe, Jim represented a mere nothing for Julia, now, being her savior, he obviously means much more to her. As a last man discriminated in a white-led society, Jim becomes the first man, a sort of Adam, the first of a new humanity where blacks and whites have the same rights and dignity. As Yaszek (2006) has pointed out, Du Bois seems to suggest that it will take a natural disaster to eradicate racism in America.

However, the idyll is suddenly interrupted by a car horn revealing that there are actually other survivors, in particular Julia's father and fiancé, who are quite concerned by the fact that she has had to share this experience with someone whom they would call "a nigger". What is even more striking is that Julia herself, after reassuring her fiancé saying that Jim had actually rescued her, quite ungratefully keeps showing the same prejudices as before, by not looking at him again. Fanon (2008 [1952], 86) once again helps us to expose strikingly attitudes like this: "The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly". In the end the status quo is restored, everything is just as it was.

Ultimately, Du Bois treats this proto-Afrofuturist short story as a parable, in which the supernatural element of the fall of the comet allows him to make interesting speculations on racial discrimination. A notable example of post-apocalyptic, speculative and proto-Afrofuturist short fiction, "The Comet" thus functions as a fictional counterpart of the influential key concepts – double consciousness, the color line and the veil – previously introduced by Du Bois and it also fore-