

How does it feel to be a problem?

—W. E. B. DU BOIS, *The Souls of Black Folk*

What did I do to be so black and blue?

—FATS WALLER, “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue”

Bearden and Basquiat can be said to raise the question of racial stereotyping and “cataloging” as a means by which to foster boundaries and regressive openness, and they do so through the innovative use of biographically informed modalities of artistic production—collage for Bearden and hip-hop-influenced Neo-Expressionism for Basquiat. Furthermore, it is important to note they work in the wake of earlier efforts to frame philosophically and sociologically this process of racialization as fixing. Perhaps the most compelling example of this intellectual exercise is found in the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, who set in motion a diagnosis of black life circumstances with an underlying consideration of naming-thing and thing-thing interaction framed by a cultural climate (as a prophylactic) of disregard.

In this chapter, I highlight a particular text—*The Souls of Black Folk*—not because I want to suggest Du Bois’s thinking is not organic and does not change over times. My focus on a single Du Bois volume is not meant to suggest anything along these lines. His corpus is rich and complex, and it

demonstrates evolving opinions and theories, which are mindful of shifting sociopolitical circumstances. Yet I limit my attention to this 1903 volume because of the manner in which it outlines a theoretical point of departure for Du Bois regarding the nature and meaning of black being, and it does so in (implicit) conversation with a range of his influences (e.g., William James). The text explicates epistemological and ontological concerns that, while altered in terms of application, continue to inform and influence the conceptual considerations haunting his writings afterward. Still, my concern in interrogating this text involves what it lends readers regarding the nature and meaning of racialized naming-things, not the sociopolitical, intellectual, and economic mechanism one might employ to restructure their relationship to the United States. On this latter point, mechanisms for advancement, Du Bois's thinking differed over time; for instance, he wrestles with the elitism embedded in his early depiction of the "talented tenth." However, I would argue that his sense of a racialized ontology at work in the structuring/restructuring of certain naming-things remained somewhat consistent. That is to say, while the problem of concern to him remains in place, the mechanisms he advances for addressing it shift over time.

*The Souls of Black Folk* entails Du Bois's most widely recognized effort on this score, and that volume begins with a question: "How does it feel to be a problem?"<sup>1</sup> By this question and his explication of it, Du Bois points in the direction of openness denied—to bounded naming-things. It is helpful to keep in mind that before Du Bois described the double consciousness of African Americans, he first announced the cultural climate, or prevailing ethos, shaping the historical moment.<sup>2</sup> "The problem of the Twentieth Century," he writes in the forethought to *The Souls of Black Folk*, "is the problem of the color-line."<sup>3</sup> Reiterated numerous times throughout the book, this short but forceful line captured the racial logic of the post-Civil War United States and shaped the public imagination of and expectations for the nation moving forward.<sup>4</sup> It articulated a sense of bodied experience (i.e., moments of interplay) as wrapped in the garb of racial animosity, and the book's prophetic quality spoke what millions knew but could not articulate safely.

This color-line theory jibed so well with documented activities of a pervasive antiblack racism that it became a frequently employed hermeneutic in both popular and academic analysis. While undeniably impactful and considered by many a complete framing of post-Reconstruction development, what the color-line pronouncement points to, however, is only one dimension of a dualism, what Du Bois references as the "Negro problem." At the start of the first essay in *Souls*, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois reflects,

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 Do not those Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? *I answer seldom a word.*<sup>5</sup>

*How does it feel to be a problem?* With this question, Du Bois highlights the second dimension of the dualism, what I will call the *problem soul*. It is the naming-thing present within a context defined by effort to racially close off and deny active openness; furthermore, the problem soul is marked by a sensibility regarding or posture toward the U.S. cultural climate defined by a vicious logic of racial difference as dangerous.<sup>6</sup> My read of Du Bois suggests not that double consciousness causes the problem soul (as a problem of interplay), but rather it is prior to the Negro problem.<sup>7</sup> The problem soul involves positioning of intent expressed through the African American's existential movement in the world as a troubled and troubling bodied naming-thing trapped by conflicting identities articulated in terms of discourses of boundaries and a certain type of fixity. While important to the larger argument, the problem soul has received limited consideration, and as a consequence our understanding of Du Bois's aim within *Souls*, his most popular text, is truncated.

The Negro problem, framed as a cultural ontology of twoness, is addressed in terms of social, material, and political alterations to public and private life bent on making African Americans whole and functioning citizens—that is, open naming-things.<sup>8</sup> The problem soul, the diagnostic of concern, however, entails a web of psychological, philosophical, social, theological, and affective vantage points constituting a posture that seeks to trouble such violent closing off and reaction against openness. Hence, understanding the problem soul requires a different framing. I suggest adaption of William James's "sick soul" as heuristic for exploring sensitivity to the particular posture toward the world Du Bois intends by the problem soul as marker of interplay fought against. Suggesting the possibility of such a link does not push an unreasonable intellectual connection.<sup>9</sup> To the contrary, Du Bois's "problem" viewed in relationship to James's "sick soul" merely tags a connection that extends beyond more widely recognized overlap. My effort entails unpacking what biographers Arnold Rampersad and David Levering Lewis note

in terms of Du Bois's use of the popular psychological category of twoness, which is shadowed by James's "hidden self," or "subconscious." Both the former and the latter escape our full grasp—just as Du Bois's duality avoids our efforts at unification.<sup>10</sup> Ross Posnock puts it well: "With his poetic genius, Du Bois turned skepticism of stable selfhood into an indelible image of the black Americans' anguished psychic striving."<sup>11</sup>

Before moving on, I want to first acknowledge a point that will come up again and that relates to the "anguished striving" noted by Posnock. Simply put, the problem soul, at first read, might be thought to advise a nihilistic or fatalistic turn. However, this is far from what Du Bois intends. Rather than that, Du Bois operates consistent with moralist-absurdist sensibilities later exhibited by writers like Nella Larsen and Richard Wright and theorized by Albert Camus. There is no surrender, no nihilism in statements by Du Bois such as this: ". . . the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity."<sup>12</sup> The "No!" to demands associated with the cultural climate marking this description of postslavery life is echoed in the "No!" to false promises of redemption recorded by writer Nella Larsen's character Helga Crane in *Quick-sand*; in the "No!" to racial terror written by Richard Wright in terms of his life and that of his character Fred Daniels in "The Man Who Lives Underground," and in the perpetual labor of the absurd hero, Sisyphus, endorsed by Camus. This consideration is important because attention to a moralist-absurdist sensibility helps clarify the nature of the problem soul and aids in our surfacing the call for perpetual struggle (i.e., perpetual openness) rather than nihilism central to Du Bois's diagnosis of "strange experience" summed up in *Souls*.<sup>13</sup>

### Double-Consciousness

According to Du Bois, the system of slavery resulted in global cooperation premised on material need and resource, and guided by metaphysical stipulations. One proviso marked Africans as inferior (e.g., fixed and bounded) in every respect, and another extended the correctness of this argument through violent coercion of African Americans into believing themselves inferior (and confined with limited opportunity for interplay).<sup>14</sup> The goal of this debased epistemology and dwarfed ontology is control over docile naming-things, tame minds, and the nation's sociopolitical and economic infrastructure.

Freedom troubles this logic in that it disrupts what were once assumed stable cultural identities by forcing a rethinking of the African American's occupation of time and space. A consequence of this rethinking is double-consciousness—two warring cultural identities African Americans attempt to hold together (as a matter of interaction) in a historical context ill-equipped to grasp and appreciate such complexity.<sup>15</sup> That is to say, against societal wishes, African American naming-things seek interplay between themselves and other things so as to maintain openness over against boundaries limiting interaction on particular sociopolitical and economic fronts.<sup>16</sup> This dilemma is the birth of the existential Negro problem—framed by life within a context of close but troubled proximity without old methods of regulation—played out on geography of entitlement and opportunity, marred by exclusionary borders.

In the essay “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” Du Bois offers a question capturing this problem: “What shall be done with Negroes?”<sup>17</sup> First addressed in an expansive and systematic manner through the Freedmen’s Bureau, the answer to that nagging question involved judicial structures, economic opportunity, political involvement, educational organizations, and social maneuvering.<sup>18</sup> This approach entailed an assumption that double-consciousness is addressed best through integration and material intervention—thereby tackling the basis of disregard, countering assertions of inferiority, and opening access to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Nonetheless, the failure of this tactic is clear in that for so many the African American had not been reconstituted but simply and inconveniently repositioned. In a word, the formerly enslaved were visible in an altered way, but this did not constitute a substantial change in sentiment toward them. “For this much all men know,” writes Du Bois, “despite compromise, war and struggle, the Negro is not free.”<sup>19</sup> He outlines this situation by vivid sociological and historical narratives regarding life in particular regions of the nation where he believed the Negro problem most graphic.<sup>20</sup>

Effort to foster a “better and truer self” produces frustration in that it involves what Du Bois references as the “contradiction of double aims.”<sup>21</sup> Appealing to a religious vocabulary, he expresses these wasted efforts as “wooing false gods and involving false means of salvation.”<sup>22</sup> There is a relationship here to tragic-soul life by means of which Du Bois presents, through the musical form of the spirituals and religious rituals, an African American theological response to these existential conditions.<sup>23</sup> Impact, if any, is short-lived, as Du Bois hints at through the fiction undergirding the

spirituals.<sup>24</sup> Creating synergy between past and present, these songs wish for a future that does not come. Hence, they are for Du Bois sorrow songs, hauntingly beautiful sorrow songs. The spiritual communities in which these songs were housed primarily and the ministers who led those communities failed to impact the cultural climate that suffocated their aspirations. While Du Bois might have known something of the genre before this transformation, he knew nothing of their context of creation—nothing of the hush arbors, nothing of the traumas of enslavement that provided the affective quality of the narratives, and he believed little of the theological assumptions embedded in their lyrical content. What he did know and what he did experience is this: each attempt to demand something of the world is met with frustration, and so the Negro problem persists.

What should be done with the Negro presupposes a prior consideration: How does it feel to *be* a problem? It is with respect to this question that Du Bois presents the problem soul, which, again, is conditioned, informed, and shaped by a particular cultural climate, or what Du Bois references as a “new philosophy of life” associated with the technologies and strategies of racial deep disregard.<sup>25</sup> It is this philosophy that articulates the “soul-life” of the nation in which by definition African Americans participate.<sup>26</sup>

### Sick Soul

As claimed earlier, William James’s description of the sick soul lends itself to framing the problem soul. In suggesting this exploration, I am concerned to apply this category beyond the world he describes, beyond his framing of religion, and beyond the individual concerns that mark *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>27</sup> In appealing to James’s sick soul within this larger context, my aims are to highlight the details of this posture named the problem soul, and thereby capture something of its sensibility and the cultural climate of exclusion it stands against.

I imagine this language will hit some ears wrong. Perhaps it is too clinical, suggesting illness of some sort. However, while to limit the analysis to clinical and medical diagnosis would miss the point, Du Bois does suggest the psychological as a dimension of the situation he describes, and James proposes a philosophical reading. One hears this, for instance, in his naming of the most widely borrowed notion from *Souls* (double-consciousness), which entails Du Bois suggesting African Americans suffer from cultural personality dissociation—or a type of metaphysical and cultural disorder, perhaps

cultural schizophrenia, or even a type of cultural dissociative identity disorder. Yet this rendering of the situation, the historical moment, is tied to sociological, historical, and cultural consideration and pronouncements. Using a heuristic of the sick soul, against what might be initial resistance on the part of those who are more comfortable with a type of heroic quality lodged in a sense of tragedy overcome in Du Bois, allows for a different range of questions, a different sense of the problem plaguing Du Bois, and the connection of this problem to death.

Prior to the sick soul, James described a healthy-mindedness marked by optimism regarding circumstances, seeing them as generally good despite all. This stance takes two forms. The first, which is involuntary, defines an immediate emotion of happiness regarding the conditions of life. The second is systematic healthy-mindedness and entails conceptualization of life in a general sense as good.<sup>28</sup> Despite what the term “healthy-minded” might suggest, it is a narrow approach that works with a limited range of experiences.<sup>29</sup> As Charles Taylor notes, the terminology used by James—“morbid,” “sick,” and “healthy”—suggests a preference for the “healthy-mindedness.” However, this is not the case. “James,” Taylor writes, “identifies with the sick here. Not just that this is where he classes himself, without, of course, explicitly saying so . . . but also in that he sees the sick as being more profound and insightful.”<sup>30</sup> As a religious attitude, healthy-mindedness is practiced as we, according to James, “divert our attention from disease and death as much as we can; and the slaughter-houses and indecencies without end on which our life is founded are huddled out of sight and never mentioned, so that the world we recognize officially in literature and in society is a poetic fiction far handsomer and cleaner and better than the world that really is.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, it is a willful determination to bracket off what is unpleasant and to present the world through a hermeneutic of harmony and comfort. For the healthy-minded, through the exercise of a childlike happiness, the world is projected, as one needs it to be—marked by progression that is not inevitable but that is harnessed to a deep sense of possibility. James finds examples of healthy-mindedness in “New Thought” camps known to highlight the good by preaching potentiality and possibility while, in his words, “deliberately minimizing evil.”<sup>32</sup> The healthy-minded, in a religious sense, experience conversion as the once born—an easy attention to happiness and goodness.

Over against this posture is one in which evil is recognized and confronted—to the extent evil is understood as being constitutive of the world. The soul that views evil as pervasive and fundamental is the sick soul. It is

sensitive to the troubling reality of the universe and our relationship to it. *In other words, it is content to be open to entanglement with and interplay between things.* And in a philosophical sense, it offers a deeper knowledge of existence as porous. Despite the tone of this description, James highlights a positive dimension to the perspective offered by the sick soul. The lucidity, a penetrating and guiding awareness, marking it is not to be dismissed and should be valued over against the “fragile fiction” embraced by the healthy-minded—that is, a fiction of unity or wholeness with clear borders that mark off certain dimensions of engagement with things.<sup>33</sup> (Think in terms of my depiction in earlier chapters of theistic approaches meant to close off naming-things.) The sick soul, unlike the more restricted view of the healthy-minded, probes the world and recognizes that “the self is a battleground.”<sup>34</sup> Still, this is no reason to turn away and take an easier path. “Let us not simply cry out, in spite of all appearance,” cautions James, “Hurrah for the Universe!—God’s in Heaven, all’s right with the world.’ Let us see rather whether pity, pain, and fear, and the sentiment of human helplessness may not open a profounder view and put into our hands a more complicated key to the meaning of the situation.”<sup>35</sup> Framed in terms of the individual and her contact with the world, the healthy-minded seeks a sustainable happiness in the face of its contradiction, while the sick soul finds no benefit in such a delusion and does not seek a “higher unity.”<sup>36</sup> The sick soul knows, in James’s words, “back of everything is the great specter of universal death.” What appears good is equally and quickly matched by its negation.<sup>37</sup>

This is not to suggest sick souls are without the possibility of conversion—of a turn toward closure desired. Those deeply sensitive to a world of suffering can be twice born, that is, they can change to a different perspective on engagement with the world—one marked by consciousness affording new consideration of the good and happiness as bound to fixity outside “penetration” by the Divine. However, conversion is a mere possibility not a probability, because the sick soul need not surrender or collapse in the face of misery.<sup>38</sup> As James remarks, some will not be converted because they are never so “exhausted with the struggle of the sick soul” that they give up in the face of crisis.<sup>39</sup> Some have, James proclaims, “drunk too deeply of the cup of bitterness ever to forget its taste.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, there is an extreme pessimism that can prevent conversion due to a “pathological melancholy.”<sup>41</sup> This is a psychological sense of loss blocking optimism, whereby “the subject of melancholy is forced in spite of himself to ignore that of all good whatever. For him it may no longer have the least reality.”<sup>42</sup>

The sick soul as a heuristic sheds light on the problem soul, but the two are far from identical. For example, while James speaks of figures such as Tolstoy living in a universe “two stories deep,” by which he means a response to and interplay with the universe that entails embrace of good within the shadow of a persistent sadness, the moralist-absurdist tendencies of Du Bois suggest even this stance as a surrender to illusion and a denial of the persistent effect of disregard that overwhelms all else. As witness to this, one need only call to mind the figure John, found in chapter 13 of *Souls*, who returns home from college with lucidity regarding the plight of African Americans, only to be met by a persistent disregard from whites and resistance from his community, which selects religious delusion over mature analysis and confrontation. In the end, neither his lucidity nor the religious *encasement* chosen by the African American community provides protection from the racial dynamics in the town.<sup>43</sup>

For James, religious conversion, as one way of addressing the sick soul, involves a binding of the once “divided self”—a resolution, we might say, of doubleness, through the centrality of certain ideals once neglected.<sup>44</sup> If conversion is substantial resolution—wholeness away from openness—*Souls* rejects its likelihood. Instead, Du Bois proclaims that the two warring ideals defining double-consciousness never merge successfully; a truer self never develops, but instead a “longing,” a “wish” for meaning as wholeness, might endure. There is a clear goal—“to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation”—but it remains unfulfilled in that openness, the porous nature of things, prevents such escape—always life *and* death.<sup>45</sup>

The problem-soul posture shares with the sick-soul personality a vision of the world that lacks easy comfort vis-à-vis distinction and boundaries between things, and this way attention to James helps to clarify the perception of the world as marked by racial disregard Du Bois seeks to highlight through the problem soul. This positioning against the world in and of itself has not fostered a negative response in that for critics such as Cornel West proper perspective does not involve denial of the tragic quality of life. To the contrary, it is vital; however, what West finds missing is a creative tension between the tragic and the comic. Du Bois’s perception of the human condition is lacking because he does not consider sufficiently the current context in which even “ultimate purpose and objective order” are called into question, and he does not fully grasp what West calls the “sheer absurdity of the human condition.”<sup>46</sup> West assumes a type of fatalism in Du Bois stemming in part from his failure to engage adequately—instead of paternalistically and dismissively—

the life and resource of the larger African American community. He is outside the circle of concern, so to speak, and therefore lacks a robust safeguard. Without “ritual, cushioned by community or sustained by art,” West cautions, “we are urged toward suicide or madness.”<sup>47</sup> Yet this community is not foreign to Du Bois. More to the point, however, this “community,” complete with the resources West names, has also produced redemptive-suffering models of response to the absurdity of life that challenge persistent struggle and instead promote a radical sense of the future that easily sacrifices the present and “kills,” so to speak, the possibility of a robust anthropology by diminishing human responsibility and accountability in the world as well as by giving misery high status. The ritual and artistic expression within African American communities, as Du Bois knows, is not always inclined toward self-care and collective advancement.

On closer inspection, the underlying issue for West seems not a lack of attention to the absurdity of the world—or a disciplined diagnosis of the historical moment. Instead, he challenges what he perceives as Du Bois’s failure to find comfort and resolution within the collective life of the “least of these.”<sup>48</sup> Du Bois, if one ignores changes to his thinking and reflects only on his early work, appears elitist and “exceptionalist” in orientation, and this “inability to immerse himself fully in the rich cultural currents of black everyday life” constitutes the issue because without this immersion a sense of the tragicomic quality of life is impossible to grasp.<sup>49</sup> Hence, reflecting on his early thinking in isolation, a turn to classical education was betrayed by the theory of the talented tenth; economic inclusion was marred by the tenacious nature of white supremacy; cultural production as Du Bois presented it within his early career failed to do more than offer an apology for African American genius; and political participation was short-circuited by an Enlightenment worldview championing yet another form of elitism as the “impulsive and irrational masses” were guided into public life by their superiors.<sup>50</sup>

I argue, however, that the cultural world of “everyday” interactions is not foreign to Du Bois and that the elitism critiqued by West is later challenged by Du Bois himself; the difference with West is Du Bois’s unwillingness to see in this resource a sustainable aid.<sup>51</sup> This disagreement notwithstanding, even limited attention to West’s critique points in the direction of the sensibility I want to highlight. While not framing absurdity in the moralist-absurdist manner I have in mind, West does promote implicitly the utility of this vocabulary in connection to Du Bois’s perspective in *Souls*.

## Problem Soul

Consideration of the Negro problem, particularly in theological terms, entails a sense of hope funneled through faith in cosmic assistance, while the problem soul connotes “a hope not hopeless but unhopeful.”<sup>52</sup> Du Bois mentions this unhopeful posture in relationship to death as physical demise, but it is just as applicable to the depth of disregard—or ontological irrelevance—also marking encounter with the cultural climate associated with the world.<sup>53</sup> To be unhopeful within this cultural climate raises the question of pain and suffering, but not as a matter of theodicy. Rather, the problem-soul posture rejects grand unity of purpose, and this entails a stance much more in line with a Camusian sense of struggle (as interplay) and life without appeal. Paul Taylor points toward this sense of struggle without resolution in Du Bois prior to his departure for Ghana: “Du Bois offered to a friend what we might take as his final assessment of the prospects of social justice. ‘Chin up and fight on,’ Du Bois says, ‘but realize that American Negroes can’t win.’”<sup>54</sup> Sharing West’s desire to avoid passivity or fatalism, Taylor makes an effort to recast this statement not as a general denouncement of struggle as having a useful outcome; rather, he reads it as an endorsement of pan-African striving for justice as opposed to the more geographically limited push for civil rights in the United States. Taylor argues, yes, Du Bois says *American* Negroes can’t win, but he doesn’t say Negroes (as a global population) can’t win. The more expansive framing of the global African American community involves rejection of America as the standard and embrace of pan-African allegiances—a different type of interplay to be sure.<sup>55</sup>

Beside the mode of revision offered by Paul Taylor, melancholy as response to loss is a manner in which some have attempted to capture the tone of Du Bois’s diagnosis.<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Flatley, for whom it can be a positive, argues melancholy is produced for Du Bois through white supremacy. Flatley discusses melancholia in relationship to Du Bois as a means of disclosure—a look into the sources of melancholia thereby producing a historical sense of the source of loss and an interest in the world. Yet I am not convinced this is the best way to frame the problem soul. What would constitute the prior thing, an initial situation, against which the new situation is measured? Loss involves a change in posture, mood, and perception of experience premised on something desired and once present, now gone and therefore mourned. What Du Bois articulates has little if anything to do with properly or improperly addressing loss.

If anything, the African American is culturally constituted by a mode of misplaced nostalgia, consistent with the manner in which Camus captures U.S. self-understanding more broadly. As such, African Americans, at least as culturally or discursively constructed, are without a capacity for loss. The assumed sense of longing or loss is better described as existential disruption—affective, geographical, and physical ramifications tied to the failure of Reconstruction. Du Bois does not point to an original moment of wholeness, a location once beyond the grasp of racial disregard, a space set aside and set apart. No, he poses the question of unendingly warring identities within a cultural climate of violent difference, shaped by a vivid awareness of absurdity, akin to this consideration marking out naming-things set apart as thing-things: What do things of history lose or gain?

It is true the spirituals, or sorrow songs, as Du Bois names them, hint at what may be thought of as a sense of longing. Of course, there is individual loss through the tactics of white supremacy and Jim Crow, but even this is not connected to a remembered past of equality in the United States that is longed for. Jim Crow over against enslavement produces not melancholy but a deep sense of racial disregard as already and always, speaking not to loss but to the overwhelming presence of white supremacy impinging on every dimension of collective life. Furthermore, religious melancholy, as James defines lost meaning, does not apply either. Melancholy as a mode of personal sin or as fear generated by the radical evil marking the world as lacking grand significance and devoid of meaning—presented in a “modern style,” as Charles Taylor frames it—does no better a job of capturing the sensibility of the problem soul.<sup>57</sup> These two—personal sin and fear—suggest longing for an alternate, a different relationship to the world that is missing but plausible. This is more consistent with what was said in the second chapter regarding Yates’s reading of Bakhtin through a Christian theological hermeneutic which privileged (over against degradation as Bakhtin understands it) wholeness and boundaries. Yet by means of the posture known as the problem soul, personal sin is moot, and fear is an intimate dimension of disregard. There is no ritualization of loss and no effort to end openness.<sup>58</sup> Available to the problem soul are only thought and habits of revolt without resolution—a resolve only to recognize the absurdity of encounter with the world—while maintaining an interplay with/between things.

Charles Long might be said to come closest to offering a useful way to position Du Bois in relationship to melancholia. In his 1975 William James Lecture, Long reflects on *Varieties* and questions the ability of James’s “once

born” and “twice born” framework to, as he puts it, bear “the weight of the cultural experiences of the Americas, much less the experience of humankind.”<sup>59</sup> The values and meanings accorded life within a context of racial disregard require recognition of a different source for the “twice born” soul. It is this different source Long means to address through his discussion of the negative element of religious experience. Moreover, through religious experience the oppressed push back toward “primordial experience and histories” that critique modernity and its metaphysical categories used to re-create the “other.” This second creation, or reinvention, is for Long what Du Bois intends by double-consciousness.

Furthermore, unlike the dread experienced by James and his father, the dread Du Bois chronicles in the essay “On the Faith of the Fathers” might be said to involve reevaluation of, or better yet, the compromised stability of this second creation opening the possibility of a prior meaning—as the persistent separateness of conflicting identities impinges.<sup>60</sup> Religious experience within the context of a new formulation of community addresses a sense of first creation—the self prior to the logic of modern racial disregard—as a “new form of human consciousness.” And the political struggles within these newly formed communities speak to the forging of space in which to exercise this new consciousness regarding openness—the porous quality of interaction.<sup>61</sup> It is a crawling back for Long, away from the second creation to a first creation—which is loss of destructive significations of identity and meaning. This loss, then, is rejection of the second creation, the modern articulation of limited metaphysical black worth.

Despite Long’s modifications, a feeling of loss assumes an integrity of past experience foreign to African Americans as a consequence of antiblack racism and its structuring of discourse. Perhaps this is why the Cargo cults to which Long points entail unfulfilled resolution sought through material acquisition. The religion of the oppressed, as I read Long, offers conversion—one grounded in the historical consequences of American culture, but conversion nonetheless. Yet for Du Bois, there is no possibility of conversion; there is no salvation (i.e., a reliable end to openness and interplay), not even the type to which Long points. And as described in *Souls*, the religion of African Americans involves not a crawling back but rather an embrace of the second creation, an unwillingness to confront structures of disregard but instead a thinking theologically about second creation as a mode of theodicy resolved through address of personal sin and the mysteries of God’s will. Herein closure is sought to the degree that only divine presence penetrates the naming-thing:

all interplay is of limited worth when one considers the interplay with the Divine.

On the microlevel, with the death of Du Bois's son, there is a poetic quality offered through personal pain and angst that lends a softer meaning to the misery of disregard. Du Bois says, "I saw his breath beat quicker and quicker, pause, and then his little soul leapt like a star that travels in the night and left a world of darkness in its train."<sup>62</sup> Still, this brief glimpse of transcendence through removal from the cultural climate by means of death is more often silenced by Du Bois the scientific thinker, who, as he acknowledges, "longs for work" and who "pant[s] for a life full of striving."<sup>63</sup> With this example in place, what James says about evil is applicable. The normal arrangements of life are filled "with moments in which radical evil gets its inning and takes its solid turn."<sup>64</sup> However, as Du Bois outlines the cultural climate, and the ongoing push to render black naming-things fixed and bounded—marginalized and limited—this "turn" seems perpetual.