

## LAND, THE COLOR LINE, AND THE QUEST OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE

An Introduction to W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*  
and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (Selections)

BRETT CLARK

JOHN BELLAMY FOSTER

University of Oregon

Manning Marable (1999) writes that William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) “was without question the most influential black intellectual in American history” (p. v). Even more, he was a citizen of the world, gaining an international stature rarely achieved (Gates, 1989, p. xii). This year is the centennial of *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois, 1903/1989), in which Du Bois famously declared, “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (p. xxxi). The color line divides people within the countryside, cities, and the globe. People of color are denied the same opportunities, privileges, and rights as Whites. During a life spanning 95 years, Du Bois’s scholarly work and commitment to activism were unsurpassed. He engaged in critical examinations of social and racial relations within the United States, as well as on the global level, always incorporating a rich historical context for situating his studies. Unfortunately, the relationship between human beings and nature, which was such a crucial part of his overall analysis, has received little attention.

Throughout much of Du Bois’s intellectual corpus—especially in his early studies of Black farmers and Black rural life for the Department of Labor, in his treatise *The Souls of Black Folk*, and in his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*—there is a special focus on the human relationship to the land that is influenced by labor, the color line, and the social organization of society in general. Already in his 1901 study, “The Negro Landholder of Georgia,” written for the Department of Labor, Du Bois had singled out the failure of the Freedmen’s Bureau’s land redistribution program in the Reconstruction Era as the key to understanding the condition of Black tenant farmers and agricultural laborers in the South. Du Bois wrote the following:

One of the greatest problems of emancipation in the United States was the relation of the freedmen to the land. Millions of laborers, trained principally to farm life, were suddenly freed. If they were left landless, homeless, and without money or tools, starvation or practical reenslavement awaited them; if they were to be given

---

Authors’ Note: *The authors would like to thank Frederick H. Buttel for providing insights into Du Bois’s early work in rural sociology.*

*Organization & Environment*, Vol. 16 No. 4, December 2003 459-469

DOI: 10.1177/1086026603259095

© 2003 Sage Publications

land, who was to pay? In the discussion that arose on the eve of the proclamation of 1863 [the Emancipation Proclamation] there was a general agreement that in some way land must be furnished the freedman. This demand became more and more imperative as the Northern armies penetrated the South. Thousands of Negroes dropped their work and followed the Northern armies in droves until the problem of their subsistence and ultimate disposal became pressing and puzzling. . . . When the Freedmen's Bureau took charge it received nearly 800,000 acres of . . . land and 5,000 pieces of town property, from the leasing of which a revenue of nearly \$400,000 was received from freedmen. The policy of President Johnson, however, soon put an end to this method of furnishing land to the landless. His proclamation of amnesty practically restored the bulk of this seized property to its former owners, and within a few years the black tenants were dispossessed or became laborers. (Du Bois, 1901, pp. 647-648)

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903/1989) further explained how the Freedmen's Bureau, the core of the Reconstruction program following the Civil War, had been designed "to grapple with vast problems of race and social condition" (1903/1989, p. 11). One of the primary purposes of the Freedmen's Bureau was to oversee the redistribution of land to freed slaves, providing them with the means to provide for their own livelihood. However, the North's commitment to Reconstruction was limited and support for the Freedmen's Bureau was withdrawn before it was able to achieve its objectives. In fact, land that was given to Blacks was, in some cases, taken back and returned to White landowners. Du Bois viewed the failure of the Freedmen's Bureau's land redistribution program to be the most tragic event in the Reconstruction period and a formative factor in the development of the modern color line. This historic failure is the context for everything else that he writes about the Black Belt in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In examining Du Bois's work, utilizing an environmental lens, we can gain insights into the importance of land in struggles for freedom and the meanings that are given to land by different populations. Du Bois also documents how social structures create and sustain class and race divisions. Lastly, he exposes how the particular and general characteristics of wealth production under capitalism contribute to the degradation of labor and the environment.

Born during the Reconstruction Era, but in Massachusetts, Du Bois experienced life between the poles of both race—Black and White—and social class—lower and upper (Lewis, 1993, pp. 11-37). By the time he attended college at the historically Black Fisk University, the so-called era of "Redemption" (Jim Crow) had taken hold of the South, instituting a form of de facto slavery. Through the relationships that Du Bois formed at school and the time he spent traveling through the countryside of the South meeting peasant farmers (whose lives and struggles inspired *The Souls of Black Folk*), he felt increasingly connected to other people of African descent (pp. 67-69). After Fisk, Du Bois went to graduate school at Harvard, where he studied sociology, economics, philosophy, and history, earning an MA in history. For a couple of years, Du Bois studied in Germany at the University of Berlin, where he attended lectures by Max Weber. Then, returning to the United States, Du Bois became the first person of African descent to obtain a doctorate from Harvard. An abbreviated listing of his accomplishments includes writing an ethnographic study (*The Philadelphia Negro*) that established urban sociology in the United States, authoring a series of studies for the Department of Labor in 1898-1903 through which "field investigation of rural life was initiated" in U.S. sociology (Buttel, Larson, & Gillespie, 1990, p. 2), cofounding the Niagara Move-

ment in 1906 to confront and reconcile ongoing racism, contributing to the birth of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), editing the NAACP's publication *The Crisis* (the voice of civil rights mobilization) from 1910 to 1934, organizing the Pan-African Congress movement, and leading the U.S. peace movement (Du Bois, 1968/1997; Lewis, 1993, 2000; Marable, 1999).

Du Bois's (1968/1997) radicalism and commitment to historical materialist analysis deepened through the years, but as he noted, these positions had hovered in the background, waiting to break out in his early work (pp. 240-251). He used this analysis to explain how the origins of the global capitalist system and imperialism created the hierarchies among nations and the social and racial divisions between peoples. Land, labor, and the color line figure predominately in this story that leads to an understanding of the social system that eventually reigned in the cotton lands of the United States. In *The World and Africa* (1947), Du Bois drew on Marx's classic discussion—"Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist" in *Capital*—to discuss the primitive accumulation of capitalism. Marx (1867/1976) explained how the birth of capitalism entailed the pillaging of resources (gold, silver, etc.) from continents beyond Europe, the development of the slave trade, the exploitation and dispossession of indigenous peoples, and the transformation of nature into a source of raw materials and agricultural goods for the world market (pp. 914-926). The triangle trade of humans, rum, and sugar contributed to the development of the global capitalist system, which necessitated the exploitation of nature and humans (Du Bois, 1947, pp. 56-59). Capitalist expansion increased the dispossession of indigenous peoples from land while creating labor reserves—both free and forced—on plantations for the production of goods desired by European nations. All the while, a theory of racial inferiority was created by Europeans to justify the exploitation "of those hundreds of millions of people on whom the world long has walked with careless and insolent feet" (Du Bois, 1945, pp. 40-57).

From these global-economic arrangements, the human-nature relationship was transformed creating

that dark and vast sea of human labor . . . on whose bent and broken backs rest today the founding stones of modern industry . . . despised and rejected by race and color; paid a wage below the level of decent living; driven, beaten, prisoned and enslaved in all but name; spawning the world's raw material and luxury—cotton, wool, coffee, tea, cocoa, palm oil, fibers, spices, rubber, silks, lumber, copper, gold, diamonds, leather—how shall we end the list and where? All these are gathered up at prices lowest of the low, manufactured, transformed and transported at fabulous gain; and the resultant wealth is distributed and displayed and made the basis of world power and universal dominion and armed arrogance in London and Paris, Berlin and Rome, New York and Rio de Janeiro. . . . Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human beasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal. (Du Bois, 1935/1992, pp. 15-16)

Thus, an intimate aspect of (ecological) imperialism is the transformation and organization of both labor and nature in the periphery for the accumulation of wealth in the core. This awareness remained a thread woven through Du Bois's work as he examined a long history beginning with the origins of the global capitalist system, continuing with the formation of the United States and its subsequent history as a nation, and culminating in ongoing global struggles between the

periphery and core. The pattern revealed is one of exploitation of laborers to obtain the riches of the land.

From its very beginning down to the present day, racial inequality remains a fundamental part of the social history of the United States. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903/1989) described the social transformation of the South, in terms of both nature and society, as the indigenous peoples were removed from the land:

The Indians were removed to Indian Territory, and settlers poured into these coveted lands to retrieve their broken fortunes. For a radius of a hundred miles about Albany, stretched a great fertile land, luxuriant with forests of pine, oak, ash, hickory, and poplar; hot with the sun and damp with the rich black swamp-land; and here the corner-stone of the Cotton Kingdom was laid. (p. 80)

Slavery involved the importation of people from Africa into the Americas—and into the United States in particular—to raise crops such as cotton and tobacco. While this population was tied to the land, the landowners running the slave system controlled the production process. The profitability of this system depended primarily on the exploitive and oppressive relations between landowners and slaves. In time, as Eugene Genovese (1967) explains, the slave system encountered a number of crises, including the inefficiencies of the slave labor force, too large of a capital outlay, an inability to invest in new productive technologies that would not threaten the labor system, overt and covert resistance on the part of slaves, an ongoing soil crisis because of the depletion of soil nutrients, and a growing presence of capital interests from the North. The formal system of slavery collapsed as the Civil War came to an end.

Du Bois was extremely interested in the social changes in the South following the Civil War. Such works as “The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia: A Social Study” (1898) and “The Negro Landholder of Georgia” (1901)—two of his studies of Black rural life in the South for the Department of Labor—*The Souls of Black Folk*, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (a novel), and *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* all present historical and sociological examinations of the United States, the South, Black-White relations, and political-economic institutions. The new society carried the legacy of slavery, as social inequalities were perpetuated through a variety of means: a failure to engage in large-scale land redistribution, violence (including, as Ida B. Wells documented, a system of lynching), and a distortion of Black culture, which relegated African Americans to a position outside of “normal” society, given the dictates of the dominant White culture. Du Bois’s examination of this period in U.S. history illustrates the contrasting views of land between Blacks and White landowners as well as how the issue of the color line became the most pressing problem of the 20th century.

In “The Negro Landholder of Georgia,” *The Souls of Black Folk*, and *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, Du Bois explained how land distribution was proposed but never fully embraced as a social program following the Civil War. The Freedmen’s Bureau helped create institutions for education, political participation, and limited land reforms. It was deployed to open and sell confiscated and abandoned land to newly freed slaves (Du Bois, 1903/1989, pp. 19-29). Thus the Freedmen’s Bureau quickly became the enemy of the White oligarchy in the South. Obstacles of class, race and organized state repression hindered progress. Although the Civil War pointed to the possibility (and offered the hope) of a second American Revolution, Du Bois noted that the U.S. state failed to provide enough

capital and support to carry through a true transformation of social relations in the South. The Freedmen's Bureau was to oversee the redistribution of land, but a number of problems presented themselves. First, proposals for land redistribution were slow at being enacted, given a lack of land, because politicians and capitalists from the North did not want to set a precedent for confiscating land for social justice (Du Bois, 1935/1992, p. 601). Second, proclamations for general amnesty of White, southern landowners led to the return of 800,000 acres of land, diminishing the amount of land available for redistribution (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 18). Furthermore, the southern landowners that applied and received pardons reclaimed any land that was lost. The process of pardons was accelerated, dispossessing Blacks of land and the ability to provide for their own livelihood (Du Bois, 1935/1992, pp. 602-604). Even when the Freedmen's Bureau redistributed land and provided employment, the civil courts in the South countered these measures, helping to perpetuate White domination (Du Bois, 1903/1989, pp. 20-29). Lastly, the compromise of 1876 between Republicans and Democrats in response to the electoral crisis of that year included an unwritten agreement that the Republicans would be allowed to retain the nation's presidency if the Republican-controlled North would remove the federal troops and not interfere in Black-White relations in the White-dominated, largely Democratic South. In this way, the Reconstruction Era was brought to an ignominious end.

Du Bois believed that land was the key to moving toward freedom. The failure of the Freedmen's Bureau's land redistribution program perpetuated racial inequalities. Thus, the problem of the color line was thrust to the forefront of U.S. concerns. He explained,

For this much all men know: despite compromise, war, and struggle, the Negro is not free. In the backwoods of the Gulf States, for miles and miles, he may not leave the plantation of his birth; in well-nigh the whole rural South the black farmers are peons, bound by law and custom to an economic slavery, from which the only escape is death or the penitentiary. (Du Bois, 1903/1989, pp. 28-29)

Although some redistribution of land had occurred, Blacks in the South were largely forced into extremely coercive labor regimes based in agricultural areas on a sharecropping system that amounted to debt peonage. Du Bois (1953) wrote,

In the South the land was rich and the climate mild. There was sun and rain for grain, fruit, and fiber. There were natural resources in rivers, harbors, and forests. In the bosom of the earth lay coal, iron, oil, sulphur, and salt. All this either already belonged to or was practically given by the government to the landholder and capitalist. Only a small part of it went to labor, black or white. (pp. 478-479)

Du Bois provided a vibrant picture of the natural conditions and the organization of life in the South and how this related to the social relationships of people to nature. In fact, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (see excerpts from the chapter "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece" below), Du Bois (1903/1989) declared, "The country is rich, yet the people are poor" (pp. 95-96). The global market remained tied to cotton production in the South. Yet the Black tenant farmers lived in debt. Rent, food, seed, and supplies were taken out of the sale of cotton at the end of the growing season, leaving families with little to nothing. The tenant farmers lived in the shadows of the landowners. The tenant cabins were crowded, poorly ventilated, and dilapidated (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 97). Child labor blocked educational attainment

while stunting physical development (1903/1989, p. 100). Ironically, the only escape and the only advantage accruing to this working population was that they spent much of their lives “outside . . . [their] hovel, in the open fields” (1903/1989, p. 97). Du Bois believed this condition of rural labor had its benefits because of the increasing air pollution in industrial cities. He wrote: “It is work in the pure open air, and this is something in a day when fresh air is scarce” (1903/1989, p. 101).

At this time in the South, the primary jobs available to the Black population involved working as tenant farmers or as laborers in the cotton mills. Although tenant farmers retained a direct relation with nature in their work, this productive action was dictated by the organization of the capitalist economy. The fruits of nature and human labor were appropriated for profit rather than the workers’ sustenance. The material and ecological flow from and to the environment was shaped for the accumulation of capital. Continual racial and social inequalities sustained a system of exploitation of labor and nature. Tenant farmers were kept permanently in debt. Competition and debt infected the land as forests were laid to waste to expand cotton production and to provide the means of repayment to creditors. Du Bois reflected how “‘Oakey Woods’ had been ruined and ravished into a red waste” (1903/1989, p. 89). Thus, capitalist agriculture, based on the pursuit of even greater profit, increased the exploitation of land and the clearing of forests for expanded production.

“Despite long abuse,” Du Bois observed, “the land on the whole is still fertile” (1903/1989, p. 101). A diversity of crops could be grown throughout the South, but “on two-thirds of the land there is but one crop, and that leaves the toilers in debt.” The landlords only accepted payment in cotton and merchants only accepted mortgages on cotton crops. Given the dependence created by depriving the tenant farmers of enough capital, land, and other means of existence, the farmers were not able to diversify their crops. This system encouraged monoculture and was “bound to bankrupt the tenant” (1903/1989, pp. 103-110). Furthermore, merchants overcharged tenant farmers for food and supplies. Thus, tenant farmers were never able to earn and save money to purchase their own land on a scale sufficient to achieve independence from the bankers, merchants, and landowners. The only thing of value that tenant farmers held was their labor. They worked simply for their keep, continuing a system of forced labor that sustained the social inequalities of hundreds of years. If the price of cotton increased, the rent would increase, preventing the farmers from obtaining any monetary gain. However, if the price of cotton declined, the farmers were denied credit or deprived of additional supplies to make ends meet.

Du Bois directly addressed the ecological consequences of cotton production. He repeatedly pointed out how the land was deteriorating because of abuse. The rich land had been “partially devitalized by careless and exhaustive culture” (1903/1989, p. 96). The exhaustion of soil nutrients made it more difficult to grow crops. “The poor land groans with its birth-pains,” Du Bois wrote, “and brings forth scarcely a hundred pounds of cotton to the acre, where fifty years ago it yielded eight times as much” (p. 89). In words reminiscent of Marx’s statement regarding how capitalist agriculture results in the degradation of both the soil and labor (1867/1976, p. 638), Du Bois concludes that the agricultural system operating in the South resulted in the “abuse and neglect of the soil, deterioration in the character of the laborers, and a widespread sense of injustice” (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 110).

All of the aforementioned themes and theoretical insights are incorporated into Du Bois's novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (from which selections are reprinted here), which he saw as both a story and an economic study. *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* provides a realist presentation of the struggles for land and freedom in a Black community. The story follows the lives of Zora and Bles, two children who met when Bles was sent away to school. White landlords, the Cresswells, owned the land (surrounding the school) on which Black tenant farmers worked. For the landowners, sustaining racial and social inequalities was essential to sustain access to cheap labor, which provided for greater profits. The school, run by a White woman, served as a center for the education of the tenant farmers' children, including Zora and Bles at the beginning of the novel. Zora and Bles struggled to gain money for education by planting cotton on land within the swamp adjacent to the cotton fields, believing their work would provide rewards. For Zora, the land held promise. She described this land to Bles: "Over yonder behind the swamps is great fields full of dreams" (Du Bois, 1911/1969, p. 19). Land offered the possibility of freedom if it could be obtained.

Bles gained a greater understanding of the social relations operating in the South when his schoolteacher told him the story of the golden fleece. Du Bois made use of the story of Jason and the Argonauts in both *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* to illuminate the exploitation and inequalities perpetuated against the people and land in the South. Miss Taylor, one of the schoolteachers from the North, inspired by the image of cotton covering the lands, thought of it as a silver fleece, rather than the golden fleece from the story of Jason and the Argonauts. She told Bles the story of Jason, the adventurer, pursuing the golden fleece. When she finished telling the story, Bles proclaimed, "All yon golden fleece is Jason's now" (Du Bois, 1911/1969, pp. 35-36). Startled, the teacher exclaimed that the cotton belonged to the Cresswells. Bles affirmed this position, stating that this was exactly what he meant: Jason was a thief, just as the Cresswells were. Bles continued by indicating that the land was filled with Black farmers who worked the land to produce the cotton, only to have it stolen from them.

Zora and Bles's friendship continued to grow as they prepared the land to plant cotton. Their love for each other was interwoven with their toil, as they worked the land and facilitated the growth of cotton. Work served as an act of beauty. Through their labor they deepened their attachment to the place, thinking that their work would provide greater freedoms (pp. 99-100). While Du Bois provided a full account of Zora and Bles's toil, he also included a detailed picture of the vertical integration that was taking place within the cotton industry to control the prices and production of raw materials. Industrialists from the North consolidated their interests, making contracts with the landowners in the South to regulate the flow of cotton to the market. Eventually, the industrialists, who were establishing monopolistic control, built cotton mills in the South. The cotton mills, later in the story, ushered in many changes to social life in the South by bringing a new "song of sorrow" to the land (pp. 389-401). Displaced farmers and an increasing number of urban residents provided a population in need of work. The new mills lowered the costs of production for industrialists. Even children worked in the factories. Workers experienced a continual degradation in their physical stature, as the townspeople and town itself showed "a ragged tuberculous looking side with dingy homes in short and homely rows." The capitalists pitted the Black and White population of the region against each other by threatening to hire Blacks if the White workers

demanded too much. In this, capital maintained a social and racial hierarchy to maximize profits.

Profit guided these actions, and the exploitation and impoverishment of the Black laborers all but escaped from consciousness (pp. 54-55). Landowners built their wealth on the exploitation of the laborers and the exhaustion of the soil. At harvest time, they stole the silver fleece from the tenant farmers, buying the cotton at bargain prices, subtracting rent, food, and supplies, leaving the farmers with little money for a year's work. "Cotton was currency; Cotton was merchandise;" the tenant farmers were kept across the color line (pp. 181-189). Zora confronted this situation (Bles had left for the North by this time), ending up with a debt of \$25 despite the high quality and abundance of her crop. These events served as wounds and lessons as the years passed and as Zora continued her education.

Du Bois followed the separate lives of Bles and Zora as they separately left the South and where they encountered the color line in the urban centers of the North. Eventually, they returned (Zora first), as adults, to the cotton lands of the South. Again, the importance of land comes front and center, as Zora created a plan to obtain freedom—not just for her, but also for her people—through the purchase of land. Zora's goal was to tap the unorganized power of the masses to break the grip of the landowners whose fists had squeezed them of life and wealth for hundreds of years (p. 359). Zora declared, "We must have land—our own farm with our own tenants—to be the beginning of a free community" (p. 362). To do this, Zora, using money given to her by a wealthy, White woman whom she had worked for in the North, approached Colonel Cresswell to buy the swamp, the land of her childhood dreams. As Du Bois had indicated as early as 1901 in "The Negro Landholder of Georgia," lands obtained by freedmen after the Civil War (outside of lands from bankrupt plantations) were principally swamp lands, the cultivation of which had been previously neglected (Du Bois, 1901, p. 665).

Cresswell agreed to sell the land to Zora, believing that he would reclaim the improved land once the debt became too much for Zora. John Taylor, a northern businessman, and Cresswell only saw the land as a means to acquire greater riches. In fact, the trees standing on the land were viewed as a hindrance, creating waste (pp. 363-375). Here, Du Bois cleverly contrasted the way in which these two opponents, from different social positions, viewed the land. Zora, on behalf of Black tenant farmers, viewed land as a means to achieve freedom if released from the chains of the landowners and capitalists. Once Zora made a deal with Cresswell, she set to work organizing the local farmers, proposing that the way toward liberation was through human action and cooperation. The Black community set to work, collectively growing cotton for the market but also seeding plans to diversify their crops to provide the means for their own livelihood and subsistence. In this, Du Bois presented a vision of the Black community meeting their own needs rather than being dependent (for food) on the merchants who managed to profit off of tenant farmers' debts. He was, in fact, inspired by the discoveries emanating from his own earlier research into rural landholding in the South. As he had noted, quoting from the reports from the Reconstruction Era, in "The Negro Landholder of Georgia":

There were at first several socialistic experiments, which if encouraged and directed might have led to interesting and instructive results. "I met at a cotton merchant's in that city [Savannah] 10 freedmen who had clubbed together with the proceeds of their crop and bought a whole sea-island plantation of 700 acres." "Last Spring 160 Negroes banded together, chose one of the smartest of their



number as superintendent, and commenced work. Now they show you with pride 250 acres of rice, 250 acres of corn, nearly the same amount of peas [beans we should call them], besides many acres of smaller crops. This joint-stock company are working not only with energy but in perfect harmony." There was, however, too little experience and intelligence to allow such experiments to be successful generally. (Du Bois, 1901, p. 666; quotes are taken by Du Bois from a report to the Freedmen's Bureau in 1870 and an American Missionary in 1865, respectively).

As the year passed, Cresswell was troubled by the success of the Black community and sought to destroy the living example showing that people could create a different productive relationship. So, when the harvest came, he attempted to take two thirds of the crop in partial payment for the land and then to evict Zora. However, Zora placed the cotton in a warehouse, refusing to sell it. Instead she planned to fight the battle against Cresswell in the courts where she could establish her right to control the sale of the cotton (Du Bois 1911/1969, pp. 402-414).

In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, Du Bois presented a social system on the brink of change, as tenant farmers organized to seize political, economic, and social freedom by gaining control over their labor and the land that they worked. Land held the promise of freedom if it could be withdrawn from the clutches of those who only saw the land as a realm of resources to be surrendered to the drive for profit. Du Bois highlighted the struggles of Blacks in the South as they confronted the color line that perpetuated social inequalities and degraded them as people by depriving them of the means (capital, land, and opportunities) to organize their productive lives outside a racist society. Within this context, Du Bois indicated that the cotton monoculture had to be overturned. Instead, a diversity of crops would allow the community to produce for themselves. Here, as in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois noted how the land had deteriorated in quality (had been "worked out") through the years. Whereas an explicit plan is not proposed to deal with this problem, Du Bois was well aware of the degradation of the soil as a result of continued exploitation. This awareness highlights the need for sustainable farming practices, a position that could easily be developed given the focus on radical social change.

Du Bois recognized that the exploitation of nature and humans that accompanied the color line was part of the operations of the capitalist system in general. He extended his critique to the global level using a historical materialist analysis to understand the past and present. In *Darkwater* (1920/1999), Du Bois argued that the commercial exploitation of Africa was contributing to the outward flow of materials, including rubber, cocoa, cloves, palm oil, and cotton. The plundering of Africa under capitalist influence was only expanding to include all raw materials, foods, lumber, and fibers. Rather than "a paradise of industry," this transformation was "much more likely to be a hell" (p. 36). The people, living in the periphery, would be displaced from their land, organized into labor operations for the export of goods, and the workers and land would be subjected to an intense form of degradation to generate wealth for capital in the core nations. To counter these developments, Du Bois helped found the Pan-African movement, which "signified the militant, anticapitalist solidarity of the darker world" (Lewis, 1993, p. 9).

Du Bois clearly believed that an alternative way of organizing social life in rural areas was possible. He contended that

it would be [a] shame and cowardice to surrender this glorious land and its opportunities for civilization and humanity to the thugs and lynchers, the mobs and profiteers, the monopolists and gamblers who today choke its soul and steal its

resources. The oil and sulphur; the coal and iron; the cotton and corn; the lumber and cattle belong to you the workers, black and white, and not to the thieves who hold them and use them to enslave you. They can be rescued and restored to the people if you have the guts. (Du Bois, 1995, p. 549)

The answer thus lay in a society that would collectively manage the production of social needs in relation to land as well as labor. It is not too much to suggest that the struggle for freedom could, and must, as we now know, involve the incorporation of sustainable interactions with nature. Du Bois took note of how capitalist agriculture laid waste to the soil. This awareness suggests that a more balanced relation to the land and a recycling of soil nutrients are necessary components for a just and sustainable society. After all, to rescue and restore the products of labor to the people, we must protect and sustain the land.

Du Bois's work presents an engaging picture of how the color line influences social relationships to the land. Contrasting social positions are presented; the land is seen as simply a reserve for resources by capitalists and as a means for liberation by Blacks, as people invest and reproduce themselves through their labor and the land. Speaking from within the veil, Du Bois reveals how the struggle for freedom involves freeing land from the dictates of capital. In this struggle, a transcendence of the color line is possible. By ending the exploitation of people and land for the sake of profit, the seeds for a new society can be sown.

## REFERENCES

- Buttel, F. H., Larson, O. F., & Gillespie, G. W., Jr. (Eds.). (1990). *The sociology of agriculture*. New York: Greenwood.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1898). The negroes of Farmville, Virginia: A social study. *Bulletin of the Department of Labor* (No. 14, January; in U.S. House of Representatives, *House Documents*, vol. 50, 55th Congress, 2nd session, pp. 1-38).
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1901). The Negro landholder of Georgia. *Bulletin of the Department of Labor* (No. 35, July; in U.S. House of Representatives, *House Documents*, vol. 88, 56th Congress, 2nd session, pp. 647-777).
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1945). *Color and democracy: Colonies and peace*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1947). *The world and Africa: An inquiry into the part which Africa has played in world history*. New York: Viking.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1953). Negroes and the Crisis of Capitalism in the United States. *Monthly Review*, 4, 478-485.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1969). *The quest of the silver fleece*. College Park, Maryland: McGrath. (Original work published 1911)
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1989). *The souls of black folk*. New York: Bantam. (Original work published 1903)
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1992). *Black reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*. New York: Atheneum. (Original work published 1935)
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1995). *W. E. B. Du Bois: A reader* (D. L. Lewis, Ed.). New York: Henry Holt.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1997). *The autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A soliloquy on viewing my life from the last decade of its first century*. New York: International Publishers. (Original work published 1968)
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1999). *Darkwater: Voices from within the veil*. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. (Original work published 1920)
- Gates, H. L., Jr. (1989). Introduction. In W. E. B. Du Bois, *The souls of black folk* (pp. vii-xxix). New York: Bantam.

- Genovese, E. (1967). *The political economy of slavery: Studies in the economy & society of the slave south*. New York: Vintage.
- Lewis, D. L. (1993). *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a race, 1868-1919*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Lewis, D. L. (2000). *W. E. B. Du Bois: The fight for equality and the American century, 1919-1963*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Marable, M. (1999). Introduction. In W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the veil* (pp. v-viii). Mineola, New York: Dover.
- Marx, K. (1976). *Capital* (Vol. 1). New York: Vintage. (Original work published 1867)

*Brett Clark is a sociology doctoral student at the University of Oregon. His areas of interest are ecology, political economy, and imperialism. He has published pieces on Henry S. Salt, William Stanley Jevons, George Perkins Marsh, Helen Keller, and Ebenezer Howard in past issues of Organization & Environment.*

*John Bellamy Foster is coeditor of Monthly Review and has served as coeditor of Organization & Environment. He is a professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. His most recent books are Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature (Monthly Review Press, 2000) and Ecology Against Capitalism (Monthly Review Press, 2002).*