

EDITED BY

JASPER DELBECKE

FROM
THE SCENIC ESSAY
TO THE
ESSAY-EXHIBITION.

EXPANDING
THE ESSAY FORM
IN THE ARTS
BEYOND LITERATURE
AND FILM.

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THE MUSINGS AND MIRRORS OF W. E. B. DU BOIS – FROM AN ESSAY COLLECTION TO THE ESSAY PLAQUE

For many scholars and practitioners of the essay, it continues to be commonplace to ask, 'what is an essay'? It remains equally commonplace to reply from conviction and experience, 'the form is impossible to define'. A useful and creative way out of this dead-end, for me, is to ask what authors and artists do with the essay, how they explore its potentials and how that can shape ideas of the essay as a form. It has also been immensely useful and creative to consider how the essay has crossed the boundaries of the written realm, where it was originally located, to venture, as it were, into various media beyond text (in a narrow meaning of the term) and to reflect how it can be put to use in other fields such as the visual arts and performance.¹ What impact does the essay have, for instance, in curatorial practices?

An example of the essay form used in a curatorial context, I suggest, can be found in the main building of *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* on the boulevard *Unter den Linden*. A memorial marker for one of its famous students was unveiled on July 1, 2022: the 'W. E. B. Du Bois Memorial Marker' for the scholar, political activist, and writer William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963). According to Nahum D. Chandler, who published a magnum opus on Du Bois's oeuvre and persona, Du Bois can be considered 'above all a thinker-writer, the producer of formulations of problems for knowledge, notably with regard to matters African American—but not only. For his problematization concerns matters of the human in general' (xvii). Du Bois spent formative years as a student of economics, sociology, and history in Berlin from 1892 to 1894. The plaque on the ground floor of the university main building, created by Berlin-based Haitian-American artist Jean-Ulrick Désert, can be understood to constitute what I call an 'essay plaque' in honor of this important figure in the movement for equality for Black Americans and a leading figure in the Pan-African decolonization movement. The essay plaque serves to acknowledge the life and legacy of Berlin's

¹ The essay conference that took place in Ghent in 2022 took this approach. Its title—'From the scenic essay to the essay exhibition. Expanding the essay form in the arts'—references two such conceptualizations of the essay, that of the 'photographic essay' by iconologist W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) and that of the 'scenic essay' by postdramatic-theater scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999/2006).



Fig. W. E. B. Du Bois Memorial Marker at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2022. Image by Philipp Plum for Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, with kind permission of the artist Jean-Ulrick Désert.

outstanding Black student and at the same time furthers the university's own self-understanding as a leading institution of academic excellence that values diversity (see Fig.).

To approach the idea of the essay plaque, it is useful to consider the following dimensions of the essay. These dimensions play a role in broader discussions of the form and an assessment of its potential functions. They are also relevant when approaching the example of the Du Boisian essay plaque in Berlin; they will partially be considered here:

- the essay's formalization of discourse through material and symbolic means, including material, size, shape, and location,
- the work of the essay at the boundary of discourses,
- the form's location at the interfaces between fact and fiction/art, history and present,
- its position between the public and the private and the personal and the political; further,
- its references to person experience as strategies of (self-)authorization and (self-)positioning, and
- its dialogic communicative structures.²

²See Junker.

The essay plaque is both a site of perceptive experience and a place that provides an opportunity to reflect the history and complexity of knowledge production and the positionalities of those included in or excluded from it. The way Désert made use of and arranged different materials and media for his commemorative sculpture is striking: metal, glass, photography, and writing. The visual markers of the plaque include, at closer inspection, a black-and-white photograph of an 1890s class of doctoral students (Du Bois can be spotted in the top left corner), as well as two personal portraits of Du Bois as a young man, under green glass, and as a distinguished public figure, under red glass. The artist decided to arrange these images on a horizontal line suggesting linearity and progress, evoking what Black-diaspora and literary studies scholar Michelle M. Wright has called 'the linear progress narrative' so prevalent in African American

culture (4). Two bent metal plates structure a vertical axis, a brass one on top in which Du Bois's hand-written signature is engraved, and another steel one on the bottom with summary biographical dates. This axis takes up and plays with the motif of an unfolded wooden desktop or exhibition display, referencing Du Bois's collaborative work on the *Exposition des Nègres d'Amérique* at the *Exposition Universelle Internationale* in Paris in 1900. Visitors are thus invited to reflect critically on how objects are displayed, not least in ethnological contexts during the height of European imperialism and the postbellum United States. The color scheme of this essayistic work (green, black, and red) is inspired by the color coding of the Paris exhibition as well as of the flag of Pan-Africanism. If it were not for the artists' explanations of his piece during the unveiling ceremony in July 2022, my reading would not be an interpretation of the essay plaque that goes beyond mere description and observation. The highly polished, shiny surfaces of the glass and metal plates allow those who observe it to see themselves and the university environment mirrored; they become part of the commemorative position which draws Du Bois's legacy into the present.

Before we return to the essay plaque, let us take a step back and examine W. E. B. Du Bois and the role he plays in the history of the essay in general, and of the essay as an instrument of critique in the service of 'The Idea of Black Culture' in particular (Spillers). 'Du Bois, it must be said, was one of the great essayists of the twentieth century,' according to Chandler (3). The year 1903 saw the publication of the groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois published this work as a collection of fourteen essays covering a wide range of topics, from racist segregation and the life-threatening living conditions that Black Southerners had to endure in the wake of the Civil War that ended in 1865, to the history and power of African American forms of religion and music. Du Bois made use of the genre of the essay as an instrument of rigorous sociopolitical analysis and cultural-critical intervention.

This prompts a more general consideration of how the genre provides writers with a generic frame, as I call it, within which to address diverse social and cultural questions related to regimes of power and knowledge marked by Eurocentric, white-coded hegemony, including how an intellectual of African origin such as Du Bois could position himself in sociopolitical and epistemic orders on both sides of the Atlantic at the time. I suggest that it is necessary—when thinking about discourses of diversity, plurality, and inequality—to consider the means of a genre such as the essay that formalize such discourses.

The essay, as a form situated between scholarship, politics, and literature/

the arts, is a remarkable instrument with which not least marginalized subjects and groups could raise their voices and establish their speaking positions. Asking about the ways in which particular formalizations of knowledge circulate at a certain time and in a specific context raises a wide range of questions, among them issues concerning the positions from which essayists speak that allow them to make themselves publicly audible and endow what they say with validity. Acts of speaking about racism, among other matters, are obviously contingent on discursive and structural racialization—it makes a difference whether someone speaks from a subject position racialized and gendered as white or Black, male or female, for instance. Moreover, by addressing their audiences, speakers *establish* publics in the first place. In what ways do binary categories impact different subjects' access to genres and the way they use them? Who, for instance, wrote essays in the sixteenth century and who wrote a so-called slave narrative in the eighteenth or nineteenth? Historically speaking, Black men and women in the United States generally had to articulate themselves as enslaved subjects (objects/property) up to the nineteenth century. In order to speak about their enslavement, they had to authorize themselves through white editors. And to give another example: in sixteenth-century France, Michel de Montaigne spoke as a member of the French gentry and influenced the ways the notion of an autonomous subject could even be conceptualized in the first place. Such a concept was linked to a discursive agency that had exclusionary effects: how to interpret the world (i.e., read reality) was a privilege of well-educated men. Influential work on the essay has emphasized that the genre emerged from a 'patriarchal European/white origin' and originated in wealth and privileges (Joeres and Mittman, 12-13).

Montaigne used the form to question established knowledge but at the same time—and this introduces an ambivalence into speaking about the essay—he spoke from a relatively exclusive social position. Taking a huge leap in time and place, we can note that those who do not occupy socially privileged positions, as Montaigne did—groups marginalized on grounds of racist and heteronormative mechanisms of exclusion, for instance—went far to appropriate the essay as a form of cultural critique. A large number of essays were written during times of social change; the North American context in the late 1960s and 1970s serves as an example. These years saw a disproportionately high number of essay anthologies by African American writers who attacked existing power structures and formulated the goals of the civil rights and the Black Power movements. Du Bois's collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, laid ground for and

anticipated such dynamics in the early twentieth century. *The Souls of Black Folk* synthesized different strands of cultural traditions, creating an ambivalent, intense tissue of quotations beyond supposedly distinguishable cultures of knowledge.

Shaped by his observations of the realities in the U.S. around the turn of the century, Du Bois foreshadows in the 'Forethought' of *The Souls of Black Folk* that the twentieth century would be preoccupied with material and symbolic differentiations and forceful hierarchizations along what became the proverbial *color line* relevant to both Black and white readers:

Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. 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 1999 [1903], 5).

The Civil War between the Northern and Southern United States, which marks the formal end of enslavement, had only ended a generation earlier, and during the years of the so-called Reconstruction, racist power relations along a Black/white axis had been reconsolidated. Blacks were excluded from access to political life and educational opportunities and kept in place—outside the bounds of white civic society—through the terror of lynching. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court had declared racist segregation constitutional by passing the notorious 'separate-but-equal' verdict. At around the same time, the sciences passed a similar verdict aligned with a long Eurocentric history of reasoning, the supposition of the evolutionary underdevelopment of people of African descent and the putative progress of white civilization. After 1894, when Du Bois's funding was not extended to continue his doctoral studies at what was then Berlin's Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität (renamed Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in 1949), he returned to Harvard University, becoming the first Black scholar to receive a doctorate from the institution. His dissertation, published as *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade, 1638–1870*, focused on the complexity of the abolitionist struggle to end the trade of enslaved Africans in a transatlantic sphere. Looking back at those years half a century later, Du Bois reflected the social-Darwinist dogma of black inferiority he had been confronted with in a course entitled 'Politics' in Berlin (Gates and Oliver, xvii),

a truth he grudgingly accepted at the time because it counted as valid, state-of-the-art knowledge then:

I can never forget that morning in the class of the great Heinrich von Treitschke in Berlin. He was a big aggressive man. [...] 'Mulattoes,' he thundered, 'are inferior.' I almost felt his eyes boring into me, although probably he had not noticed me. 'Sie fühlen sich niedriger!' 'their actions show it,' he asserted. What contradiction could there be to that authoritative dictum? [...] I could accept evolution and the survival of the fittest, provided the interval between advanced and backward races was not made too impossible (Du Bois 2007 [1914], 50).³

³ For a discussion of Du Bois's ambivalent attitude toward imperial Germany, see Barkin.

This passage is taken from *Dusk of Dawn* from 1940, an autobiographical reflection subtitled *An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*. Featuring the genre label of 'essay', Du Bois here points to the link between personal life writing and discourse that is so characteristic of the essay genre. In the late 1890s the dominant discourse of race assumed a developmental difference, a discourse Du Bois would de-legitimize in *The Souls* and his other historical and sociological studies by contextualizing it not least in the history of European colonialism and the transatlantic enslavement regime.

In *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois connects economic, philosophical, and literary, as well as psychological and religious discourses. The form of the essay allows him to establish a kind of writing that combines scientific, literary, and autobiographical aspects. Du Bois thus shows that facts are always already framed in a narrative perspective. The essays that refer to sociological and historical facts are written in metaphorically condensed figurative language, establishing a coherence among them through recurrent metaphors: there is the metaphor of the *veil*, a cloth or cover that separates Blacks from whites, draws the distinctions of the *color line*, and affects the ways Black subjects perceive reality. Du Bois explicitly addresses his audience, proclaiming that he has left the white world to step behind the veil to make visible a world within it, its religion, its suffering, and the struggle of its people:

Leaving, then, the white world, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper

recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls' (Du Bois 1999 [1903], 5).

By articulating collective experiences of Black religious practice, suffering, and struggle, Du Bois points to a sense of Black solidarity. The much-cited concept of *double consciousness* is of central significance in this regard; it refers to an ambivalent realization of subjects who have to negotiate tensions that result from a conflict between external racist ascriptions and internal notions of self-identification that do not agree with those ascriptions.⁴ By also addressing a white audience for which Du Bois lifts the veil, he makes them accountable and responsible for the color line. They have to answer to that which Du Bois speaks to them about—to the questions that racism poses.

The Souls of Black Folk establishes references between divergent archives of knowledge with respect to both propositional content and form of expression: generally, each essay opens with excerpts from poetry written by a white American, European, or Persian poet⁵, as well as with notations of sorrow songs, African American spirituals that originated in the foundational years of enslavement in seventeenth-century North America. Du Bois dedicates the essay that concludes the collection to this musical genre: 'I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world' (Du Bois 1999 [1903], 156). Du Bois thus establishes a concept of Black Culture that encompasses different (racially coded) traditions, media, and genres, suggesting this might be a concept Black readers should claim for themselves.

As a spokesman for such a concept of Black Culture, Du Bois established himself as an authoritative Black male subject of humanistic education and culture—in German: *Bildung*. Around 1900 he represents and claims for his persona an elitist ideal of bourgeois education that stands in contrast to an

⁴ For scholarship on the concept of 'double consciousness' and its possible references to Hegel, Emerson and Herder, see Zamir.

⁵ Arthur Symons, James Russel Lowell, Lord Byron, Friedrich von Schiller, John Greenleaf Whittier, Omar Khayyám (transl. Edward FitzGerald), William Vaughn Moody, Elisabeth Barrett Browning, William Sharp aka Fiona McLeod (pseud.), Algernon Charles Swinburne, Alfred Tennyson; essay VII opens with Song of Solomon 1:5-6.

ideal of professional training for Blacks in the so-called 'industrial school', as advocated by Booker T. Washington (Du Bois 1999 [1903], 65). Du Bois rejected the latter ideal because he was convinced that it would forward a profit-oriented belief in economic progress that kept Blacks in check. In that sense, Du Bois's concept of culture is also shaped by an impulse critical of capitalism. That critique would become more pronounced throughout his lifetime. In 1961, at the age of 93, he became a member of the Communist Party of the United States of America. The same year, Du Bois, who had advocated for the idea of Pan-Africanism from the early twentieth century onwards, settled in Ghana shortly after the country's political independence in 1957.

How was Du Bois received by his white teachers and German audience? Unlike Heinrich von Treitschke, the social Darwinist and advocate of German colonialism who would not likely have recognized the legitimacy of his Black student's work, the sociologist Max Weber showed great interest in Du Bois: Weber suggested in 1905 that *The Souls of Black Folk* should be translated into German (the book was only published in German translation one hundred years later, in 2003). Weber asked Du Bois to write a sociological essay for the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, a journal Weber co-edited in Heidelberg. The essay appeared in German in 1906 as 'Die Negerfrage in den Vereinigten Staaten' ('the Negro Question in the United States') (Chandler, 194). Another half century later, in 1958, Du Bois's former German university, located then in East Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic, awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor of Economics. After German unification, the American Studies program at the *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* continues to honor Du Bois by naming a lecture series after him. And now there is the commemorative essay plaque. The unveiling ceremony of the essay plaque in honor of Du Bois shows two sides of one and the same coin of the recent acknowledgement of Du Bois in Germany: on the one hand, Du Bois gains recognition, on the other, there is a dynamic at work in which a dominantly white institution can celebrate (and appropriate) the perspective of a structurally marginalized subject. The representational politics of the memorial plaque and its ceremonial inauguration serves both Black self-empowerment and a white desire for self-aggrandizement. There seems no way out of this contradictory logic.

As I am standing in front of the essay plaque that honors Du Bois and see my image reflected in the polished metal of its steel plate, I cannot help but wonder about the complexities of this dilemma: how do the representational politics of the marker relate to the structural dimensions of knowledge production today?

⁶ Given this dynamic, the essay plaque in particular and the essay as form in general is also a subject of investigation in *Contradiction Studies* (cf. Junker and Warnke; Lossau, Schmidt-Brücken, and Warnke).

How does the latter contradict the former?⁶ The mirror effect of the plate is an effective artistic—essayistic—means that allows me, a white alumnus of this university, to ponder this dynamic. While Du Bois was never able to finish his studies at this university, it was in the *Senatssaal* in which the essay plaque was inaugurated that I attended the ceremony of my own graduation a century further on

to proceed and pursue PhD work in American Studies on the essay, including Du Bois's oeuvre. It is in the field of American Studies that such questions of accessibility with respect to demographic plurality in scenarios of inequality find resonance. And it is the faculty members and students of the American Studies program at this university who initiated this project of essayistic memorialization in the first place. The plaque results from long struggles over and demands for broadening access to prestigious institutions such as universities. Alina Weiermüller, co-founder of the Black Student Union at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, reminds the festive crowd at the unveiling ceremony of the exclusionary structures of racism that Black students continue to face in an institution such as Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Courageous students like Weiermüller make the university a place of lived debate. In her words:

If the university truly wants to do justice to W. E. B. Du Bois's legacy, it must go beyond gestures of representation and work towards creating a space where the color line becomes obsolete and diversity is not only welcomed but fostered into a community that is aware of its differences but united in its goal to use these differences to create a more just society (1:12:42–1:13:05.).

Just as Du Bois used the essay to take a critical position against established forms of knowledge, Jean-Ulrick Désert takes the memorial marker and turns it into an essay plaque. What is powerful about the plaque is that its mirrors reflect literally who is looking, but it also reflects figuratively on questions of power, for instance on who has access to symbolic and material resources. The essay as form, both in its printed and sculpted versions, provides an apt means for critiquing marginalization and exclusion. In the conclusion of my own dissertation, I drew on the critical authority of Theodor W. Adorno, who—in his famous 1958 essay titled 'The Essay as Form'—stresses that the essay's crucial function

is to formalize critique. As he asserts, the 'essay remains what it always was, the critical form *par excellence*' (66). I find this statement too ahistorical and apodictic, and argue instead that the essay is not a critical form in and of itself. Rather, it takes speakers such as Du Bois to turn it into a form of critique in the first place. If it were not for essayists such as him, the essay would not be the critical genre it is perceived to be. It is through acts of speaking and writing and designing and sculpting and curating that writers and artists constitute genres. Du Bois helped consolidate the notion of the essay as an instrument of reflection and critique. Désert does the same in a way that invites collaboration.

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KASK & Conservatorium - School of Arts Ghent

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