Journal of African American Studies (2021) 25:102–123
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-021-09520-y

ARTICLES

Prometheus as Racial Allegory: The Sociological Poetics of W. E. B. Du Bois

Matthew W. Hughey[1]

Accepted: 21 January 2021 / Published online: 22 February 2021

Abstract

W. E. B. Du Bois often appropriated and deployed the metaphor of "Prometheus," drawing from Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, Goethe's poem "Prometheus," and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Throughout Du Bois's career, he employed this figure in order for the reader to better understand the racialized social order in general and White supremacy in specific. In what follows, I cover the eighteenth and nineteenth century use of the Prometheus metaphor in regard to critiques of racism and slavery. I then establish how Du Bois stepped into this tradition to advance a multifaceted critique of global White supremacy that continues to resonate today. Precisely, Du Bois rendered this character in six patterned forms: (1) as an embodiment of de jure and de facto segregation; (2) as newly conscious Black people that would soon revolt against White supremacy; (3) as the paradoxical capture and harm of White people by their own design; (4) as the prejudice, discrimination, and racism born of White supremacist politics; (5) as the struggle of Black folks against White supremacy; and (6) a Black-centered spiritual worldview of eventual liberation. Together, these six deployments signal the early manifestations of both critical race theory and Afrofuturism—two modes of inquiry that help us to reconsider not only the material repercussions of racial inequality but the pathways and roadblocks toward racial utopia.

Keywords Afrofuturism · Critical race theory · W. W. B. Du Bois · Poetics · Prometheus · Racism

Introduction

W. E. B. Du Bois repeatedly appropriated and redeployed the varied metaphor of "Prometheus" from ancient Greek stories and eighteenth century German poetry to nineteenth century English novels. In using this polysemic character, Du Bois

✉ Matthew W. Hughey
matthew.hughey@uconn.edu

[1] Department of Sociology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

invited his readers to better understand the White supremacist functions and effects of US racial policies and politics. This article is far from the first to recognize the use of Promethean metaphors to unpack the realities of Black life (cf. Hickman, 2016, 2013; Moore, 2012). However, this investigation emphasizes novel attention to how Du Bois's deployment of the literary device of Prometheus was a reservoir deep in racial allegory to which he continually returned. Moreover, the Promethean poetics of Du Bois's sociological analysis stands as an early manifestation of both "Critical Race Theory" and "Afrofuturism." In specific, Du Bois continually drew upon the Prometheus character from wide-ranging sources: the ancient Greek poem of Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Prometheus," and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*.[1] These references, and the social contexts of their publication and reception, provide us enduring Du Boisian lessons about race and racism today.

Race, Slavery, and the Prometheian Allegory

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a host of writers mined the conventional Eurocentric classics for arguments against slavery. Gods, giants, mortals, and monsters are emmeshed in conflict over Herculean tasks to achieve freedom and enlightenment as well as Sisyphean struggles against loss and imprisonment. In that vein, drawing from the works of Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Goethe, the character of Prometheus—the titanic figure who stole fire from the gods for which he was eternally bound and tortured—figures prominently. For instance, Phillis Wheatley (circa 1753–1784) used Prometheus as an allusion to people chained and enslaved (cf. Shields & Lamore, 2011). In her 1773 poem "An Hymn to the Morning" Wheatley wrote, "Here, in this wooden house / I take the gift to us / from Prometheus— / For which he was Punish / Ed, and made a slave — / starved and chained." Responses to her poetry were mixed. From the US and Dr. Benjamin Rush (a signatory of the Declaration of Independence) to France and Voltaire (critic and philosopher), scholars cited Wheatley's poetry as evidence that people of African descent should be free, while Thomas Jefferson (1782:139) curtly wrote, "the compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism."

[1] Depictions of Prometheus have changed overtime, oscillating from lowly trickster, cultural hero, to monster. Many point to the origin of the Prometheus myth in Hesiod's (circa 750–650 BCE) poem *Theogony*. In Greek mythology, "Prometheus" is a titan who stole fire from the gods, was chained to a rock as punishment where an eagle plucked out his liver, which regenerated overnight for the eagle to return for eternity. Later Aeschylus (circa 525–455 BCE) used the myth in the play *Prometheus Bound*. Between 1772 and 1774, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote the poem "Prometheus" and paints the character as a god-hating and defiant character. And in 1818, Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* which appropriated the Greek character as a device to construct the characters of both Dr. Victor Frankenstein and the "creature." Importantly, Frankenstein ("The Modern Prometheus") would often be conflated with his "creature" in popular renderings. In both cases, Shelley's work stands as a metaphor for how creation, change, and how even well-meaning actions might have monstrous effects.

Additionally, barely a decade after the British Empire outlawed slavery in the Slave Trade Act of 1807, the British writer Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* in 1818. Her use of "Prometheus" in her subtitle draws a parallel between Victor Frankenstein's attempt to give humans what had prior belonged only to God: immortality. In her text, like Prometheus's theft of fire, life and death would no longer be controlled by the divine. And just like Prometheus's fate, both Frankenstein and his creature suffered daily torture and punishment. Yet, Shelley's reception in the USA was mixed. Pro-slavery readers of her *Modern Prometheus* "soon discerned an uncomfortably mixed message... Frankenstein was both creator and slave to his creation. Freeing slaves could be a calamity... Frankenstein's monster became the favored, frightening metaphor for both slaveholders and those who held to notions of black inferiority" (Moore, 2012).

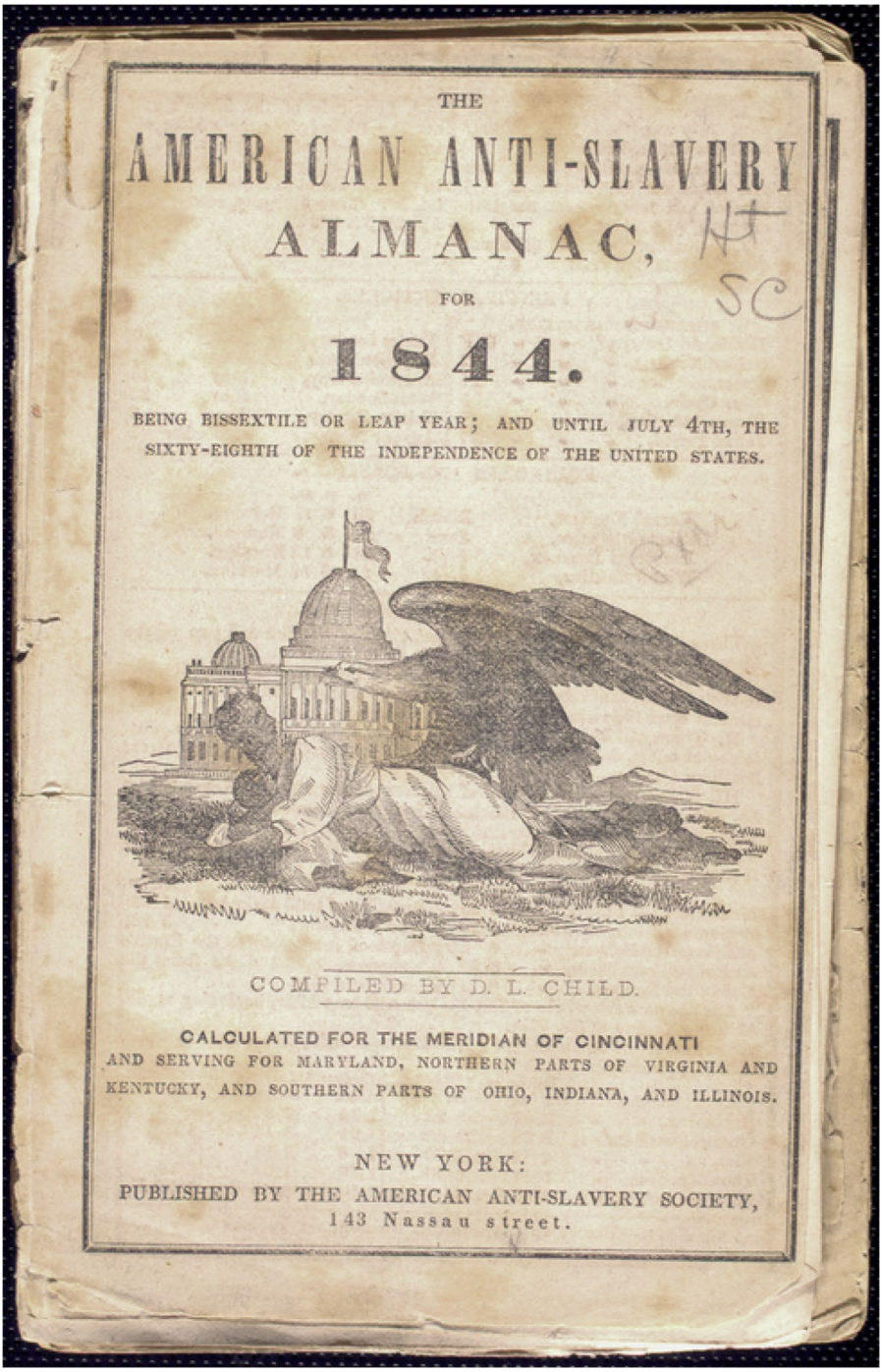
Coupled with Shelley's modern adaptation, the Prometheus stories of Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Goethe were continually employed in anti-slavery rhetoric during the remainder of the antebellum period. For example, the cover of the *American Antislavery Almanac* for 1844 offers a Promethean image of a slave mother, underneath the backdrop of US Capitol building and US flag, prone but shielding her baby from the onslaught of an aggressive bald eagle. And the second edition of Frederick Douglass's (1818–1895) biography, re-published in 1855, employed the metaphor as a description of Douglass's life; a "Promethean rebel against the cosmic order of slavery. *My Bondage and My Freedom* should be contextualized in a transatlantic tradition of Romantic titanism" (Hickman, 2013:338–39) (Fig. 1).

After the Civil War, Prometheus appeared less frequently in critiques of race relations. But, only 3 years removed from slavery in 1868—the same year as the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, and the writing of a radical constitution in "reconstructed" South Carolina—William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963) was born (Blight, 1994). In the aforementioned tradition, Du Bois would go on to combine the Promethean metaphor with exacting sociological analysis, and with styles that anticipated the modern perspectives of critical race theory and Afrofuturism. Under the American apartheid of the Black Codes and Jim Crow—what has been called "slavery by another name" (Blackmon, 2008)—Du Bois would use this artful metaphor to articulate the forms and functions of White supremacist politics and policies in the wake of the Civil War.

Du Bois's Promethean Vision: A Multifaced Metaphor

Du Bois grew up in Great Barrington, Massachusetts "by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills" (1920:5) where,

> ... this matter of color loomed significantly. My skin was darker than that of my schoolmates.... As I grew older,... the problem changed from a simple thing of color, to a broader, deeper matter of social condition: to millions of folk born of dark slaves, with the slave heritage in mind and home... to a whole problem of the uplift of the lowly who formed the darker races. (Du Bois, 2007 [1940]:2).


THE

AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY ALMANAC,

FOR

1844.

BEING BISSEXTILE OR LEAP YEAR; AND UNTIL JULY 4TH, THE SIXTY-EIGHTH OF THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE UNITED STATES.

COMPILED BY D. L. CHILD.

CALCULATED FOR THE MERIDIAN OF CINCINNATI AND SERVING FOR MARYLAND, NORTHERN PARTS OF VIRGINIA AND KENTUCKY, AND SOUTHERN PARTS OF OHIO, INDIANA, AND ILLINOIS.

NEW YORK:
PUBLISHED BY THE AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY,
143 Nassau street.

Fig. 1 The American Anti-Slavery Almanac Accessed: https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-753f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99

Indeed, Du Bois's trajectory saw him transform from a son of Massachusetts to a globally recognized scholar of race and inequality. His scholarship is marked by a perhaps unrivaled blend of idealistic poetry and scholarly pragmatism, whereby his analysis would place charts and figures next to pseudo-Biblicism and classic literary characters. Accordingly, the corpus of Du Bois's work shows his repeated return to figure of Prometheus, in both ancient and modern variants. From cartoons and poems to essays and letters, he oversaw in his role as editor of NAACP's magazine *The Crisis* (1910–1933), as well as in multiples articles by his own pen in *The Crisis*, in scholarly journals such as *The Independent*, and in his books such as *The Negro* (2007[1915]), *Darkwater* (1920), and *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), Prometheus walks his pages. Du Bois would render the Promethean character in six patterned forms: (1) an embodiment of de jure and de facto segregation; (2) as newly conscious Black people that would soon revolt against White supremacy; (3) the paradoxical capture and harm of White people by their own design; (4) the prejudice, discrimination, and racism born of White supremacist politics; (5) the struggle of Black folks against White supremacy, and (6) a Black-centered spiritual worldview of eventual liberation. Together, these six deployments signal the early manifestations of both critical race theory and Afrofuturism—two modes of inquiry that not only help us to reconsider the material repercussions of laws and government policies, but the pathways and political roadblocks toward racial utopia. Firstly, by re-imagining Prometheus in stories beyond their original forms, Du Bois employed counter story-telling. Secondly, his use of Black-centered speculative fiction enabled the illumination of shrouded social and political vistas.

In the former, Du Bois exploited various renderings of the Prometheus story to investigate the possibility of transforming the relationship between law, policy, and racial power. In prefiguring the 1980s critical race theory turn toward counter-story telling, Du Bois altered the standard interpretations and narratives of the Prometheian character. "By responding only to the standard story, Lisa Ikemoto (1997:136) argues in *Critical Race Feminism*, "we let it dominate the discourse." Accordingly, Du Bois re-told and changed the meanings of the character, often subverting a dominant interpretation against itself. Through this metaphor, Du Bois pursued both a sociologically grounded and imaginative route for using and pressuring law and policy to achieve racial emancipation and anti-subordination. Such counter-story telling critically illuminates concepts, ideas, and experiences before unseen, thus demonstrating embryonic elements of critical race theory long before the approach was so coined.

In the latter, his use of Prometheus allows the reader to re-imagine the past, present, and future of African Americans in order to remove the Black diasporic narrative from White supremacist assumptions about political, economic, and social possibilities. That is, Du Bois speculated *qua* theorized alternative racial realities that could be imagined only by couching the real-life dynamics of racism, racial inequality, and racial identity within the context of the supernatural and other-worldly. By explicitly addressing what was commonly understood as fictional and wildly fantastical, Du Bois implicitly theorized a fact-based, pragmatic roadmap for achieving racial equality. Importantly, Du Bois's quasi-speculative fiction establishes Blackness not as a mark of shame but a source of pride, and establishes

views of the future as attainable spaces in which Black folk can thrive. This is an aesthetic yet political choice, that for Du Bois, had significant effects, as noted by his 1926 advocacy that, "All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda" (Du Bois, 1926:295).

Prometheus and the Color Line

As Du Bois began to formally address racial segregation, what he commonly called the "color-line," he continually returned to the metaphor of Prometheus as a potent device able to unpack the causes and effects of White supremacy, especially as it pertained to human freedom. The oft-quoted phrase from *The Souls of Black Folk*—"the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (1903:vii)—appears in the "Forethought," the etymology of which is "Prometheus"[2] (Smith, 1849). Hence, the Promethean beginning of *Souls* (1903) stakes a claim that what follows will be, like the fire stolen from the gods, illuminating: "I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses" (Du Bois, 1903:vii).

The question of the color-line, of how segregation controlled and limited people's lives, was at the heart of sociology itself. In an unpublished essay, composed near in time to the publication of *Souls* (1903), Du Bois wrote that "Sociology then, is the Science that seeks the limits of Chance in human conduct" (c1905:9). Du Bois saw the "color-line" as primary in the "limits of Chance." Accordingly, Du Bois occasionally identified the ultimate limitations of chance—that of racial segregation—through the "Modern Prometheus" *qua* Frankenstein and his creature (as the ugly embodiment of segregation itself). As he unpacked the effects of segregation he would employ the classic Greek Promethean tale in order to draw a parallel (whereby Prometheus was the tortured figure who suffered under the repeated daily violence of the Gods).

For example, as editor of *The Crisis*, Du Bois reprinted a December 1914 letter sent to *The New York Times*. That letter anthropomorphized prejudice and segregation through a common misreading of Shelley's "Modern Prometheus" whereby "Frankenstein" is depicted as his creation. The letter thus read:

> Easy to create, it is hard to destroy. Sinister of wit, it is weak of wisdom. Its preceptions are false. It sees in darkness; it is blind in the light. It nurtures lies and rejects truth. Breeding hatred, it blasts sympathy. It rules those who give it life. It is a conjured Frankenstein, dominating millions of men. It sits beside the gates of life and takes toll of all that pass.... It feeds fear and poisons hope. It lives by the law of the dead.... It drains the potions brewed by witches of the brain. It is a thing of charms and amulets. (Straus, 1914:81).

[2] "Prometheus" is derived from the Greek *pro* (before) and *manthano* (learn). Plato contrasted Prometheus with his somewhat naïve brother Epimetheus (which means "afterthought") (cf. Hansen 2020:159).

The use of "Frankenstein" as the monster of segregation, along with the caché of originally appearing in *The New York Times*, would prove attractive to Du Bois. By reprinting the letter as an article entitled "Prejudice"—and placing it after an article debating a supposed "lack of creditable scientific work by mulattoes" (Cattell, 1914:81) and preceding an article on the attempt to institute racial segregation within the American Bar Association (Storey, 1914:82)—Du Bois underscored the significance of "dominating" segregation on the micro-level of inter-racial identity, sexuality, and "miscegenation" as well as on the macro-level of a prominent national organization charged with defending justice and the law.

In another instance of Du Bois's use of Prometheus, he oversaw *The Crisis*'s 1926 publication of a cartoon entitled "The Black Prometheus Bound" by M. Crump (1926:92) (see Fig. 2). With echoes of the 1844 *American Antislavery Almanac* image, the legal and political (both federal and state) practices of segregation and violence are embodied in the classic Promethean story: a bald eagle protects vultures (labeled as various southern states) to pick from the guts of a Black figure prone on the ground strewn with chains. Du Bois was keen to deliver an undeniable message in the underneath caption that referenced both his own ("The Souls of Black Folk brought down from heaven!") and Booker T. Washington's supposedly antithetical philosophy ("Up from Slavery to that fire of freedom").[3] Du Bois's message is unmistakable; he addressed how Black people (as the titan Prometheus) were commonly seen as thieves of White folks' (as the gods) property as well as their economic opportunities and social status in the USA. That is, for many Whites, Blackness existed as theft and Whiteness was legally protected (cf. Harris, 1993). Moreover through the inclusion of his and Washington's books, Du Bois drives home the point that White supremacist allegations make no distinction between a supposedly "accommodationist" or "radical" stance on the part of Black folks. Legal accusation in the era of Jim Crow was no respecter of ideology, even as "Truth" attempts to shed light on the unwarranted affair.

Modern US segregation is stubbornly persistent (Andrews et al., 2017; Fahle, et al., 2020). Contemporary racial segregation exists as an entrenched and legally buttressed structure similar to how Du Bois first analyzed it, particularly within his first major sociological endeavor, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). Du Bois wrote that the purpose of *The Philadelphia Negro* was to "present the results of an inquiry... into the condition of the forty thousand or more people of Negro blood now living in the city of Philadelphia" and to "ascertain something of the geographical distribution of this race, their occupations and daily life, their homes, their organizations, and above all, their relation to their million white fellow-citizens" (Du Bois, 1996 [1899]:1). The modern field of critical race theory owes to this Du Boisian focus. In particular, critical race theory concentrates on how the state maintains segregation beyond the legal Jim Crow era through a refusal to address Black interests and often articulates this dynamic through counter-storytelling and literary metaphors—a method personified by Du Bois. Accordingly, in "Four Du Boisian Contributions to Critical Race Theory," John Shuford argues:

[3] A reference to both Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and Booker T. Washington's autobiography, *Up From Slavery* (1901).

Fig. 2 The Black Prometheus Bound Accessed: http://exhibitions.nypl.org/biblion/outsiders/outsiders/image/0-nypl-660

> Racial injustice permeates the nation's cultural fabric, pervades American institutions, and remains salient during periods of progress and backlash alike. Perhaps the most remarkable and most overlooked dynamic in this enduring legacy is that government has *never* [emphasis in original] engaged African Americans as a group to speak about what sort of redress they sought or what would help them heal still-open wounds from America's original sin. (Shuford, 2001:320).

Put plainly, "The writings of W.E.B. Du Bois are Critical Race Theory in and of themselves" (Avshalom-Smith, 2020).

Frankenstein, the Creature, and Black Revolt

Du Bois continued to use his editorial perch at *The Crisis* to launch poignant political attacks using Promethean metaphors. For instance, in an open letter published in a 1921 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois chastised President Warren Harding's appeal to "sedulously avoid" the "development of group and class organizations in this country," especially African American organizations. Given in a 1921 speech in Birmingham, Alabama, President Harding (a recent recruit of the Ku Klux Klan) positively cited Lothrop Stoddard's eugenicist tract *The Rising Tide of Color*, argued that Black people should simply have "race purity and race pride" that would result in "natural segregations," and insisted Black people should not organize or attempt to share in the resources allocated to Whites (Harding, 1921:8). For Harding, a Black social movement seeking either integration or equality would only divide "class against class and group against group have fortunately found little to reward their efforts" (Harding, 1921:9). The common conflation of "Frankenstein" with his monstrous creation again manifested in Du Bois prose and his reply did not suffer the hypocrisy of asking Black people to refrain from organizing when White terrorism, White vigilantism, and the long arm of the law was used to disproportionally surveil, imprison, and murder Black people:

> Is the President calling himself a demagogue? Does he not realize the logical contradictions of his thought? Can he not see his failure to recognize the Universal in the Particular, the menace of all group exclusiveness and segregation in the forced segregation of American Negroes?.... can he not realize the vast, the awful implications of this appeal to the *Frankenstein of race exclusiveness* [my emphasis]—that hateful thing which has murdered peace and culture and nations? Does he not hear the answer that leaps to our lips? For when Warren Harding or any white man comes to teach Negroes pride of race, we answer that our pride is our business and not theirs, and a thing they would better fear rather than evoke... (Du Bois, 1921:55).

Du Bois provided both a warning and a lesson grounded in both Promethean myth and sociological materialism. His prose echoes that of Shelley's monster's counsel to his creator who, in not-so-subtle fashion, flips the master/slave relationship: "Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your

master; — obey!" (Shelley, 1982 [1818]:165). To limit the life chances of Black folks and to then ask Black folks to have pride in their limitations is to invite both a critical consciousness of their condition and, based on that newfound consciousness, to revolt.

This metaphor spoke directly to the conditions of Du Bois's day. Writing only 2 years removed from the both the "Red Summer" of 1919 and the First Pan-African Congress in Paris (which Du Bois attended), this was a context in which there was both an epidemic of lynchings as White supremacy manifested in clandestine, paramilitary forces that brought war to people of color in the name of peace and an increasing awareness of the tenuous colonial hold of European nations through racist imperialism. Du Bois offered the figure of the "Modern Prometheus" as both the creator of racial segregation (Frankenstein) as well as the embodiment of the lasting struggle against it (the Creature) (cf. Fertik & Hanses, 2019:8).

Du Bois's use of the "Modern Prometheus" metaphor made the clear case for the maintenance of White supremacy as an unworkable paradox; the "limits of Chance in human conduct" (Du Bois c1905:9) were so imbalanced that appeal to the monstrous creature of "race exclusiveness" would only turn upon the "white man" that evokes it (Du Bois, 1921:55). In this sense, Du Bois conjures the specter of a figure that would be monstrous to White segregationist eyes. This metaphor is particularly subversive, as notions of Black people as unchecked and ravenous people continue to be invoked to rationalize racist social control and punitive measures. Here Du Bois exploits the racist connections between Blackness and monstrosity and flips them on their head, or perhaps more appropriately sets them aright on both feet.[4] The uses of the (modern) Prometheus, stand as poignant examples of proto-Afrofuturism. As Ruth Mayer (2000:556) wrote, "speculations and fantasies move ceaselessly back and forth through time and space, between cultural traditions and geographic time zones." Hence, in grounding a vision of imminent Black rebellion and liberation in classic and canonized stories drawn from both Greek antiquity and early nineteenth Century British literature, Du Bois presents a history of the future. Such a move disrupts the socio-political flow of time and how we perceive what was and what will be. Blackness becomes no longer an artifact of past narratives where it is absent, invisible, or pathological. Rather, it is an oracle of a future neither marked by racial antagonism or color-blind equality, but by the recognition of the humanity of Blackness.

Du Bois's Afrofuturist view of the "Modern Prometheus" now finds resonance in current Black cultural production. For example, Victor LaValle revised H. P. Lovecraft's story "The Horror of Red Hook" in his novella *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016) and introduced Shelley's monster as a Black man who revolts against White racism: "... finding myself unsympathized with, [I] wished to... spread havoc and destruction around me." When a White interlocutor states, "You're a monster, then," Black Tom replies, "I was made one." In 2017, LaValle returned to Shelley's creature in his publication of *Destroyer* (a six-issue, limited-series comic) in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. In *Destroyer*, Shelley's creature emerges nearly 200 years later in 2017 to destroy White-dominated society. The creature finds a willing partner in the last-living descendant of Victor Frankenstein

[4] I borrow this turn of phrase from Marx's redeployment of Hegelian dialectics.

who, in LaValle's rendition, is an African-American woman scientist named Josephine Baker whose 12-year old son was just killed by the police. The Du Boisian use of the "modern Prometheus" as an allegory for Black revolt continues to resurrect itself.

The Janus-Faced White Prometheus: "Bound by His Own Binding"

Not content to explore Prometheus as related to the color-line or Black rebellion, Du Bois also placed the Promethean metaphor in the service of critiquing White racial identity. In both his original essay "The Souls of White Folk" first published in *The Independent* (1910:342) and then rewritten and published as a chapter in *Darkwater* (1920), Du Bois addresses the demigod directly:

> Why will this Soul of White Folk, — this modern Prometheus, — hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a fable of the past? I hear his mighty cry reverberating through the world, "I am white!" Well and good, O Prometheus, divine thief! Is not the world wide enough for two colors, for many little shinings of the sun? Why, then, devour your own vitals if I answer even as proudly, "I am black!" (1920:52).

As a double-entendré, Du Bois first employs the "modern Prometheus" as a reference to both White people *qua* thieves caught in their own machinations via the classic Greek fable. Second, and through Dr. Frankenstein's creation of his slowly non-conformist creature. Du Bois references White people as architects of a monstrous system of White supremacy that socializes generation upon generation of White folks to see themselves as superior to People of Color whom they believe should be deferential if not obedient. Together, Du Bois advances a critique of White people's inability to escape their own self-mythologization (cf. Hickman, 2016:19).

In foreshadowing the Greek tale of Prometheus's Divine rebellion at the end of "The Souls of White Folk," Du Bois called Europe's White colonialist project "heaven-defying audacity" (1920:43). Scholars now largely concur with Du Bois's framing, such as Martin Bernal's concession that Prometheus is "the epitome of Europe" (Bernal, 1987:220) and Jared Hickman's (2016:18) contention in *Black Prometheus*:

> Just as the Prometheus myth had served ancient Greeks and Christian allegorists as a theodicy—an explanation for the evils human beings suffered at the hands of the gods—so for Du Bois it functions here as a quintessentially modern, racial theodicy: contemporary evil, in the forms of slavery, racism, and colonialism, is traceable to the Promethean overreaching of European modernity.

The protection of White modernity in the USA has its origins in slave patrols and extends its genealogy to modern policing and the criminal justice system. Because of the reliance on slave labor, slave rebellions were though a direct threat to White economic livelihood. Slave patrols, the earliest antecedents to modern US policing, were first formed in 1704 in South Carolina. And while these patrols only technically ended in 1865, they were socially continued in the extralegal tactics of White vigilantism, such as the Red Shirts and the Ku Klux Klan (Hadden, 2001:203). As modern policing took shape,

it relied on the practices and ideologies of racial control. "The history of police work... grows out of this early fascination, by white patrollers, with what African American slaves were doing. Most law enforcement was, by definition, White patrolmen watching, catching, or beating black slaves" (Hadden, 2001:4). Du Bois saw this connection clearly. He wrote in 1919 that "the Police and Public Opinion back the mob and the least resistance on the part of the innocent black victim is nearly always construed as a lawless attack on society and government" (Du Bois, 1919:231). Moreover, Du Bois frequently advocated application of scholarly insight. For instance, he was a signatory to the 1945 document *We Charge Genocide: The Historic Petition to the United Nations for Relief from a Crime of the United States Government Against the Negro People*, which relied on the 1948 U.N. definition of "genocide" (created after the Jewish Holocaust) to indict US lynchings and police killings of African Americans (We Charge Genocide, 1951).[5]

Viewed through Du Bois's use of a Promethean allegory, it is readily apparent how the protection of the Promethean thievery of slave labor via the police and criminal justice system have captured "the soul of white folk," too. As Du Bois wrote, the White soul "hang[s] bound by his own binding" (Du Bois, 1920:52). While the police and prison system were designed to protect White families from a Black menace supposed primed to take property, economic opportunity, and social status, today's police state is increasingly brought to White people's doorstep, especially White women from lower socio-economic classes ("The Sentencing Project" 2019; "Prisoners Series" 2019). While, by 2017, the imprisonment rate for Black women (92 per 100,000) was twice the rate of imprisonment for White women (49 per 100,000) ("The Sentencing Project" 2019; "Prisoners Series" 2019), the rate of imprisonment for Black women has declined since 2000, while the rate of imprisonment for White and Hispanic women has increased: between 2000 and 2017, the rate of imprisonment in state and federal prison declined 55% for Black women while the rate of imprisonment for White women rose by 44% ("The Sentencing Project" 2019; "Prisoners Series" 2019). Overall, there remains a highly significant racial disparity in U.S. jails and prisons that advantages Whites. Yet, since 2005, the Black incarceration rate has declined by 20% nationally and 30% in urban areas, while the White local jail incarceration rate for Whites has slowly increased (Vera Institute of Justice, 2018). Whiteness is becoming increasingly "bound by his own binding" (Du Bois, 1920:52); increasingly threatened by the monstrous creature of its own creation.

The Janus-Faced White Prometheus: "Mob Rule"

Even with the rise of White incarceration rates, the impact of White supremacy on men (and particularly women) of color and their families is, on average, much more substantial. Deepening inequities and societal divides structure life pathways toward contact with the criminal justice system even for those not directly impacted. While the White Prometheus drawn by Du Bois's pen has fallen into the trap of his own design,

[5] In the same spirit as Du Bois, in 2016 the group "We Charge Genocide" emerged as a grassroots, inter-generational effort—explicitly drawing from the 1945 document—to draw attention to police violence and the underlying causes of unequal relationships between marginalized racial communities and the state (We Charge Genocide, 2016).

Du Bois never once forgets the monstrous intent of the trap itself. "Du Bois's white Prometheus is not the hero who defies the gods on behalf of helpless men and women. He is a monstrous figure" (Balfour, 2010:548). For example, 44% of Black women and 32% of Black men (compared with 12% of White women and 6% of White men have a family member imprisoned (Lee et al., 2015:7). Approximately 25% of US women have at least one family member in prison (Lee et al., 2015:7). Today, Black Americans are more likely than Whites to be arrested, more likely to be convicted, and more likely to experience lengthy prison sentences for the same crimes. Overall Black adults are 5.9 times more likely to be incarcerated than White adults (Bureau of Justice, 2018).

Racialized extra-legal actions have long been sanctioned by the state, from lynching to the modern day resurgence of White racialism.[6] Consider that under Du Bois's editorship of *The Crisis*, he published in 1927 a cartoon entitled "Mob-Rule" by Albert Alex Smith (see Fig. 3). Smith's work depicted the figure of a dead Black woman hovered over by Frankenstein's creature (symbolizing the mob) as a White soldier/officer flees the scene. In that same issue, Du Bois noted 34 lynchings had occurred in 1926 (nearly twice as many from 1925) (Du Bois, 1927:180).

If Whiteness is, as critical race theorist Cheryl Harris (1999:1707, 1725) wrote, "a form of property that, historically and presently acknowledged and protected in American law... The law's construction of whiteness defined and affirmed critical aspects of identity... of property (what legal entitlements arise from that status)," then Whiteness shall continue, in the absence of those formal laws, to operate and advocate for the control of resources to the exclusion of people of color. Consider the current manifestation of the White mob rule, from public demonstrations of White racialist groups, the rise of White-based hate crime, White propaganda, and the storming of the U.S. Capitol in 2021. The number of White racialist rallies and conferences has increased from 76 in 2017, 91 in 2018, and 97 in 2019 (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). In Europe alone, White racialist violence has grown by 43% over 2016–2018 (DeSimone, 2019), while in the USA in 2016, there were 6121 recorded hate crimes, 7175 recorded hate crimes in 2017 (the highest total since 2008), and 7036 recorded hate crimes in 2018 (over this time, approximately 60% of these hate crimes were motived by race/ethnicity/ancestry, with the majority committed by Whites against people of color (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019). And over 2017 and 2018 there was a 182% increase in distribution of White racialist propaganda (421 instances in 2017 and 1187 in 2018 (Anti-Defamation League, 2019). And in 2017, 9% of people (22 million US residents) said they were either "strongly" or "somewhat" agreeable that neo–Nazi or White supremacist rallies should be held (Clement & Nakamura, 2017).

Black Prometheus: Eternal Struggle

Du Bois again re-deployed the Promethean metaphor to represent the omnipresent struggle against capture. If Prometheus is chained, the parallelism to Black enslavement, the Black codes, and Jim Crow is rather obvious. In a "*Herrenvolk* Democracy" (van den Burgh, 1967) which considers African Americans thieves who rebel against the gods, the

[6] An umbrella term for White supremacist, White nationalist, and White segregationist groups.

"MOB RULE," BY ALBERT SMITH. HONORABLE MENTION, 1926

Fig. 3 Mob Rule Accessed: https://books.google.com/books?id=XloEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

Modern Prometheus story turns an existing discourse of Black atrocity upon its creators. The story can be a rigid defense of the so-called "monsters" themselves. Hence, in *Darkwater*, Du Bois wrote, "If I cry amid this roar of elemental forces, must my cry be in vain, because it is but a cry,—a small and human cry amid Promethean gloom?" (Du Bois, 1920:52). Fifteen years later in *Black Reconstruction in America* Du Bois doubled-down on this imagery in his warning to remember:

> How civil war in the South began again — indeed had never ceased; and how black Prometheus bound to the Rock of Ages by hate, hurt and humiliation, has his vitals eaten out as they grow, yet lives and fights.... Reconstruction was a determined effort to reduce black labor as nearly as possible to a condition of unlimited exploitation and build a new class of capitalists on this foundation. (1935:670).

And again as editor of *The Crisis*, Du Bois promoted many a writer that used the Black Prometheus imagery. A poem by Theodore Anthony Stanford (1934:180) entitled "Symphony Incarnadine" contained the line "I lie, a new Prometheus, bound by inflexible cords of bitterness."

Even after Du Bois departed as editor of *The Crisis* in 1933, the Promethean metaphor endured in its pages. A 1935 poem entitled "Revolt" by Mark Fisher was published in *The Crisis* and stated, "Some day I shall revolt against the chains... Unyoke the fetters that have held me bound/As fast as those that stayed Prometheus" (Fisher, 1935:111). And again in 1935, an unsigned editorial encouraging Black people in New York to run for Congress because such a leader could bring "unemployment relief, better-equipped hospitals, new and renovated schools, nurseries, playgrounds, low cost housing and a multitude of other things. The leader who can carry his district.... [is] a veritable Prometheus unshackled" ("Seek Congressman" 1935:274).

Du Bois also employed Shelley's "Modern Prometheus" character as both a warning to White America and a Black call to arms over racial segregation and White supremacist violence. As a harbinger of critical race theory's use of counter-storytelling to bring attention to material conditions, Du Bois picked characters and stories that already lent toward a racialized reading. While the chained torture of Prometheus by the gods in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, and Goethe's "Prometheus" remains an easy parallel to concepts of racialized struggle, Du Bois's use of Shelley's "Modern Prometheus" also invites a racial correspondence that Du Bois would not have missed. In specific, near the end of Shelley's (1818) book, a near mutiny occurs aboard a Royal Navy ship. Du Bois would likely recognize such a maritime dispute as a racialized conflict of a Black crew against the White ship captain. That is, the British Royal Navy possessed a well-known reputation for its "multiracial" crews composed from Irish, Scottish, English, West Indian, and African people. In fact, at the time of Shelley's writing in 1818, "roughly one-quarter of the Royal Navy was black" (Linebaugh & Rediker, 2000:132, 311). Moreover, the Royal Navy was very well known—begun just a decade prior to Shelley's publication—for its role in anti-slavery policing on the Atlantic Ocean. As historian David McNally (2011:257) explains, British navy vessels "transgressed the enclosures among nationalities and ethnoracial groups, acquiring a heightened grotesquerie in its violations of the emerging categories of race." With such racial connotations in Shelley's work already present, Du Bois counter-storytelling of the "Modern Prometheus" character is catapulted by the already racialized motif.

Counter-storytelling emerges early in Du Bois's tenure at *The Crisis.* In early 1913, Woodrow Wilson doubled down on "separate but equal" policies, even allowing his cabinet members to segregate their federal departments. Responding in

an essay entitled "The Strength of Segregation," Du Bois made clear that White people would bitterly regret support for, and apathy toward, segregation:

> ... at the present rate we will have in this country a mass of people of colored blood acting together like one great fist for their own ends, with secret understanding with pitiless efficiency and with resources for defense which will make their freedom incapable of attack from without.... Those who advise "race pride" and "self-reliance" *do not realize the Frankenstein which they are evoking* [my emphasis]... (Du Bois, 1913:84).

Du Bois then immediately shifted tack to blend this elegiac Frankenstein "monster" of Black rebellion created by White segregation and terrorism with sociological acumen. He outlined how attempts at social control through segregation and violence would soon reach their economic and social breaking points:

> The physical intimidation of lynching cannot be kept up; the economic intimidation of exclusion from work cannot, with the present organization of Negro industry, be kept up after ten years. Continual social insult is powerless against those who refuse to be insulted. After this—what? What can America do against a mass of people who move through their world but are not of it and stand as one unshaken group in their battle? Nothing. The yell of the segregationist is the last scream of beaten prejudice. (Du Bois, 1913:84).

Du Bois's predictions were largely correct. While stark disadvantages remained throughout the twentieth century, lynching rates began to fall, Black workers (concentrated in the rural south in agricultural employment) began to enter better blue-collar jobs and the white-collar sector, and Black homeownership rose. Yet, none of these transpired peacefully, but were hard won battles borne of the Black-led Civil Rights Movement which was often predicated upon the very "race pride" and "self-reliance" which Du Bois prophesied was becoming an "actual organization.... [that] is progressing by leaps and bounds. It needs now but to be knit together into one great unity. This can be done—it is being done" (Du Bois, 1913:84).

Moreover, Du Bois's divination of the brewing "strength of segregation" that would boil over into the Civil Rights Movement also prefigures Critical Race Theorist Derrick Bell's critique of the desegregation litigation strategy of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund for its failure to promote quality of education ahead of school racial integration (Tate, 1997). While a liberal approach to the law tends to treat racism as irrational and aberrational—as well as any kind of race-based logic or action as destructive to the social contract—the proto-Critical Race Theory of Du Bois embraces race-conscious struggle against racism as normal and necessary acts, rather than as atypical ruptures in otherwise equal social relations.

Black Prometheus and the Cosmology of Freedom

Closely related to Promethean struggle, is the worldview—or perhaps a cosmology—begot by a resistance to White supremacy. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois argues that the origin of White-controlled modernity rests in racial

slavery. Du Bois engages in a retelling of modernity's, if not the industrial revolution's, origin story in which Black people are centered as the indispensable and unique factors that enabled the creation of American wealth. In using Prometheus (an original entity that pre-dates even the gods of Olympus), to voice a Black perspective, Du Bois transforms Black people into the wielders of Promethean wisdom and omniscience over Whiteness. In Du Bois's telling, a "Black Prometheus" can predict the words and deeds of Whites before even Whites know them: Of the "many souls that toss and whirl and pass" as Du Bois sits "[h]igh in the tower... above the loud complaining of the human sea," Du Bois (1920:30) notes that of "the Souls of White Folk":

> I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of know their thoughts and they know that I know. This knowledge now embarrassed, now furious.

Du Bois reworks the Biblical Genesis story of creation and constructs Black people as simultaneously divinely-endowed with insight into "The Souls of White Folk" and as quintessentially human in *The Souls of Black Folk* by writing that Black people are "bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil" (1903:5).

This "second-sight" of the Black Prometheus, or this "double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois, 1903:5) is juxtaposed against the dominant ideology that "whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!" (Du Bois, 1920:30). Such counter-story telling undermines the authoritative perspective of dominant White discourse and weakens claims to ostensibly "objective" voices of Whiteness. Moreover, it grounds a perspective on Whiteness so that Whites can better engage in self-examination (cf. Kincheloe, 1998). To deny the relevance and power of this move is to render the mainstream discussion of legal and policy decision of disproportionate racial effect as simply pertaining to "those people" (people of color) that leaves Whiteness both invisibilized and uninvolved. In this sense, Du Bois frames Whiteness as a faulty claim to ownership and divinity while demonstrating the insight gleaned from a standpoint on the underside of society.

When Du Bois again references the cosmology of Black Prometheus (this time in relation to Goethe), he writes of Black religious life in *The Negro* (1915:74):

> Religion is life, and fetish an expression of the practical recognition of dominant forces in which the Negro lives. To him all the world is spirit. Miss Kingsley says, "If you want, for example, to understand the position of man in nature according to fetish, there is, as far as I know, no clearer statement of it made than is made by Goethe in his superb 'Prometheus'." Fetish is a severely logical way of accounting for the world in terms of good and malignant spirits."

Here Du Bois cites Kingsley's interpretation that the investment of religious value in objects (making them "sacred" or "fetishes") serves the basis of African indigenous social structures. However, Du Bois then goes beyond Kingsley's interpretation in which the good and bad of life are filtered through a belief that the gods have willed

these circumstances. He instead advocates an Afrofuturist pragmatism he saw in Goethe's use of Prometheus.[7] First, Du Bois was said to have charged the Fisk University community to "immerse themselves in Goethe in order to speed 'the rise of the Negro people'" (1893:6). Second, Du Bois was perhaps attracted to Goethe's rendition of the Greek myth because Prometheus denies Zeus any ability to keep him in chains or "slavery," decries the gods as poorer than any other thing "under the sun" and instead threatens to create a new "race" ("Geschlecht") as insolently free as himself: "Here sit I, forming mortals after my image; A race resembling me, To suffer, to weep, To enjoy, to be glad, And thee to scorn, As I!" (Dole, 1839:210; cf. Hickman, 2016:20). Together, Du Bois's mobilizes Goethe's version to promote a Black Prometheus that refuses to accept the will of the gods for his lot in life and instead tears down the false gods of Whiteness and promotes self-determination: the Black Prometheus metaphor allows for simultaneously ridicule of White supremacy and deeper-understanding of Black resistance as both rooted in Black religious faith, but not wholly captured by orthodoxy and knowledge in the interests of White supremacy (cf. Rath, 1997). Du Bois's use of Goethe's Prometheus prefigures Critical Race Theory's emphasis on knowledge and power in that he particularly challenges "deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002:23).

While the sociology of Du Bois's day (and much of it in our day) often described the world under the guise of "objective" analysis, such social scientific research upholds and rationalizes racialized deficiency notions about people of color. Du Bois's early counter-storytelling via the Black Prometheus character offered, and continues to invite, a subversive and Afrofuturist sociology grounded in the experiences, perspectives, and knowledge of Black folk.

Conclusion

Du Bois's six deployments of Prometheus indicate an early use of what we now call "critical race theory" and "Afrofuturism" as relates to counter-storytelling and Black-centered speculative fiction, respectively. These modes of analysis, reconsidered today, urge us to employ them to better see how many of the historical contexts of Du Bois's day are repeating themselves and how to intercede in their reproduction. Given the realities of racial inequality, and the place of policy and law to lessen or worsen its effect on our lives, this is not purely an academic matter, but one relevant in our everyday lives.

Given Du Bois's prescience on these matters, it is fitting that so many equated Du Bois with the titan of old. John Henrik Clarke, Esther Jackson, Ernest Kaiser, and J. H. O'Dell, edited the book *Black Titan: W E. B. Du Bois* (1970). David Blight (1994:327–28) wrote that W. E. B. Du Bois was a "black Titan who stole the languages of heaven and wielded them against almost every pretense of the color line," and David Levering Lewis, the

[7] "Fetishism" was a term, often used derogatively, to describe African indigenous peoples supposedly arbitrary and ultimately erroneous valuation of material objects, especially as pertained to religious ceremony or magical power. Here Du Bois cites from Mary Kingsley's book *Travels in West Africa* (1899). Kingsley (1862–1900) was a well-known English ethnography whose work was influential in shaping European perceptions of Africa, colonialism, and indigenous religion.

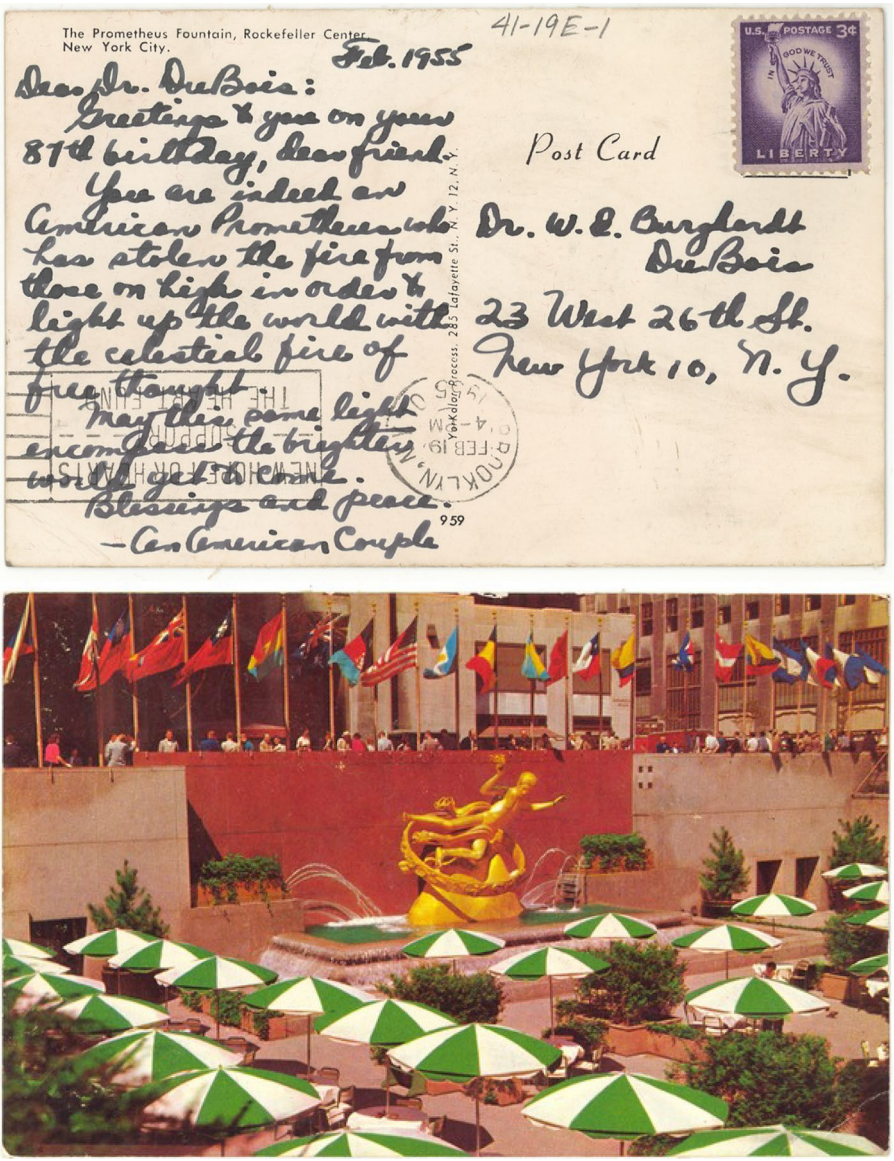


Fig. 4 Postcard Accessed: Postcard from unidentified correspondent to W. E. B. Du Bois, February 1955. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

chief biography of Du Bois, said that his life was altogether "Promethean" (2009:4). And perhaps most aptly, in a postcard from an unidentified writer to Du Bois in February of 1955, "An American couple" compares Du Bois to the New York City Prometheus Fountain on the postcard and expresses the hope that "this same light encompass the bright world yet to come" (Postcard, 1955) (Fig. 4).

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