Du Bois and Dark, Wild Hope in an Age of Environmental and Political Catastrophe

Mark S. Cladis
Brown University, USA
mark_cladis@brown.edu

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Abstract

The question of hope and its relation to despair looms all around us—in private conversation and in public discourse. In Environmental Humanities and the Literary Arts, one finds a pervasive pessimism as these fields grapple with such catastrophes as climate change and white nationalism. In this article, I investigate and critically appropriate W. E. B. Du Bois' notion of a dark, wild hope, suggesting that this particular form of hope is needful as we confront various environmental and political crises. I begin the article by exploring a form of hope that sustained Du Bois in the face of persistent racism—including environmental racism. Next, I argue that Du Bois' dark, wild hope can help us think about forms of hope appropriate for our own time. Du Bois' response to the catastrophes that he faced is instructive as we attempt to respond robustly to our current catastrophes. Resilience and vulnerability, resistance and uncertainty, transformation and constraints—these aspects of the human drama informed Du Bois' dark, wild hope. And this hope—not sunny and Pollyannaish, but rather rooted in suffering, trial, and grief—is a powerful resource for us today.

Keywords: Environmental humanities, W.E.B. Du Bois, climate change, environmental justice, hope.

Resumen

La cuestión de la esperanza y su relación con la desesperación pululan constantemente a nuestro alrededor, tanto en conversaciones privadas como en el discurso público. En las humanidades ambientales y los estudios literarios—disciplinas que lidian con catástrofes como el cambio climático o el nacionalismo blanco—es fácil toparse con un pesimismo generalizado. En este artículo, investigo y hago uso crítico de la noción de W. E. B. Du Bois de una oscura y salvaje esperanza para sugerir que esta forma precisa de esperanza resulta necesaria al confrontar las diversas crisis políticas y medioambientales que nos asolan. Comienzo explorando la forma de esperanza que Du Bois mantuvo para hacer frente al racismo persistente, incluyendo el racismo medioambiental. A continuación, sostengo que la idea de una esperanza oscura y salvaje de Du Bois puede ayudarnos a pensar sobre formas de esperanza apropiadas para nuestra época. La respuesta de Du Bois a las catástrofes a las que él se enfrentó resulta especialmente instructiva al intentar responder, con firmeza, a nuestras catástrofes actuales. Adaptación y vulnerabilidad, resistencia e incertidumbre, transformación y restricciones son aspectos del drama humano que nutrieron la esperanza oscura y salvaje de Du Bois. Y esta esperanza, que no es cándida ni ligera, sino que encuentra sus raíces en el sufrimiento, el dolor y las tribulaciones, se dibuja como un poderoso recurso para nuestro presente.

Palabras clave: Humanidades ambientales, W.E.B. Du Bois, cambio climático, justicia medioambiental, esperanza.

The Question of Hope

The question of hope and its relation to despair looms all around us—in private conversation and in public discourse. In Environmental Humanities and the Literary Arts, one finds a pervasive pessimism as these fields grapple with such catastrophes as climate change and white nationalism. In this article, I investigate and critically appropriate W. E. B. Du Bois' notion of a dark, wild hope, suggesting that this particular form of hope is needful as we confront various environmental and political crises.[1] I begin the article by exploring a form of hope that sustained Du Bois in the face of persistent racism—including environmental racism. Next, I argue that Du Bois' dark, wild hope can help us think about forms of hope appropriate for our own time. Du Bois' response to the catastrophes that he faced is instructive as we attempt to respond robustly to our current catastrophes. Resilience and vulnerability, resistance and uncertainty, transformation and constraints—these aspects of the human drama informed Du Bois' dark, wild hope. And this hope—not sunny and Pollyannaish, but rather rooted in suffering, trial, and grief—is a powerful resource for us today.

Du Bois (1868-1963) was an African-American sociologist, historian, novelist, poet, and civil rights activist. In different ways at different times, Du Bois wielded aesthetics, sociology, history, economics, and philosophy to bear on such subjects as religion, race, gender, class, justice, and the environment.[2] A particular, radical aesthetic ethos permeates much of his diverse work, so much so that he could be deemed a poet-social scientist. Although Du Bois was a North American author, his aesthetic efforts to present the plight of black North Americans were presented on a large, global canvas that sought to capture the intimate connection between oppression in America and in other postcolonial empires. Moreover, Du Bois increasingly turned to socialism, Marxist critiques of capitalism, and global perspectives in order to better comprehend the U.S.'s complicity in the international dimensions of slavery, colonialism, and economic oppression.

A Dark, Wild Hope

Du Bois presented the wild as a place and a condition of resistance and hopeful transformation (Cladis 844–45). This wildness and its concomitant hope are seen, for example, in his account of the Sorrow Songs. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois claimed that "the *wild* sweet melodies of the Negro slave"—"the soul of the Sorrow

[1] In this article, I employ the first personal plural, "we," to refer broadly to academics engaged in the environmental humanities and academic activism. I recognize that, due to the power differentials of race, class, gender, sexuality, and geographic location, people will respond differently to notions of hope and despair. I do not pretend to offer a universal argument that is convincing or edifying to all people everywhere.

[2] Elsewhere I have argued that Du Bois was a nature writer and one of North America's first environmental justice authors (Cladis). For others who place Du Bois in the tradition of ecocriticism, see Beilfuss, Hicks, and Smith (Smith, 2005 has been especially influential on my work on Du Bois and the wild).

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Songs"—are distinctive African-American contributions to the "American Republic" (13-14; emphasis added). What makes the Sorrow Songs *wild*? The Sorrow Songs were nurtured by the African forests and were then intensified by the slave's experience of an oppression that was delivered by cruel public laws and brutal individual hands. The wild permeated a slave-culture that, against all odds, resisted practices of oppression and thereby produced the Sorrow Songs—songs that expressed a hope forged in loss, struggle, and suffering. This wildness—not only a place but also a quality of being and a process of becoming—resists those oppressive practices and institutions that would attempt to subdue it and shackle its sources of hope.

Du Bois linked hope to the wild, and he linked the wild to the swamp. For example, in his first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), Du Bois depicted a wild swamp in Alabama as a prospect and strength embodied by a people and place, enabling an African-American community to become liberated from local and global white, capitalistic and racist oppression. The swamp was to supply wild (non-conventional) cash, wild (anti-market) food crops, and a wild (non-conformist) culture. Spiritual resilience, political resistance, and economic transformation flowed from the swamp—as did the main character in the novel, Zora: a "child of the swamp" and its "music… of a wildness," *a genius of the wild* who understood that the liberation of her people and the land depended on the creation of a just community built on and in the wild.

Du Bois' earlier work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, has its own swamp which also responds to questions of hope and despair. The Chickasawhatchee swamp of Georgia is a land and a culture, an ecosystem and an archive of history, a site of oppression and of hope. In Wordsworthian fashion, Du Bois presented the swamp as a storied landscape: inscribed in the land are stories of tears and oppression as well as resistance and hope. In contrast to the southern white culture (a distinctive form of settler colonialism), Du Bois depicted the swamp not as the antithesis to purity or as that which needs to be dominated, but rather as a place of beauty, wild resistance, and survival.

Du Bois never downplayed the profound, intertwined racist and environmental oppression of people, place, and land. Nonetheless, he forged and discovered sources of hope, and often in unexpected places. For example, the wild swamp in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* is not only a place but also a hopeful process of transformation that challenges racist and exploitive capitalist institutions and practices. The struggle against persistent racism (among other oppressive structures and conventions) is a feature of the wild, and such struggle is a practice of hope, specifically a form of hope that is rooted in and colored by an agonizing present and by an uncertain future (and by the relation between such agony and uncertainty).

So, although I am arguing for hope, it is important to note that *dark, wild* hope does not deny but rather acknowledges and bears witness to the multiple forms of oppression and risk that various world populations currently face. The hope that I find in Du Bois is not optimism (a cheerful denial of cheerless facts) nor is it faith in inevitable progress. It

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is, rather, hope as a social practice that is informed by suffering and loss, by uncertainty and vulnerability.[3]

In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, the struggle against white oppression is bloody, costly, and uncertain. As Zora and her community bravely create their cooperative farm, white mobs destroy their crops, burn their buildings, and lynch two community members ("two red and awful things" hang from a tree; 233). In its detailed, palpable aesthetic discourse, the language of the novel delivers the horror of black strife and suffering, but also a hope, stained in blood, that sustains resilience and resistance. In the last lines of the novel, Zora proposes marriage to Bles (her friend and lover) as they stand ready to keep up "the great fight" in the presence of the wild swamp and the beauty of the moon: "Zora stood very still and lifted up her eyes. *The swamp was living, vibrant, tremulous*. There where the first long note of night lay shot with burning crimson, burst in sudden radiance the wide beauty of the moon. There pulsed a glory in the air" (238; emphasis added). In the poetics of the novel, Du Bois expressed a hope forged in fire.

Dark hope is also found in "Of the Passing of the First Born," that poignant chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* where Du Bois gave a moving account—a threnody—of the death of his 18-month-old child. No white doctor would tend to the child sick with diphtheria. The chapter reads like a song of mourning. "Unto you a child is born"—thus begins the chapter like a trumpet proclaiming the birth of a biblical prophet. But what does this birth bring, of what does it speak—of hope or doom? It's a difficult question, and Du Bois did not provide a simple answer. Back and forth, Du Bois winded and moved between past, present, and future sorrows as well as past, present, and future sources of hope. From this complex motion across temporal geographies of suffering and hope, of injustice and expectation, there emerged "*a hope not hopeless but unhopeful*" (141; emphasis added).

Unhopeful hope? Yes, for even as Du Bois and his wife traveled down the street to bury their child, the white city folks glanced at them and uttered the n-word. Du Bois' unhopeful hope has no room for that paradigmatic narrative of the promise of the Child as the Future—the future replication of the present. Here, Du Bois' Afro-pessimism joins Edelman's queer negativity and its manifesto, "No Future," "No Child" (Edelman 4). And yet Du Bois was not content to stop at "unhopeful hope" alone. His meditation on the death of his son demanded of him something more intricate, something more difficult. It demanded of him "*a hope not hopeless*." And so at the conclusion of his threnody, he exclaimed, "surely this is not the end. *Surely there shall yet dawn some mighty morning to lift the Veil and set the prisoned free*…" (144; emphasis added).

In this remarkable passage, Du Bois maintained a "hope not hopeless" for a "mighty morning," a *transformed* future. His dead child is not Edelman's "the Child," embodying a reproduction of the present in the future (Edelman 10).[4] Rather, Du Bois' child stands—or *dies*—as a condemnation of the present and as a forged-by-fire, wild hope for a different

[3] For a brilliant discussion on Du Bois and the topic of hope, see Winters 31-55.

[4] For example, Lee Edelman writes, "…the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust" (10).

and more just future. His earlier reflection in the chapter on past and present suffering and striving signaled that a transformed future requires a present-minded focus on current injustice, but also that such a focus requires a form of hope, "*a hope not hopeless but unhopeful*." Without denying the immense suffering caused by persistent racism in America, indeed, in acknowledging it, Du Bois articulated a hope in and for the current struggle and work.

The Work and Practice of Hope Today

Du Bois' response to the catastrophes that *he* faced is instructive as we attempt to respond robustly to *our* current catastrophes. What, then, can we learn from Du Bois' dark, wild hope—which emerged in the context of the racism of his day—to help us reflect on hope in the context of today's white nationalism as well as climate change and other environmental disasters?

The first, most fundamental lesson is this: while it is tempting to dismiss hope as naïve or even delusional, lack of hope is a dangerous scenario. The absence of hope must be understood as a profound debilitation, lest we slip into moral paralysis. Rather than thinking of hope as a naïve or unrealistic stance, Du Bois would have us conceive of hope as a way to open our eyes to the reality around us. As Teresa Shewry has noted, "hope involves orientation of the critical eye to what in the present world might otherwise escape notice; such an orientation allows a relationship with an uncertain, promising future" (5).[5] Hope, then, does not deflect our sight from unpleasant realities but rather brings critical attention and active engagement to such painful realities for the sake of imagining and working toward a more promising future. Hope is a *realistic, practical* stance when faced with such crises as climate change and white nationalism.

But what kind of hope do we need? The hope that we find in Du Bois does not deny suffering and loss but includes them. Climate change, for example, has already brought tremendous suffering and loss. It is not a future event alone. Nor is it merely a recent one. While we must not lose sight of what is distinctive about the catastrophic challenges to life today, we do need to register that communities have confronted similar catastrophes in the past. When Native American communities were forcibly removed from one region of the U.S. to another, they experienced catastrophic climate change and displacement (Whyte 224–242). Loss, then, haunts our past and present—and it *haunts our future*. Du Bois certainly understood this. But lest we become paralyzed over such loss, Du Bois would recommend to us a dark, wild hope that remembers loss for the sake of both mourning and morning—for both grief and transformative change.

If hope is a sunny emotion, it will not serve our needs. Much good work in affect studies has investigated and critiqued various forms of hope and optimism. In *Cruel Optimism*, for example, Lauren Berlant describes how attachment to hope in the American Dream can sabotage public and private flourishing, rendering one blind to systems of

[5] Shewry is glossing Tsing 269.

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domination (1, 23-24). Bladow and Ladino, in their edited volume, *Affective Ecocriticism*, write of the importance of "recuperating bad feelings" and note that "straightforward emotions like hope are of dubious efficacy" (11, 2). And yet, in a reparative mode, Berlant also writes of "having adventures and being in the impasse together, waiting for the other shoe to drop, and also, allowing for some healing and resting, waiting for it not to drop" (266).[6] And Bladow and Ladino claim that "both climate and social justice activists require altruistic emotions as a foundation for action" (3). We need, then, not only to recuperate "bad feelings" but to honor and cultivate a wide, complex set of affective responses. As Catriona Sandilands wisely states, "A monolithic diet of fear starves more complex feelings. It does not touch the difficult heart of what so many people are currently experiencing in their everyday lives in these climate changing times: grief, rage, hope, wonder, perplexity, even love" (8). My claim is that Du Bois' "dark, wild hope" belongs precisely to a rich catalogue of complex affects that are needed for these difficult, challenging times.[7]

If hope is understood as a practice, as a form of work and engagement, then it can contribute to resilience and resistance. Dark, wild hope is a vocation. It looks at reality with clear-eyed vision, and it announces *wildly*: we have work to do, transformation may yet come. This wild vocation honors those who have suffered and struggled in the past, and works for those who dwell in the present and who will dwell in the future (the human and more-than-human of our future earth). As Du Bois stated in "Criteria of Negro Art," this wild vocation "*mourns the past and dreams a splendid future*" (995; emphasis added). Vulnerability, resilience, and uncertainty are intertwined in Du Bois' notion of a dark, wild hope, and this hope is vital for us today.

This wild hope—ever so practical and realistic—is present in our world today. Macarena Gómez-Barris complains that our conception of the "no future" Anthropocene fails to register the resilience and resistance of indigenous populations dwelling in extractive zones so oppressive that they are already living in the so-called "no future" (4). Others, too, such as J. K. Gibson-Graham reveal pockets of resistance within capitalistic societies that oppose extractive economies and politics (53-78). Gómez-Barris and Gibson-Graham surface the submerged work of hope. As Catherine Keller has argued, resistance requires that we embrace uncertainty and risk, and reimagine our ways of being with the human and more-than-human (266-83). Such risky reimagining requires a wild hope. Without it, we cannot take even the first step.

The metaphor of the step is a not a simple one. Hopeful work does step forward, but not into a preordained progress. Rather, hopeful work steps into the present struggle, ever seeking to understand those past ways that led to it, ever seeking to imagine and work toward a more just future—a justice that includes the more-than-human world. Hopeful work resists the problematic futurism that queer theorists such as Edelman and

[6] For this "reparative" interpretation, see Glavey 51.

[7] Among other needful affective modes and sensibilities, I would include such "bad" ones as those found in Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism*, namely, irony, satire, ambivalence, irreverence, camp, anxiety, suspicion, humor, playfulness, parody, absurdism, perversity, and glee (Seymour 4, 36, 149, 158-59).

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Ensor have so ably critiqued (Edelman 1-30; Ensor 41-62). Taking steps forward does not deny present harms or seek to save the unjust status-quo from a future catastrophe. Stepping forward, the work of hope embraces Ensor's environmentalism, namely, an environmentalism that takes "its cues from queer theory…seeking less to save the planet from a single, cataclysmic end than to embrace the ethical and practical demands posed by the multiple endings that condition our experience of the everyday" (Ensor 55). The work of hope does not ask us to choose between being attentive to current *or* future suffering and injustice. Rather, the work of hope acknowledges the connections between the two, including mutual vulnerability and uncertainty. Indeed, *vulnerability and uncertainty are the context and argument* for dark, wild hope.

There is no doubt that it is tempting to resign to extractive and racist capitalism, lament it, and assume alternatives are impossible. But the more difficult, radical act is to imagine a desirable and just future**.** Imagining future dystopias can also be a radical, powerful act, but the normative force of such dystopias is to highlight possible future injustice and suffering in *the hope* that they might be mitigated.[8] In either case, then, the hopeful, wild act is always rooted in present, everyday reality—with all its suffering, and, yes, with all its beauty. This is the work and practice of the dark, wild hope that Du Bois manifested in his life, and which now recommends itself to all who would work like him in the age of social injustice and climate change.

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[8] Caleb Murray's dissertation project, *Feeling a Failing Climate: Tragedy, Affect, and Religious Storytelling in Literature and Film*, powerfully explores the normative dimensions of dystopian films and novels. It has also greatly informed my own thinking on the relation between hope and despair in the face of climate change and other crises.

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