

Between General Strike and Dissensus: W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*

Political Theory

1–29

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DOI: 10.1177/00905917231154425

journals.sagepub.com/home/ptx

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Abstract

For W. E. B. Du Bois, the tragedy of Reconstruction was that its achievements were overthrown and erased from collective memory. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* corrects this, claiming enslaved people who fled plantations self-emancipated, thus enacting a “general strike against the slave system.” Yet Du Bois contravenes his general strike thesis when he quotes without rebuttal several Union officials who spoke of the formerly enslaved in degrading, nonagentive terms. I turn to Jacques Rancière's politics of dissensus to understand why Du Bois quoted such racist views without comment. In Rancière, political actors “stage a scene” of equality that is shared, even among parties in conflict. Recording conflicting perceptions of the strike, highlighting divisions that persist despite momentary advances of equality, Du Bois's reading of the general strike is dissensual in Rancière's sense, I argue. But Du Bois also offers a valuable corrective to Rancière, whose account of the first plebeian secession erases a different general strike from memory. Rancière reads the Aventine as an event of confrontation unconnected to the collective action that Du Bois summoned from the archive and named “general strike.”

Keywords

aesthetics of politics, refusal, Jacques Rancière, abolition democracy, self-emancipation

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. . . in the clash much truth emerges.

W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*

The tragedy of Reconstruction, for W. E. B. Du Bois, was that the “finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions” was never allowed to appear. The revolutionary achievements of Reconstruction were not only overthrown by mob and capital, they were also erased from collective memory. “We discern it in no part of our labor movement; no part of our industrial triumph; no part of our religious experience” (Du Bois 2014, 595). Americans are thus “blind and led by the blind”—unaware of the sources and remedies of the political problems they face (Du Bois 2014, 595). Du Bois writes *Black Reconstruction in America* to rectify this, retelling the history of Reconstruction “with especial reference to the efforts and experiences of the Negroes themselves” (Du Bois 2014, xliii). He recovers the triumph of enslaved people’s self-emancipation and postwar political activity. His most spectacular historiographical innovation was his general strike thesis: that enslaved people fled plantations during the Civil War, not as dispersed fugitives but as a collective “general strike against the slave system.”

Du Bois (2014) knew this triumph would only appear to readers who already “believe that the Negro in America and in general is an average and ordinary human being” (p. xliii). But “even his most sympathetic readers” resisted his general strike thesis (Phulwani 2018, 288). The Marxist economist Abram Harris (1935) claimed in a review of *Black Reconstruction* that while “no unbiased historian would deny” the important role played by “the Negro soldiers and laborers” in the Civil War, the idea “that they won the war by a general strike, or by any other means, cannot be established scientifically” (p. 367). Political scientist Ralph Bunche (1935), in his review of *Black Reconstruction*, similarly downgrades the agency of enslaved people: “the slaves were lacking in social and class consciousness, and, finding an opportunity to escape from an onerous existence, simply took it” (p. 570).

The rise of Black studies since the 1960s precipitated a new appreciation for *Black Reconstruction* and its general strike thesis (Mount 2015; Roediger 2015). But appreciative readers of Du Bois faced another problem: the fourth chapter of Du Bois’s book, “The General Strike,” features lengthy quotes from Union officials and reporters that contradicted Du Bois’s view of enslaved people as political actors who could thoughtfully and collectively undertake to realize a shared goal. Why does Du Bois present, without

rebuttal, the very views he sets out to overcome? To understand why, I turn to the work of Jacques Rancière, particularly his concept of dissensus.

Drawing on Rancière's account of politics as aesthetics, I argue for reading Du Bois—who wrote novels and poems, supported the arts, and theorized the relationship between art and politics—as a thinker of the aesthetics of politics.¹ Nikhil Pal Singh (2005) observes that Du Bois's revisionist history “reject[s] the separation of literature and truth” in “an effort to dramatize a social movement of black people into the new symbolic space of democratic history-making” (p. 93). But Du Bois does not just replace the old symbols of Black passivity with new, active, and empowering ones. He retains traces of the conventional, anti-Black views of Union officials in his account of the general strike. I propose that rather than just retell the history of emancipation from the perspective of the enslaved, Du Bois stages it in the form of what Rancière calls “dissensus,” depicting and not resolving the clash between the perspective of the formerly enslaved and that of Union officers and their allies.² Published nearly six decades after Reconstruction's demise, Du Bois's work highlighted the still-unsettled character of Black freedom and equality in America.

Where Rancière helps us understand Du Bois's puzzling decision to air racist views in *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois puts welcome pressure on Rancière's foregrounding of the incipient or irruptive nature of dissensus.³ Du Bois provides a valuable counter to Rancière's account of dissensus, which locates equality in a singular *confrontation* with a hierarchical order. Du Bois's scene of dissensus, by contrast, unfolds in the context of a *longue-durée* general strike consisting of clandestine organization and capacity building.

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1. The phrase “aesthetics of politics” appears in Rancière (2006, 9) and refers to politics as a conflict over what can be perceived (seen, heard, or felt); see Panagia (2009, 2016). Scholars working to illuminate the aesthetics of politics in the tradition of Black political thought include Lawrie Balfour (2010, 2021); P.J. Brendese (2014); Jason Frank (2009, 2021); Adom Getachew (2021); Melvin Rogers (2014); and Michelle Rose (2020).
 2. I focus here not primarily on conflicts between enslaved people and the Confederacy but on the more subtle struggle between the enslaved and their putative allies in the Union.
 3. In debates regarding the ordinary and extraordinary in democratic politics, Jason Frank (2015) argues that Rancière should be understood as a thinker not only of the extraordinary, irruptive event but also of the everyday. In this essay, I highlight a distinction between events of confrontation and practices of conjugation (irreducible to the everyday), and I find in Du Bois a valuable corrective to Rancière.

I begin by reviewing *Black Reconstruction*'s general strike thesis, drawing attention to the strange presence, in Chapter Four, "The General Strike," of derogatory white perspectives on Black fugitives from slavery. The various efforts of Du Bois scholars to account for these perspectives are inadequate, I argue, and I propose turning instead for illumination to Rancière and the politics of dissensus—in particular, to Rancière's dissensus reading of the Aventine Secession. I return to the general strike chapter of *Black Reconstruction* to advance a new dissensual reading of it but then note that some of Du Bois's critics approach his work dissensually too. When Black feminist critics argue that Du Bois's general strike thesis is masculinist, they also issue an egalitarian challenge that stages a clash between worlds. Approaching Du Bois and his critics as practitioners of political aesthetics highlights their unique contributions to democratic theory. Neither put their faith in the transformative capacity of the people to see themselves (as Frank (2021) puts it) nor in a Rancièrian clash that unwittingly grants equality to unequal parties. Moreover, reluctant to merely replace negative stereotypes with a more positive account of Black agency, Du Bois turned to aesthetics to advance equality by memorializing, staging, and reframing hindrances to it.

Black Reconstruction: The General Strike and Collective Self-Emancipation

Black Reconstruction reinterprets published accounts of the Civil War and Reconstruction under the assumption that "the Negro in America and in general is an average and ordinary human being" rather than "a distinctly inferior creation" (Du Bois 2014, xliii). Du Bois challenges historians who maligned Reconstruction as a grave mistake and who argued that empowering Black Americans with civil and political rights introduced corruption and mismanagement into local, state, and federal government.⁴ Du Bois shows that Black Americans were not corrupt public officials, not passive beneficiaries of Northern whites' good will, and not dupes of "carpetbaggers'" predatory schemes. But he goes further. Beyond debunking such falsehoods, he shows that, with their contributions to Reconstruction, Black Americans pushed

4. David Levering Lewis (2014) says the immediate impetus for Du Bois's writing of *Black Reconstruction* was the publication of Claude Bowers's *The Tragic Era*, which was, to Du Bois's Black contemporaries, "tantamount to a lynching in prose" (p. xxviii). Notably, when Du Bois referred to the overturning of Reconstruction as a "tragedy that beggared the Greek," he took Bowers's key term and put it to new, subversive use.

American democracy in radically egalitarian directions.⁵ Black citizens fought for land redistribution, greater labor rights, and universal public education.

Du Bois wrote *Black Reconstruction* in the first half of the 1930s, during his first sustained encounter with the work of Karl Marx and a falling out with NAACP leadership. Du Bois resigned from the NAACP after he, one of the organization's founders, publicly aired his doubts about its pursuit of equal rights via litigation aimed at achieving integration. His turn to Marx was in part motivated by Du Bois's sense of the limits of the NAACP strategy. He was also skeptical of his younger colleagues in the struggle, who had embraced Marxism and who accused Du Bois of "racial chauvinism" for rejecting the notion that the class struggle would unify the working class across racial divisions.⁶ *Black Reconstruction* offers a materialist analysis that positions Black workers at the forefront of revolution without subordinating their strategies and tactics to those of white workers (Robinson 2000).

Du Bois sees enslaved workers as central both to capitalist production and to politics, arguing that when they fled the plantations during the Civil War they staged a general strike, and the strike decided the outcome of the Civil War.⁷ The centrality of the enslaved to the Civil War was dismissed by leaders of the Union's war effort and, later, by historians. However, for Du Bois, "the Negro occupied the center of the stage because of very simple physical reasons: the war was in the South and in the South were" millions of enslaved Black people and hundreds of thousands of "free Negroes" (Du Bois 2014, 45). Black people's centrality was not merely physical but also etiological: fugitivity and popular resistance to slavery caused the Civil War to erupt in the first place, according to Du Bois.⁸ Though open, armed revolts among

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5. Balfour (2011) elaborates the radically democratic dimensions of Du Bois's thought, as does his biographer Marable (2005).
 6. In a piece for *The Crisis*, Du Bois (1931) notes that white labor has throughout history "been the Black man's enemy, his oppressor, his red murderer." He continues, "Whatever ideals white labor today strives for in America, it would surrender nearly every one before it would recognize a Negro as a man" (p. 315). See Lewis (2000) and Singh (2005).
 7. Historians still debate whether the slavery of the antebellum south could be said to be capitalistic, given that chattel slaves did not primarily sell their labor power as a commodity on the market. Du Bois notes that slavery was less efficient than wage labor, a point echoed by contemporary Marxist historian Post (2011). Despite such differences, Du Bois's acknowledgment of enslaved people as workers shows that they, like the industrial proletariat, had power by virtue of their role in the productive process.
 8. Du Bois (1985) writes in a contemporaneous manuscript that "the Underground Railroad led indirectly to the Civil War," because the loss of capital led to an intensification of antagonisms between North and South.

enslaved people in the United States had “dwindled” in the nineteenth century, the decades leading to the Civil War featured “grave losses to the capital invested in black workers” who “sought freedom by running away from slavery” (Du Bois 2014, 9). Successful fugitives directly harmed planters and also contributed to a growing “leadership for the mass of the black workers” (Du Bois 2014, 9). After the outbreak of the war, enslaved people saw the opportunity to bring down the system of slavery by withdrawing their labor from the plantation and offering it to the army fighting against the Confederacy (Du Bois 2014, 46).⁹

On the Union side, those leading the war did not immediately recognize this opportunity, nor did they conceive of the struggle as being against slavery. As late as 1862, Du Bois (2014) writes, commanding officers in the Union army refused to let fugitive slaves join their ranks, and “most of them permitted masters to come and remove slaves found within the lines” (p. 48). Yet as the army pushed further into Confederate territory, enslaved people saw increased opportunities to quit the plantation and risked it. They forced a change in Union policy that shifted to emancipating enslaved people in the rebel states and inviting them to enlist. Du Bois insists that enslaved people did not assume from the beginning that the Union army would be friendly to their cause. “What the Negro did was to wait, look and listen to try to see where his interest lay. There was no use in seeking refuge in an army which was not an army of freedom; and there was no sense in revolting against armed masters who were conquering the world” (Du Bois 2014, 46). Because enslaved people could not count on Union support for emancipation and did not yet know who would win in battle, the flight from the plantation and into the army was considered and not initially widespread. But wherever Northern victories occurred, Du Bois writes, enslaved people escaped to follow the army.

From the perspective of the government, which had not “planned or fore[seen] this eventuality,” this appeared as a “stampede of fugitive slaves,” not as a collective act of self-emancipation. It was only after confronting what at first appeared to be a nuisance, the masses of fugitives, that the Union army recognized “a truth which ought to have been recognized from the very beginning: The Southern worker, black and white, held the key to the war; and of the two groups, the black worker raising food and raw materials held

9. The suspension of work is not opposed to undertaking different work. Bonnie Honig (2021) calls this the “intensification” of work in a politics of refusal (p. 18). Later in the article, I discuss Glymph (2013), Hartman (2016), Hunter (1997), and Weinbaum (2013), who recover the many forms that work refusal took under slavery.

an even more strategic place than the white” (Du Bois 2014, 50). *Black Reconstruction* records these two divergent perspectives. Union officials and the enslaved begin from these different premises. They do not come to consensus, but they do meet at a shared goal of slave emancipation.

Once it became clear that the Northern army was not only winning but was now also accepting the fugitives among their ranks, “the movement became a general strike against the slave system on the part of all who could find the opportunity” (Du Bois 2014, 51). Planters had “always faced the negative attitude of the general strike,” because enslaved people who could not freely quit work instead refused work through fugitivity (Du Bois 2014, 31). The early practice of fugitivity served as a “safety valve that kept down the chance of insurrection in the South” (Du Bois 2014, 50). But, in the context of war, slavery’s escapees were a powerful collective force: they put pressure on the Union army, forcing a change in policy that created conditions for fugitivity to intensify and spread. If antebellum fugitivity was a general strike whose generality lay in its “mundane” frequency (Hughes 2020, 192), the forced shift in Union policy made individual work refusals a refusal of the slave system *in general*. Enslaved people remade fugitivity, turning it from the slave system’s “safety valve” into a general strike that would be its Achilles’ heel (Du Bois 2014, 50).

Du Bois had long argued that fugitivity was crucial to the outcome of the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves, but his initial accounts focused on the role of Union officials. In the *Souls of Black Folk*, he writes of the tens of thousands leaving the plantation: “The stream of fugitives swelled to a flood, and anxious army officers kept inquiring: ‘What must be done with slaves, arriving almost daily? . . .’” (Du Bois 1999, 19). The image of a flood depicts fugitive enslaved people as a natural phenomenon not directed by conscious intent. White army officers, by contrast, appear as the agents of political decision. Over the course of his oeuvre, however, Du Bois’s position changes, and he increasingly “treat[s] fugitive slaves as agents of democratization,” Vijay Phulwani notes, “thereby moving beyond his purely naturalistic depiction in *Souls* and toward the idea of the general strike in *Black Reconstruction*” (Phulwani 2018, 284; Rampersad 1990, 236). For Phulwani (2018), Du Bois’s understanding of the goals of Black politics shifted too: rather than aim for incorporation into “a state that refused to acknowledge” Black Americans, Du Bois turned to autonomous practices like Black consumer cooperatives (p. 280). Moreover, Cedric Robinson (2000) argues, for Du Bois such autonomy was inflected by class divisions among Black people in America. Whereas Du Bois had in his earlier work championed a political program led by a “Talented Tenth” of the Black elite, *Black Reconstruction* precipitated his recognition of “the capacities of the Black masses to take steps decisive to their own liberation” (Robinson 2000, 198). On this view,

Du Bois's conceptualization of the general strike in *Black Reconstruction* marks the apogee of his transformation while highlighting continuities between pre-Civil War resistances and wartime work refusals as a testament to the autonomy of Black popular politics.¹⁰

Although this approach helps track what is radical and innovative about the general strike thesis, it does not note the prominent role given by Du Bois to Union officials in *Black Reconstruction*, which seems at odds with what Phulwani and others see as Du Bois's increasingly agentifying narrative. Du Bois includes, without comment, long quotations from Union officers and allies that differ markedly from his own perspective and that of the enslaved.¹¹ Some quotes are from Union officers who support emancipation but portray fugitive slaves as helpless and in need of the army's care. For example, after Du Bois notes that "the movement [of fugitives] became a general strike against the slave system," he quotes at length and without comment the memoir of Union officer John Eaton, in which enslaved people are assumed to lack caution and agency.

Unlettered reason or the mere inarticulate decision of instinct brought them to us. Often the slaves met prejudices against their color more bitter than any they had left behind. But their own interests were identical, they felt, with the objects of our armies; a blind terror stung them, an equally blind hope allured them, and to us they come. (Eaton, quoted in Du Bois 2014, 51)¹²

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10. The radicality of *Black Reconstruction's* claims in relation to Du Bois's earlier works has made it a touchstone in debates about Du Bois's underlying political commitments: was he an elitist or a populist, an "expressivist" or a radical democrat? James (1997), like Robinson (2000), reads *Black Reconstruction* as departing from earlier, elite conceptions of politics; others read the book as confirmation of an essential radical strain in Du Bois (Burden-Stelly and Horne 2019; Marable 2005), whereas others suggest it is a deviation from his otherwise persistent commitment to elitism (Gooding-Williams 2011; Reed 1997). The dissensus reading I offer here suggests that, in *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois figures intellectual and political struggles over equality as essentially unresolved; conflicting interpretations of Du Bois reflect the traces of these struggles, unresolved, in his work.
11. Among these, the most frequently quoted by Du Bois is brigadier general John Eaton, an army chaplain appointed by General U.S. Grant to be the "General Superintendent of Contrabands" for the Department of the Tennessee. Also quoted is Henri Junius Browne, a journalist who wrote a memoir of his imprisonment by Confederates.
12. Eaton and Mason (1907) avers, in parts of the memoir not quoted by Du Bois, that "This identity of interest came slowly but surely" (p. 124). I discuss the political significance of the difference between this statement and the one quoted by Du Bois in my dissertation, *The General Strike: Democracy, Revolution, and Refusal*.

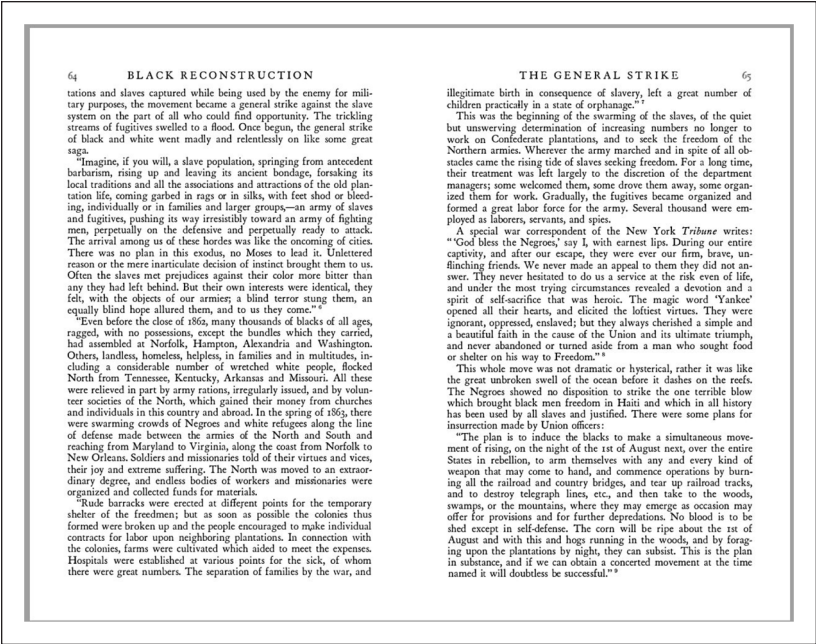


Figure 1. Quotes of Eaton and others as they appear in the first edition of *Black Reconstruction*.

Sympathetic to the difficulties faced by fugitive enslaved people, Eaton nevertheless portrays their actions as merely instinctual.¹³ In contrast to Du Bois, who emphasizes their strategic calculations, Eaton claims the interests of formerly enslaved people aligned with the army officers.

A few lines down, Du Bois includes a paragraph-long quote, from the memoir of a war journalist, that similarly fails to consider that enslaved people might have their own distinct perspectives, informed by their intelligence: "We never made an appeal to them that they did not answer. They never hesitated to do us a service at the risk even of life [. . .]. They were ignorant, oppressed, enslaved; but they always cherished a simple and a beautiful faith in the cause of the Union and its ultimate triumph" (Browne, quoted in Du Bois 2014, 52). Though Du Bois does not agree with these views, he presents them without context or critique (Figure 1).

13. Eaton's term, "unlettered reason," suggests that there may be an ambivalence in his account that Du Bois exploits for his own purposes. Thanks to Will Cameron for this observation.

Why does Du Bois risk weakening his painstaking account of fugitive refugees' industriousness with depictions of them as helpless? Thavolia Glymph (2013) suggests he merely "absorbed" this manner of speaking about enslaved people, "accepting and reproducing the biases and racism of white Northerners" (p. 493). In favor of Glymph's account, Du Bois is infamous for a persistent elitist strain in his thinking. But *Black Reconstruction's* explicit challenges to such bias are at odds with that strain of his thought. Others have argued that Du Bois overstated his case: his general strike thesis goes beyond what the available evidence can confirm. Historian Brian Kelly (2016) says that the "early majority" of escapees were "[m]ade up overwhelmingly of the elderly and the infirm, 'encumbered' women and their young children," who had, "according to Eaton, 'become so completely broken down in spirit, through suffering' that 'it was almost impossible to arouse them.' His grim account suggests the need to differentiate between those slaves in a position to actively pursue emancipation and those carried along by events beyond their control. In light of these circumstances," Kelly asks in response to Du Bois, "does it make sense to regard slaves as a *discrete* element in the war?" (Kelly 2016, n.p.) For Kelly, Eaton's account suggests that the fugitives are best understood not as an autonomous political entity, but in terms of their "increasing convergence" with the Union (n.p.). James Oakes (2019), who similarly argues that the enslaved were less responsible for their own emancipation than Du Bois claims, says Du Bois "contradicted himself" when he featured "federal officials saying things that flatly contradicted his own thesis" (n.p.).

But what for Kelly and Oakes is a dispute about historical data, and for Glymph a lapse in critical thinking, might instead be seen as a political dispute. In Jacques Rancière's terms, this would be a dispute about who or what counts as an "active" political agent. For Rancière (2011), associations of some with "activity" and others with "passivity" are part of "a distribution [or division] of the sensible" that serve as "embodied allegories of inequality" (p. 12). Focusing on perception and sense in Du Bois means approaching his work from the perspective of aesthetics.¹⁴ Some interpreters of *Black Reconstruction* do so, drawing on the "polyphony" of Du Bois's oeuvre (Gilroy 2003, 115), which features myriad tones, subjects, and genres. For example, some read the book "juxtapositionally" (Gillman and Weinbaum 2007), pairing *Black Reconstruction* with works of fiction by Du Bois, highlighting the book's significance to Du Bois's

14. In this, my approach to Du Bois shares an affinity with Robert Gooding-Williams's (2005), in which "literary reading and political reading are inseparable" (p. 206).

internationalism or emphasizing his “untimely” approach to literature and politics (Hughes 2020; Mullen 2015).¹⁵ Henry Louis Gates is among the few readers to appreciate the multivocal quality of *Black Reconstruction* itself, which combines historical analysis, “flights of poetic rhetoric,” and lengthy quotes from various speeches, memoirs, and reports (Schomburg Center 2021). However, emphasizing polyphony risks diminishing the cacophony of clashing perspectives and distracts from the silence that seems to surround the words of Union officials decontextualized by Du Bois. Du Bois presents these words as if spoken from and into a void.¹⁶ Why? Jacques Rancière’s concept of *dissensus* offers a clue.

Staging Dissensus: Aesthetics and Politics in Rancière

Dissensus is Rancière’s term for what happens when political subjects claim equality in or with a community that grants them no say in public decision-making. For Rancière, such unauthorized emergence is part of the very logic of democracy, as the Greek term *demos* referred originally not to “the people,” as we now assume, but specifically to those who are unqualified to rule (Rancière 2010, 32). Hence, Rancière’s gloss of *demos* as “the part that has no part.” Political subjects make their claim when they speak, think, and act politically, despite being left out of the order as it is. Their claim can be perceived in two ways: from the “police” perspective, which claims that “there is nothing to see here,” or from the perspective of politics, which hears the new claim as a claim to equality. The police perspective assumes that all those who are capable of thinking, speaking, and acting are already accounted for, and so it does not take seriously the emergent political subjects’ challenge. Whether or not they win recognition as political equals, however, dissensus is the term for their effort, which consists in staging the conflict of the two perspectives. These two perspectives are not merely different interpretations of the same thing, Rancière argues. They are differences of perception—that is to say, differences in what can be seen or heard in the existing

15. In setting, side by side, essays, fiction, and poetry whose topics were adjacent but not explicitly linked, Susan Gillman and Alys Weinbaum (2007) argue that Du Bois’s texts stage connections—for example, between imperialism and gendered violence—that he does not state explicitly or study analytically, which they call “juxtaposition.” See also Balfour (2010) and Hooker (2017).

16. My argument about the politics of Du Bois’s silences thus resonates with how Weheliye (2005) reads Du Bois’s use of the “mute ciphers” of music notation in *Souls of Black Folk*.

order. Dissensus demonstrates “a gap in the sensible itself,” and this challenges the police order that hierarchically organizes perception (Rancière 2010, 38).¹⁷

Resonances between Rancière and Du Bois become more evident when we consider the French philosopher’s account of the first plebeian secession in the early Roman Republic among his most widely cited accounts of dissensus (Breugh 2013; Gündoğdu 2017; Inston 2017; Norval 2012; Vatter 2012). Rancière builds on the most well-known classical account of the *secessio plebis*, by Livy, who describes how plebeians quit their work and left the city of Rome for several days to protest debt slavery and their being used as shock troops for the Republic’s military adventures. Livy says the elite politician Menenius Agrippa was sent to convince the striking plebs that their place in the social hierarchy was justified. Menenius regales the plebs with an allegory that likens the polity to a human body: like the hands, legs, and other body parts that work to feed the apparently idle stomach for the entire body to survive, so too must the plebs toil to support the Roman patricians (Livy 2006, 122–23). This allegory, in Rancière’s terms, displays a police logic: it depicts social arrangements as naturalized hierarchy in which the plebs have their proper place and no say in it. Livy reiterates Menenius’s police logic, noting that the plebs did not object to his argument. But, Rancière argues, in having to justify patrician rule in spoken and written word, Menenius and Livy each implicitly concede the intelligence and worth of the plebs.

Rancière finds a corrective to Livy in the work of Pierre-Simon Ballanche, who retells the story with a twist: in Ballanche’s version of the plebeian secession, Rancière says, the plebs “execute a series of speech acts that mimic those of the patricians. . . . Through transgression they find that they, too, just like speaking beings, are endowed with speech that does not simply express want, suffering, or rage but intelligence” (Rancière 1999, 24–25). In Ballanche’s retelling, we see more vividly the egalitarianism that is postulated but denied by the patricians’ account, Rancière argues.

The two versions of the scene at the Aventine—the patricians’ version in which the plebs do not meaningfully reason and the plebs’ version in which they display an equal capacity to deliberate—mirror the two versions of the

17. Rancière’s term for the distribution of roles and positions that define our experience of the world is *partage du sensible*, often translated as “partition of the sensible.” Samuel Chambers notes, “The multivalent phrase contains [. . .] both the sense of dividing up the world, of ordering it, of structuring it, on the one hand, and the sense of connection, of linkages, and sharing, on the other” (Chambers 2013, 70).

story told by Livy and Ballanche, respectively. Livy's version shores up the patricians' perspective, suggesting that the plebs were too simple to recognize the motivated reasoning of the patricians. Ballanche's version builds on the egalitarian implication of Livy's account: the plebeians had to decide whether to accept Menenius's story. Because the plebeians ultimately won the creation of the first representative institution for plebs, the Roman tribunate, there is a case to be made for Ballanche over Livy. But deciding between the two is not the point, Rancière (1999) writes: the "significance of the scene on the Aventine" is not that it inaugurates a plebeian politics in the form of the tribunate (p. 50).¹⁸ There can be no happy ending because the disagreement is not ended; it is constantly "iterated" by the parties to the dispute (Inston 2017): one insists the social order is singular, coherent, and consistent; the other that the world is unequal, though those in it are all equally capable.

Rancière's dissensual account of the plebeian secession punctures democratic aspirations to consensus by staging political conflict as a scene of confrontation. To understand how Rancière's use of the "scenographic mode" (Panagia 2018) expresses his egalitarian commitments, consider his democratic celebration of *mimesis*. Inverting the terms of Plato's critique of *mimesis* in the *Republic*—that dramatic poetry leads to a confusion of proper roles in the *polis* characteristic of democracy's "reign of appearance and flattery" (Rancière 1994, 50)—Rancière champions this "deceptive" aspect of art, literature, and specifically theater. Staging a scene of dispute, political subjects take on roles that don't belong to them. What could be more democratic? (Recall that for Rancière (2014a), rotation and lot are the key classical elements in a democratic order.) In Rancière's account of the Aventine Secession, the aesthetic staging of the political event involves two recursive events of *mimesis*: the plebs' unauthorized imitation of the patricians, and Ballanche's representation of plebeian speech, which challenges Livy's "authorized" history.

But Rancière's focus on singular scenes of interruption may neglect certain key features of democratic struggles for equality. Hallward (2009) notes that Rancière's approach overlooks the role that *rehearsal* plays not only in theater but also in democratic forms of collective action (p. 155). A democratic politics consisting of scenes of confrontation, Hallward worries, is too "sporadic and intermittent" to offer a meaningful challenge to persistent elite power (p. 152). The story of the Aventine's confrontation

18. Breaugh misinterprets Rancière but promotes his own genealogy of "plebeian thought" when he treats the event at the Aventine as one of "subjectivization," after which the plebs become "full-fledged political subjects endowed with equality and opposed to the domination of the few" (Breaugh 2013, 98).

between the police and the subject of politics also obfuscates what, or who, “opens up the world where argument can be received” (Rancière 1999, 56). Rancière (1999) insists that only the actions of the plebs “gives [. . .] equality any effectiveness,” that “from the moment the plebs could understand Menenius’s apologia [. . .] they were already [. . .] equals” (p. 25).¹⁹ But this derivation of equality from the speech situation during the plebeian secession appears to make inevitable equality’s triumph over inequality.²⁰ A number of Rancière’s critics have pointed this out. Marchart (2011) observes that because, for Rancière, “the condition of equality is anchored in the very structure of communication” (p. 135), egalitarian politics has “an ontological privilege over non-egalitarian, non-emancipatory politics” in Rancière’s work (p. 137). In one way or another, it seems, the authoritative speech of the patricians will undermine itself. If the patricians’ justification of their rule implies the plebeian’s equality, what role is left to the plebs in the confrontation? Where is their agency?

Black Reconstruction: A Dissensus Reading

Du Bois answers these questions. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois places two worlds in one. The first world is one in which whites see enslaved people as subjects in need of tutelage before they can take to politics. The second is the world in which the enslaved are political subjects capable of self-emancipation. In contrast to the Aventine example, voices of authority in *Black Reconstruction* do not promise or prove the equality of the enslaved. They mark the persistence of contrary ways of perceiving the world. Du Bois shows how *confrontation* is just one moment in a larger *conjugation* of collective action that creates conditions for a democratic dissensus that can put elite voices “in their place.”

Du Bois (2014) begins his chapter, “The General Strike,” noting the irony that an opponent of emancipation, neglecting to consider the perspective of enslaved people when he “fired the first gun at Fort Sumter,” inadvertently

19. Barnor Hesse (2011) argues that in a white supremacist society Rancière’s concept of politics “assume[s] the horizon of white normativity” and may even “excommunicate” blackness (p. 975). Gündoğdu (2017) and Chambers (2013) urge us to take seriously the “impurity” of Rancièrian politics, suggesting it is impossible to eliminate this dilemma from political speech and action, though it may not always fall along racial lines. See Huzar (2021) for a further discussion of Rancière’s race politics.

20. As Rancière (1999) acknowledges, Ballanche intended his retelling of the Secession to aid his arguments that history inevitably marched toward equality.

freed them (p. 44). The neglected perspective was that of the enslaved who had begun “carefully to watch the unfolding of the situation” (Du Bois 2014, 48). They were well aware, Du Bois suggests, of the prewar practices and institutions by which enslaved people had escaped the plantation and how these might now be seen as long-gestating rehearsals for collective action. They also likely took note of how Southern propaganda insisted that the war was “an abolition war,” whereas mainstream Northern “newspapers, orators and preachers [. . .] carefully disclaimed any intention of disturbing the ‘peculiar institution’ of the South” (Du Bois 2014, 48).²¹

Read dissensually, Du Bois does not unwittingly undermine his own argument when he includes long quotes expressing the conventional, racist view that the enslaved were mostly helpless and in need of tutelage. Quite the contrary. He is demonstrating the perspective of the officers (what Rancière would call the police order) for whom it is not possible that the fugitives have equal intelligence and capability. From that “police” perspective, the fugitives can only appear in terms of their prescribed social roles, as slaves, workers, or helpless naïfs. *Black Reconstruction* uses different literary techniques and highlights different aspects of the struggle for equality: decontextualizing the voices of elites, Du Bois channels Ballanche, but he also preserves and does not cancel the perspectives of America’s Livys.

Eaton’s memoir helps illustrate the power of Du Bois’s technique of dissensual decontextualization. *Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen*, Eaton’s memoir of the war and Reconstruction, begins with the passages, quoted in *Black Reconstruction* and previously in this article, about the “blind terror” and “blind hope” of fugitive enslaved people. Eaton shortly thereafter reports on a meeting with Grant at which the future president proposes to employ the “contrabands,” so called because enslaved people were still primarily considered, by federal policy, property.²² Some military officers worked to return fugitives to their putative owners, whereas other officers did their best to ignore them. Grant justifies his decision to employ the self-emancipated slaves, Eaton notes approvingly, with the logic of moral and political progress through work. According to Eaton, Grant believed that “the Negroes were incapable of making any provision for their own safety and comfort” and thus required “some form of guardianship

21. In this way, the Union, too, neglected the perspective of the enslaved. Du Bois endeavors not to repeat this mistake.

22. This policy changed once the enslaved were allowed to enlist and become legally emancipated. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013), in a critical gesture similar to Du Bois’s reclaiming of the slave as a revolutionary subject, suggest that because humans treated as commodities carried out the radical project of self-emancipation, “things” might be the agents of revolution (p. 51).

[to] be exercised over them” (Eaton and Mason 1907, 13). Work, Grant insisted and Eaton agreed, was “the means by which the army of blacks might be transformed from a menace into a positive assistance to the Union forces” (Eaton and Mason 1907, 14). Once “the Negro” had proved “himself” “as an independent laborer [. . .] it would be very easy to put a musket in his hands and make a soldier of him, and if he fought well, eventually to put the ballot in his hand and make him a citizen” (Eaton and Mason 1907, 15). The ability of former slaves to work diligently would evidence their political capacities.²³

Du Bois relies extensively on Eaton’s descriptions of the fugitives’ conditions in the care of the army, but his presentation of Eaton’s words dissensually decontextualizes them. Du Bois (2014) inserts lengthy quotes from Eaton after describing the “perfectly logical” work refusal and flight that enslaved people undertook in response to the movement of the Union army (p. 50). Decontextualization challenges the logic that underpinned the army’s decision to “use” the fugitives. The fugitives did not need to labor in order to become political subjects—their general strike, which decisively affected the outcome of the war, proved that they were already engaged in political action. Enslaved people exercised political power not primarily by working but by *refusing work*.

Moreover, their vision of politics was not limited, as Grant’s seems to have been, to the official formal exercise of citizenship, narrowly construed. Du Bois (2014) highlights how Black escapees from plantations used strikes to refuse the reinstatement of the plantation labor regime under the Union army’s auspices (p. 55). For Du Bois, Black political activity is not best understood in terms of consensual convergence with the white majority’s conception of proper citizenship. Political agency includes a wide range of activities, clandestine and public, individual and collective, that challenge prevailing conceptions of the shared world.

Nick Bromell (2018) also notes a similarity between Du Bois’s and Rancière’s interests in the politics of a *part sans part*. But Bromell claims that Du Bois merely advocates a democratic ethos of “honest and earnest criticism,”²⁴ whereas I see *Black Reconstruction* as an aesthetic and political staging of dissensus that is not reducible to criticism, whether earnest or honest. Du Bois’s

23. It might be argued that neither Grant nor Eaton actually held this view but believed the white public required such evidence of Black responsibility before admitting Black people into citizenship. Both this position and the one outlined previously underrate the capacities of Black subjects to transform the polity on their own terms.

24. Bromell argues that this commitment is found throughout Du Bois’s oeuvre, but he does not consider *Black Reconstruction*. Bromell (2018) also turns the tensions inherent to challenging police orders into elements of a progressive narrative about collective growth (p. 173). This is in contrast to Du Bois’s more tragic sensibility.

staging of the general strike does not, as Bromell (2018) says of Du Bois's rhetorical strategy, "make room for" difference by "seeking an enlargement of the whole" (p. 166).²⁵ It dramatizes how political action rends a community unified by a police distribution of the sensible that is inegalitarian. Though Du Bois did aspire to build a new community founded upon a more just distribution of rights and goods as represented by the coalition for "abolition democracy," this future would be built not by resolving conflicts into a more inclusive order but by dissensually accentuating conflicts and their afterlives.

In the wake of the counterrevolution against Reconstruction, Du Bois knew well that inequality would persist after "enlargement." Du Bois's decontextualization presents the views of powerful whites, suspending the effectiveness of their speech but not defeating their views. These words would serve as a record of (never quite) past conflicts to instruct those who would have to fight future battles. The triumph of collective Black power illuminates, but does not eliminate, the divisions that make achievements of equality partial and precarious: equality asserted, claimed but not guaranteed.

Between General Strike and Dissensus

Like Rancière, Du Bois stages mimetic scenes of democratic equality in which political subjects demonstrate capacities they are said not to have. His tableau of vigilant Black subjects, "waiting, looking, listening," exemplifies this mimetic approach. Unlike in Rancière's account of the Aventine, however, Du Bois's scene does not involve a direct confrontation with the police order. Du Bois's representation of the white officials' police perspective, in contrast to the words of Menenius's speech to the plebs, involves words not directed to enslaved people but said about them, in their absence. This insulates Du Bois from the abovementioned critiques of Rancière, which see him as committed to an egalitarian promise in the speech

25. Du Bois's turn to the dissensual aesthetics of staging in "The General Strike" suggests he is aware of the limits of rational argument in fighting racism. In *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois argues that racist oppression is caused not just by ignorance and ill will but also by a conjunction of economic motives and unconscious actions and reactions. Racism's opponents must confront it with not just reason but also "force"—with "weapons of Truth" or the "sword of the intrepid uncompromising spirit, with organization in boycott, propaganda, and mob frenzy" (Du Bois 1984, 6). Reason, imagination, nonviolent collective action, and disorganized riots are, for Du Bois, complementary practices of struggle. For this reason, Rogers's (2012) persuasive argument that *Souls of Black Folk* uses rhetoric to transform its readers' sense of who constitutes "the people" does not capture the approach of the later Du Bois.

situation itself. Instead, we see in Du Bois evidence of two worlds and, in one, the powerful are speaking into a void.

This is Du Bois' great accomplishment in *Black Reconstruction*. Setting the quotes of white officers and observers in long block quotations without much commentary, Du Bois shows how the democratic actions of the strikers voided the words of the officers, and the world inhabited by them, rendering both inoperative. Through more- and less-organized practices of work refusal, strikers contested and overcame the policies and perspectives of Union officials. Even while centering them on his pages, Du Bois put the officers' speech in its place, thus staging the autonomy of the part with no part. Though their strikes surely involved confrontation with slaveholders, police, and military officials, Du Bois focuses on the democratic conjugation of the fugitives: building long-distance networks of communication, planning actions, and mutually supporting one another. This departure from Rancière's preferred Ballanchean narration allows Du Bois to present fugitivity as a collective practice comparable to that of a general strike. The escape from the plantation, he argued, was not haphazard but became increasingly organized by "black revolutionists like Henson and Tubman" and "the extra-legal efforts of abolitionists" (Du Bois 2014, 9). Voiding the words of Eaton and his ilk means refraining from commenting on them directly.

Rancière's account of the plebeian secession helps highlight the dissensual dimensions of Du Bois's history of the general strike, but the two authors' respective approaches to dissensus are distinct. Rancière treats equality like an axiom that can be derived from justifications of inequality, inviting challenges to rule wherever it is asserted, especially when authorities' speech is really backed by power. In Du Bois's account, by contrast, the general strikers have already sapped the authorities' speech of its power. Despite orders to return fugitives to the plantation, enslaved people continued to strike and flee the plantation, winning emancipation and the egalitarian reforms and institutions of Reconstruction. Thinking of Du Bois as focused on conjugation calls attention to Rancière's own neglect of the general strike in his example. He treats the Aventine Secession as a collective act of self-emancipation but without noting that it was a conjugation of an earlier action: its power stemmed in part from a mass collective work refusal.²⁶

26. Having conceptualized what is distinct about Du Bois's dissensus, we might see how other moments in Rancière's oeuvre speak to a concern for conjugation. Seen from the vantage Du Bois provides us, Rancière's (2014b) recovery of worker's poetry and prose published in worker-run journals testifies to the forms of organization that underwrite speech and action that challenges police frames of the working class.

For Du Bois, the general strikers serve as an image of a different American “people” in whose image the country could be shaped. However, Du Bois knew their success in remaking American democracy could not end conflicts of race and inequality. It would divide the polity again and again.²⁷ Aware that the strikers would only enact their collective power temporarily, Du Bois records the police perspective of the general strike, highlighting divisions that would persist. Strikers’ collective attempts to transform American democracy provoke police responses: racist narratives, institutions, and violence. Reconstruction would be met with similar violence.

Du Bois’s recognition of the iterative, ongoing character of dissensus helps him appreciate other stagings of dissensus, as well, even in work that mostly recapitulates white-supremacist narratives of Reconstruction. In *Black Reconstruction*’s last chapter, “The Propaganda of History,” he describes a book that has some “scientific poise and cultural background” despite being influenced by anti-Black historiographies:

[I]n the midst of conventional judgment and conclusion, and reproductions of all available caricatures of Negroes, it does not hesitate to give a fair account of the Negroes and some of their work. It gives the impression of combining in one book two antagonistic points of view, but in the clash much truth emerges. (Du Bois 2014, 590)

This last phrase—“in the clash much truth emerges”—summarizes the aspirations of dissensus.

Dissensus Again: The Gender of the General Strike

It is in the spirit of dissensus that scholars working in the Black feminist tradition have contested Du Bois’s approach to the general strike. Though Du Bois acknowledged how the exploitation and violence of slavery involved gender-specific forms of abuse, he did not appreciate how the strike against enslavement involved gender-specific forms of resistance (Glymph 2013; Weinbaum 2013). Some charge that his silence regarding the distinctive

27. Later in *Black Reconstruction* Du Bois suggests that a more forceful attempt on the part of Radical Republicans to realize the dictatorship of the proletariat may have forestalled the return of white rule in the South and perhaps even the late-nineteenth-century “nadir” of racist violence in America. However, his oft-quoted remark from a 1933 essay, “Marxism and the Negro Problem,” that “No soviet of technocrats would do more than exploit colored labor in order to raise the status of whites” (p. 104), suggests that even in such a scenario, the struggle for equality would continue.

contributions of enslaved women to the strike suggests they lacked political agency.²⁸ If so, then his political reading has a police dimension, reproducing a hierarchy of active and passive in which the male fugitives are heroic agents and women the passive beneficiaries of their agency. Thavolia Glymph (2013), Saidiya Hartman (2016, 2019), and Alys Weinbaum (2013) show that women also engaged in work slowdowns, refusals, and gender-specific forms of insurrection that challenged the master-slave dynamic, thus playing their own part in a general strike broader than that imagined by Du Bois. The concept of the general strike itself, such work suggests, may constrain our perceptions of the political life and the specific contributions of Black women to egalitarian politics.

Black feminist historians like Glymph and Tera W. Hunter, as well as novelists like Toni Morrison, use mimesis and decontextualization to conjure scenes of rebellion and resistance that contest the general strike frame. Glymph (2013) writes that Du Bois saw the presence of women “in Union lines [. . .] as complicating more than enhancing the struggle for the Union and freedom” (493). She counters by showing how enslaved women’s legal status as an enemy, though they had the rights of neither citizen nor soldier, forced them onto the same “path of war” that enslaved men took as Union soldiers (Glymph 2013, 495). Du Bois underrated not only the “flight of enslaved women” as “part and parcel of the ‘great strike,’” Glymph (2013) argues, but also the degree to which the “home front” of the plantation became “politicized” in the context of war (p. 492). Hunter (1997) explains that, as the Union army approached, “many refused to work at all, others changed their work pace and the quality of their output” (p. 16). Both Hunter and Glymph extract from the diaries of slaveholders accounts of confrontations between slaveholders and enslaved women that suggest the women were engaged in practices of slowdown, sabotage, and work refusal. Hunter (1997) recounts the wartime story of an enslaved woman who “abruptly replied in response to her owner’s command to attend to her duties: ‘answering bells is played out’” (p. 4). Assembling these records of refusal, these thinkers decontextualize the words of slaveholders, finding in their imprecations of “recalcitrant” enslaved women the subjects of a general strike.

Another example: Weinbaum (2013) reads Toni Morrison’s fictionalization of the enslaved woman Margaret Garner in *Beloved* “as an exploration of women’s participation in the general strike against sexual and reproductive bondage and as a meditation on women’s withdrawal of sexual and

28. Du Bois (2014) does mention women, but only those among the fugitives who “worked in the camp kitchens and as nurses in the hospitals” (p. 55).

reproductive labor and products from circulation” (p. 458). For Weinbaum, the early chapters of *Black Reconstruction* diagnose how Black women’s labors, productive and reproductive, as well as the violence and coercion used to extract such labor, are central to capital accumulation. However, she argues, Du Bois does not see how Black women, too, interrupt this accumulation through the refusal of work.

Saidiya Hartman takes a different tack. She also criticizes Du Bois’s general strike as a kind of police category that circumscribes Black women’s subjectivity but she argues that *Black Reconstruction*’s representation of “the slave through the figure of the worker [. . .] obscures as much as it reveals” (Hartman 2016, 166). It obscures the scope of power and violence, as well as the generative work of “social poesis,” involved in Black women’s work of “care, intimacy, and sustenance exploited by racial capitalism” (Hartman 2016, 171). Black women are called upon to labor not only for capitalists but also for the family and for Black social life more broadly under conditions of violence and oppression. For this reason, Hartman argues, Black women’s “freedom struggle remains opaque, cannot be assimilated to the template or grid of the black worker” on strike (p. 171).²⁹ Thus, Hartman identifies an impasse: what if the social networks and practices of care nurturing the fugitivity of the general strike are profoundly inegalitarian?

From Hartman’s perspective, Du Bois’s prioritization of conjugation over confrontation recedes. Not only does Du Bois bring a police perspective to Black women’s agency, his conceptualization of Black self-emancipation as a general strike highlights the masculine clash of political conflict over the conjugations of the social for which women were predominantly responsible. Hartman voices a concern for the conjugations of Black life beyond the spectacle of confrontation. Hartman’s writing of the afterlife of the slaves’ general strike shows how the relational worlds of the oppressed nourish egalitarian cultures of survival and resistance, worlds Du Bois hints at but does not fully acknowledge.

These contestations of Du Bois’s general strike thesis underscore what is distinctive about a politics of dissensus and what differentiates it from a liberal politics of pluralism into which some interpreters have translated it (Bromell 2018; Norval 2012). Ranci re showed us how subjects who enact dissensus break out of identity categories like “pleb,” “worker,” or “slave”

29. Hartman seems to depart from this refusal of “the general strike” in her recent book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. There, like Glymph and Weinbaum, she situates Black women as contributors to a general strike that has hitherto refused to claim them (Hartman 2019, 48).

when their speech and action radically challenge prevailing categories. Du Bois's decontextualization, in turn, showed us how gestures of inclusion on the terms of the white police order stand in stark contrast to the equality enacted by enslaved people themselves. Du Bois didn't just argue that Black people could be incorporated into democratic life as citizens; he showed how doing so required challenging prevailing concepts of citizenship that diminished popular agency. Black feminist critiques of Du Bois's general strike do not just seek an expansion of the boundaries of the general strike so that women are included in it. On the contrary, attending to the role of women in work refusal alters our understanding of the general strike and promotes greater appreciation of the power of conjugations alongside a politics of confrontation.

Conclusion

What is the relationship between an aesthetic or literary political strategy and forms of collective democratic action? Bromell (2018) and Melvin Rogers (2012) find in Du Bois's rhetoric an exemplary democratic practice by which the oppressed might invite their fellow citizens into new ethical and political relationships. We might describe these approaches as "tactics of disclosure," Erin Pineda's (2021) term for a tactic that "in revealing the ordinarily hidden violence of white supremacy" put its faith in "hailing a white audience not yet present, challenging them to shift the way they understood their place within the racial order and their role in maintaining it" (p. 132). I have argued, however, for the salience of another approach to Du Bois's work, emphasizing a kind of collective action that Pineda calls "tactics of disruption." These aim to interrupt the "maintenance of domination" by withdrawing "the cooperation of the marginalized," "physically impeding civilians or state actors, forcibly shutting down institutions or processes, wielding power in numbers and pressure tactics" (Pineda 2021, 132).³⁰ The activists Pineda studies, like Du Bois, asked how they could transform a democracy whose fundamental ideals were "forged in the crucible" of slavery. Du Bois's dissensual aesthetics highlights how police interpretations of racist violence thwart such democratic aspirations. Events of confrontation that disclose inequalitarian reality must be supplemented by conjugations that sustain disruption over time.

30. Pineda adds that tactics of disruption were in service of "gaining a hearing," which they may have been in the particular case she discusses. But undertaking tactics of disruption does not commit us to that goal, and that formulation risks reducing the differences between the two tactics.

I see *Black Reconstruction* as an archive of collective disruption. The book reproduces challenges brought by the enslaved to the commonsense white view that Black people were not yet capable of citizenship. We might read Du Bois's account of the general strike as an aesthetic and literary effort to make visible a popular assembly that was somehow not visible to many, even though fugitive slaves too, gathered in public. We know from Du Bois that many of those who saw the fugitives assembled saw degraded, needy masses and not heroic agents. This is why Du Bois took on the task of aesthetic representation. Might we say, then, that for him the image of the general strike is one meant to help an incipient "people" "feel their power," as Jason Frank (2021) might put it (p. 70)? For Frank (2021), depictions of public assembly offer a "living image of the people" that puts pressure on "official" accounts of who "the people" are (p. 70). But Du Bois and his Black feminist critics show that achieving visibility is not enough. Enslaved people may leave the plantation, but enforcers of the white police perspective make sure the formerly enslaved are still seen as workers or as helplessly dependent, not as free people. Imagining an emancipatory political subject requires keeping in our sights the police frames—like the Dunning School narrative of Reconstruction—that seek to return self-emancipating people to their "place" in an inegalitarian oppressive social order.³¹

Frank acknowledges the salience of such conflicts by turning to a Rancièrian supplement that focuses on the "traps" of visibility.³² Du Bois anticipates these traps. Black fugitives evaded them for a time, by voiding, through collective action, the policies of white officials. But, as Reconstruction was thwarted and racial hierarchy reestablished, such conjugations of equality proved to be less than effective: Du Bois (2014) laments that the power of the general strike "could only be shown by refusal to work under the old conditions, and [labor] had neither permanent organization nor savings to sustain it in such a fight" (p. 481). In dissensually staging the conflict in his pages, Du Bois teaches that empowered collectives can fight to remake the world while facing, again and again, the divisions they seek to overcome. Between the general strike and dissensus is a modified understanding of dissensus, one that prefers a focus on conjugation and contingency over the

31. Thus Frank (2009) rightly suggests elsewhere that the strength of Frederick Douglass's rhetoric is its dissensual portrayal of the American people as "internally divided, haunted by disavowed violence or injustice" (p. 91).

32. Frank's (2021) discussion of the image of the barricades better captures such conflicts than that of the Rousseauian silent assembly and its "spectacle of collective self-regard" (p. 61).

logic of iterative speech acts. But with his lament, Du Bois reminds us that the conjugations of politics, on which even Rancièrian confrontations depend, themselves require organizations and institutions of coordination, like the consumer cooperatives Du Bois promoted in the 1930s. Such organizations may not be reducible to the everyday with which Frank wants to affiliate Rancière, but they also exceed by far the event with which Rancière is most commonly associated by democratic theorists today. Recall Du Bois's claim that during Reconstruction, Black Americans pushed American democracy in radically egalitarian directions. Somewhere between rupture and continuity, general strike and dissensus, Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* and its feminist critics further their efforts, illuminating the need for infrastructures that support conjugation and confrontation like the land redistribution, labor rights, and public education for which they fought then and now.

Acknowledgments

For detailed comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I thank Damali Britton, Will Cameron, Alex Diones, Alex Gourevitch, Juliet Hooker, Ferris Lupino, Melvin Rogers, Sam Rosenblum, Nica Siegel, and especially Bonnie Honig. Thanks to Niklas Plätzer for helpful suggestions late in the drafting process. I received invaluable feedback from William Clare Roberts, Geneviève Rousselière, and Massimiliano Tomba, who discussed earlier drafts of this paper at the American Political Science Association conference, the Duke Graduate Conference in Political Theory, and the Western Political Science Association conference, respectively. At each of these conferences, and at the Brown Graduate Symposium in Political Theory, audiences offered helpful questions and criticism. Finally, I thank the two anonymous reviewers from *Political Theory* for their insightful questions and suggestions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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