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Leaders Fit for the Masses

W. E. B. Du Bois and Japan's Transnational Democratic Leadership

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that Du Bois's Japan—despite displaying his myopic failure to critique non-Western imperialism—served as a potential model for his reimagining transnational democratic leadership beyond Western-centric models and their legacies of White supremacy and democratic despotism. Du Bois's reflections from the 1890s to the 1960s generally demonstrate a sustained, seven decade-long fluid commitment to realizing a vision of transnational leadership that was accountable to the democratic masses, whether in Asia, Africa, the United States, or elsewhere. Such reflections hold importance now (even as they did in Du Bois's time) as we continue to grapple with the legacies of Western “democratic” dominance, especially in international institutions designed to facilitate global governance.

Keywords: Du Bois; Japan; Democratic Despotism; Right to Fail; Leadership; Masses

Introduction: The Forethought

In 1948, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois delivered a speech before the distinguished Sigma Pi Phi fraternity questioning his nearly five-decade commitment to “The Talented Tenth.” In the *Boulé Address* (as it later became known), Du Bois lamented the ways in which he failed to see how selfish material pursuits of the elite might take the place of selfless uplift of the Black masses: “I assumed that with knowledge, sacrifice would automatically follow. In my youth and idealism, I did not realize that selfishness is even more natural than sacrifice. I made the assumption of its wide availability because of the spirit of sacrifice learned in my mission school training.” (Du Bois 1948, p. 4) Yet while scholars have concluded that Du Bois “recanted” (James 1997, p. 23) or “discarded” his notion of the “Talented Tenth” (Gao 2021, p. 35) both in this 1948 speech and in a later restatement in 1953, Du Bois himself did not seem to intimate such conclusions. Rather, he conceived of his “re-examined and restated” theory of the “Talented Tenth”—under the moniker of the “Guiding Hundredth”—as one of “group-leadership, not simply educated and self-sacrificing, but with clear vision of present world conditions and dangers, and conducting American Negroes to alliance with culture groups in Europe, America, Asia, and Africa, and looking toward a new world culture.” (Du Bois 1948, p. 8) In short, Du Bois hardly abandoned his longstanding commitment to *non-elitist*, democratic leadership (Shaw 2013); rather, he enhanced his vision of such leadership by further democratizing, materializing, and transnationalizing it to a greater degree than he had previously.

In this article, I argue that Japan similarly served as a potential model for Du Bois's theorizing of such transnational democratic leadership and especially its shifting away from an historically Western-centric focus. And even if Japan ultimately frustrated Du Bois due to its imperfect embodiment of democratically accountable leadership in a transnational setting, Japan was nevertheless still generative for Du Bois as he attempted to counter Western democratic despotism. Thus, Du Bois's writings on Japan—despite displaying his myopic failure to critique non-Western (i.e. Japanese) imperialism—feature a longstanding commitment to democratically accountable leadership not unlike his restatement of the Talented Tenth in the *Boulé* address. Put differently, from the 1890s to the 1960s, Du Bois sustained a seven decade-long fluid commitment to realizing a vision of transnational leadership that was accountable to the democratic masses, whether in Asia, Africa, the United States, or elsewhere. For this democratically-oriented Du Bois, Japan represented a potential model of democratic leadership *only insofar as* it upheld the empowerment of the people to whom it was committed to lead. Du Bois's commitment to this transnational vision of democratic leadership was fluid because he recognized that, at any point, any of his exemplars (e.g., Japan) could (and often did) lose the mantle of democratic leadership, as the mantle could shift to other actors who better embodied a commitment to the masses.

At the same time, we ought to approach Du Bois judiciously. Rather than simply lauding Du Bois as a prescient democrat (though he was in certain respects), this article approaches Du Bois's ignoring of Japanese imperialism as a cautionary tale that even transnational, antiracist, anti-capitalist, emancipatory, and democratic impulses can become limited or contradictory in their orientations and conclusions. To be sure, Du Bois acknowledged later in life that his transnational vision may have blinded him too much to the ways that Japan was oppressive, but he nevertheless saw Japan (even late in life) as having a similar "right to fail" as the Soviet Union (per Vaughan Rasberry's terminology, to which I will return later in the article) "en route to a genuinely emancipatory sequence" (Rasberry 2016, p. 205). Ostensibly (or even genuinely) democratic projects can end up justifying all kinds of oppressive political realities in the name of a more equitable future. This applies not only to the democratic despotism of the United States (per Du Boisian critique), but also to Du Bois's valorization of imperial Japan. This argument has significant implications not only for how we understand Du Bois's commitment to democracy, but also how we assess his elitism, sexism, Afro-Orientalist essentialism, romanticism, and increasing affiliation with socialism and Marxism over the course of his life.

The recent literature on Du Bois and Asia—particularly around Du Bois's visions of "colored" solidarity between African diasporic communities and those of South and East Asia—has largely been quite critical, with some exceptions (Du Bois 2005; Du Bois 2015; Frazier 2014; Ho and Mullen, 2008; Kearney 1995; Lee 2015; Mullen 2004; Onishi 2013; Onishi and Shinoda, 2019). To be sure, these and other accounts have deepened our understanding of Du Bois's often problematic approaches to individuals and societies differently socially located than himself and this has been in keeping with ongoing debates over Du Bois's elitism and gendered assumptions with respect both to Asia and the Americas (Balfour 2011; Bhalla 2018; Carby 1998; Gooding-Williams 2009; Griffin 2000; Hancock 2005; James 1997; Onishi 2013; Threadcraft 2016). Nevertheless, I maintain that, despite his Orientalism and gendered assumptions about Asia, Du Bois's vision of democratically accountable leadership in Asia is consistently evident when one turns to his writings on Japan (and India and China, though they are beyond the scope of this article). While I do not disagree with scholars who read Du Bois's Japan as a kind of romanticized Afro-Orientalism with problematic racial and gender-based assumptions (Du Bois 2005; Frazier 2014; Mullen 2004), I depart from these accounts by reconstructing Du Bois's scattered commentary through the lens of democratically accountable leadership to further highlight the continuities and ruptures between Du Bois's evolving approaches to

“colored” leaders across global and domestic contexts (James 1997; Reed 1997; Shelby 2007; Taylor 2010; West 1996). Put simply, Du Bois’s genuine, enduring commitment to transnational democratically accountable leadership facilitated a critical stance toward Western, democratically despotic formulations.

Diagnosing Defunct Transnational “Democratic” Leadership

Before diving into Du Bois’s Japan writings (in the next section), a word of clarification regarding Du Bois’s use of the term “democratic despotism” is in order. Du Bois first used the term “democratic despotism” in his 1915 *Atlantic Monthly* article, “African Roots of War.” There, he noted that democratic despotism is “the ruling of one people for another people’s whim or gain” and, explicitly chastised so-called “democratic” governance of African countries by European powers in a post-Scramble for Africa context (Du Bois 1915, p. 713). Inés Valdez (2022) has helpfully noted that, for Du Bois, democratic despotism illustrates the entanglement of popular sovereignty and empire in which Western democracies both determine themselves (democratically) and others (despotically). In short, purported democracies like the United States, Britain, and France engaged in modes of White supremacist and colonial transnational governance in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that undermined their democratic credibility on the global stage. It is with this reality in view that Du Bois turns to Japan’s emerging transnational leadership—despite its imperial violence, which I will address later in the article—as a counterweight to the democratic despotism of the West.

Du Bois consistently noted that one of the major transnational effects of the insidious and enduring forms democratic despotism/White supremacy he observed was that they stifled democratic self-determination and solidarity in Asia. For example, Du Bois often focused on the many lost opportunities for solidarity between China and Japan because of White supremacy, though he (regrettably) put the blame for continued animosity between China and Japan squarely on the former’s shoulders:

When Japan seized that part of China which was nearest anarchy, England, America and the white world howled, and are still howling. China braced herself and, protected by European weakness and Europe’s fear of Japan, began a forward development. But [China] let her bitterness toward Japanese aggression become a leading motive in her quest for new unity and strength forgetting all about the worse and longer aggressions of white Europe (Du Bois 2005, p. 80).

At the same time in a separate publication, Du Bois claimed that it was “perhaps the most astonishing paradox of modern times” that China came to regard Japan as the real and main enemy while viewing Europe and America as friends (Du Bois 2012, p. 259). China’s hatred played not only into weakening both nations, on Du Bois’s account, but also bolstered the “diplomatic lies” that allowed Europe and America to annex territory while foreclosing that possibility for Japan, particularly in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War.¹ In all of this, the major obstacle Du Bois identified was the ability of White supremacy to divide and conquer otherwise unified “colored” peoples. Thus, Du Bois chastised China for “buying into” this narrative and attacking Japan when it should have been attacking Europe and America.

White supremacy and democratic despotism not only pit Japan against China, though; they also, on Du Bois’s reading, continually undermined or challenged both Japanese and Chinese efforts at democratic self-governance. Du Bois wrote in 1944: “The greatest and most dangerous race problem today is the problem of relations between Asia and Europe:

the question as to how far ‘East is East and West is West’ and of how long they are going to retain the relation of master and serf” (Du Bois 2005, p. 130). Du Bois went on to note that Japan and China, while sharing the same reaction to European imperialism, nevertheless chose different methods of eliminating it, with Japan choosing war and force and China choosing cooperation and gradual understanding. Chinese leaders were not deluded in choosing this approach, according to Du Bois, as they knew all-too-well the racist attitudes Europe had toward them—particularly those around the inappropriateness of using “civilized” ethics (as opposed to force) in dealing with either China or Japan on the global stage (Du Bois 2005). Du Bois pivots here, however, and begins indicting the main perpetrator—European and American presumptions of superiority toward Asia:

There has not only been silence concerning Hong Kong, Burma, and Singapore, but there is the continued assumption that the subjugation of Japan is in the interest of Europe and America and not of Asia. American leaders have insisted that we must have in the Pacific after this war American bases for armed force. But why? If Asia is going to develop as a self-governing, autonomous part of the world, equal to other parts, why is policing by foreigners necessary? Why cannot Asia police itself? Only because the deep-seated belief among Europeans and Americans that yellow people are the biological inferiors to the [W]hites and not fit for self-government (Du Bois 2005, p. 131).

Behind the developmentalist frameworks offered by Western nations, Du Bois sensed racial theories of superiority bent on maintaining racial inequality and democratic despotism on the global stage (Sultan 2020). This position is simultaneously continuous with and a marked contrast from Du Bois’s position earlier in the 1940s, in which he viewed the United States and the Allies as promoters of global democratic reconstruction but also sensed that these same actors perpetuated racial exclusions (Porter 2010). Western altruistic defenses of democracy and freedom abroad (which he might have earlier entertained) rang hollow for Du Bois; maintaining a military presence in Asia was clearly a realization of (previously subtle) efforts at the ongoing political subjugation of the racialized other and the stifling of democratic leadership and self-governance.

Later in that very same 1944 essay “Prospect of a World Without Racial Conflict,” Du Bois argued moreover that White supremacy also twisted narratives around “defense against aggression” to justify White uses of military force while delegitimizing “colored” uses of force. Claiming that race and race difference provided the frame for the White world’s resolution of major political and economic issues, Du Bois (2005) noted:

When we think of defense against aggression, we are thinking particularly of Europe, and the aggression which we have in mind is not simply another Hitler but a vaster Japan, if not all Asia and the South Sea Islands. The ‘yellow peril’ as envisaged by the German Emperor William II has by no means passed from the subconscious reactions of Western Europe. That is the meaning of the world police and ‘our way of life’ (p. 135).

Du Bois’s understanding of the global color line took as given that White supremacist views were embedded in institutions and cultural perspectives that often outlived the people who perpetuated them—as his invocation of William II (1859–1941; r. 1888–1918) demonstrates. “Defense” and “aggression” were not neutral or objective words for Du Bois. Within the veil, they were weaponized in ways that legitimized White democratic despotism in Asia as “defense” while decrying Asian democratic resistance as “aggression”.

Thus, it is not surprising that, from 1942 through the 1950s, Du Bois consistently viewed the West as preventing global democracy and juxtaposed the West promoting imperial colonialism with colonized peoples promoting democracy (Porter 2010). Of course, Du Bois's arguments retained elements of elitism, paternalism, ethnocentrism, and a lack of clarity on what Asian democratic "self-determination" entailed (Mullen 2015; Porter 2010), but his consistency in calling for a kind of democratically accountable leadership (even if only to offer resistance by force, at points) remains evident. White supremacy's deep democratic despotism remained the key impetus for Du Bois's turn to alternative (i.e., Japanese) forms of transnational leadership that would enable genuine democratic governance and resistance.

Japan as Alternative Form of Transnational Democratic Leadership?

Japan's Ascent and Du Bois's Evolving Notions of Transnational Democratic Leadership

His cultural essentialism notwithstanding, Du Bois foregrounded Japanese leadership and accountability as a source of self-determination, as early as 1897. In "The Conservation of Races", Du Bois championed the cultural developments of the leaders of the "colored" world and Japan featured prominently in his global narrative. After contending that "the Negro race has not yet given the full spiritual message which they are capable of giving", Du Bois notes that the same is true of the "Yellow" race (Du Bois 1997). After inquiring as to how their messages might be delivered and their respective ideals realized, Du Bois writes,

The answer is plain: by the development of these race groups, not as individuals, but as races. For the development of Japanese genius, Japanese literature and art, Japanese spirit, only Japanese, bound and welded together, Japanese inspired by one vast ideal, can work out in its fullness the wonderful message which Japan has for the nations of the earth (Du Bois 1997, p. 233).

Notably, Du Bois does not divulge from whence he obtained his information on Japan in making these claims, let alone how familiar he was with discourses around "civilization and enlightenment" in Meiji Japan (1868–1912). Indeed, given the Meiji oligarchs' complicated relationship with "traditional" Japanese and "Western" culture (Howland 2001), Du Bois may have revised his views of Japan considering some of these "civilizational" discourses.² Moreover, we might read Du Bois's cultural essentialism here as a kind of "Teaist" or "Japanist" Pan-Asianism, as Eri Hotta (2007) has noted with Japanese figures of this period, precisely due to Du Bois's own developing views on race and the larger shifts in racial theories in the social sciences at this point. Nevertheless, even if we might (rightly) identify elitist tendencies (James 1997) or a kind of limited liberal progressive developmentalism or hierarchical and Eurocentric domestic subjectivity (Valdez 2019) in Du Bois's thinking at this point, he clearly still viewed Japan as leading the way with its own ideals and valuable contributions to global society—in a word, his appeal to Japan demonstrates early intimations of a kind of transnational leadership which resists the centrality of the Western/White-world.

Far from being unique to his 1897 essay, the example of Japan as an alternative "civilized colored" leading nation to White nations was a recurring theme for Du Bois across many of his writings. Just three years later in his essay, "The Present Outlook for the Darker Races of Mankind" (1900), Du Bois would assert that Japan was the "one bright spot in Asia" precisely because it had recently been admitted to the ranks of "modern civilization" by abolishing foreign consular courts within its borders (Du Bois 2015, p. 114). Six years later

in his 1906 “Color Line Belts the World”, Du Bois would build on this, asserting that Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese war marked an epoch of the awakening of the “Yellow” races, to be followed by the “black and brown” races (Du Bois 2005, p. 34). Lest one be tempted to think these declarations were solely a product of Du Bois’s early idealism, he echoed similar sentiments later in his life following his 1936 trip to Japan, noting that the incongruities, contrasts, and contradictions between old and new, East and West within Tokyo were emblematic of “civilization” and “progress”, assuming the Japanese community was sufficiently conscious of the paradoxes (Du Bois 2012, p. 257). To be sure, within his consistent reflections, there are points of disjuncture. For instance, on a particular reading, Du Bois’s early belief in a singular modern Japanese “civilization” gave way to a more complex interplay between East and West later in his career. However, there is an important continuity here as well: just as in 1937, Du Bois recognized in 1897 and 1900 that Japan’s cultural leadership toward “civilization” was set within a broader, transnational context. While his later conception of “Japanese civilization” allowed for a greater degree of hybridity within Japan than earlier iterations, each iteration of his vision held to a view of Japan as having distinct cultural value and political import as a leader on the global stage. This is not to dismiss or defend Du Bois’s problematic cultural essentialism, but simply to acknowledge certain continuities in his thought.

Du Bois’s consistency in holding out hope for Japan as a transnational democratic leader does not imply, however, accuracy on Du Bois’s part. Cultural essentialism and historical oversights featured prominently in his attempts to explain how Japan became a leader in the later 1930s. For example, Du Bois’s attempts to explain Japan’s Meiji revolution as the grounding for its transnational leadership consistently featured historically inaccurate and culturally essentialist praise of Japan. Elements of these are perhaps most evident in two of his 1937 articles—“A Forum of Fact and Opinion” and “What Japan Has Done”—in which Du Bois employs similar language about Japan enacting revolution without violence (Du Bois 1937, 2005). To quote the latter, Du Bois writes, “The accomplishment of Japan has been to realize the meaning of European aggression on the darker peoples, to discover the secret of the white man’s power, and then without revolutionary violence is change her whole civilization and attitude toward the world, so as to emerge in the twentieth century the equal in education, technique, health, industry and art of any nation on earth” (Du Bois 2005, p. 78). Nowhere does Du Bois acknowledge the immense amount of violence in the Meiji Restoration (1868), the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5), or the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5)—the three events he often indirectly pointed to in championing Japanese transnational leadership. Moreover, he fails to acknowledge even the domestic struggle involved in Japan “chang[ing its] whole civilization and attitude toward the world” and the deep ambivalence among most Meiji oligarchs, due to a share sense of insecurity in the face of Western political, legal, and economic aggression. Intense debates, political infighting, and economic, social, and religious strife among various factions of Japanese leadership were a mainstay of the Meiji (1868–1912) years. Thus, while his effort to revise the conception of world revolution to center Asia (Mullen 2015) might be seen, overall, as a constructive or more informed development in his writings from 1937 to 1950, in the early part of this period, it often came at the expense of cultural sensitivity and historical nuance.

Japanese leadership was not merely cultural, though. Du Bois’s early writings also center a hope for transnational democratic Japanese leadership of the “colored” world insofar as Japan could ensure peaceful, just, democratic self-governance across Asian countries instead of allowing Western democratic despotism (i.e., the ongoing political subjugation of Asian populations by the West) to dictate the terms of Asia’s political regimes. Du Bois had articulated these views with respect to Japan as early as his 1917 essay, “Of the Culture of White Folk” where he contrasted European greed-driven war with the rise of the “colored” world: “the escape of Japan, and the rise of India and the unrest of Africa and

[B]lack America all give hope of real peace: of peace built on world democracy, of equality of men of all races and color, and the damnation of all industrial organizations build on theft” (Du Bois 1917, p. 446) Japan was largely leading this charge for Du Bois, precisely because it had been the first to “hammer at the doors of justice” in the name of the “colored” world with its victory in the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War (Du Bois 1917, pp. 444–445). Early on, then, Japan represented hope as a leader of global democratic equality for Du Bois—a beacon for rising actors like India, China, and various African nations.³ Of course, such a vision of democratic Japanese leadership did not obviate Du Bois’s continued elitist tendencies during this period (Robinson 1994), nor did it signal much more than a weak transnational subjectivity (Valdez 2019), but given Du Bois’s general framing of the historic resistance of Asia to the domination of the West from 1897–1928 (Chandler 2012), it is perhaps unsurprising that Du Bois held out hope that Japan’s “escape” or resistance to Western colonialism held potential for the democratic futures of Asia and Africa (Porter 2010) at this early stage.

From 1917 through the first half of the 1930s, Du Bois wrote comparatively less on transnational Japanese leadership and democracy than he would from the mid-1930s to 1945, but several developments in his life would inform the continuities in his conclusions about transnational Japanese leadership and democracy until the end of World War II. In the wake of the Bolshevik revolution and the rise of Lenin, Du Bois was elated with Moscow’s declaration emphasizing freeing Africa and Asia from colonial tyranny, but he nevertheless rejected the dictatorship of the proletariat (Burden-Stelly and Horne, 2019). Still, in the late 1920s, Du Bois (like Jawaharlal Nehru) “rededicated” himself to anti-imperialism, using the Soviet example as the inevitable end for Asia and African America (Mullen 2015). For Du Bois, the Soviet revolution was a litmus test for drawing oppressed nations and peoples into an emancipatory history of their own making, even as his enthusiasm was tempered by skepticism toward full identification with the Russian revolution (Mullen 2015). If one adds the fact that Du Bois was lecturing on Japan’s “colored” self-determination in opposition to the capitalist global order in the early 1930s at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States and that his understanding of China as an “oppressed darker nation” and not a victim of its own folly was “growing” (Mullen 2015, pp. 128, 134), it seems apparent that transnational Japanese leadership and Asian democratic self-determination remain continued foci of Du Bois during this (inter)war period. While Du Bois still continued to problematically link Japan (colonizer) with China (colonized) in his historical and political analysis (Mullen 2015) and he maintained certain hypocritical and classist views on global leadership (Robinson 1994), his vision of radical Black politics and class conflict along with his growing facility with Marxism (Burden-Stelly and Horne, 2019) and his (later) framing of the problem of Japanese domination in Asia as one of resistance to the West (Chandler 2012) all speak to his efforts to consistently hold onto a “charismatic” democratically-accountable vision of leadership in the late 1920s and early 1930s that “promise[d] to unite African and Asian peoples in international struggle against racialized oppression” (Edwards 2012, p. 60).

As I noted earlier, though, Du Bois did not first develop this transnational vision of armed Asian and African struggle and resistance to White supremacy in the 1930s; the seeds of this development go back at least two decades prior. As early as 1915, Du Bois contended that force was the only viable and likely means of “colored” resistance to White democratic despotism:

[T]he colored peoples will not always submit passively to foreign domination. To some this is a lightly tossed truism. When a people deserve liberty they fight for it and get it, say such philosophers; thus making war a regular, necessary step to liberty.

Colored people are familiar with this complacent judgment. They endure the contemptuous treatment meted out by Whites to those not ‘strong’ enough to be free. These nations and races, composing as they do a vast majority of humanity, are going to endure this treatment just as long as they must and not a moment longer. Then they are going to fight and the War of the Color Line will outdo in savage humanity any war this world has yet seen. For colored folk have much to remember and they will not forget (Du Bois 1915, pp. 714-715).

For those alarmed by the prospect of mass global warfare in the name of “colored” liberation, Du Bois offered little comfort. His vision for Asian and African peoples was an anticolonial and “militant” liberal one rooted in exceptional leadership and race responsibility that went back to his writings in the 1890s (Burden-Stelly and Horne, 2019) and continued well into the 1930s and 1940s (Du Bois 1935, 2014). One way or another, practices of subjugation must be undone in the name of democratic self-determination and the Japanese, Chinese, Indians, Egyptians, and descendants of African slaves would lead the way to this liberation in the name of peace and democracy for all races (Du Bois 1915).

Yet, even if he consistently held out hope for Japan as a leader in promoting peace and democracy for “colored” peoples, Du Bois acknowledged early on that White resilience often rendered solo Japanese efforts at resistance temporary. A mere two years later in 1917, Du Bois wrote that, “White supremacy was all but world-wide: Africa was dead, India conquered, Japan isolated and China prostrate, while white America whetted its sword for mongrel Mexico and mulatto South America, lynching her own Negroes the while.” (Du Bois 1917) In this dire situation, there was a spark of hope for “colored” folk, but it was not without severe consequences:

Temporary halt in this program was made by little Japan, and the white world immediately sensed the peril of such ‘yellow’ presumption. What sort of a world would this be if yellow men must be treated ‘white?’ Immediately the eventual overthrow of Japan became a subject of deep thought and intrigue from St. Petersburg to San Francisco, from the Key of Heaven to the Little Brother of the Poor (Du Bois 1917, pp. 439-440).

Japan’s solitary resistance, for Du Bois, could only be temporary, given the unified efforts of White supremacists to resist equality with “colored” populations. This is evident when he notes in his 1937 article on Japanese colonialism that Manchuria was Japan’s natural mainland precisely because it wrested it from China after the 1895 Sino-Japanese war, only to have Europe make Japan surrender it, and Russia calmly walk in and take it (Du Bois 1937). Du Bois directly identified the hypocritical moral objections by England, France, and the United States to Japanese colonization of Manchuria (Du Bois’s preeminent concrete example of Japanese-led transnational “democratically-accountable” leadership) in this instance as the direct cause of Japan leaving the League of Nations (Du Bois 1937). And this was not the only time Du Bois noted the challenges Japan faced regarding White supremacy. In his earlier 1936 “Union of Color,” in his 1940 book *Dusk of Dawn*, and in his later 1942 “Chronicle of Race Relations II,” Du Bois explicitly acknowledged European tropes of “resisting the Japanese Yellow Peril;” the difficulty of viewing Asians as equals even during WWII; the reality of Japan, Russia, and China rising but Europe being determined to dominate; and the lack of attentiveness by Whites to the justice of Japan’s WWII cause (Du Bois 2005, 2014). In short, the White opposition was too great; Japan could not ensure peace, justice, and democracy by itself—leadership required transnational

support, which strikingly echoed similar conclusions he reached about Russia around the same time (Rasberry 2016).

“The Right to Fail”: Du Bois on Manchuria, Cooperatives, and Japan’s Risks

Ironically enough, despite his attentiveness (in 1937) to the ways hierarchical non-democratic influences could influence fascist transnational Japanese military exploits, Du Bois neglected to include Matsuoka Yōsuke’s (松岡 洋右, 1880–1946) role in Manchuria among such instances of non-democratic leadership. Indeed, as Taketani (2014) has argued, Du Bois’s Manchurian narrative makes a strong case for liberal and anti-capitalist empire, which he thought he was witnessing in Manchuria. Because Du Bois’s encounter with Matsuoka—a Japanese diplomat and president of the South Manchuria Railway Company—was a defining experience that inspired him to imagine what Taketani calls a “black Eurasian Pacific,” he failed to critique Japanese imperialism in Manchuria. Du Bois “Manchurian idealism” (Gao 2021, p. 22) led him to choose to see “anti-capitalist” imperialism where he could have (by his own account) seen capitalist imperialism—in keeping with Chandler’s (2012) characterization of Du Bois on Japan as a “persistent parallax.”

Because Du Bois’s symbiotic sympathies with Matsuoka in 1936 allowed him to view Matsuoka as a leader and architect of a Manchukuo that would lead to a new, democratic model of government for “colored” peoples (Taketani 2014), Du Bois overlooked—however ambivalently, reluctantly, or unwisely—Japanese atrocities in northeast Asia in favor of a greater vision of “Asian” democracy of spirit and co-prosperity (Taketani 2014). My point in rehashing this is not to defend Du Bois’s omissions, but to note that there is a continuity here in Du Bois’s approach to transnational democratic leadership that Taketani, Mullen, and others miss. While I agree with Taketani that Mullen obscures a subtle continuity of Du Bois’s in favor of his “discontinuity” in shifting to support China over Japan later in life (Taketani 2014, p. 151), unlike Taketani, I locate that (not so) “subtle” continuity in his push for democratically-accountable leadership. Du Bois initially sincerely believed Matsuoka’s Manchukuo held democratic promise for the people of Manchuria, but once Du Bois became convinced of Japan’s lack of democratic accountability to the Manchurian people in the form of a “regionally-integrated Asia” (however misguided or unformed his initial support may have been), he ceased to view Japan as fit as a leader of the “colored” world.

Still, even if he became increasingly critical of Japan over time, Du Bois nevertheless largely absolved Japan of guilt for its imperial ambitions, choosing instead to fault European compulsion (Gao 2021).⁴ Du Bois argued in 1937 that Japan was essentially forced to be dominant in China so that China wouldn’t surrender to Europe (Du Bois 2005). Furthermore, he contended that Japanese annexation of north China was, at root, due to the fact that Europe had attacked first, cutting off Japanese resources (Du Bois 2005). Du Bois did not let Japan off the hook entirely, though, as he was blunt in denouncing Japan’s crossing of the Yellow Sea to demand recognition as an exploiter of China as “dangerous” and its attempt to establish an “Asiatic caste system” as unacceptable as an alternative to White domination (Du Bois 2012; Onishi 2013). Notably, though, he didn’t critique the belief that Japan must dominate China so Europe wouldn’t, but merely referred to it as the product of a “disillusioned” Japan bent on commercial exploitation of China (Du Bois 2012; Onishi 2013). Thirteen years later, in 1950, he continued to refer to Japan’s invasion of Manchuria as “forward” movement, although his later use of quotes in that document on Russia and America in referring to Japan’s efforts to “save” China from Bolshevism in 1931 might suggest some critical distance on Du Bois’s part (Du Bois 1950, p. 22). Regardless of the absence or presence of critical distance, Du Bois refrained from

explicitly condemning Japanese imperialism and chose instead to condemn European and American capitalist greed as the original source of Asia's woes.

All in all, Japanese transnational imperial pursuits were a *non-ideal*—but better—alternative to White domination, for Du Bois (Gao 2021).⁵ Early on, he certainly repeated the argument across multiple writings that Japan had to be dominant in China to stymie Europe's imperial ambitions (Du Bois 2005, 2012), but he also defended Japanese imperialism in "World Search for Democracy" because he thought it might arouse jealousy, resentment, and admiration in China that could spur practical and effective anti-capitalist and democratic developments (Du Bois 2012, p. 260). Most concretely of all, Du Bois defended Japan's Manchurian colony on several "democratic" grounds: it had no caste system, it impartially enforced law and order, it supported public control of capital for the general welfare, it established public infrastructure for health and education, and it featured several native Manchurians in administration—in short, it promoted the happiness of, and was accountable to, the Manchurian people (Du Bois 1937). Returning to "World Search for Democracy," Du Bois also contended that even while Japanese capitalism extended toward empire (a negative phenomenon), the greater threat was the union of the two "unreconcilable" faces of the White world in opposition to Japan:

White economic reaction, based on imperial exploitation of colored peoples, wants Japanese capitalism to collapse lest it undermine white domination. White economic reform wants Japanese capitalism to collapse in order to advance the universal collapse of industrial imperialism. Both reformers and investors cheer heartily for the economic debacle of Japan but for fatally opposite reasons. It faces Japan with a unanimity on the part of the white world which has all of the too familiar earmarks of the Color Bar (Du Bois 2012, p. 261).

To be sure, Du Bois displays naïve romanticism about the state of Japanese capitalism and imperialism in Manchuria in these earlier writings and his views both overlapped with, and were appropriated by, unapologetic Japanese settler-colonialists and fascists (Onishi 2013; Porter 2010). Yet, it is significant that Du Bois attempted to defend Japanese imperialism on "democratic" grounds; his attempt to defend Japanese imperialism as accountable to the Manchurian masses reinforces a longstanding commitment of his to democratic accountability, notwithstanding its misguided, exaggerated, and "illiberal" permutations which strikingly also mirror his "democratic" analysis of Russia during this period (Rasberry 2016).

And although Du Bois would ultimately distance himself from Japan due to its lack of democratic accountability in Manchuria (and elsewhere), it is worth fleshing out how the logic of his defense of Japanese imperialism parallels other cases. Vaughan Rasberry's "right to fail" framing with respect to Du Bois's discussion of the U.S.S.R. is key here. Building on Rasberry, I contend that Japan and the U.S.S.R. can both be read as instances of Du Bois championing a "right to fail" in pushing for a new vision of transnational democratic leadership. In both cases, Du Bois (1) highlights a good beginning while acknowledging later suffering; (2) understates said suffering; (3) embraces failure and experimentation as permissible because such radical projects of reform potentially hold emancipatory promise; (4) sanctions violence in realizing these projects; (5) recodes certain socialist elements as democratic in nature; and (6) ultimately lays blame for the disasters of these projects at the feet of the West (Rasberry 2016). Whatever historical inaccuracies or charges of polemicism one might (rightly) levy at Du Bois, his bet on Japan's and the U.S.S.R.'s "right to fail" share much in common because, for Du Bois, they both

represented compelling (albeit, imperfect) attempts at resisting White supremacy and democratic despotism.

Beyond the example of his (sincere but misguided) celebration of a “democratic” Japanese Manchuria, Du Bois’s other main locus of a Japanese-led, democratic Asia resided in cooperative economic endeavors. More specifically, the union of Asian labor, for Du Bois, not only developed a common consciousness among workers, but also stymied the possibility of democratically despotic exploitation by the West. This emphasis on unified “colored” labor became salient for Du Bois with respect to Japan and China in 1933, again with his deep concerns over how White supremacy pitted China against Japan: “The real rulers of the world today, who stand back of Stimson, Macdonald, and Herriot, are blood-sucking, imperial tyrants who see only one thing in the quarrel of China and Japan and that is a chance to crush and exploit both” (Du Bois 2005, p. 74). For Du Bois, imperialism, capitalism, and exploitation went together. If the White world could profit from conflict between Japan and China, Du Bois believed the White world would do everything it could to encourage and exploit this conflict. Hence, he was adamant that these “Colossi of Asia” (Japan and China) unite in self-defense and “assume that leadership of distracted mankind to which [their] four hundred millions of people entitle[d them]” (Du Bois 2005, p. 74). To not unite was to put the hope of democratically-accountable leadership in a White world that despised and feared Japan and that coveted China’s land and labor.

Indeed, Du Bois had hoped Japanese transnational democratic leadership would foreground the importance of unifying labor and raising consciousness among “colored” workers around the world. Writing in 1925 in his article “Worlds of Color,” Du Bois painted an ambitious vision of global solidarity in which

quicken India, the South and West African Congresses, the Pan-African movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in America, together with rising China and risen Japan—all these at no distant day may come to common consciousness of aim and be able to give to the labor parties of the world a message that they will understand (Du Bois 1925, p. 443).

Du Bois even held out hope that Russian White labor might reconcile with China, Japan, and India and resist the temptation of White labor to disassociate concerns about democracy in Asia and Africa from concerns about “colored” labor (Du Bois 1925). Du Bois’s hope was that pushing for a democratic vision of unified “colored” labor with common consciousness would eventually lead to better working conditions and the raising of colored wages.

Du Bois rooted his praise of Japanese transnational democratic (economic) leadership in the cooperatives of a famous Japanese Christian socialist—Kagawa Toyohiko (賀川豊彦, 1888–1960).⁶ Kagawa was perhaps most famous for his phrase (and 1936 book) on “brotherhood economics” in which he exhorted his audience to “without delay endeavor to *cooperatize* the economic system of the world. With this accomplished, we shall find that we have built the only sure foundation for the establishment of world peace” (Kagawa 1936, p. 196). In his 1936 essay “Union of Color,” Du Bois echoed these themes:

I believe that by consumers’ co-operation and production, a thoughtful and scientific blending of the preachments of Gandhi and Kagawa, we can stop the dependence of coloured consumers upon white exploitation; that we can establish new ideals of mutual respect which shall not be exclusively and continually white ideals (Du Bois 2005, p. 67).

Of course, Du Bois would have no way of knowing what the future held for Co-op Kobe (コープこうべ)—which Kagawa founded in 1921 and which still exists in 2023 as one of the largest consumer cooperatives in the world (following a merger with Nada Consumer Co-operative)—but his confidence in democratic economic alternatives to Western democratic despotism is nevertheless apparent.

To his credit, Du Bois did, nevertheless, identify dynamics of Japanese transnational leadership that could spell danger for unified, democratic, non-exploitative labor. Du Bois explicitly worried that militaristic fascism in Japan was “bent on extending the Japanese empire in China and the South Seas for new capitalistic enterprise” (Du Bois 2012, p. 263). Thus, it would be a mistake to say—as Mullen (2015) has—that during this period, Du Bois failed to recognize Japan’s role in sustaining non-democratic, transnational capitalist exploitation and imperialism. Du Bois admitted in 1933 that Japan’s domination of China and other areas in Asia could lead to a more dangerous path in opposition to unified labor and common consciousness—one that foregrounded profit and exploitation. In his article “Japan and Ethiopia,” Du Bois revealed both aspirations and apprehensions toward Japan’s economic ventures in Africa.

We have no illusions about the Japanese motives in [the matter of its economic treaty with Ethiopia]. They are going to Ethiopia for purposes of profit. At the same time the treatment of Ethiopia by England and Italy and France has been so selfish and outrageous that nothing Japan can do can possibly be worse (Du Bois 2005, p. 75).

Moreover, around the same time he defended Japanese domination of China in 1937, he also noted the Japanese turn to empire was a tragic response to European imperial domination. While Japan was rightly proud of its resistance to the West,

in her very pride and accomplishment lies danger. The Europe which she copied was no perfect land. The technique of industry which Japan mastered, the capitalistic regime which she adopted so successfully has, as all thinking men see today, threatening, if not fatal tendencies (Du Bois 2005, p. 78).

Du Bois concludes this section by arguing that Japan must save the colored world from slavery to capital (Onishi 2013). Thus, Japan had two options before it (in Du Bois’s mind), which could either shore up or undermine its potential as a transnational democratically accountable leader: it could empower workers through the kinds of transnational, democratic communes championed by Kagawa and others, or it could continue to rely on exploitative, imperial practices rooted in Western capitalism.

I highlight this awareness on Du Bois’s part because it stands somewhat in tension with Eric Porter’s claim that Du Bois sought “a mid-way” between capitalism and communism from 1940–1952 (Porter 2010, p. 4). Du Bois was clearly influenced by socialist visions—as Porter suggests with his language of socialism as a “midway”—but it is not entirely clear that, with respect to Kagawa’s cooperatives, Du Bois viewed this as a “midway” between capitalism and communism. Of course, Du Bois would conflate “cooperative economics” and “communism,” as Mullen (2015) convincingly shows, but this hardly implies that Kagawa’s cooperatives (to take one influential example for Du Bois) were capitalist (or “midway”) in character. Du Bois’s ideal cooperatives were clearly of a kind of socialist character—even if the categories of “socialist” and “communist” sometimes collapsed for Du Bois—in keeping with Du Bois’s growing affinity with socialist forms of analysis, as evidenced in his *Black Reconstruction*, published in 1935 (Burden-Stelly 2019). And this is to say nothing of the complex varieties of socialist and Marxist thinking and praxis happening

in Japan at the time of Du Bois's writing, of which he likely knew very little, despite significant conceptual and practical resonances (Walker 2016).

But even in discussing democratic and socialist labor and cooperatives, Du Bois remains complicated. In 1937, in two separate articles, as he recounted a conversation with Matsuoka, Du Bois would flesh his vision of economic egalitarianism out more, quoting Matsuoka on Japanese capital accumulation: "We Japanese have always been communistic in a sense; we always hold our property for the common welfare, rather than for private profit exclusively" (Du Bois 2012). For Du Bois, Matsuoka's claims spoke to Japan's uniqueness as not quite Marxist, but nevertheless a country in which primary accumulation of capital "was largely a government function" and private property was "a family rather than an individual matter" (Du Bois 2012, p. 261). But, notably, this was a non-democratic vision for combatting economic exploitation, as it did not require prior voter enfranchisement or vote mobilization, as a younger Du Bois had argued was necessary for African Americans in 1903 (Du Bois 1997; Gooding-Williams 2009). To be sure, it was a view indicative of Du Bois's increasing engagement with, reworking of, and acknowledgment of the fundamental importance of, socialist visions of economic uplift later in life, as other scholars—and Du Bois, himself, would note in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940)—have noted (Bogues 2003; Du Bois 2014; Johnson 2016; Robinson 1994).⁷ Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear that Du Bois's vision of Japan was a *democratic* socialist one.

That same year (1937), in fact, Du Bois even went as far as to suggest an ominous future for Japan, rooted primarily in the actions of transnational Japanese capitalists. At the outset of his article "Manpower," Du Bois wrote: "Three things attract white Europe to China: cheap women; cheap child-labor; cheap men. And these same three things, too, attract and build the power of Chinese and Japanese capitalists" (Du Bois 2005, p. 76). In essence, Japanese capitalists were no different from their Chinese or White counterparts—they sought to exploit wherever they deemed it efficient to do so. Moreover, in "What Japan Has Done"—written in the same year, 1937—Du Bois not only intimated the dangers Japanese capitalists in particular posed to unified labor, but also flat out admitted—likely to his chagrin—that Japanese leaders, as a whole, had chosen profit over the people:

Japan today is thinking in terms of capitalistic advance and not primarily in terms of human culture. Her attitude toward China is the main case in point...In the nineteenth century Japan had to protect China against herself, or otherwise Europe from the domination of the Chinese would have sunk little Japan into the sea...Japan, after the war determined to dominate China and other parts of Asia, so as to make a recurrence of European aggression impossible...But Japan forgets the danger of capitalism (Du Bois 2005, p. 79).

Du Bois goes on to note that not only did Japanese capitalists wrongly oppose collaboration with Russian Soviets—a point he re-emphasizes in his 1957 article "The American Negro and the Darker World" (Du Bois 2005)—but also that Japan was far from being a leader that prioritized the well-being of its people over and against profit (Du Bois 2005). Du Bois still held out a sense of hope that Japan could do what it had done before (namely, revolutionize democratic masses against Western-led exploitation), but his narrative demonstrates the flexibility of his approach to democratically accountable leadership. Japan could lose—and indeed, was losing—its mantle as a transnational democratic leader. Thus, I agree with Mullen when he claims that Du Bois revised Japan's role in 1942 because he "needed a colored nation clearly committed to smashing capitalism" (Mullen 2015, p. 144). However, Du Bois had begun this process earlier than 1942; in 1933 and 1937 he

was already revising Japan's role in ways consonant with his early visions of democratic leadership from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century.

The "Progressive Era" Du Bois displayed a romantic idealism of what transnational Japanese leadership could do for global democracy. The "(inter)war" Du Bois held a conflicted view of that very same leadership. The "post-war" Du Bois viewed Japanese leadership with a profound sense of tragedy. Ultimately, the Western-imposed, democratically despotic, cultural, economic, and political tensions Japan sought to navigate proved too much, as Japan's vision of leadership over China in response to Western pressure proved worse than the oppression of the West itself, even despite Japan's and China's shared cultural heritage (Gao 2021). Reflecting in 1961 through the ignorance of his fictional stand-in, Mansart, Du Bois acknowledged the atrocities Japan had committed in China, perhaps most poignantly through Mansart's discussion with a fictional Chinese college president:

The Japanese are our kin. We gave them the civilization which they have developed. But today they despise us because we are victims of Western aggression which they barely escaped, and because of their power they propose to replace the West as our masters. It is explicable that we hate so fiercely our own Asiatic brothers who plan to treat us worse than the foreign devils from beyond the seas (Du Bois 2005, pp. 95-96).

Being made aware of the Western and Japanese atrocities in China over the last century caused Mansart to be "deeply ashamed" of his ignorance of Chinese history. However, at no point does "Mansart" declare that his shame stems from having supported Japan. With new insight into China's oppression by the West and Japan, it is only suggested that Mansart had a "prejudice in favor of the Japanese" that may have been due to him knowing "nothing of recent occurrences" (Du Bois 2005, p. 95). Less than a page after his discussion with the Chinese college president, however, Mansart is found hurrying to Japan—"the one colored nation whose talent, industry, and military might the West feared" and where "he felt himself in a colored nation who hated the white world just as he, despite all effort, did himself" (Du Bois 2005, pp. 96, 97). While it is difficult to conclude with certainty that Mansart acts as a stand-in for Du Bois reflecting in the last few years of his life on his earlier views, it would seem that if such connection could be drawn, Mansart—and by extension, Du Bois—remains convinced that knowledge of China's suffering did not ultimately consign the possibility of a resurgent transnational Japanese democratic leadership to the waste bin of history. Yes, Du Bois admitted in 1950 that he was ignorant of the subordination of the CCP to a bourgeois nationalist party and Stalinist influence and he admitted further that his main concerns about Asia in the 1920s centered on Europe limiting Japan and nurturing Japanese exceptionalism (Mullen 2015), but the smoldering embers of Japanese leadership in the post-1945 moment were far from fully snuffed out.

Yet, in Du Bois's eyes, the tragedy for Japanese leadership was that, in trying to assimilate to Western notions of civilization, capitalism, and empire, it sacrificed genuine Asian democratic self-determination. Scarcely five years after Japan's loss in World War II, Du Bois, in reflecting on Russia and America in 1950, still noted that Japan's was "the greatest uprising of Asia since Genghis Khan" and that Japan's attempt at imperial expansion was really meant to "oust European masters," but that "the tragedy of this epoch was that Japan learned Western ways too soon and too well. She had a fine culture and an industrial technique unsurpassed in workmanship and adaptability. The Japanese clan was an effective social organ and her art expression was unsurpassed" (Du Bois 1950, p. 37). This tragedy leads Du Bois to a telling nostalgia:

She might have led Asia and the world into a new era. But her headstrong leaders chose to apply Western imperialism to her domination of the East, and Western profit-making replaced Eastern idealism. If she had succeeded it might have happened that she would have spread her culture and achieved a co-prosperity sphere with freedom of soul (Du Bois 1950, p. 37).

In resisting Western democratic despotism, Japan justified exploitation of workers and perpetuation of mass poverty (over and against democratic, home-grown cooperatives) as well as imperial rule and subjugation of its Asian neighbors (over and against ensuring their democratic freedom). Put simply, Japan failed to embody genuine transnational democratic leadership. Du Bois openly acknowledged and regretted this before, during, and after WWII, driving home the point that his commitment to democracy and democratically accountable leadership went in tandem with his willingness to give the Japanese empire a “right to fail” (Rasberry 2016).

Moreover, Du Bois’s repetition of the above lines about Japan’s tragedy eleven years later in his narrative around Mansart (Du Bois 2005) is notable not so much because of the repetition itself, but because of what he excised from the 1950 version in restating it in 1961. In the original, unpublished essay “Russia and America,” Du Bois continues:

But in her headlong effort to conquer Asia, [Japan] affronted both the British Empire and American Big Business. That spelled her doom for they had the military might and the wealth, while her arrogance toward Asia gave her no help from those millions ready to follow her lead but as men not slaves. But Japan is not dead. She bides her time. If she learns well she may yet lead new Asia (Du Bois 1950, p. 38) .

Du Bois’s motive for excising these more hopeful passages regarding Japan’s ability to lead Asia as a free people remains unclear. Similarly, his motives for leaving the earlier “Russia and America” and the “World Search for Democracy” manuscripts unpublished remain unclear. They are likely due, in part, to his increasing infatuation with the potential for transnational Asian democratic leadership via Indian independence and Chinese socialism rather than Japanese imperial capitalism. This speaks both to (1) the flexibility of Du Bois’s conception of democratically accountable leadership as well as (2) continuities between global “colored” solidarity and “colored” solidarity in the United States, rooted in a similar kind of leadership, albeit by U.S. Blacks (Shelby 2007). Regardless of his reasons, the 1961 version undoubtedly ends on a more tragic note than its 1950 forebear and, coupled with Du Bois’s “long and emotional goodbye to Japan” in his post-1961 writings (Mullen 2015, p. 149), signal a key shift for Japan and democratic leadership. Japan’s loss in World War II while not totally in vain in Du Bois’s view, as it enabled other forms of durable Asian democratic resistance (Du Bois 2005), nonetheless led Du Bois to see fewer possibilities for transnational Asian democratic freedom under Japan than he had before. This led him more to the view that Japan’s fault lay in the catastrophic effects of imitating White democratically despotic repertoires on the global stage.

Assessing Du Bois, Japan, and Futures of Transnational Democratic Leadership

In the introduction, I noted that we ought to approach Du Bois judiciously, precisely because his ignoring of Japanese imperialism acts as a cautionary tale that even transnational, antiracist, anti-capitalist, emancipatory, and democratic impulses can become limited or fraught in their orientations and conclusions. The reality that Du Bois justified Japanese imperialism as potentially “democratic” and that he was co-opted by racist

Japanese Pan-Asianists (Dower 1986; Gao 2021; Hotta 2007) has significant implications not only for how we understand Du Bois's commitment to democracy, but also how we assess his elitism, sexism, Afro-Orientalist essentialism, romanticism, and increasing affiliation with socialism and Marxism over the course of his life. Yet, as I said before, while I do not disagree with scholars who read Du Bois's defense of imperial Japan as a kind of romanticized Afro-Orientalism with problematic racial and gender-based assumptions, I depart from these accounts by foregrounding Du Bois's genuine, enduring commitment to transnational democratically accountable leadership and how this commitment facilitated a critical stance toward Western democratic despotism. For all his limits, Du Bois achieved a remarkable feat in attempting to take seriously non-Western forms of transnational democratic leadership on their own terms.

Perhaps the most important takeaway, then, is that despite his uncritical championing of a kind of imperial transnational democratic leadership under a "colored" power (i.e., Japan), Du Bois nevertheless resolved to hold said power to the same standard he held for Western democratically despotic powers—the *actual* empowerment and self-determination of the people of the majority world. His critiques, his celebrations, his laments—all of them can be seen as stemming from his transnational democratic commitments to assess potential leaders by their capacity to uphold the empowerment of the people to whom they were committed to lead. This would bear out in his later defenses of Indian democratic, Chinese socialist, and African liberationist movements as well. Furthermore, these reflections on Du Bois's Japan also have implications for the U.S.-focused literature on Du Bois and leadership. Refocusing on Du Bois's transnational democratic commitments challenges charges of Du Bois's "narrow" definition of colored rule as a Platonist aristocratic organization of the unruly demos through shared identity (Gooding-Williams 2009). What's more, highlighting Du Bois's sustained (yet evolving) commitment to democratically-accountable leadership from the 1890s to the 1960s challenges the idea that Du Bois radically discarded or abandoned his 1903 understanding of the Talented Tenth in his 1948 *Boulé Address* (Burden-Stelly and Horne, 2019; Gao 2021; James 1997); rather, Du Bois's shift to the "Guiding Hundredth" seems intended to *further democratize* leadership (Du Bois 2014; Slate 2012), *not* to get rid of it altogether. Du Bois's engagement with Japan bolsters this view. Japan—like other Asian and African contexts—served as a potential model for Du Bois's theorizing of transnational democratic leadership and as such, set the stage for reimagining global leadership beyond Western-centric models and their legacies of White supremacy and democratic despotism. Such reflections hold importance now (even as they did in Du Bois's time) as we continue to grapple with the legacies of Western "democratic" dominance, especially in international institutions designed to facilitate global governance.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted Lawrie Balfour, Adam Dahl, Tejas Parasher, Nazmul Sultan, and the audiences and participants at the University of Madison-Wisconsin Political Theory Workshop (January 2021) and the University of Pennsylvania Center for the Study of Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration (January 2021) for their insightful comments and helpful feedback on earlier iterations of this article. Moreover, I am grateful for the editorial stewardship and the constructive and illuminating feedback from the anonymous reviewers at the *Du Bois Review*.

Notes

¹ This diplomatic event is widely known as the "Triple Intervention" or "Tripartite Convention" of 1895, in which Russia, Germany, and France forced Japan to return land ceded from China in the aftermath of the war.

Britain and America abstained from the negotiations. Many in Japan felt cheated and humiliated by being forced to return spoils of war and this was a major underlying cause for the Russo-Japanese war in 1904–1905.

- ² Here, I am primarily referencing the *bunmei kaika* (“civilization and enlightenment”) movement in the wake of the Meiji Restoration in Japan. The Meiji Restoration (1868) ended over 200 years of shogunate rule and ushered in many reforms under the banner of “modernization” and “westernization.” Fukuzawa Yukichi (福沢諭吉, 1835–1901) was a prominent figure in the *bunmei kaika* movement and openly championed embracing Western “modernization” and abandoning “traditional” Japanese cultural values. Others had more mixed views. For more, see Craig 2009.
- ³ As Vaughan notes, nearly two decades later, Du Bois would draw similar conclusions about the Soviet Union’s “auspicious beginning” which came only by bearing the cost of subordinating known suffering (Rasberry 2016, p. 190).
- ⁴ Again, the parallels between Du Bois’s defense of Japan and his defense of the Soviet Union are significant. As I have shown with Japan, Vaughan Rasberry notes that Du Bois argues that the “West” is ultimately to blame for the costs of U.S.S.R. communism (Rasberry 2016, pp. 212, 216, 222).
- ⁵ Much has been made of how Du Bois’s defense of Japanese imperialism put him at odds with many leading figures of his day, Black and White. In his “Chronicle of Race Relations II” (1942), though, Du Bois made a point of quoting scholars, media, and even soldiers who expressed views similar to his own, thereby complicating attempts to read him as unique in this regard (Du Bois 2005, p. 120; Porter 2010, p. 69).
- ⁶ For more detailed accounts of Kagawa’s influence on Du Bois, see Onishi (2013, p. 81) and Onishi and Shinoda (2019).
- ⁷ Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* (1935) and *Color and Democracy* (1945) are key works in this regard and were written just a year before and nearly ten years after, respectively, he made these comments. For more on Du Bois, Marxist thinking, and racial capitalism, see Douglas (2019).

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Cite this article: Haskins, Alex (2024). Leaders Fit for the Masses: W. E. B. Du Bois and Japan's Transnational Democratic Leadership. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 21: 182–200. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X23000127>