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“She walked on worlds”: Intertextualizing Myth, Sexuality and Class in DuBois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and *The Souls of Black Folk*

“She walked on worlds, and worlds of worlds, and heard there in her little room the tread of armies, the paeans of victory, the breaking of hearts, and the music of the spheres.” from, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, W.E.B DuBois

I broach this investigation of myth, sexuality and class within the context of post-American Reconstruction, particularly as it relates to African Americans and their struggle against Western interpretations of mythology, sex and class distinctions. This critical analysis is a paucity, a small contribution in terms of examining how these socio-cultural signals are rooted against an African diasporic tradition that has largely gone unnoticed, even after slavery ended and American Reconstruction began its violent start. Merriam-Webster defines American Reconstruction as the “reorganization and reestablishment of the seceded states in the Union after the Civil War” (20) and yet many African Americans were excluded from this “reorganizing,” “reestablishing” process. During this volatile period in U.S. history the stakes were enormously high for a nation newly removed from a long history of African enslavement in the New World. Most criticism and literature, with the exception of a few, curtailed any profound dissection on how the admixture of race, sex, class and mythology were inextricably linked to a Union and Confederate alliance. Instead of forging discussions on how to improve national division, (post)-American Reconstruction served as a vehicle to continue most forms of myth-rooted separatism. Fortunately, many literatures and criticisms about various aspects surrounding the collision of class, sex and myth, as they related to race, surfaced. Writing

composed by African Americans during this time was focused on disengaging old notions about formerly enslaved blacks.¹ Aristotelian questions about the nature and reason of life surfaced in many ways. African American critical and literary writers launched subsequent movements that encouraged the involvement of African Americans in the political narrative thread of American literary, critical history. Mythologies surrounding African Americans during and after Reconstruction was a major factor in white on black sexual violence and lynching; moreover, there existed a ninety-percent poverty rate for blacks at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was pressing due to a socio-cultural amnesia regarding the atrocities of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its influence on creating socially misguided myths about non-Whites. The socio-cultural erasure that erupted out of a collective slave past that surfaced in ways were often disturbing and anathema to a larger conversation that corroborated indices of racial, sexual and economic egalitarianism. Nationalistic tendencies before, during and after American Reconstruction were located within hermetic spaces. These closed terrains were relegated to specific definitions of who was and who was not defined as American. What this period of nationalism has shown, and I define nationalism within the confines of white heterosexual Judeo-Christian hegemonic patriarchalism, is the profound exclusion of movements or ideologies that greatly contrast a Western phenomena of nationhood. This essay seeks to unearth a small part of this erasure as told through the critical and creative lens of selected literature and criticism by W.E.B DuBois.

DuBois, a germinal and influential writer and critic of Western modes of class, sexual, mythological and racial identities, expanded narrow unproductive discourses bent on keeping non-Western notions in a state of subjugation. DuBois's critical and creative life highlighted

¹ See Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture Black Consciousness: African American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.

gaps and holes in Western discourse that subjected non-Westerns to classist, sexist, mythological invisibility and alienation. DuBois returned to these discourses constantly; his cyclical visitations and profound rhetoric of uplift allowed the world to see the prostrate position of excluded nations. DuBois was well aware of these competing discourses and put his literary and critical oeuvre at the service of a new type of inter-discourse that elevated previously misguided scholastic understandings of the West versus the non-West. DuBois's dialectic was one of the first to synthesize competing ideas of the West and "the Other." He was one of the first great black scholars to construct a schema that employed and merged sociological, literary, and historical inquiries to find solutions to myth-based racism, sexism and classism. DuBois's two major works, written during post-Reconstruction, *The Souls of Black* (1903) and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) highlight his desire to marry differences in competing notions of myth, sexuality and class.

In reading these two pieces by DuBois and subsequently drafting this paper many questions, that were ultimately associative attracted me like: How does DuBois's African American progressive rhetoric criticize notions of class division as it relates to the problem of race in a southern post-American Reconstructive context? The quest for the silver/golden fleece is a journey of economic independence that eluded blacks. Thus DuBois suggests or is given to an alternative reworking of a classic Western myth, one that elevates a class consciousness whereby blacks are independent and own cotton. Secondly, I asked myself: What are some of the ways DuBois represents sexuality, specifically black female sexuality within the context of post-American Reconstruction's volatile psychic, physical and spiritual hold over black female bodies? After all, one major subject of *Quest* is the co-protagonist Zora's sexual purity. This "purity" is juxtaposed alongside Victorian definitions of chastity and feminine purity as it relates

to marriage and “true” womanhood and sexuality. Sex and sexuality were confined to marriage and procreation, often reduced to the realm of pathology and aberrant psychology². Black female slaves were not defined within these Victorian spaces because of myths that constructed them as inhuman. They were written out of what Dolan Hubbard calls “the social text,” relegated to spaces of sexual, mythical and economic death³. Black women, particularly, were subjected to rape and torture continuously during the Peculiar Institution and notions of black virtue and chastity were of little interest to white slave owners. DuBois interests and emphasis on how sex is legitimized, what parameters are put in place to define sex, is not a validation of Victorian visions of sexuality within a post-American Reconstructive context; he peels skin off fixed black sexual representations and links black sexuality to victimization. Constructions of black females as lasciviousness negatively inform many characters in both the novel, which is a pro-feminist treatise, and in *Souls*.⁴ These constructions stem from biased residual notions that are diametrically linked to chattel slavery under the Peculiar Institution. Finally, why does Western mythology figure prominently in DuBois’s critique of Western impositions on African American reality? DuBoisian criticism and literature is replete with Greek, Roman and Judeo-Christian mythologies. Incidences of African (Egyptian) are rare, and I suggest DuBois uses Greek, Roman and Judeo-Christian mythological influences, or non-African influences, as a rhetorical strategy to criticize Western privileging of these myths. I am of the mind that DuBois manipulates these mythologies to show African Americans quest for an elusive silver/golden

² Jane Ussher. *Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1991.

³ See Dolan Hubbard’s “W.E.B. DuBois and the Invention of the Sublime in *The Souls of Black Folks*.” Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.

⁴ See Beverly Guy-Sheftall. “Remembering Our Feminist Forefathers.” *Progressive Black Masculinities*. Ed. Athena D. Mutua. New York: Routledge, 2006.

fleece (cotton) that elucidates Americans warped views surrounding class, sex and race. In this vein, DuBois attempts to shred myths about African American life by exposing how Western mythology (particularly Greek) defined sexuality, class and racial behavior, alienating blacks from the socio-historical text of post-American Reconstruction.

DuBois began his analysis of mythology, racism, class exploitation and sexuality with his groundbreaking *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). Already aware of how the West defined African Americans, the book's major thesis sought to de-mythologize notions about the inferior status of African Americans within a sexualized, class-based American Reconstructive history. Influenced by Marxist thought, DuBois's instincts are used to examine the major presence of Jim and Jane Crow laws within the south. By calling American Reconstruction the Second Civil War, DuBois espouses the harsh conditions of the period, chiefly as white and blacks fought over the new condition of freed slaves who were no longer working inviolably and without monetary gain. These divisions were rife to the point whites and blacks realized the impact of the other for economic sustainment. DuBois implements a modicum of mythological range, importing mostly Greek myth, particularly in the first three chapters of the book to show similarities between lower class blacks, rich whites and poor whites. In *Black Reconstruction*, DuBois calls upon the goddess Nemesis, the goddess of retribution who also appears in Hesiod's *Theogony* as the daughter of Nyx. She is also known for her beauty; DuBois plays on this beauty by desexualizing Nemesis. Essentially, she represents both black men and women who suffer under a white labor-based system. To mitigate the desperate situation, DuBois turns the myth on its head and reinterprets the myth outside its traditional narrative frame⁵. DuBois also cites Judeo-Christian religious mythology in terms of expressing how blacks felt about their new

⁵ See Charles Lemert's "The Race of Time: DuBois and Reconstruction."

found emancipation after the Civil War. In *Black Reconstruction* he states: “To most of the four million black folk emancipated by the Civil War, God was real. They knew him. They had met Him personally in many a wild orgy of religious frenzy, or in the black stillness of night. His plan for them was clear; they were to suffer and be degraded, and then by Divine edict, raised to manhood and power; and so on January 1, 1863, He made them free” (124). In this representative passage, DuBois’s sexualized language is juxtaposed against and within a religious mythology that exposes the harshness of the black slave condition. I suggest DuBois’s use of Judeo-Christian mythology serves as a backdrop in highlighting certain economic, racial and sexual-behavioral concerns that came out of slavery. Similarly, DuBois’s highly influential dissertation *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States: 1638-1870* (1896) linked notions of morality to slavery. DuBois examines former United States colonies to deconstruct their role in the slave trade. The book blends objective sociological inquiry to historical facts. The ethos surrounding chattel slavery was married to religious myths which in turn corroborated inferior notions of blackness and black sexual identity, resulting in further racialized class maltreatment. In his attempts to demythologize these myths DuBois devised ways to end the slave trade and in turn mobilize economic racial, sexual and class egalitarianism. DuBois uses words like “infidel” and “prostitute” metaphorically to show the rape and economic exploitive relationship between black and whites during slavery and after slavery. In doing this, Judeo-Christian religious mythology is re-crystallized in DuBois’s liberationist rhetoric. The book becomes a titular sociological series of slave horror, a germinal text on slavocracy, a taking apart of what it means to be a colonial power in relation to the countries it has colonized. According to DuBois: “This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where men should be

bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce” (54). DuBois shows his strengths as a paradigmatic historian by exposing the gravity of slavery and the Civil War by using the metaphor of a broken marriage or broken sexual relationship between racist and economically stable Britain and the underrepresented nations they exploited. Beliefs about black racial, sexual and economic inferiority are tied to religious-based myths. As we will see later in *Souls* and *Quest*, DuBois obliterates notions of a nostalgic myth-based American south that paid greatly for their sins after slavery ended. As a result of being trained in Greek and Latin at Fisk and Harvard, it is not surprising that classical references alluding to Cicero, Plato and Jason are found in *Souls* and *Quest*⁶. Tied to these mythological figures is the economic and sexual raping of blacks. In countering this, DuBois’s two works serve as an illustrative rupturing of old mythological renderings about class and black sexuality, particularly chastity. In his powerful essay “Beyond Exclusivity: Writing Race, Class, Gender into U.S. History” David Levering Lewis elucidates DuBois’s radical attempts to foster equality across many fronts. Lewis applauds what he calls DuBois’s epistemic gifts which he views as “fundamental to all analysis—the indivisible, four-fold construct of race-gender-class-sexuality” (9). Lewis goes on to note that “in spite of their conceptual affinities and a common, marginalized past, however, the histories of women and people of color have only very recently begun to transcend the structural problem divined ages ago by de Tocqueville and prophesized by DuBois” (9). Other works such as the *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward the Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940) again display DuBois’s prowess as one of the first sociologists in the

⁶ See Carrie Cowherd. “The Wings of Atalanta: Classical Influences in *The Souls of Black Folk*.”

United States and discusses the influence of globalization, its influences on women's suffrage, class issues, myth and racism around the world.

It can be seen that *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* characterizes, largely, examinations of black reality under white exploitative systems that in most cases employ mythological allusions. DuBois shows in both texts, how these exploitations manifest themselves in many different forms. *Souls* for example, is a collection of fourteen prose pieces that uses sociology, literature, history, religion and myth to dissect classist, racist and sexist realities within the frame of slavery and beyond. *Souls* mainly highlights these reality formations within post-bellum United States, mainly within the American south. In his travels, DuBois captures the devastations of black sexual, racial and class repression; furthermore, DuBois makes a case about black American's ability to thrive in spite of their low condition. DuBois brilliantly locates the horrors of class hierarchy, sexual violence, and lynching within this period by wounding them in mythology; he does this convincingly, in hopes of finding solutions to the African American predicament.

In a similar fashion, *Quest* is a sentimental fictionalized adaption of *Souls*' realism. In using *Souls* as an intertext, DuBois creates a sort of myth-text that blurs traditional assumptions about Greek mythology. The story of Jason and the Argonauts serves as a brilliant mythological backdrop to DuBois's overall discussion of "double-consciousness" and the metaphorical "veil" that demarcates white and black realities. Similar to Jason's quest, DuBois posits a black quest of economic and racial equality via the control of cotton in both texts. Jason's text becomes one that is exploitative and violent, anathema to traditional adaptations of this profoundly influential story. Away from this pleasant narrative, is DuBois's drawing of black people on their backs while Jason (white exploiters) seizes the fleece (cotton) and returns home triumphantly. DuBois

draws a sort of masculine/feminine paradigm: whites as “masculine” intruders and blacks as “feminine” victims and subjects of ill-use. To complicate this broken relationship, Jason’s original myth is not a black myth. He does not obtain the fleece for blacks. The story is designed to champion Jason’s ability to capture the Golden Fleece for the King Pelias. According to the myth, Jason was ordered to bring the fleece home to Pelias. Jason underwent a series of quests, ending in triumph. But triumphant to whom and to what end? DuBois’s play on this psychic and physical distance of the fleece’s relationship to black reality elevates his theories of “the veil,” “double-consciousness” and the alienation of black reality.⁷ In merging black characters into Jason’s myth-text, DuBois allows black readers to understand their own fleece mission, one that has been kept from them during and after the Peculiar Institution. Thus, the post-American Reconstruction in *Quest* becomes not another reflection of slavery, but a concept similar to Locke’s “new negro,” corroborating new notions of what reconstruction, what the new American south is really about. DuBois writes or reconstructs egalitarianism into a socio-cultural frame that sought to exclude blacks in many forms.

DuBois interrogates Jason’s positive position in the myth and shows how blacks were sexually and economically on their backs. By incorporating the mythological story about Jason first, then ultimately omitting the original myth text, DuBois boldly places the golden fleece in entirely different racialized hands. Just as he drew upon the European Romantic movement and Emersonian Transcendentalism to rework his major themes of “double-consciousness” and “two-ness” DuBois both embraces and shuns Emerson’s feelings of being split off from the world. This is in tandem with Romanticism, whose major notions on the individual, the imagination and the natural world, bring about positive and negative feelings associated with being separated

⁷ DuBois outlines his notions of the veil and double-consciousness in “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” from *The Souls of Black Folk*.

from society. DuBois delineates these Romantic and Transcendental notions by placing them within an African American context. Like his reorientations of Romanticism and Transcendentalism, DuBois explores class separatism and mythology, using them to reorient notions of cotton exploitation. Moreover, DuBois uses purity, chastity and sexuality as an occasion to discuss links between myths surrounding black women in relation to white and black male sexist constructions. DuBois's view of post-American Reconstruction, as exhibited in *Souls* and *Quest*, mirrors Romantic and Transcendental notions of a "binary" between different myths of alienation. Women are alienated from men. Blacks are alienated from whites. Upper classes shun lower classes. All of these binaries are constructed about competing mythologies that corroborate division. DuBois locates this binary in *Quest* and *Souls* by focusing on the split between black and white races in the United States through a study of how biased Western constructions of myth, class and sex maintain the oppression of underrepresented groups.

DuBois's comparison of Jason and Zora aids the reader in rupturing the legitimacy of European myth-based entitlement. By illuminating the difficulties in acquiring cotton and preventing further economic exploitation which has been enumerated by the invention of the cotton gin, DuBois's eagerness is predicated on a black cultural desire to break the cycle of myths that have served as a basis for class division. In *Souls* and *Quest*, the cotton gin acts as a *mysterium tremendum fascinans*, or god-like machine, and becomes a metaphor for wealth. The cotton gin is complicit in the Industrial Revolution's terror on black people. DuBois understands this terror by painting a grim and dark mythological picture of southern black and white economics during post-American Reconstruction. In the beginning "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece" DuBois covers a grim picture of Jason and the white owner's negative position in relation to Dougherty County, a predominately black county in Georgia. In showing how blacks

live in “cabins rebuilt on the sites of the old” DuBois outlines the pauper state of black America and in turn links it to the people who may have suffered while Jason was searching for the silver fleece (91). DuBois begins Chapter Eight of *Souls* by asking a powerful rhetorical question:

Have you ever seen a cotton-field white with the harvest? I have sometimes half suspected that here the winged ram Chrysomallus left that Fleece after which Jason and his Argonauts went vaguely wandering into the shadowy East three thousand years ago; and certainly one might frame a pretty and not far-fetched analogy of witchery and dragon’s teeth, and blood and armed men, between the ancient and the modern Quest of the Golden Fleece in the Black Sea. (89)

DuBois spends the rest of this transformative section answering this question and ultimately goes on to fictionalize his concerns within *Quest’s* sentimentalized narrative frame. His powerful protagonists, Zora Creswell and Bles Alwyn grapple with this same rhetorical question in the novel. They understand Jason and the Argonauts to be the Creswells mainly, the Vanderpools and the Taylors. Zora and Bles are aware of Jason and his Argonauts once they begin to plant and grow cotton for themselves in the swamp, despite the dangers in taking the fleece from Jason (Creswells). Strikingly, DuBois exposes the reader to a different interpretation of the myth-text. Similar to the socio-cultural erasures surrounding slavery, DuBois privileges class divisions inextricable to the myth. Although DuBois himself suggests that most blacks in the Black Belt “are ignorant of the world about them, of modern economic organization, of the function of government, of individual worth and possibilities,” they are still quite sensitive to their place within the class division (92). By giving Zora and Bless a relatively “new Negro,” new class consciousness, DuBois is suggesting their talented tenth-status and ability to uplift the rest of their race. DuBois gives both Zora and Bless insight into the

imprecision and arbitrariness of class exploitation. Each character exposes the hierarchy of white ownership over the myth-text by infusing multiple class readings and disowning notions of white cavalier upper-class entitlement. They accomplish this first by entering the swamp and planting cotton seeds for themselves. The growing of cotton in the swamp is an introduction to an altogether different, separate mythical world. Elspeth, who is a black Medea, an enchantress and wife of Jason, aids Zora and Bles's reworking of the original white myth-text. In Bles's view "she wouldn't give her own flesh and blood to help the thieving Jason" (40). Zora disagrees and suggests the two grow their own cotton. The context of the swamp, "one which screamed with voices" represents a dark black space constantly subjected to the evils of the outside white world. Zora, "a child of the swamp" is cognizant of the swamp as a depository of everything negative about the sharecropping system. Her awareness allows her devise a way out of her predicament. She does not want Jason to continue his exploits and toils the swamp in order to rise out of her condition. According to the novel:

The toil was beyond exhilaration—it was sickening weariness and panting despair. The great roots, twined in one unbroken snarl, clung frantically to the black soil. The vines and bushes fought back with thorn and bramble. Zora stood wiping the blood from her hands and staring at Bles. Slowly Zora forgot her blood and pain. Who would win—the witch or Jason? (74)

They discover the monumental task of taking Jason's fleece, decide to steal a mule from the Cresswell plantation and "from that day on," walked in "a new world" (82). Zora and Bles understand that Jason's thievery is not in the best interest of the blacks who live under the sharecropping system. When Ms. Taylor attempts to cast Jason as "a brave adventurer," Bles rebuts and declares: "I thought he was a thief" (25). Ms. Taylor dismisses Bles's comment by

suggesting those were “other times.” The other times are a connection to a slave past that still lingers in the post-American Reconstructive context. DuBois’s ability to draw these parallelisms is demonstrated in Bles’s ability to connect the thief Jason to the Cresswells who now own the silver fleece. Bles and Zora become sensitive to the economic rape of blacks and begin to resent the original Jason myth. Like the real-life sharecroppers in *Souls*, DuBois exposes the absurd position of Jason’s/Cresswell’s power over the fleece/cotton. According to DuBois in *Souls* “The currency of the black belt is cotton. The landlord therefore demands his rent in cotton, and the merchant will accept mortgages on no other crop. Moreover, the system is designed to bankrupt the tenant” (96). In DuBois’s view “the Negro started” in debt and he shows the power of mythology in showing this indebtedness.

Zora and Bles ultimately use cotton as a jumpstart to educational and economic stability. Zora mildly escapes because she first lives in the swamp before she is taken in by the Vanderpools. Zora goes from a “half-clothed” girl who “peeps furtively through a rent gown,” (8) who spoke English incorrectly,” to a girl whose “idioms and errors were chipping away” (107). Zora’s dress and language changes as she attempts to mold herself into a woman who will have a positive impact on the economic stability of her community. Her low economic status does not become symptomatic of typical black female plights. In building the school, with the help of Mrs. Vanderpools’ check, Zora realizes she is able to transform and subvert Jason’s wrath, claiming both educational and economic advancement. In a similar way, Bles moves to Washington, becomes a clerk in the United State’s Treasury Department and ultimately a politician for the Republican Party. He leaves Washington because of the social exploitation he is unable to surmount; because the racist scale is too large and too dangerous, he realizes it would be better to return to the South where he can have a more direct impact on his community.

Bles's return is not defeatist because of DuBois's desire to marry Zora and Bles's, exhibiting the power of redemption and forgiveness.

Bles's move is calculated, a move that will ultimately exhibit a powerful union between a black female and black male whose history was marred by perverted mythological conceptualizations of black sexuality. DuBois relies on obtrusive narrative strategies by making both Zora and Bles a simulacrum of positive myth figures. Against Jason who is exploitative and cast as negative, Bles and Zora are reconstructed as heroic figures who save sexually and economically exploited terrains; moreover, DuBois does not allow this mythic reframing to be violated, aiding in the characters' monumental success. After the "rape of the fleece" Zora vows "they will not kill her; they would not enslave her. A desperate resolve to find some way up toward the light, if not to it, formed itself within her" (161). DuBois makes links between this rape of the fleece and Zora's own sexual violation. In this same soliloquy Zora promises to fight for the Black Belt and simultaneously "never falling lower; never being utterly despicable in the eyes of the man she loved" (161). She asserts "there was no dream of forgiveness, of purification, of rekindled-love" (161).

DuBois intertextualizes myths of sexuality by comparing Zora's sexual plight to that of Chapter Eight in *Souls*. Similarities can be drawn in terms of DuBois's analysis on the treatment of black women and black sexuality within the southern post-American Reconstructive context. He makes links between the present and slavery. His critique in *Souls* is a critique of marriage and sexual lasciviousness. He contends that "the plague-spot in sexual relations is easy marriage and easy separation. This is not sudden development, nor the fruit of Emancipation. It is the plain heritage of slavery. In those days Sam, with his master's consent, 'took up' with Mary"(93). DuBois makes a case for how whites imposed broken notions of marriage and sexuality onto

black men and women during slavery and extended these sexual myths about marriage past slavery. Like class divisions and their links to myths, black sexuality was merged with myths that constructed blacks as promiscuous. In constructing his views on “sexual looseness,” among blacks at the time of post-Reconstruction, DuBois links this to Victorian myths surrounding sexuality and then ruptures this myth in *Quest*. DuBois ruptures these negative myths by illustrating how blacks, particularly black women have been victimized.

In *Souls*, for example, the character Sam exists outside the typical marriage space. He is not a mimetic figure of Victorian manhood. His sexuality is not confined to the marriage bed. Marriage for DuBois exists not only in terms of virtue and chastity, but to the extent of who was allowed virtue and chastity. Sam’s married life “with Mary was usually unceremoniously broken” and was not considered sacred (92). The myth of black as lower-animals hindered Sam’s construction of the typical marriage bed. The legality of marriage and sex were not relegated to blacks because of their impure and low status as slaves⁸. The myth of Jason taking the ram and highly sought after golden fleece, mirrors the myth of white ownership over black marriage, sexuality and chastity. Most males, white and black, carried traditional conservative myths about female chastity and virtue. As a result, in *Quest*, Zora is not a simulacrum of black feminine sexuality because she is not considered chaste although she initially considered herself “pure” (82). She is accused of sexual “[notoriety] (141) and “staying out all night” (143). Mary Taylor consistently asks Bles: “Can it be Bles that you don’t know the sort of girl she is?” (142). Bles becomes aware of Zora’s sexual victimization once he asks her if she is “pure” and she does not answer him in the way he wishes. He does believe she is “impure” and yells to the woods “it’s a damned lie” (142). Once Bles engages Zora’s so-called “purity” DuBois states: “[Zora] was

⁸ See Carolyn Cocca’s book *Jailbait*. Albany: State University of New York UP, 2004.

silent, but her body went all a-tremble. He stepped forward until she could almost touch him; there standing straight and tall he glared down upon her” (144). Bles thus takes on the role of Jason and acts an exploiter, interrogator of Zora’s body. He extends Victorian notions of chastity by policing Zora’s “purity.” Bles’s initial rejection of Zora’s emblemizes Victorianism and harnesses slavery’s sexual violation, even after Zora screams in defense: “He was our master, and all the other girls that gathered there did his will; I began running away, and they hunted me through the swamps. And then—then I reckon I’d have gone back and been—as they are all are—but *you* came” (144). Zora attempts to re-vocalize her definitions of purity, which are definitions of the swamp, independent of the mythological world Jason, the Creswells, Taylor’s and Vanderpool’s inhabit. She pleads to Bles, saying “I thought that purity was just wanting to be pure” (144). Against Bles’s beliefs that foster white masculinist constructions of black sexuality, are the empty recourses Zora does not own; she “knew the end had come” (144).

But of course it does not. It is through a myth recreated that Bles and Zora fulfill what Jason and his Argonauts could not. DuBois success in *Souls* and *Quest* lie in his extraordinary ability at reframing unexpected conclusions. In each piece DuBois delivers the future of promise. In Chapter of Eight of *Souls*, he states: “But for a few thousand poor ignorant filed-hands, in the face of poverty, a falling market, and social stress, to save and capitalize two hundred thousand dollars in a generation has meant a tremendous effort. The rise of a nation, the pressing forward of a social class, means a bitter struggle, a hard and soul-sickening battle with the world” (104). In spite of the Black Belt’s low-economic condition and sexual exploits, DuBois reiterates that Jason’s quest for the Black Belt will not and cannot persist. *Souls* anticipates *Quest*’s story of hope and heartbreak. DuBois suggests that the heartbreak is necessary in order to subvert Jason’s wrath. I am reminded of *Quest*’s influential ending in which Zora ponders a future unexpected in

a newly created swamp: “She stood very still and lifted up her eyes. The swamp was living, vibrant, tremulous. There where the first long note of night lay shot with burning crimson, burst in sudden radiance the wide beauty of the moon. Her little hands groped and wondered over his close-curved hair and she sobbed, deep voiced” (378). DuBois ends the marriage plot on a high note and reconstructs Jason’s myth. For once, African Americans have a myth that pertains to them and highlights their achievements away from interpretations outside their scope. Finally, Zora’s sexual “impurity” is resolved and her chastity becomes null and void. DuBois suggests it is possible for blacks to create narratives outside a traditional mythical frame by showing Zora and Bles’s transformations. In the end they both become characters who “walked on worlds.”

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Cocca's book is the first to examine statutory rape policies in the United States. Cocca discusses the relationship between being young and having a budding sexuality. Most legislators policed adolescent sexuality in an attempt to protect youth, but Cocca believes this comes with a price. Cocca makes links between

morality and religious conservatism. Many laws surrounding statutory rape did not historically align with the general public. Cocca maintains that many groups like feminists and policy makers fought aggressively over statutory rape laws.

Cowherd, Carrie. "The Wings of Atalanta: Classical Influences in *The Souls of Black Folk*." *The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later*. Ed. Doland Hubbard. Columbia: University of Missouri UP, 2003.

Cowherd's brilliant article outlines the Greek and Roman classical influences in DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. Cowherd makes a case regarding DuBois's classically trained education at Fisk, Harvard and Berlin Universities. In most of his writing, chiefly *Souls*, Cowherd details Roman and Hellenistic influences in chapters like "Of the Wings of Atalanta," "Of the Black Belt" and DuBois brilliant novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. Cowherd maintains that most of DuBois's writing enhanced "the totality of his thinking and... who he was" (284). Cowherd believes DuBois championed Greek and Roman myths because of their liberatory effects. These effects align well with DuBois's novels. This article was tremendously useful in that it discusses DuBois's ability to reorient traditional interpretations of classic Greek and Roman mythologies. Cowherd offers a refreshing critical gaze that places DuBois's *Quest* alongside canonized Greek and Roman epics.

Guy-Sheftall, Beverly. "Remembering Our Feminist Forefathers." *Progressive Black Masculinities*. Ed. Athena D. Mutua. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Guy-Sheftall's criticism unearths the contributions of early pro-feminist thinkers like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois and Benjamin E. Mays. Guy-Sheftall makes the case that many of these early thinkers were ignored for their feminist leanings due to strong black nationalistic sentiments. This essay shows that these thinkers were not adverse to women's rights. In fact, their theoretical scopes were progressive in believing that racial advancements had to incorporate equal rights for women. Sheftall outlines a long list of male critical thinkers who were more involved in women's rights than many race women. In Sheftall's view "an examination of the still-neglected topic of African American men and feminism usually begins with the writings and activism of Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois" (47). She considers Mays, DuBois and Douglass to be feminist forefathers because of their loyalty to gender egalitarianism. This article was useful primarily because of the section dealing with DuBois. In many critical circles, the discussion of DuBois as a sexist is still up for debate. I believe Sheftall does a wonderful job at dispelling some of these myths and alleviating concerns about DuBois's anti-feminist position.

Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University UP, 1977.

Levine's germinal classic on African American culture discusses the negative impact of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Reconstruction and racism in the United States. Levine details the relationship between freedom, culture and religion. He encourages African Americans to raise their consciousness because of a past afflicted by racism and slavery. Levine's description of the post-bellum Reconstruction period is intellectually impassioned and heavily researched. Much

of Levine's research focuses on the modernization and the elevation of consciousness in African American life. Many parallels can be made between Levine's research and DuBois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. Most important is Levine's chapter "A Pantheon of Heroes." The journey of these heroes is similar to Zora and Bles's journey in *Quest*. I found this book to be highly useful and apt to articles being written about DuBois's *Quest*.

Lewis, David Levering. "Beyond Exclusivity: Writing Race, Class, Gender into U.S. History." *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1981.

Levering Lewis's essay focuses on the politics of history and its relation to United History. Lewis primarily discusses a history of gaps and holes along the line of race, gender, sexuality and class. Calling upon various important twentieth century historians, Lewis alludes to the concerted effort to ignore various politics that do not focus on the issues dealing with whiteness. Lewis shows how race is linked to class and how sex is linked to gender. Lewis shows developments in political history that affected universities and capitalism. He draws attention to women's history and the powerful influence of women's rights in U.S. history. Although this essay was rather dense and very in depth with its analysis, I enjoyed its desire to merge all forms of oppression. Lewis does not privilege one form over another and shows how all forms of discrimination shape and fit within the U.S. historical landscape.

Simon, Denise. "Review of *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*." *Black Issues Book Review*. Sep/Oct 2005. pg. 61.

Simon's review discusses the transformative effect DuBois's *The Quest of the Silver of Fleece* has had on African American literature at the turn of the century and beyond. Simon speaks to DuBois's ability to transport the reader to the horrors of sharecropping and American Reconstruction. Simon lauds DuBois's command of plot and characterization; she supports his profound use of the supernatural and its marriage to the African American oral tradition. Simon is impressed with DuBois's critique of oppressive economic policies designed to maintain black subjugation and exploitation. She discusses Arnold Rampersad's introduction and DuBois's influence on Rampersad's work. I found this review useful for its taut overview of *Quest*.

Ussher, Jane. *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1991.

Ussher focuses on the history and diagnosis of mental illness in women's history. This book also examines Victorian and western notions of female sexuality as they relate to aberrance and pathology. In Foucauldian terms, Ussher examines the policing of female bodies and questions female sexual and physical representation in history. Ussher shows the thin line between medicalization and torture, between misogyny and mental illness. Ussher dispels notions of women as the weaker sex and unearths the psychology behind women and madness. I liked the articles in this book mainly because they reminded of Foucault, who I

admire. But I also enjoyed these articles because they allowed me to see the pathology behind the construction of female sexuality and identity. What I discovered was that these notions of gender and sex were not specific to race.