

## POLITICAL THEORY

**The Gratifications of Whiteness: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Enduring Rewards of Anti-Blackness.** By Ella Myers.

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In the final sentence of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois appealed to the power of “infinite reason” as a weapon against segregation. Between *Souls*’ publication in 1903, however, and his 1920 book *Darkwater*, Du Bois increasingly qualified his views about the ability of reason to combat racial injustice. In those 17 years, he witnessed a massive uptick in lynching, the spread of state-sanctioned segregation, and anti-Black violence so brutal and gratuitous that it could not be explained in terms of rational action, class interest, or ignorance. White groups of all socioeconomic statuses and political identifications engaged in acts of violence, exclusion, and exploitation against Black people. As Du Bois asked in his searing essay, “The Souls of White Folk” republished in *Darkwater* (2004, 22), “What on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?”

In *The Gratifications of Whiteness: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Enduring Rewards of Anti-Blackness*, Ella Myers takes up Du Bois’s question and addresses it by way of his interwar writings, especially *Darkwater*, *Black Reconstruction* (1935), and *Dusk of Dawn* (1940). Whereas Myers’s first book, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (2013), examined how to cultivate egalitarian ethical orientations, *Gratifications* focuses on the dispositions that foster anti-Black oppression. Rather than being a study of democratic virtue, the book investigates the antidemocratic vices of whiteness. Myers persuasively extracts three “motifs” from Du Bois that are common to the dispositions and practices of whiteness: whiteness-as-wage, whiteness-as-pleasure, and whiteness-as-dominion. All three, she writes, can be considered “gratifications.” Why gratifications? Myers argues that “the concept of *white gratifications*” (8) can help us think beyond received notions of whiteness, which, in contemporary usage, tend to be conceived as privilege, ignorance, or indifference (7). The concept is also “anti-reductive” in that it cannot be reduced to either-or explanations of race or class; as such, it captures both the Freudian and Marxist dimensions of Du Bois’s interwar thought (8).

In making this intervention, the book provides the best reading that political theorists currently have of Du Bois’s “wages of whiteness” thesis—his seminal argument in *Black Reconstruction* that whiteness is a compensatory mechanism for building cross-class white solidarity (31–32). Myers also provides one of the most illuminating

interpretations of Du Bois’s “The Concept of Race,” from *Dusk of Dawn*, where he elaborated his later views about the meanings of race and Blackness. Finally, Myers poses a stark challenge to the notion of unintended consequences as applied to racial injustice, akin to Richard Rothstein’s recent arguments in *The Color of Law* (2017). On Myers’s reading of Du Bois, racism is primarily the result of deliberate, active, and even pleasurable actions. As such, her book should be required reading for scholars of Du Bois, whiteness, violence, and structural injustice more generally. The book’s strengths come in part from her “plural” reading of Du Bois, and each chapter provides compelling textual evidence from a range of his writings that then links his thought to the present. Although I was ultimately unpersuaded by the book’s attempt to unify Du Bois’s plurality of concepts around the idea of “gratifications,” it clearly marks a significant contribution to scholarship on Du Bois and whiteness that many will find value in reading.

The book contains five chapters and an epilogue. Chapter 1, “The Gratifications of Whiteness,” introduces gratifications as “forms of comfort, reassurance, and even pleasure” that provide an “array of rewards.” They are *not* unintentional but “are desired, sought, and defended.” *White* gratifications rest on “the material and symbolic devaluation of Black existence” (8). Chapter 2 examines Du Bois’s “wages of whiteness” thesis, arguing against the common overemphasis on the “psychological wage” and foregrounding the dual nature of the wage as both psychological and *public* (31–36). Myers argues that white citizens’ psychological sense of status is shored up through a racially driven maldistribution of public resources, including recreation, education, and security (35–36). The chapter ends with an illuminating survey of school re-segregation in the United States since 1954 (44–50). Chapter 3 advances the concept of whiteness-as-pleasure, asking: what explains the gratuitous violence of anti-Black racism? Myers creatively turns to several instances where Du Bois speaks of “white sadism” (60–62). Her point is that whiteness is driven not only by a political economy but also by a *libidinal* economy. Black suffering, on this view, is a source of white pleasure (53). The chapter’s coda helpfully shows how whiteness-as-pleasure traverses reductive claims in both Marxist and Afropessimist theories of race (71–78). Chapter 4 elaborates on whiteness-as-dominion, which Myers uses to connect whiteness to ownership and property while diverging from Cheryl Harris’s and Derrick Bell’s “whiteness as property” view. Myers does not dispute Bell and Harris but argues that whiteness *also* looks on nonwhite people—not simply whiteness—as property (85–86). Chapter 5, “Resistances,” explores the possibilities of contesting whiteness, turning to Du Bois’s use of the term “propaganda” (108–19, 128–33). This chapter is weaker than the previous three. It would have benefited from

engagement with recent Du Boisian-inflected research on propaganda, such as Jason Stanley's *How Propaganda Works* (2015), as well as Du Bois's institutional alternatives, including his idea of a "cooperative commonwealth." An epilogue suggests how white people may promote "abolitionist possibilities," including suggestive claims about the role of "pleasure activism" (145–47) that I hope Myers elaborates on in future research.

Despite the richness of Myers's book, I was ultimately not persuaded by the claim that the three modes of whiteness in chapters 2–4 are best captured by the concept of "gratifications." At least in my view, gratification implies a relatively narrow conception of moral psychology in which positive rewards are the primary drivers of people's actions. The focus on positive incentives, however, is somewhat counteracted by Myers's own analysis of Du Bois, which shows that white racism is also activated by *negative sanctions* (the fear of unemployment discussed in chap. 2), *embodied habits* of action and faith (chaps. 3 and 4), and *the motivated and compulsory ignorance* induced, especially in children, by racial propaganda (chap. 5). Although negative sanctions, habits, and compulsory ignorance are often related to positive rewards or gratifications, both psychological and material, they cannot be reduced to the idea of gratifications. Myers seems to recognize the limited explanatory power of the term, as she does not consistently employ it throughout the chapters, and the term mostly disappears by chapter 4.

I want to close, however, by suggesting that Myers's own concept of white dominion offers a more capacious concept for capturing the plural motivations of whiteness.

In a short section of chapter 4, Myers shows how whiteness-as-dominion shapes both whiteness-as-wage and whiteness-as-pleasure (98–100). Dominion, above all else, means a sense of property ownership over non-white people and mastery over nonhuman nature. Myers convincingly argues that although this ideology was central to slavery, it has persisted into the present. By providing a sense of entitlement, it "activates" in white people a sense of exclusive possessiveness over the public goods and psychological compensations that are at the core of the wages of whiteness. Similarly, a sense of dominion may entail not only a feeling of entitlement and mastery but also a "felt pleasure in the suffering of racialized others" (100). In short, the notion of dominion shows how ideas about property derived from slavery manifest in psychological, interpersonal, and institutional relationships today.

Despite the book's ostensible focus on the concept of gratification, therefore, it is Myers's concept of dominion that provides a more historically specific, yet equally broad, concept for understanding the plural set of motivations behind anti-Blackness. Myers's book, in other words, shows that white supremacy persists not simply because it provides psychological and material rewards. These rewards only reproduce whiteness because they are also connected to negative sanctions like fear and a set of historically induced habits, all of which are activated by the continuing presence of ownership and property ideals carried over from slavery. That *Gratifications* can challenge itself in this way is a credit to both its intellectual vitality and its capacity to illuminate the urgent question of why and how racial injustice persists.