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Note: In anticipation of the 2015 Philosophy Born of Struggle conference next month, I am pitching a draft of my ideas in the hopes of refining them further. Below is the abstract of my paper.

Title: On the Methodological Advantages of Historical Fiction for Philosophical Purposes: W.E.B. DuBois' Critique of "The Negro Problem" in *The Black Flame*

Abstract:

Between 1957 and 1961, toward the end of his long life, W.E.B. DuBois wrote a lengthy work of historical fiction, a trilogy collectively titled *The Black Flame*. Through the prism of Manual Mansart— DuBois' protagonist—the narrative offers a probing and illuminating glimpse into the American, political drama of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing particularly on the degree to which "the negro problem" featured in important decisions. As *historical fiction*, DuBois' project deftly escapes both the staid artifactual aspirations of history, and the purely aesthetic strictures of art. Furthermore, as a project concerned with an historical period within the span of DuBois' own life, *The Black Flame* serves as a foil against which we can analyze the differences between this text and DuBois' explicitly (auto)biographical works. In the methodological space between these styles of discourse—history, fiction, and autobiography—*The Black Flame* becomes "propaganda" in the strong, DuBoisian sense, entailing arguments and insights truer than facts: in other words, it becomes Philosophy.

Treating DuBois' trilogy as a self-consciously philosophical project for reasons that I will defend in this piece, this essay will examine two aspects of *The Black Flame*. First, I will consider the meta-philosophical question of DuBois' method: What is the philosophical import of historical fiction? Why write a work of fiction in the first place—historical or otherwise—especially if one's concerns and interests are pressing and critical, as is the case in *The Black Flame*? DuBois' stated responses to these questions are interesting and informative, but do not exhaust the implications or effect of *The Black Flame* as a text. I will argue that the form of any discourse, generally speaking, makes a philosophical statement; furthermore, unlike traditional academic ways of writing, the discursive form of *The Black Flame* in particular—literary, narrative, imaginative—makes a statement that is consistent with—or at least one that does not directly contradict—a conclusion whose premises are based in history and experience.

The second aspect that I will examine concerns the actual argument(s) of *The Black Flame*. In short, DuBois argues that the gravity of the "Negro Problem" in the U.S.—or as we might characterize it now in the 21st century: the reality and pervasiveness of American, anti-black racism—in the formation and constitution of American culture and political institutions has been, and continues to be, greatly underappreciated to the detriment of emancipatory projects. Particularly in the retelling of history, the role of the "Negro Problem" has been overwritten, effectively erased—except for a few self-congratulatory milestones—thus occluding the real motivations of many historical actors, the actual expected outcomes of policies, and the causes of measureable demographic patterns and disparities.

DuBois' methodological choices in *The Black Flame* incline us to reread our canonical texts in light of the implicit statement of their respective forms, particularly those that make arguments that draw upon history and experience, and bear upon contemporary pressing matters. Additionally, the specific arguments of *The Black Flame* heighten our skepticism regarding *any* American political discourse that fails to account for the dimension of race.