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Rethinking utopian limitations: Black co-operative traditions and W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911)

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This think-piece draws attention to African American co-operative traditions. For this purpose, it considers *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), written by the African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois. It calls out for future researchers not to limit themselves to hegemonic, mostly European, reference points but also consider and appreciate ideas and structures that arise from the historic contexts of co-operative imaginaries of the marginalised.

The nineteenth century USA saw many Black communities organising into settlements and townships, especially after the end of the Civil War (for examples, start with Ely, 2010; Pease and Pease, 1963; Robertson, 2024; Wolcott, 2023). In the twentieth century, more Black co-operatives emerged (see Hunt, 2022). For example, the Young Negro Cooperative League, founded by civil rights activist Ella Baker and (in)famous author George Schuyler in the early 1930s, aimed for Black economic independence via co-operative economics. Fannie Lou Hamer's Piggy Bank programme in the 1960s was a grassroot effort to promote financial independence for Black individuals in the rural south. MOVE and the Black Panther Party implemented community-focused strategies. *Soul City* (Healy, 2021) strove to create a thriving city, free from racial oppression. Religious communities, such as the International Peace Mission Movement and The Shrine of the Black Madonna promoted cultural and economic self-reliance (Robertson, 2024). These examples illustrate a strong tradition of Black utopian thinking and organising.

Yet, the popular imaginary sidelines these efforts. For a long time, the White, middle-class commune (or utopian community, or intentional community) has dominated the literary imagination. From faintly canonical texts such as *The Blithedale Romance* (Hawthorne, 1852), to popular bestsellers such as *Drop City* (Boyle, 2003), *The Hammer of Eden* (Follett, 1998), *The Beach* (Garland, 1996), and *Arcadia* (Groff, 2012), these fictionalised depictions are not only rather pessimistic about a co-operative lifestyle but also focus on periods and movements that were largely White. *Paradise* (Morrison, 1997) features an African American co-operative community, but has garnered far less attention than Toni Morrison's other novels.

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Black co-operative structures, on the other hand, have more recently entered the literary imagination via Afrofuturist novels that involve schemes of communal organisation. Octavia Butler's Parables (*Parable of the Sower*, 1993; *Parable of the Talents*, 1998), N. K. Jemisin's The Broken Earth Trilogy (*The Fifth Season*, 2015; *The Obelisk Gate*, 2016; *The Stone Sky*, 2017), *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead (2016), or adrienne maree brown's Grievers trilogy (*Grievers*, 2021; *Maroons*, 2023; *Ancestors*, 2025), have been received well and are widely studied and discussed. These novels highlight that community building and the sharing of resources are essential for survival and resistance, and gesture towards societal change. Precisely from marginalised positions arise fundamental critiques of capitalist society, and co-operative organisation plays a fundamental role in many African American futures.

One the most influential intellectuals of the USA likewise saw a future in drawing on co-operative traditions. W. E. B. Du Bois is famous for his political tracts and sociological works, yet he also wrote fiction, if less highly acclaimed. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) is no obvious addition to the Afrofuturist list above, as it is a more or less realistic romance, set in rural Alabama and in Washington DC at the turn of the twentieth century. *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*'s ending in a co-operative community in Alabama suggests that Du Bois at least considered such organisations as one step towards uplift, and it allows for insights into what he imagined to be the foundations of such a community, and where he perceived limitations. In my reading of the novel (Adamik, 2020), I discuss at length how Du Bois's imagination seems deeply invested in, or limited by, utopian socialism of nineteenth-century USA. However, it is worth considering where Du Bois's imagery took him beyond these references.

Certainly, one building block for the co-operative is a classical, Eurocentric education. Part of the *Bildung of Zora*, the main character and community organiser, consists of reading: from *Plato's Republic* and other ancient classics, presumably in the original, to Dumas, to "Gorky's 'Comrades,' a Cyclopaedia of Agriculture, Balzac's novels, Spencer's 'First Principles,' Tennyson's Poems" (Du Bois, 1911, p. 399; see also Withun, 2019). If this is not symbolic enough: the community grows out of a school for African American children, which was run by a benevolent White teacher from the Northeast.

Yet, education and books do not suffice to turn Zora into a visionary organiser. In fact, the notion that "white folks make books" (Du Bois, 1911, p. 46) underlies Zora's critical engagement with the knowledge that she gains. By contrast, *The Quest* features other smart and educated Black characters that ultimately do little in the service of their community. Zora first must reconnect to her community's experience before she begins organising.

> So she looked on the world about her with new eyes. These men and women of her childhood had hitherto walked by her like shadows; to-day they lived for her in flesh and blood … There were thoughts and vague stirrings of unrest in this mass of black folk. They talked long about their firesides, and here Zora began to sit and listen, often speaking a word herself. (Du Bois, 1911, p. 355)

Another important role is played by the land itself. Economically speaking, '40 acres and a mule' could have provided a foundation for Black equality, had the promise ever been fulfilled. The many examples of Black community organisation throughout the nineteenth century, combined with European utopian socialist thought, tie into Du Bois's imagination of ownership as communal. In addition to this, a deep connection to the land via agricultural labour strengthens Black belonging (in a double sense):

> All that dark earth heaved in mighty travail with the bursting bolls of the cotton while black attendant earth spirits swarmed above, sweating and crooning to its birth pains. After the miracle of the bursting bolls, when the land was brightest with the piled mist of the Fleece, and when the cry of the naked was loudest in the mouths of men, a sudden cloud of workers swarmed between the Cotton and the Naked, spinning and weaving and sewing and carrying the Fleece and mining and minting and bringing the Silver till the Song of Service filled the world and the poetry of Toil was in the souls of the labourers. (Du Bois, 1911, p. 54)

This relationship, established over generations and tied to mystical ancestral rites (Du Bois, 1911, pp. 99-100), enables Zora and Bles to plant and raise a supreme product on the grounds:

the eponymous Silver Fleece, an almost mythically high-quality cotton. That is, Du Bois imagined Black history not only to be included in the communities, but fundamental to their success.

Finally, I want to put special emphasis on the radicality that Du Bois bestowed on this community: in the final chapters, the White plantation owners ponder fearfully the proliferation of such communes, as “Such an example before the tenants of the Black Belt would be fatal” (Du Bois, 1911, p. 408) for the White oppressors. The community even manages to organise against White mob violence. Further, Du Bois openly threatens the White reader with havoc should they continue to wrong his people: “Let my people go, …, lest the world shudder at THE END” (Du Bois, 1911, p. 434). That is, co-operative action should not be pressed into a framework of a transition into middle-class assimilation, but considered as a strategy of survival and meaningful resistance.

That is, while taking into account the intellectual interplay with commonly known co-operative histories, it is necessary to consider other aspects of the Black radical tradition that have influenced African American imageries. The relationship to the land and to Native populations, African influences, religion, fiction, and community structures emerging from survival in enslavement or thereafter, shape how co-operation, survival, and hopefully futures can be conceived.

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