
Resounding *Souls*: Du Bois and the African American Literary Tradition

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By almost every critical reckoning, *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 1989) is the preeminent statement of modern black consciousness. A fusion of history, sociology, personal memoir, and collective memory, *Souls* is unique in form and unsurpassed in influence among African American texts. Yet it is not on these grounds alone that *Souls* garnered the range of commentators and celebrants for its centenary that it did.¹ In his masterwork, W. E. B. Du Bois drew on African American expressive culture—its music and rhetoric—to produce a singular text that resounds throughout the literary tradition of the twentieth century. Metaphors of the Color Line, the Veil, double consciousness, and the Black Belt inform such African American classics as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), *Cane* (1923), *Invisible Man* (1952), and *Song of Solomon* (1987). In Arnold Rampersad's assessment, "If all of a nation's literature may stem from one book, as Hemingway implied about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, then it can as accurately be said that all of Afro-American literature of a creative nature has proceeded from Du Bois' . . . *The Souls of Black Folk*."²

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1. In addition to the conference at Northwestern University, symposia were held at the City University of New York, Morgan State University, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta. The city of Newark, New Jersey, selected *Souls* as the text to be read in their "one city/one book" initiative.

2. Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 89.

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I concur with that judgment. My argument centers on why and how *Souls* has been foundational to modern African American literature. The most important reason lies in the text's self-consciousness of its participation in an ongoing tradition of African American expressivity. However, as its chapters unfold, *Souls* locates itself in a soundscape that exceeds the limits of textual representation. The distance between what the text can and cannot represent is figured by the musical epigraphs that precede each chapter. The silent bars of music drawn from the Negro spirituals or "sorrow songs," as Du Bois deemed them, are signs for sounds to which the text can at best allude. They represent voices that Du Bois's readers in 1903 could not hear. I read the epigraphs as hieroglyphs that stand in for gaps in the text, gaps that subsequent writers would strive to fill. I end my article with a reading of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, a novel that creates a fictional terrain evocative of the Black Belt in *Souls*. In her re-sounding of Du Bois, Morrison writes a text as haunting as its precursor.

Although my argument turns on what *Souls* omits, I want first to acknowledge how much it contains. As a multigeneric volume, *Souls* documents the history of the Freedmen's Bureau, the agency established in 1865 that served as the government of the unreconstructed South for seven years. It charts the rise of Booker T. Washington, who is sardonically described as "certainly the most distinguished Southerner since Jefferson Davis," and assesses his role through the historical perspective of black leadership.³ It compiles statistics on housing and employment. It analyzes the structure of rural black communities, giving data on social class, criminality, and the church. It offers an eloquent brief for the value of liberal arts education and cites the number of black college graduates—400 from white colleges and 2,000 from black institutions—at the time of its writing.

The importance of this data notwithstanding, Du Bois had announced in his preface that the aim of his little book was to "sketch, in vague, uncertain outline, the spiritual world in which ten thousand thousand Americans live and strive" (37). Far from empty-handed supplicants, black folk brought their own estimable gifts—spiritual and aesthetic—to the branch of the kingdom of culture slowly being established in the United States. Consequently, *Souls* testifies to the legacy of the black intellectual and spiritual leader Alexander Crummell. It elegizes those whose potential goes unrealized, including Du Bois's own son, his student Josie, the fictional protagonist John Jones, and his sister Jennie. It presents religious rituals and proclaims the beauty of the sorrow songs, deeming them "the

3. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Penguin, 1989), 37. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically to this edition.

singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people” (205).

Even the chapters that adhere most closely to the protocols of social science leaven facts with poetry. The chapter on the Freedmen’s Bureau, for example, is titled “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” and its musical epigraph quotes the majestic theme of the spiritual “My Lord, What a Morning!” The lyrical title captures the promise inherent in the Emancipation moment and the hopes and dreams subsequently invested in the Freedmen’s Bureau and its work. The chapter outlines the extent to which the promise was realized—particularly in the schools organized for and by freed slaves—as well as its failures, notably in the reallocation of the abandoned lands that was central to the bureau’s charge. The default on the economic promise leaves the slaves freed but hardly free. The spiritual whose opening lines can be heard both as “My Lord, What a Morning” and “My Lord, What a Mourning” measures the distance between the poetry of the promise and the fact of its failure as it weighed on the spirits of black people.⁴

By worrying the line between genres, as it were, *Souls* splinters the opposition between history and memory. As Pierre Nora conceives the terms, history is static while memory is dynamic: “At the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory. History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it.”⁵ *Souls* defies this expectation, for Du Bois writes as both a historian and a poet/preserver of the cultural memory encoded in the spirituals. He writes, that is, with the understanding that the “true” history, the then-unwritten history of black Americans, was expressed in their songs and spiritual traditions.⁶

The protagonist of *Souls* is a traveler, unsure of his relationship to the folk who live behind the veil but certain nonetheless that he is connected to them. One of the first texts in the African American tradition to reverse the journey from South

4. In “The Sorrow Songs,” Du Bois cites the title as “My Lord, what a mourning!” (208). Eric Sundquist points out the ambiguity of the title and suggests that Du Bois might have chosen the spelling he did “to emphasize its resonance as one of the ‘sorrow songs.’” *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1. Charles Nero extends that point in a comment he made in response to this essay. Black English speakers may say/sing “My Lawd, What a Moanin’” and thereby enact the emotion they express.

5. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les lieux de mémoire*,” trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (spring 1989): 9.

6. Shamooin Zamir rightly emphasizes the originality of Du Bois’s conception of unwritten history. Rather than the inclusion of particular events or specific individuals, Du Bois was “concerned, instead, with uncovering those intricate structures of consciousness that are formed, broken, and reformed under the slow and daily violence of actual historical process.” Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888–1903* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 105.

to North mapped in the slave narratives, *Souls* constitutes what Robert Stepto aptly terms a “cultural immersion ritual.”⁷ *Souls* documents the *collective* history of Africans in the United States, particularly the difficult and unfinished transition from slavery to freedom, as well as the *personal* history of its author, a northern-born intellectual who is by dint of birth rather than experience “bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil” (2). The text fashions that personal history as a journey. It begins in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, then moves on to Nashville, where Du Bois matriculates at Fisk, and to the rural Tennessee community in which Du Bois the narrator teaches during the summer in a one-room school. It continues from Atlanta to Dougherty County, Georgia, the heart of the Black Belt. At every destination, the narrator encounters a community more unfamiliar to him than the last, more distant from northern customs and mores, and more steeped in the southern expressive traditions honed during slavery. The book ends as Du Bois, in his study at Atlanta University, meditates on the sounds he has heard.

Du Bois’s “Black Belt” is the center of the black population in the United States. More than one million African Americans lived in Georgia at the turn of the century; it was the “historic ground” in which the traditions go deepest. The region’s rich black soil made it the heart of the antebellum Cotton Kingdom. Du Bois’s idea of “historical ground” is very close to Nora’s “site of memory,” which exists “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists.”⁸

The historical moment in *Souls* is post-Reconstruction, which, as “Of the Black Belt” illustrates, has proven to be a less decisive break with the past for African Americans than for whites. Blacks’ labor was exploited in the Black Belt during slavery; their labor fueled the Confederate war effort when the region became the granary of the Southern troops; and it continued to be exploited after Reconstruction. Continuing, too, is blacks’ resistance, sometimes in alliance with Native Americans but more often solitary and unavailing. The present is eerily continuous with the past. The vastness of the landscape, the ruins of the corrupt old social

7. Robert Stepto asserts that “what is extraordinary and absolutely fresh about this ritual is that, in terms of its symbolic geography, it is a journey both to and into the South.” Stepto, *From behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 66.

8. Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 7.

order, the harshness of the corrupt new social order, and the isolation of a population in which blacks outnumber whites by five to one render this history in the starkest of terms. These terms are at once documentary and poetic, political and prophetic. Du Bois's phrase "the Egypt of the Confederacy," for example, has the force of biblical allusion, connoting both the bondage of the slaves and the peonage to which the putative freedmen and -women have been delivered. The chapter as a whole is, to quote Eric Sundquist, "the spiritual center" of the book.⁹

Leaving Atlanta, Du Bois's narrator invites his reader to join him in the Jim Crow car, a gesture that reinscribes the narrator's racial difference vis-à-vis the white audience that is announced in the book's preface.¹⁰ But the more telling difference in the later chapter is the experiential gap between the narrator and his racial kin. Detraining in Albany, Georgia, "the centre of the life of ten thousand souls" (95), the narrator remarks on the transformation it undergoes on Saturday as black country folk take "full possession of the town" (94). The narrator does not comment further on this incipient nationalism. Instead, cosmopolitan to his fingertips, he draws flattering comparisons between the black peasants of Albany and their counterparts of the Rhine-Pflaz, Naples, and Cracow—all places where he has himself traveled. Stymied by the July heat, the narrator takes several days to "muster courage enough" to explore the "unknown world" that lies beyond the city limits (95).

This unknown world is marked first by the desolate landscape, with its once fertile soil now exhausted. Little of beauty remains, "only a sort of crude abandon that suggests power,—a naked grandeur as it were" (99). Throughout the chapter Du Bois extends the metaphor of the journey, so that the reader comprehends the scene through the eyes of the uninitiated narrator/observer. Soon the power of the natural landscape is associated with the ruins that symbolize the power of the fallen slave system: "The whole land seems forlorn and forsaken. Here are the remnants of the vast plantations of the Sheldons, the Pellots, and the Rensons; but the souls of them are passed" (96). In their stead are the souls of black folk.

9. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 503.

10. Du Bois's address to his reader was well earned. As David Levering Lewis notes, the culture and institutions of the rural South "were as mysterious to most early twentieth-century readers as Livingstone's Africa." Lewis makes bold claims for the sociological importance of Du Bois's chapters "Of the Black Belt," "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece," and "Of the Meaning of Progress": "Not since Frederick Law Olmsted crisscrossed the region before the Civil War, graphically recounting its inefficient productivity, its isolation and ignorance, the sparse luxury even among its seigneurs, and the ubiquity of stunted human and natural material, had there been such a cogent blend of detailed observation and insight." Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois—Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Holt, 1993), 285.

The transformation from white to black (one day the narrator travels ten miles without seeing a white face) produces odd juxtapositions. Mansions seemingly haunted by the past appear suddenly on the horizon, standing silent amid ashes and tangled weeds. Each scene seems to offer a rebuke to the sins of the past. For example, “the Big House stands in half-ruin, its great front door staring blankly at the street, and the back part grotesquely restored for its black tenant” (97). Another crumbling mansion is “filled now with the grandchildren of the slaves who once waited on its tables” (102). As on those Saturdays when blacks take possession of Albany, these changes are not revolutionary; economic and political power remain in white hands.

Although the narrator expresses sympathy for the heirs of the departed slaveholders (“sad and bitter tales lie hidden back of those white doors”), the text gives voice to the heirs of the slaves, who are left to eke out a living from exhausted land. The narrator stops to interview impoverished sharecroppers, blacksmiths and storekeepers, and a handful of black freeholders. One of the freeholders, a tall bronzed man who “walks too straight to be a tenant,” remarks that cotton is down to four cents (97). Another “ragged, brown, and grave-faced man” witnesses slavery: “This land was a little hell. . . . I’ve seen niggers drop dead in the furrow but they were kicked aside and the plough never stopped” (102). On what was once the Bolton estate, worked for years by black convict labor, the narrator meets laborers who are in fact no more free than their slave ancestors. In response to Du Bois’s question of how much rent they pay, one man turns to his neighbor: “I don’t know, what is it, Sam?” Sam’s answer captures the pervasive despair: “All we make” (105). The laconic voices contest for authority with the erudite and eloquent voice of the narrator.

Du Bois’s narrator is quick to cite statistics: 150 barons had ruled 6,000 Negroes; 90,000 acres of tilled land in Dougherty County were valued at \$3 million. He is also adept at charting geography and quoting historical references. But he is open to other ways of knowing. One moment in the chapter stands out in this regard. In contrast to the often barren landscape, the narrator comes upon a verdant scene in which “spreading trees spring from a prodigal luxuriance of undergrowth; great dark green shadows fade into the black background, until all is one mass of tangled semi-tropical foliage, marvellous in its weird savage splendor” (100). In this setting, the narrator “could imagine the place under some weird spell, and was half-minded to search out the princess” (99). But rather than a fairy tale, the narrator reenvisioning history. In particular he calls to mind Osceola (1800–1838), the leader of the Seminoles, whose heritage was part African American and part Native American. Many fugitive slaves joined his army

that he led into battle against the United States during the Seminole War of 1835. Their defeat causes Du Bois's narrator to remark, "small wonder the wood is red" (101). Then in broad impressionistic strokes, he sketches the ensuing history: with no further impediment, the callous planters built what was by 1860 "perhaps the richest slave kingdom the modern world ever knew" (101). The kingdom was characterized by material splendor and moral corruption. The parvenu owners stand in marked contrast to the courageous warrior Osceola.

At the end of the chapter, the narrator seems considerably less estranged from the folk. He sits with a group of people as they tell stories of exploitation and dispossession. Intelligence and industry count for nothing; the talented and the ambitious are cheated as easily as the ignorant. Although the narrator's voice is differentiated by his language and education, for the first time he becomes part of a domestic scene he describes. In the moment he conveys his indignation at the wrong done his fellows, he seems to become aware of the ineffectualness of his hard-won academic knowledge in their world. He explains to one of the group that the sheriff had no right to take his furniture because "furniture is exempt from seizure by law." But the chapter gives the rural black man the last word: "Well, he took it just the same" (110). The world of the Black Belt is one in which neither reason nor law signifies. It is the antithesis of other sites of memory in *Souls*—Fisk and Atlanta universities, for example—where Du Bois is spiritually most at home.

In perhaps the most remarkable gesture in the book, Du Bois uses music, the sorrow songs in particular, to narrow the experiential gap between the collective history of places like Dougherty County and his own. The penultimate chapter begins with his acknowledgment that the sorrow songs had produced a stirring effect on him since childhood, a strange effect that made him know them "as of me and of mine" (204). He emphasizes that he came to this realization in the North, long before he learned anything of the history that produced the songs or, for that matter, of his racial affiliation to those who sang them. He follows this testimony with a description of Jubilee Hall, the landmark building on the Fisk campus that was built with funds raised by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in their performance tours throughout the United States and Europe: "To me Jubilee Hall seemed ever made of the songs themselves, and its bricks were red with the blood and toil. Out of them rose for me morning, noon, and night, bursts of wonderful melody, full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past" (204–5).

Jubilee Hall becomes a metonym for the history of Fisk and of African American education more generally. Fisk was founded in Nashville by officers of the

American Missionary Association in 1866 to educate freed slaves. Few students could pay their way, and George L. White, a white American who taught music and served as the school's treasurer, soon organized a student choir to help raise funds. He trained the group to sing anthems, arias, and popular ballads as well as the spirituals most of them already knew; eight of the original nine singers were former slaves. At first the singers performed locally; then in 1871 they embarked on a national tour. Less than two years later they sang a command performance for Queen Victoria. Despite having to resist classification as "minstrels," they enjoyed great success. Critics applauded them, and audiences clamored for their music, especially the spirituals that most whites were hearing for the first time.¹¹ The choir soon became known as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a name that commemorated the Emancipation. Within seven years they had taken their music across the United States and Europe and raised \$150,000 to support the school.

The Jubilee Singers made spirituals part of the national musical repertoire. The first collection of their songs was published in 1872.¹² Its success led to similar compilations, just as the model of the traveling choir was emulated by black schools and colleges for most of the next century. When Du Bois arrived at Fisk as a student in 1885, he entered a community that preserved and celebrated the slaves' musical legacy. There he heard the "ten master songs," as he deems them (208). In his travels through the Black Belt, he heard the same songs sung not as they were transcribed in books but as they were improvised in churches and tent meetings.

By the time he wrote *Souls*, Du Bois had discerned in the sorrow songs the slave's message to the world, a message that conveys a profound critique of the institution of slavery itself. This critique was the "real poetry and meaning" of the spirituals, the one that lay beneath "conventional theology and unmeaning rhapsody" (210). His interpretation moved the spirituals beyond the domains of religion or entertainment.¹³ For Du Bois, the songs not only protest exploitation but

11. Du Bois cites earlier commentators and collectors of spirituals, including Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the white commander of a regiment of African American troops during the Civil War, who wrote about the importance of music in his memoir, *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870), and Lucy McKim Garrison, who collected slave songs in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina during the Civil War and helped edit *Slave Songs in the United States* (1867). "But," he concludes, "the world listened only half credulously until the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the slave songs so deeply into the world's heart that it can never wholly forget them again." Du Bois, *Souls*, 205.

12. See John Lovell, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame; The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), chap. 25, for a history of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and a discussion of the books published about them.

13. Paul Gilroy notes that "for their liberal patrons the music and song of the Fisk Jubilee Singers offered an opportunity to feel closer to God and to redemption" and a sense of moral rectitude in

inscribe the disruption of family (“mother and child are sung, but seldom father”) and emotional exile (“the mountains are well known, but home is unknown”) (211). At the same time, the spirituals convey the message of hope, “a faith in the ultimate justice of things” (213). The power of the music is tangible, literally so in the construction of Jubilee Hall. Figuratively, its power continues to preserve the spirits of the dispossessed, even in places like Dougherty County.¹⁴

But the meditation that closes *Souls* does not end there. From whence came this power? What is the source of the expressive traditions that anchor the soul? For most of the chapter “Of the Sorrow Songs,” the focus is on the words of the spirituals, words derived in the main from the Bible. Du Bois, the sociologist, is, of course, concerned with the function of the songs as well. He claims to know nothing about music; he says simply that “the music is far more ancient than the words.” To illustrate this point, he transcribes from memory the lyrics and the music of an African song passed down in his family from generation to generation: “We sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of the music” (207). Scholars have since tried but so far failed to translate the words.¹⁵ The song that begins “*Do bana coba, gene me, gene me!*” is one of only two musical quotations in *Souls* that includes both words and music. Of course, in this instance the words cannot signify. The moment presents a sharp contrast to the bars of music that stand as silent markers at the head of each of the book’s chapters.

Scholars have interpreted these epigraphs in various ways. Donald Gibson reads them as “mute ciphers.” Contradicting the meaning that he believes Du Bois intended, that blacks and whites are “in essence the same in that they possess souls,” Gibson argues that the epigraphs convey instead the chasm between black and white, a chasm “as immense as the social, political, economic and temporal chasm” between the nineteenth-century British poet Arthur Symons and the creators of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” In Sundquist’s view, the musical

light of their political reformism. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 90. Well aware as he was of this response and its political usefulness, Du Bois wanted to complicate it by insisting on the political consciousness of the slaves and their descendants as well as the abolitionists and theirs.

14. As Paul Allen Anderson observes, “The songs had outlived legalized slavery as a beacon signaling the ongoing necessity of black liberation.” Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 30.

15. Sundquist argues that a good measure of the song’s significance derives “precisely because it cannot be translated. . . . ‘Do bana coba’ literalizes the vocalization as an unknown language beyond words, a cry out of the territory of sound that is transgeographical and Pan-African in the most elemental sense.” Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 529–30.

epigraphs may be compared to the tradition of African American performance called “lining out.” “In this respect,” he writes, “the chapters may be seen to improvise upon and extend the ideas laid out in the spiritual epigraphs.” At the same time, they constitute “a cultural ‘language’ that cannot be properly interpreted or even ‘heard’ at all, since it fails to correspond to the customary mapping of sounds and signs that make up the languages of the dominant (in this case white) culture.” Taking into account the difficulties encountered by collectors who sought to transcribe the sounds of the sorrow songs according to the Western system of musical notation, Alexander Weheliye concludes that “the musical notes, like the entire text, form a mix that transforms two distinct parts—Western musical notation and spirituals—into a temporary fusion that calls attention to its own impurity.”¹⁶

In considering *Souls* as a generative text within the African American literary tradition, I suggest that we read the musical epigraph as a hieroglyph. *Hieroglyph* is defined as a figure of some object standing for a word or—in some cases, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*—a figure standing for a syllable or *sound* and forming an element of a species of writing found on ancient Egyptian monuments and records. An additional definition of the term involves a figure or a device having some hidden meaning. All of these definitions contain associations that are richly suggestive for *Souls*, which invokes, with poetic longing, “the shadow of a mighty Negro past [that] flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx” (6). More important is the opening reference to the many things that “lie buried” herein, “which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century.” The musical epigraphs, most but not all of which are identified in the last chapter, contain the most profound meanings that are, as it were, hidden in plain sight.

The epigraphs are of course illegible to those who cannot read musical notation. For those readers, the bars may as well be hieroglyphs. Even readers who can identify the key signatures, the notes, and the number of beats in a measure can only recognize those songs they already know. Far more were acquainted with

16. Donald B. Gibson, “Introduction,” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois (New York: Penguin, 1989), xvi; Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 491, 470; and Alexander Weheliye, “In the Mix: Hearing the Souls of Black Folk,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 45 (2000): 551. Weheliye offers a compelling revisionist interpretation of the relationship between the musical epigraphs taken from the spirituals and the literary epigraphs taken from Western poets. He argues that just as the poems transform the spirituals, the spirituals transform the poems so that Symons’s poem, for example, “becomes legible as a lament against the miseries of slavery and a testimony to the ‘Spiritual Strivings’ of black subjects.” Weheliye, “In the Mix,” 552.

the melody of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” than with “Bright Sparkles in the Churchyard,” the spiritual that stands at the beginning of “Of the Black Belt.” The latter would be known only by one who had dwelt behind the Veil or had studied long to excavate its meanings. But beyond standing for the sounds that cannot be captured on the page, the epigraphs theorize their meaning.

In the influential essay “The Race for Theory,” Barbara Christian argues that rather than the dense abstractions of philosophy, people of color theorize in narrative forms that include stories, riddles, and proverbs. Christian asserts that “my folk . . . have always been a race for theory—though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure that is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative.”¹⁷ Those qualities of the hieroglyph are at work in the epigraphs of *Souls*. They are sensual in that they evoke voiceless sounds; to those whose memories cannot insert those voices, the lines and shapes are abstract figures. They communicate, but they withhold as much as they convey. As hieroglyphs, the bars of music stand for what cannot be written, they figure the gaps in the formidable knowledge Du Bois brings to bear on the history and experience of Africans in America. African American writers who follow Du Bois strive to fill in the gaps—to transcribe that sound and the knowledge it encodes—in their poetry and prose.

The Souls of Black Folk has served as a precursor text for generations of black writers. Perhaps the first to revise it was James Weldon Johnson, who gave fictional form to *Souls* in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Johnson invents a protagonist who might be considered the anti-Du Bois, a character who consistently draws the wrong messages from his experiences but whose journey is instructive for readers. Jean Toomer infuses *Cane* with the sounds of the spirituals: “Carol-ing softly souls of slavery/What they were, and what they are to me” (12). Religious shouts grate on the ears of his conflicted protagonist Kabnis, much as they do on the protagonist in *Souls*’s “Of the Coming of John.” Like the ex-colored man, the eponymous protagonist of Ellison’s classic novel experiences what Du Bois famously formulates as “a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (5). Ellison works variations on this theme to produce his trope of invisibility, the trope that defines the relation of black people to the white world in his novel. In his essays, moreover, Ellison has been as influential as Du Bois in his appreciation and critique of African American music.¹⁸

17. Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 281.

18. See, for example, Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964).

In Houston Baker's resonant appraisal, *The Souls of Black Folk* is "a singing book."¹⁹ So is *Invisible Man*. So, too, is *Song of Solomon*, as its title announces, a novel that has not to my knowledge been read in dialogue with *Souls*. In fact, the first voice we hear is Pilate's powerful contralto singing:

O Sugarman done fly away
 Sugarman done gone
 Sugarman cut across the sky
 Sugarman gone home.²⁰

The last voice we hear is Milkman's, as he sings verses of the same song to the dying Pilate in the novel's final scene. He has deciphered the history the song encoded. *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Song of Solomon* express a shared belief that the unwritten history of black Americans lies buried within their songs. But the connections go deeper: *Song of Solomon* revises and extends *The Souls of Black Folk* in several ways: through a tropological revision of the Black Belt; through the revision of an assertion of racial kinship ("Bone of the bone, flesh of the flesh") to the exploration of family history; and through an extension of the biblical allusions that inform both texts.²¹

To illustrate, I turn to the chapter that relates Milkman's encounter with Circe and introduces the second section of the novel. The chapter begins with an allusion to a fairy tale, Hansel and Gretel, that unlike a similar reference in *Souls* foreshadows the aura of enchantment that will surround the chapter's signal encounter. But, as is true of the novel in general, indirection is the mode of telling. So, before we observe Milkman's meeting with Circe, through whom he will hear vestiges of his ancestor's voice, we watch his preparation for that engagement. While still in Michigan with Guitar, he prepares for a mission he does not pursue. Then in Danville, in his conversations with Reverend Cooper and other friends of his grandfather, Milkman begins to understand what he is searching for. It isn't gold.

19. For Houston Baker's analysis, see *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 57–69.

20. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977; New York: Plume, 1987), 6. Subsequent references will be made parenthetically to this edition.

21. For a discussion of "tropological revisions" in African American literary tradition, see Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxv. In their introduction to *History and Memory in African American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally point out that a site of memory "may be [a] historical or legendary event or figure, a book or an era, a place or an idea" (7) and include *The Souls of Black Folk* itself among their examples.

By the time he enters the “dark, ruined, evil” house, now overseen by Circe, Milkman has earned the epithet Du Bois chooses for his persona: he is a “weary traveler.” He has flown from Michigan to Pittsburgh, taken the bus from Pittsburgh to Danville, and waited four days to get a ride to the abandoned Butler place only to find that it is inaccessible by car. Milkman emerges out of a swamp, “a green maw . . . a greenish-black tunnel, the end of which was nowhere in sight” (238). In the scene where Milkman encounters Circe, Morrison revisits the bare ruins of Du Bois’s text. In her novel these ruins are reinhabited by a singular black soul.

Circe, a figure with a “face so old it could not be alive,” presides over the ruins of the Butler mansion; she has been servant to the nouveau riche whites who murdered Milkman’s grandfather, the first Macon Dead, in order to steal his land (240). Like the masters of the Black Belt, the Butlers have died or scattered, and the house has been left to their one-time retainer. Circe is determined to see the house they lied, stole, and killed for collapse into ruins. Resolved never “to clean it again,” she allows the Weimarans she has inherited from the Butlers to foul the house to their hearts’ content. Unlike Du Bois’s narrator, Milkman gives in to the landscape’s weird spell. He meets Circe in a dream. As much an agent of transformation as her mythical namesake, she provides the information he cannot obtain otherwise. “Sing” is not a command; it is his grandmother’s name.

Song of Solomon locates the plantation over which Circe presides outside of Danville, Pennsylvania, far from the historical Black Belt. But the novel’s geographical shifts extend, rather than undermine, its relation to *Souls*. At one point Guitar, who tells Milkman that his “whole life is geography,” probes the meaning of North and South. The terms depend on each other, but they do not define a difference. As Guitar explains, “But does that mean North is different from South? No way! South is just south of North” (114). All of Morrison’s novels redraw the symbolic geography of African American literature and American culture. Just as *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1974) nationalize African American culture by showing how it was carried by blacks from the South—“They come from Mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta. From Meridian”—to Midwestern towns, *Song of Solomon* represents the nationalization of southern white racism in the post-Reconstruction era.²²

22. This last quote from *The Bluest Eye* links these places with the “sound” of the women’s speech. “And the sounds of these places in their mouths make you think of love. When you ask them where they are from, they tilt their heads and say ‘Mobile’ and you think you’ve been kissed. They say ‘Aiken’ and you see a white butterfly glance off a fence with a torn wing. They say ‘Nagadoches’ and you want to say ‘Yes, I will.’ You don’t know what these towns are like but you love what happens to the air when they open their lips and let their names ease out.” Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), 63.

Yet if Morrison's novel nationalizes Du Bois's major geographical trope, it particularizes the assertion of kinship. The history that engages Milkman's imagination is the history of his family: "It was a good feeling to come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people. All his life he'd heard the tremor in the word: 'I live here, but my *people* . . . ' or: 'She acts like she ain't got no *people*,' or: 'Do any of your *people* live there?'" But he hadn't known what it meant: links" (229).²³ Macon Dead resembles the freeholders that Du Bois's narrator admires, but Milkman's fascination with his grandfather's heroic exploits is fueled by the familial connection. He revels in the stories Reverend Cooper and his buddies tell, and he responds in kind with stories about his father's efforts to buy "the Erie Lackawanna" (236). One might be tempted to attribute this shift to the narcissism of Morrison's protagonist, but that would overlook how family history makes female characters more central to *Song of Solomon* than they are to the narrative of Du Bois's solitary quester.²⁴

Milkman is, of course, the indulged son and heir of a father who is very much a Bookerite figure, a man whose capacity for love died in the moment he witnessed his father's murder. Macon's materialism and greed are the object of communal censure: "a nigger in business is a terrible thing to see" is Guitar's grandmother's judgment (22). But his cruel and exploitative spirit have equally dire consequences

23. In *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; New York: Schocken, 1968), Du Bois amplifies the family history he refers to in *Souls*; he even includes a family tree. In a gesture that resonates with *Song of Solomon*, he concedes, "Absolute legal proof of facts like those here set down is naturally unobtainable. Records of birth are often non-existent, proof of paternity is exceedingly difficult and actual written record rare." He has "relied on oral tradition in my mother's family" as well as the "word and written statement from my paternal grandfather" and what written records are available. These are sufficient, for he concludes, "I have no doubt of the substantial accuracy of the story that I am to tell" (104).

24. Feminist scholars have been critical of the gender politics of *Souls*. Hazel Carby notes the presence of Josie and the myth of Atalanta but observes that neither the young woman nor the city "is a symbol of hope for the future of the African American folk, indeed neither have a viable political, social or intellectual future in Du Bois's text. Although as a student at Fisk he was surrounded by black female intellectuals who were his peers, he was not yet able to imagine a community in which positive intellectual and social transformation could be evoked through female metaphors or tropes." Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 20. Historian Joy James acknowledges that "profeminist politics" were a hallmark of Du Bois's career but argues that "a masculinist worldview . . . de-radicalized his gender progressivism." James, "The Profeminist Politics of W. E. B. Du Bois with Respects to Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells Barnett," in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture: Philosophy, Politics, and Poetics*, ed. Bernard W. Bell, Emily Grosholz, and James B. Stewart (New York: Routledge, 1997), 142. *Souls* demonstrates a lack of specificity and consequently an erasure of black women. In its genealogy of race leaders, it offers no mention of Du Bois's black female contemporaries.

at home. He encourages Milkman to exploit his sisters and to treat them as his servants. In an emblematic act, Milkman as a young boy urinates on Lena. As an adult, his attitude toward his sisters—and his mother—is disinterested contempt. Only when he discovers that Corinthians is involved with Porter, a member of the Seven Days, does he show any curiosity about her life. He intervenes to break up her romance, thereby prompting Lena to voice the novel's most explicitly feminist statement (215):

“You don’t know a single thing about either of us . . . but now you know what’s best for the very woman who wiped the dribble from your chin because you were too young to know how to spit. Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. . . . Where do you get the *right* to decide our lives?”

“Lena, cool it. I don’t want to hear it.”

“I’ll tell you where. From that hog’s gut that hangs down between your legs. Well, let me tell you something, baby brother: you will need more than that.”

His sister’s words help to propel Milkman on his journey but not because he recognizes their rightness. Like the stories his parents tell him about their past lives, Milkman finds Lena’s indictment tiresome. It makes him want to leave. That he can embark on his journey, that he has a quest to undertake, is yet another marker of male privilege; Lena and Corinthians cannot leave the house.²⁵

As the novel proceeds, Milkman sheds his sexism, just as he divests himself of his material possessions before meeting Circe. The giving relationship he shares with Sweet, the woman he meets in Shalimar, is one example; his willingness to “surrender” his life in response to Pilate’s death is another. Milkman is capable of this ultimate act only because he has learned well the “other ways of knowing” that Pilate has taught. His lessons begin with his first conscious encounter with the aunt his father forbade him to see. He espies her first posed like an ancient mother goddess, “one foot pointed east and one pointed west” (36). The gifts

25. In his analysis of Morrison’s revision of classical myth, Michael Awkward notes that Milkman’s quest is “inspired by an urge to avoid emotional commitment and familial responsibility.” However, in a conclusion that I find complements my reading, Awkward argues that although Milkman seeks familial treasure, “what he finds, after a series of episodes, conforming to traditional monomythic paradigms for the male hero called to adventure, is a mature sense of his familial obligations, an informed knowledge of familial (and tribal) history, and a profound comprehension of tribal wisdom.” Awkward, “‘Unruly and Let Loose’: Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*,” in *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 145.

she offers, an apple, lessons in how to boil an egg, and how to make wine, carry symbolic significance. Pilate teaches Milkman how to “be” in the world, from the proper way to greet (and treat) other people to the capacity to gain understanding as well as pleasure from sensual experience. Milkman’s acquisition of this knowledge confirms that the other ways of knowing the novel privileges are not women’s ways of knowing. It is, rather, the knowledge that enables one to live wholly in this world and perhaps in the next world as well.

In a telling coincidence, one of the epigraphs to “Of the Black Belt” in *Souls* comes from the biblical Song of Solomon (1:5–6):

I am black but comely, O ye daughter of Jerusalem,
As the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.
Look not upon me, because I am black
Because the sun hath looked upon me:
My mother’s children are angry with me;
They made me the keeper of vineyards;
But mine own vineyard have I not kept.

Dispossession is the key to the passage, as it is to both *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Song of Solomon*. But Morrison’s allusions to the biblical text that inspires her title also serve to deepen the representation of female character. These allusions are richly metaphorical: the sensory images of the biblical text infuse the novel. From the wine, which is a source of ecstasy and wisdom in both the ancient and modern texts, to the gingerroot and other spices that permeate them to the vivid evocations of the pastoral, the novel appropriates the song’s imagery. Thematically, however, the representation of human relations is key. “What is extraordinary in the [biblical] *Song*,” Alicia Ostriker observes, “is precisely the absence of structural and systemic hierarchy, sovereignty, authority, control, superiority, submission, in the relation of the lovers and in their relation to nature.”²⁶ Pilate is the exemplar of this egalitarian vision in Morrison’s novel. She can adhere to it in part because she lives outside of societal structures.

Never married, unaffiliated with any social institution, alienated from her only brother, Pilate has created a home for herself, her daughter, and her granddaughter that moves to its own rhythms. They live in a house without electricity, gas, or running water, “as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road” (27). Pilate, a woman who makes wine for a living, is as unimpressed with status as with technology. Although she is not naive about social

26. Alicia Ostriker, “A Holy of Holies: The Song of Songs as Counter-Text” (lecture, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J., February 18, 1997).

realities (she knows, for example, how to play the “stage Negro” when doing so is necessary to keep Milkman out of jail), she accepts people with equanimity. Macon’s money and position, which mean everything to him, mean nothing to her. Music and memory pervade her home.

At the end of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman is able to decode most of the lyrics of the song whose music he has been hearing since the day he was born. He is able to identify the African ancestor and to recognize himself as a son of Solomon. Moreover, when he revises the song to address “Sugargirl,” he inserts Pilate into the family line (336). Yet Milkman’s quest has succeeded in part at the cost of his sister (and cousin) Hagar’s life. The dark but comely daughter of Solomon, whose beauty Milkman fails to recognize, is sacrificed. Little wonder then that despite the honor the novel accords the family’s history of resistance and struggle, and despite Milkman’s belated recognition of his complicity in Hagar’s death, this family is always already “Dead.”

Many points of difference exist between Du Bois’s text and Morrison’s, but surely a major one is in how they *sound*. In contrast to the silent bars of music in *Souls*, that only the musically literate and culturally knowledgeable can hear, Morrison invents language that resounds in the reader’s consciousness. The monosyllables of the farmers in the Black Belt give way to the polyphonic vernacular voices of the Blood Bank and Shalimar. Rather than competing with the narrator’s voice, these voices extend, clarify, and revise one another’s stories. With their blues inflections and the profusion of metaphor that Zora Neale Hurston described as the “will to adorn,”²⁷ these voices enact the sounds and the meanings necessarily hidden in Du Bois’s hieroglyph. In 1903 readers could not have heard these voices.

Although no spaces comparable to the barbershop or the store exist for the female characters in *Song of Solomon*, they tell some of the most memorable stories. Typically they tell these stories, rich in biblical allusion, in private conversations; often they recount family histories. But collective meanings inhere in these personal histories. These stories, like Du Bois’s narratives, reveal the souls of black folk. A story that Pilate tells about a time before her brother was destroyed by his materialism and greed may be read as a gloss on the novel’s representation of a heterogeneous black community (40–41):

Hadn’t been for your daddy, I wouldn’t be here today. I would have died in the womb. And died again in the woods. Those woods and the dark would

27. Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934; reprinted in *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall [New York: Library of America 1995]), 831–34.

have surely killed me. . . . We were lost then. And talking about dark! You think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There're five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another. Saying something is pitch black is like saying something is green. What kind of green? Green like my bottles? Green like a grasshopper? Green like a cucumber, lettuce, or green like the sky is just before it breaks loose to storm? Well, night black is the same way. May as well be a rainbow.

A blues singer as well as a storyteller, Pilate limns a poetic image of blackness that is filled with metaphor and simile. Blackness to Pilate is not a Veil, but a rainbow. She speaks as one for whom the Veil no longer exists, as one determined to construct her own reality and to live fully within it. Pilate is the novel's consummate artist. At the end of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman learns to hear her voice just as Du Bois's narrator in *Souls* has learned to hear the voices of black folk.

In his grand pronouncement at the beginning of the "Sorrow Songs," Du Bois states, "And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience borne this side the seas" (205). As rich in philosophical, historical, sociological, and political understandings as *Souls* is, none of its insights is more important than this. Bereft of political rights, economic power, or access to education, black people in slavery and in freedom honed their gifts of the imagination and the spirit. Du Bois stands both inside and outside the scenes he narrates. He is at once historian, poet, and prophet. As a historian he brings academic modes of inquiry to bear on his subject. But as a poet and prophet, he takes his charge from the "black and unknown bards"²⁸ who created the sorrow songs. He plumbs the depths of African Americans' experience, sounding its beauty and unmasking its horrors. His art, like that of the spirituals, derives from a tragic sensibility, one that is grounded in history but not bound by it. *Souls* enters, interprets, and extends an ongoing tradition; its echoes and its silences continue to resound.

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28. I take the phrase from the poem "O Black and Unknown Bards" by James Weldon Johnson, anthologized in his *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1921; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969), 123–24.

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In many ways, Du Bois depicts a rather bleak picture of the souls of black folk, outlining the way that the seemingly endless injustice and suffering black people endure forces them into a double consciousness. Unable to escape white racist views of the world, black people become alienated from themselves. At the same time, however, Du Bois suggests that black people's souls exist on a different register from this troubled subjectivity, and are expressed in the tradition of the African-American spiritual. This simple juxtaposition creates a dialog between the Western European literary tradition and African-American folk culture, and suggests that both have equal value—a radical statement in the context in which Du Bois was writing. Get the entire *Souls of Black Folk* LitChart as a printable PDF. Although Du Bois's political involvements have largely defined his legacy, in his time he was a respected author and historian of literature as well. In his best-known book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he drew on both his academic background in sociology and his literary talents to articulate the social and psychological contours of the experience of blacks living in white America. The plight of the Africans brought to America during the slave trade and of their descendants is one of the most dramatic in human history. That there should arise a literature written by black Americans touching their own situation depended on many things—their education, their economic condition, their growth in group consciousness. W. E. B. Du Bois and The has been added to your Cart. Add a gift receipt for easy returns. Buy used While G. W. F. Hegel has been subjected to passionate critique for characterizing Sub-Saharan African peoples as nonhistorical, Stephanie J. Shaw argues, strenuously and insightfully, that W. E. B. Du Bois provides a philosophically informed account of the development of the consciousness and being of black folk as a world historical people. In so doing, Shaw has raised the bar considerably for critical engagement with *The Souls of Black Folk*.—Lucius T. Outlaw (Jr.), Vanderbilt University. From the Back Cover. In this book, Stephanie J. Shaw brings a new understanding to one of the great documents of American and black history. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* is a 1903 work of American literature by W. E. B. Du Bois. It is a seminal work in the history of sociology and a cornerstone of African-American literature. The book contains several essays on race, some of which had been published earlier in *The Atlantic Monthly*. To develop this work, Du Bois drew from his own experiences as an African American in American society. Outside of its notable relevance in African-American history, *The Souls of Black Folk* also...