
Du Bois, Politics, Aesthetics: An Introduction

Robert Gooding-Williams

There is little evidence to suggest . . . that the methodology of formalism contravenes historical perspective or deep political commitment . . . a method is not inherently ahistorical, or endemic to a fixed, divine order. . . . The attempt, then, to treat a literary text by a black writer as a text (a spate of discourse operating according to certain formal principles) need not exclude the critic's whole consciousness, but, of necessity, draws its plenitude into specific concentration.
Hortense J. Spillers, "Formalism Comes to Harlem"

The essays collected in this issue celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. Published in 1903 by A. C. McClurg, *Souls* is Du Bois's biting dissent from the racist and nationalist ideologies animating the public, political culture of post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow America. Announcing that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line," it is Du Bois's best-known attempt to explore the

Earlier versions of the essays collected in this volume were presented as part of "100 Years of *The Souls of Black Folk*: A Celebration," a conference honoring the centenary of the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* and sponsored by the Alice Berline Kaplan Center for the Humanities and the Department of African American Studies at Northwestern University, October 24–25, 2003. For help in assembling this special issue of *Public Culture*, I thank the journal's editorial committee and especially Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, Beth Povinelli, and Claudio Lomnitz. I also thank Beth Povinelli, Claudio Lomnitz, and Dwight McBride for their very helpful comments on the first draft of this introduction. Thanks, too, to each of the contributors.

Public Culture 17(2): 203–15
Copyright © 2005 by Duke University Press

“strange meaning of being black” in a society that was structured by racial apartheid and that consistently treated blacks with contempt.¹ To this end, *Souls* details a sweeping tableau of African American social and political life, highlighting the economic and social legacies of slavery, the fight for political and civil rights, and the contributions of African Americans to the spiritual and material formation of the American nation. The advent of *Souls* was an incisive event—an original, philosophically daring, and artfully wrought initiative that gave new life to the black resistance to white supremacy. In the words of David Levering Lewis, it “was like a fireworks going off in a cemetery . . . sound and light enlivening the inert and the despairing . . . an electrifying manifesto mobilizing people for bitter, prolonged struggle to win a place in history.”²

Lewis’s remarks could be taken as an epigraph for the volume as a whole, because they suggest that *Souls* is both a call to arms and an aesthetic event, at once a manifesto and electrifying sound and light—thus, a book that demands to be read equally as political argument and literary art. His remarks also resonate with the now commonplace claim that Du Bois’s book invites appraisal from many disciplinary perspectives—including politics and literary criticism—because its impact and significance cannot be reduced to the terms available to just one such point of view. The essays collected here support this claim, for they demonstrate the possibility of combining literary critical analysis with detailed reflections on *Souls*’s larger political themes (e.g., white supremacy, homosocial patriarchy, and the relation between race and nation) to produce bifocal readings of *Souls*. Incorporating the sensibilities of the literary critic and the political theorist alike, they rely on the former to explore aspects of Du Bois’s political agenda and on the latter to make sense of his aesthetic choices.

But these essays also support a stronger claim, namely, that the terms of literary criticism have a crucial role to play in exploring the efficacy with which texts establish their literary and political authority. More than any other instance of twentieth-century African American writing, *Souls* has emerged as an authoritative text: specifically, as a text that African Americans have regarded as establishing an appropriate discursive and normative framework for African American political and cultural practices. Few scholars would deny that Du Bois’s critique

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford, 1997), 34. All subsequent references to *The Souls of Black Folk* are to this edition.

2. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois—Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Holt, 1993), 227.

of Booker T. Washington addresses a constellation of political theoretical issues that have decisively (if not exclusively) shaped twentieth-century African American political debates—an eventuality that William Ferris seems to have anticipated when, just ten years after *Souls* first appeared, he dubbed it “the political Bible of the negro race.”³ And most would agree that *Souls* has played a decisive role in the formation of African American literature. Indeed, Arnold Rampersad has suggested that “all of African American literature of a creative nature” stems from *Souls*, while Henry Louis Gates Jr. has written that “no other text, save possibly the King James Bible, has had such a fundamental impact on the shaping of the African American literary tradition.”⁴ *Souls* has demonstrated an enduring efficacy as a source of both political and literary authority. As I argue below, it also conceptualizes these modes of authority as convergent, which is one reason why appreciating Du Bois’s text as literary art is essential to appreciating its political influence. While *Souls* is historically rooted in the segregationist era of Jim Crow, it still demands our attention: the book’s literary and political grip extends well beyond its origins, so much so that its compelling ideas and memorable themes continue to shape valuable discussions of black literature and racial politics in postsegregation America.⁵

Let me clarify the issues at stake here by distinguishing between *Souls* as a political theoretical defense of a politics and *Souls* as a performance of the politics it defends. As political theory, the book answers the question, “What kind of politics should African Americans conduct to counter white supremacy?” Thus it argues that a politics fit to respond to American racial apartheid must satisfy two conditions. The first relates to Du Bois’s depiction of African Americans as

3. William H. Ferris, *The African Abroad; or, His Evolution in Western Civilization*, vol. 1 (New Haven, Conn.: Tuttle, Morehouse, and Taylor, 1913), 276.

4. See Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Schocken, 1990), 89; and Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Introduction,” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois (New York: Bantam, 1989), xiv.

5. For a variety of recent examples, see Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9–41; Gerald Early, ed., *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1–17; Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Knopf, 1996); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Adolph L. Reed Jr., *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially chaps. 8 and 9 and the conclusion; and Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

“masses”: to wit, to his characterization of African Americans as an aggregate of uncultured, premodern slaves, or former slaves. The second relates to his representation of black Americans as a “folk”: that is, to his description of them as the bearers of a historically formed and collectively shared ethos, or spirit. For Du Bois, a politics suitable to counter Jim Crow had both to uplift the black masses—that is, assimilate them to the norms of modernity by battling prejudice and backwardness—and to articulate the ethos of the black folk. In short, it had to be a politics of modernizing “self-realization” (Du Bois’s term) that expressed the spiritual identity of the folk: what I have called a “politics of expressive self-realization.”⁶ *Souls* enacts this politics—most explicitly, I think, in its concluding chapters—by presenting and distinguishing itself as an act of expressive and modernizing political leadership. Performing the politics it defends, the book is meant to satisfy the conditions it identifies as essential to a black American politics that would successfully respond to white supremacy.

As both theory and performance, *Souls* is a densely figurative and carefully plotted composition that invites literary criticism. In the essays belonging to the present issue, careful exegesis and nuanced interpretation underline *Souls*’s literary allusions, its iterated suturing of music and poetry, and its reliance on allegory and the aesthetics of the picturesque. Through readings that concentrate on what the epigraph to this introduction calls “formal principles,” these essays engage Du Bois’s book as political thought or political action while also offering insight into its success in establishing its authority. To be sure, not all the contributions echo, or obviously converge with, the reading of *Souls* I have sketched here (see, e.g., the essays by Alexander G. Weheliye and Vilashini Cooppan). Yet all of them raise questions bearing on *Souls*’s significance as political theory and political performance, and they do so by attending to its specificity as a text—to its use of allegory to understand the political significance of race, to its figurings of homosociality to conceptualize political leadership, and so forth. In a related vein, they also prompt the thought that the politics performed by a text, due to the literary complexity of that text, may quite unwittingly diverge from and put into question the theory the politics is intended to embody.⁷ For most of the contributors to this issue, literary reading and political reading are inseparable.

6. Du Bois, *Souls*, 65. I present a similar sketch of *Souls*’s political philosophical argument in “Politics, Racial Solidarity, *Exodus!*” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 18 (2004): 118–28. I give a comprehensive and detailed reconstruction of that argument in my manuscript in progress, “Contributions to the Critique of White Supremacy: Du Bois and Douglass as Political Philosophers.”

7. Here I mean to allude to the possibility of a more or less deconstructionist reading of *Souls*’s integration of political theory and political performance. I mean also to suggest that there is an affin-

Not all Du Bois scholars appreciate a critical consciousness that concentrates formal and other considerations. It is significant, for example, that the currently most influential study of Du Bois's political thought dismisses the idea that literary analysis can lend itself to political interpretation. Surveying the history of the critical reception of *Souls*, Adolph Reed has reproached petit bourgeois, postsegregation-era black intellectuals for giving short shrift to Du Bois's attack on Booker T. Washington and for preferring literary (or, more generally, "text-based") to political readings of the book. But Reed's polemic depends on two false premises: first, that Du Bois's response to Washington exhausts *Souls's* worth as political thought; and second, that literary and political readings of *Souls* simply cannot coincide. As the essays here collected demonstrate, *Souls's* importance as political thought far and away exceeds its treatment of Washington. As they also attest, the view that literary and political readings necessarily exclude each other, so that interpretation is always a matter of opting for one rather than the other, is not sustained by careful, attentive, and subtle readings of *Souls's* political and literary strategies.⁸



The first essay in this centenary celebration is Cheryl A. Wall's "Resounding *Souls*: Du Bois and the African American Literary Tradition." Taking her bearing from Rampersad's suggestion that *Souls* is the ground from which all African American literature stems, Wall gives special attention to Du Bois's use of bars of music representing the sorrow songs as chapter epigraphs. Du Bois writes, she says, both as a historian and as a poet/preserver of the cultural memory the songs encode. Significantly, Wall describes *Souls's* epigraphs as hieroglyphs that "withhold as much as they convey"—that is, as figures for the gaps in Du Bois's knowledge of "the history and experience of Africans in America."⁹ In her view, African American writing in the wake of *Souls*—like Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), to which she devotes the second part of her essay—forms and

ity between some of the questions raised by the essays collected in this volume and those raised by Judith Butler's well-known and influential efforts to think the political and the performative in connection to each other. See, for example, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

8. Adolph Reed, *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought*, chap. 8. This chapter is an extended polemic against the literary criticism of Houston A. Baker Jr. and Henry Louis Gates Jr.

9. Cheryl A. Wall, "Resounding *Souls*: Du Bois and the African American Literary Tradition," in this issue.

extends the African American literary tradition through its effort to fill in the gaps left by *Souls*'s notable but finally incomplete poetic transcription of the "true," unwritten history to which the sorrow songs allude.

Very broadly speaking, Wall's analysis of the unfolding of African American literary history may be called romantic—provided that, in the spirit of M. H. Abrams, we think of romantic narratives as describing both the fragmenting dispersion of and the attempt to comprehend an original plenitude.¹⁰ For Wall, that plenitude is the presence of an unwritten African American history and experience that *Souls* and subsequent additions to the canon aspire to articulate. But no individual articulation, not even *Souls* itself, fully captures and reveals that history and experience. According to the implicit logic of Wall's argument, every contribution to the African American literary tradition serves as a repository for a fragment of the extratextual plenitude that it incompletely communicates, even as it aims to advance the unifying telos of the tradition as a whole, which is to express and grasp that plenitude in all its richness.

Another implication of Wall's argument is that *Souls*'s aspiration to authenticity—that is, to give truthful expression to African American history and experience—has been the source of its literary authority. In other words, Wall suggests that African American writers have taken Du Bois's attempt to articulate accurately black Americans' history and experience as a fitting norm for subsequent African American literary productivity. Later writers have adhered to this norm, she suggests, precisely to the extent that they have followed Du Bois in pursuing the aim of authentic expressivity by, again, attempting to fill the gaps left by *Souls*'s achievement. Du Bois, arguably, would have been sympathetic to this implication of Wall's argument, for it agrees with his own account of *Souls*'s literary authority, which he links to its political authority. Thus *Souls*'s final chapters distinguish the music of the sorrow songs from that of debased "Negro melodies" (the "gospel," "coon," and "minstrel" songs) on the grounds that the former, but not the latter, afford authentic expression of the Negro folk-spirit.¹¹ Similarly, Du Bois distinguishes *Souls* itself from these debased genres by figuring his own voice, and the text it articulates, as an echo of the sorrow songs. For Du Bois, *Souls*'s literary authority converges with its political authority, for it is precisely *Souls*'s sympathetic articulation of the folk-spirit expressed in the folk song that,

10. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971).

11. Du Bois, *Souls*, 189. I develop this argument at greater length in chapter 4 of my manuscript in progress, "Contributions to the Critique of White Supremacy."

in his view, privileges the mode of political leadership he personifies through the act of writing *Souls*.¹²

If *Souls* succeeds in presenting itself as an authentic and authoritative text, that is in part because of the literary strategies it deploys. In “Du Bois and Art Theory: *The Souls of Black Folk* as a ‘Total Work of Art,’” Anne E. Carroll discusses some of these strategies through a suggestive exploration of the possibility that Du Bois modeled *Souls* on Richard Wagner’s idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a total artwork that succeeds in fusing poetry, music, and theater. Thus, Carroll’s reading of *Souls* emphasizes the book’s chapter-by-chapter epigraphic juxtapositions of European or American verse with bars of music drawn from the sorrow songs. In addition, her essay argues that while “Wagner was interested in creating an art form that reflected and called into being a unified German culture . . . Du Bois was concerned to do for African American culture—and, indeed, for American culture.”¹³ For Carroll, the Wagnerian Du Bois’s synesthesia of song and poetry celebrates and shows the integrity of African American culture, even as it allegorizes and envisions the possibility of a racially integrated American culture.

Carroll’s reading of Du Bois invites the thought that *Souls*’s efficacy in establishing itself as an authoritative text was in part a function of its affinities to *Gesamtkunstwerke*. Carroll notes that Du Bois wrote *Souls* to advance his antiracist political goals but worried that the book would not meet his aims for want of sufficient coherence and emotional impact. Du Bois addressed the first concern, she claims, by using *Souls*’s double epigraphs as thematic leitmotifs that also lend the book a visual and symbolic unity. He addressed the second, she suggests, by relying on the specifically musical epigraphs to affect the book’s readers emotionally (leaving the poetic epigraphs to affect them intellectually) and to prompt them to actively engage the text—for example, to sound out mentally the printed notes they read. In Carroll’s view, *Souls*’s impact as a critique of Jim Crow may have been due in part to the authority it acquired through its literary transmutation of aesthetic strategies that Du Bois discovered in Wagnerian opera.

As other critics have noted, Du Bois also drew on Wagner—and, specifically, on *Lohengrin*, which he later identified as his favorite opera—to frame the single piece of fiction appearing in *Souls*. In “Of the Coming of John,” the protagonist John Jones serves Du Bois as a vehicle for analyzing the deficiencies of alienated

12. For a further development of this line of argument, see Robert Gooding-Williams, “Du Bois’s Counter-Sublime,” *Massachusetts Review* 35 (spring–summer 1994): 203–24.

13. Anne E. Carroll, “Du Bois and Art Theory: *The Souls of Black Folk* as a ‘Total Work of Art,’” in this issue.

African American political leadership. Like Alexander Crummell (as Du Bois portrays him), Jones is a doubly alienated figure, an educated man of culture who finds himself equally estranged from both the racist whites who scorn him and the community of blacks for whose religiously inflected folk-spirit he has no appreciation.¹⁴ Jones cannot be an effective black political leader, Du Bois implies, because he is oblivious to that spirit. But neither can he ally himself with similarly educated white men to bring about “a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color line” (Du Bois envisions “a few white men and a few black men of broad culture . . . joining their hands . . . and giving to this squabble of races a decent and dignified peace”), for white men view him with contempt.¹⁵ Depicting Jones as a sort of tragic hero, Du Bois leaves him, at story’s end, resigned to his double alienation and singing *Lohengrin*’s “The Song of the Bride” as he waits to be lynched.

In “Queering *The Souls of Black Folk*,” the third essay collected in this issue, Charles I. Nero concentrates on Du Bois’s treatment of John Jones’s failure to ally himself with similarly educated white men—that is, on what Nero more precisely describes as Du Bois’s lamentation on the inability of black men and white men to form a “patriarchal union . . . to establish a nation together.” Considering Du Bois’s tale from the perspective of queer literary theory, Nero argues that Du Bois’s lament records his “anxieties” and “epistemological uncertainties” relating to the “conceptions of normalcy” that governed “male bonding and the formation of patriarchal nationalism in the early twentieth century.”¹⁶

At once literary and political, Nero’s reading of “Of the Coming of John” shows how the “queer meanings” that qualify and organize the verbal and figurative texture of Du Bois’s fiction imbue his patriarchal nationalism with homosocial desire and homosexual panic. Specifically, Nero argues that the story is a revision of “Jefferson Davis as a Representative of Civilization” (1890), the Harvard commencement address wherein Du Bois contrasted the Teutonic strong man to the black submissive man. In “Of the Coming of John,” Du Bois reprises the figure of the submissive man in the character of John Jones. Noting that Jones identifies himself with the biblical Queen Esther and arguing that he assumes the feminine position of the bride when he sings Wagner’s bridal song, Nero interprets Du Bois’s hero as a figure for the frustrated desire of black men to establish homosocial, patriarchal bonds with white men. On Nero’s reading, Jones’s deci-

14. See Gooding-Williams, “Du Bois’s Counter-Sublime.”

15. Du Bois, *Souls*, 147, 88.

16. Charles I. Nero, “Queering *The Souls of Black Folk*,” in this issue.

sion to feminize himself expresses this desire but likewise incurs the risk of permanent feminization. Jones reacts to this risk with a homosexual panic that leads him to kill John Henderson, his white counterpart and the childhood friend whom the story figures as the specific object of his desire for homosocial union. After killing Henderson, Jones sings Wagner's bridal song to mourn the death of his beloved friend and to lament the impossibility of cementing homosocial political alliances between black and white men.

In "Du Bois and the Production of the Racial Picturesque," Sheila Lloyd pursues a similar theme by arguing that Du Bois invokes the tropes of literary romanticism—the aesthetics of the picturesque, in particular—to articulate his political desire to affiliate himself with *Souls's* ideal reader, "a northern, educated, white man." Presupposing his estrangement from his ideal reader, Du Bois aspires to succeed where John Jones failed. In fine, he aims to annul that estrangement by eliciting his reader's sympathetic and critical interest in the "Negro Problem." Du Bois politicizes the picturesque by relying on its characteristically pictorial vocabulary to affect the sensibility of his reader—that is, to adapt his readers' perceptions to the landscape of the South in order that they may see and respond differently to what is observed there. Du Bois hopes to teach his readers to think critically by first compelling them to see and feel differently. Aiming to foster a shared sensibility and an imagination of community, he accords a place "to desire, affect, and the aesthetic . . . in the political project of querying and dismantling the color line."¹⁷

Notwithstanding the differences that distinguish their contributions to this volume, Wall, Carroll, Nero, and Lloyd all read *Souls* with respect to its salient racial or national preoccupations—that is, with respect to its interest in African American particularity or in the integration of African Americans into a more inclusive American polity. In "The Double Politics of Double Consciousness: Nationalism and Globalism in *The Souls of Black Folk*," Vilashini Cooppan productively expands this frame of reference by investigating Du Bois's attempt to think and politicize race, nation, and globe in relation to one another. Rejecting the received tendency to read Du Bois's intellectual career through the optic of a conversion narrative that finds in a "later" Du Bois a globalism, cosmopolitanism, or universalism that surpasses and repudiates the nationalism, racialism, or particularism of the "early" Du Bois—hence, the Du Bois who wrote *Souls*—Cooppan discovers in *Souls* "a distinct form of national and racial thinking that finds its expressive

17. Shiela Lloyd, "Du Bois and the Production of the Racial Picturesque," in this issue.

medium and its oppositional force in a certain kind of globalism.” Rather than assert that Du Bois’s globalism “succeeds, transcends, or sublates his nationalism,” she holds “that it is only because he is one that he can also be the other.”¹⁸

Cooppan claims that *Souls*’s distinct form of thinking yields a “new conceptualization and textualization of black identity.” Combining the insights of Edward Said and Frederic Jameson, she defines this distinct form of thinking as “a contrapuntal or dialectical formalism that yokes opposites together at the scene of psychopolitical desire.” Specifically, Cooppan argues that *Souls*’s contrapuntal formalism links and sutures race, nation, and globe: first, through a conceptualization of race as the “shattering source of division . . . within the nation and the redemptive site of memory, connection, and affiliation across the globe”; second, through a figuring of time “for which the psyche, with its recursive temporality of memory, at once backward-looking and forward-moving, provides a model”; and third, through the textual elaboration of “a certain literary figure, allegory, that is also characterized by a back-and-forth movement between two orders of time, space, and signification.” Eschewing the thesis that race or, more concretely, black identity is a simple essence, Cooppan maintains that “race and nation, nation and globe are . . . not constituted ‘before’ or ‘after,’ ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ each other” but rather “in a mutually sustaining fluctuation between seemingly opposed yet secretly conjoined states of being.”¹⁹

Near the conclusion to her essay, Cooppan writes that “*Souls* is a different kind of founding text. National in address, diasporic in its form, and marked throughout by processes of movement, be they those of migrancy, memory, or the allegory that is their textual double, *Souls* emerges as the kind of text that both grounds a tradition and keeps it moving.” With these remarks, Cooppan invites an analysis of *Souls*’s foundational relation to African American literary history and of its circulation as an authoritative text that sharply contradicts Wall’s analysis of these matters. Declining to posit the presence of a plenitude of history and experience that *Souls* but imperfectly communicates, Cooppan reads Du Bois as modeling an interpretation of black American identity as always exceeding the boundaries of the histories and experiences wherein we expect to situate it, for race and nation “expand, deterritorialize, and move.”²⁰ *Souls*, for Cooppan, is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari might have dubbed a *conceptual rhizome*: a centerless map

18. Vilashini Cooppan, “The Double Politics of Double Consciousness: Nationalism and Globalism in *The Souls of Black Folk*,” in this issue.

19. Cooppan, “Double Politics of Double Consciousness.”

20. Cooppan, “Double Politics of Double Consciousness.”

depicting lines of flight (trajectories of movement and deterritorialization, which she ties to migrancy, memory, and allegory) that persistently desediment and displace black identity, thereby preventing it from settling and congealing into the bounded, expressible plenary presence that Wall's romanticism seems to take for granted.²¹ If *Souls* has succeeded in founding and keeping in motion a literary tradition, Cooppan suggests, it is not because its aspiration to authenticity has come to be regarded as a fitting norm for literary productivity but because its intratextual mapping of the movements that displace black identity have prompted still further displacements in writings that have drawn inspiration from *Souls*—as if, paradoxically, *Souls*'s displacement of black identity had been taken to have located a norm proper to the articulation of a distinctively black American literary sensibility; or, again, as if *Souls*'s public circulation as an authoritative text were a function of the impact on African American writers of its rhizomatic delineation of the circuits of black identity.²²

In "The Grooves of Temporality," Alexander G. Weheliye sketches a reading of *Souls* that, no less forcefully than Cooppan's essay, puts into question Wall's romanticism. Like Carroll, Weheliye focuses on *Souls*'s chapter-by-chapter juxtaposition of European or American verse with bars of music drawn from the sorrow songs. In contrast to Carroll, however, he regards these pairings less as emblems of African American cultural integrity or the possibility of American racial integration than as marks of rupture and the articulation of difference. According to Theodor Adorno, the synesthetic integration of individual arts in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was intended to produce "an artifice so perfect that it conceals all the sutures in the final artifact."²³ Whether Du Bois likewise sought to conceal the sutures in his construction of *Souls* is not clear—although Carroll's suggestion that he aspired to reflect and call into being a unified culture may imply as much. In any event, Weheliye's portrait of Du Bois as the "engineer" of a dub mix combining *Souls*'s "phono-epi-graphs" with passages of lyric poetry foregrounds and valorizes *Souls*'s sutures, figuring them not as marking Du Bois's incomplete

21. Here I improvise somewhat on Deleuze's and Guattari's difficult notion of a rhizome. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), chap. 1, especially 21.

22. Here I gesture ever so briefly to the theme of circulation, which has been productively engaged by previous issues of *Public Culture* and which is very clearly implicated in the issues I raise here relating to *Souls*'s accumulation of political and literary authority. See, for example, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, and Recognition," *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 385–97.

23. Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingston (Trowbridge and Esher, U.K.: NLB, 1981), 97.

representation of a “true and authentic African American past” but as future-oriented signs of a new and disruptive Afro-modern temporality.²⁴

Drawing on work of Ralph Ellison and Walter Benjamin, Weheliye gives a political inflection to his engagement with Du Bois when he ties *Souls*’s interruption of the temporality of modernity to “the tradition of the oppressed.” *Souls*, he claims, is a structural enactment of principles implied in Ellison’s meditation on black men’s lives “outside the groove of history” and Benjamin’s criticism of historicism in the name of a messianic sensibility that would explode the continuum of history—principles that demand a syncopated break with the hegemonic sense of time that Benjamin thought was complicit with the accumulation of the wreckage of history. In Weheliye’s reading of *Souls*, the book’s collage-like and distinctive “mixology” is an aesthetic formation that projects a time different than the time of oppression.

Weheliye’s essay forms an appropriate conclusion to our celebration of *Souls*, for its insistence on the futurity of Du Bois’s “fireworks” so effectively challenges the persistent temptation to read it as an expressive artifact of the African American past. *Souls* may indeed have been written in the spirit of an authenticity-based notion of literary and political authority that invites and perhaps justifies romantic accounts of its continuing circulation and authority. But as a dub mix, the book also incarnates a singular, phono-graphic materiality that resists efforts to read it in the spirit of a hermeneutics that would interpret and understand it as a representation of what is genuinely black or African American. To the extent that Du Bois’s recordings of the sorrow songs embody such resistance, they may be appreciated in the spirit of Adorno, and with an eye to the recent writing of Fred Moten, as the sources of an antihermeneutical aesthetic negativity that, in Weheliye’s words, “disrupt[s] the flow of words” and noisily “implode[s] the linguistic utterances that frame them.”²⁵

24. Alexander G. Weheliye, “The Grooves of Temporality,” in this issue.

25. Weheliye, “The Grooves of Temporality.” Here I improvise on Christoph Menke’s excellent discussion of the tensions between Gadamerian hermeneutics and Adorno’s development of the notion of aesthetic negativity in *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. Neil Solomon (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), chap. 1. See also Fred Moten, *In the Break: Aesthetics and the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), especially the introduction and chap. 1.

Robert Gooding-Williams teaches philosophy and African American studies at Northwestern University, where he also is director of the Alice Berline Kaplan Center for the Humanities. He is the author of *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism* (2001) and a coeditor of the Bedford Books edition of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1997). His current projects include a book on Du Bois and Douglass as political philosophers and a collection of essays on philosophy, race, politics, and film. Gooding-Williams's coeditor for this special issue, **Dwight A. McBride**, is chair and Leon Forrest Professor of African American Studies at Northwestern University. Author of *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (2001) and, most recently, of *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (2005), McBride also edited *James Baldwin Now* (1999) and coedited the 2003 Lambda Literary–winning anthology *Black Like Us: A Century of Lesbian, Gay, and Bi-Sexual African American Fiction* (2002).

