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978-0-521-87151-8 - The Cambridge Companion to W. E. B. Du Bois

Edited by Shamoan Zamir

Excerpt

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SHAMOON ZAMIR

Introduction

W. E. B. Du Bois has occupied a pre-eminent place in African American literary, social, and political thought for a very long time, and, in recent years, he has been recognized as a figure central to the history of American thought in the twentieth century. His critique of the educational and political policies of Booker T. Washington set the agenda for debates about populism, leadership, and the relative merits of a humanistic education within the black community for much of the century. His role in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) placed him at the forefront of the African American civil rights movement. As a key interpreter and disseminator of Pan-Africanism, he became a central figure in postcolonial discourse. As the author of a number of landmark works in black historiography and sociology, he brought a scholarly rigor to an understanding of the social and historical dimensions of race in the United States which is impressive even today. As a mentor to and supporter of many of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, he helped shape the literary movement which continues to attract the greatest attention within African American literary studies. Perhaps most importantly of all, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) he produced a work of exceptional literary achievement, among the most widely read and most often quoted works in African American literary history. It is the work by which most readers know Du Bois; it is also the work in which he most thoroughly explores the implications of his famous proposal, made at the first Pan-African conference in London in 1900 and then repeated throughout his career, that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” No other writer has made us understand as clearly and fully as Du Bois that race and modernity are indissolubly linked: to think one is necessarily to think the other.

Du Bois is justly most famous as the author of *Souls*. A collection of fourteen interconnected essays examining the legacies of slavery and the effects of racism from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, it is a text

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which today is regularly taught on any number of college and university level courses of African American and American literature, as well as those dealing with American cultural and intellectual history and the histories of the American South. For most readers *Souls* provides their primary and most sustained contact with Du Bois, and it is the work which most clearly secures his place within American literary and intellectual history. But as significant an achievement as *Souls* is, it is important to remember that it appeared in the early stages of an extremely productive, varied, and long career. Du Bois worked as a writer, teacher, and activist from the 1890s right up to his death in 1963. During these seventy or so years he produced major and influential work in a number of disciplines and genres.

Though rarely included in standard histories of American historiography and sociology, Du Bois was an early champion in America of positivist methodology in both disciplines and set a remarkably high standard for subsequent studies. *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* (1896) was a meticulously detailed piece of archival research which drew upon Du Bois's encounters with Rankean historiography in both the United States and Germany in order to establish new standards of research for African American historical studies. *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), Du Bois's other major achievement in black history, was a groundbreaking examination of the African American contribution to the development of the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. Both works continue to hold much of their relevance today. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899) matched the positivist rigor of *Suppression* and combined extensive fieldwork, conducted largely by Du Bois himself, with an historically informed framework in its account of poverty and social exclusion among the blacks of Philadelphia. *The Philadelphia Negro* established a high standard of research for sociological accounts of African American communities. The famous Atlanta series of sociological and historical studies of African American society, culture, and the past, which Du Bois supervised and edited while a professor at Atlanta University, were a continuation of his early work in historiography and sociology.

In addition to his academic work, Du Bois also wrote poetry, plays, pageants, and a significant body of fiction. These works have not been widely studied, but in recent years the novels in particular have begun to attract considerable critical attention, especially for their attempts to explore race within an international understanding of modernity (e.g. Byerman, Posnock). Du Bois's first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), set in the post-Reconstruction South and exploring the problematic

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of black leadership, shares much with *Souls* but, like much of the subsequent fiction, makes female characters central to the narrative. *Dark Princess* (1928), a peculiar blend of realism and romance, pursues a narrative of an affair between an African American hero and an Indian maharani within a international setting that moves between the United States, Europe, and Asia in its explorations of race, class, and colonialism. *The Black Flame* trilogy consists of *The Ordeal of Mansart* (1957), *Mansart Builds a School* (1959), and *Worlds of Color* (1961), and offers a narrative of black life in America that stretches from 1876 to 1956. Here Du Bois abandons romance, though he revisits the internationalism of *Dark Princess*, and explores an altogether darker vision of the weight of history upon individual lives than in the earlier fictions.

Du Bois made important contributions to African American letters in two other genres: journalism and autobiography. He published widely in newspapers and magazines and founded and edited four journals. The *Moon* and the *Horizon* were early and short-lived attempts to establish journals focused on race, and Du Bois's editorship of the scholarly *Phylon* ran for only four years (1940–4). His major contribution was the founding and editorship of the *Crisis* from 1910 to 1934 (the journal is still in existence). Although it was officially an organ of the NAACP, Du Bois exercised strict and independent editorial control and often found himself in conflict with the views of the parent organization. Nevertheless, under his editorship, the journal became one of the most important national African American periodicals, fostering radical protest and debate as well as the works of creative writers. Through such support and through its literary competitions the *Crisis* came to play an influential role in the shaping of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century (1968), published posthumously, was the last major work by Du Bois. As with the earlier *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940), it eschewed the self-regard and identity politics that characterize much of the genre and offered instead a more radical subsuming of the self within a collective history. And once again the life was located within international frames, with a movement toward Africa in *Dusk of Dawn* and with an account of a visit to the Soviet Union and communist China in *Autobiography*. These two volumes, however, are not Du Bois's only works of autobiography. Such narratives also play an important role in both *Souls* and *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920).

It is perhaps unsurprising that the first phase of serious scholarly interest in Du Bois (from the late 1950s to the end of the 1980s) focused largely on his

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social and political activism and thought within the ambit of African American Studies, and took the form predominantly of biographical accounts. Over the last fifteen years or so, however, a new and remarkably widespread academic interest in Du Bois has developed. This recent scholarship has not only deepened and consolidated existing approaches to his life and work, it has opened up new avenues of investigation. These assessments have focused above all on Du Bois as a writer and on his place within a cosmopolitan, comparative, and internationally defined intellectual history. This re-evaluation has been the product of but has also very much helped produce a series of significant paradigm shifts in both African American and American Studies.

Three strands of reorientation within contemporary American Studies have been especially formative in the current re-evaluation of Du Bois. First and foremost perhaps has been the broader and deeper engagement with race. Black American culture, history, and the arts have been subject to an unprecedented degree of scrutiny by both African American and non-African American scholars at the same time that race has been recognized as a formative force within “white” and “canonical” cultural histories (e.g. Sundquist; North; Lemke, *Primitist Modernism*; Siemerling). As a result of this, the separation of “margin” and “center” is being replaced by a more dialectical and comparative understanding of African American and European American traditions. It is unsurprising that the man who as early as 1903 prophesied that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” should be central to this new critical orientation.

Secondly, the revival of interest in Pragmatism as a tradition of philosophical and cultural thought indigenous to the United States has redirected attention to Du Bois and allowed us to see his work in new contexts. Du Bois studied with William James at Harvard and contemporary accounts of his intellectual development have offered widely divergent assessments of his relationship to Pragmatism. A number of critics locate him within a Pragmatist genealogy (e.g. West, Posnock); others have argued that his writings are best understood as a critical reformulation of Pragmatism propelled by the experience of racism in the United States and the influence of European philosophical traditions (e.g. Zamir, *Dark Voices*).

Lastly, and most recently, scholars have argued against the continued usefulness of studying the culture and history of the United States within the confines of a nationalist paradigm. For these writers, to continue to work within such limits is to reproduce potentially the ideology of an American exceptionalism. What is needed instead, it is argued, is a transnational framework. This has led to renewed interest in the mutually formative influence of Europe and America on each other, as well as to a new

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exploration of hemispheric studies in which continuities and connections between South America, Canada, the Caribbean, and the United States have been brought to the fore (e.g. Rowe, Giles). Within African American studies the move toward transnationalism has taken the form of “black Atlantic” studies, a comparative and mobile understanding of cultural, political, and economic exchanges triangulated between the United States, Africa, and Europe (e.g. Gilroy). Du Bois was engaged by European politics and Marxist thought and activism, he pioneered scholarly interest in African cultural history and was a leading figure in the Pan-African movement, renouncing his American citizenship near the end of his life and accepting residency in Ghana. He has, therefore, become a touchstone for transnational debates within American Studies.

The contributions to the present volume reflect many of the critical orientations and reorientations outlined above, though not in any programmatic way. The *Companion* approaches Du Bois’s work through three broad and overlapping frames: literary studies, the theory of race, and national and international intellectual history. Though not divided into separate parts, the *Companion* falls loosely into three sections which mirror these frames. The first four chapters focus on Du Bois primarily as a literary figure. Zamir offers an exploration of both the overall structure of *Souls* and a close reading of its literary strategies. The discussion includes an examination of Du Bois’s well-known psychology of “double consciousness” and a consideration of the relation of *Souls* to Du Bois’s earlier work in history and sociology. Many of the strands in this extended discussion are picked up, amplified, and approached differently in later chapters. Sieglinde Lemke’s examination of “Of the Coming of John,” the one piece of fiction in *Souls*, continues with close reading through a detailed consideration of Du Bois’s use of Wagner and opens out toward the more extensive overview of Du Bois’s fiction offered by Jennifer Terry. Finally, Carmiele Wilkerson and Zamir attempt to locate Du Bois as a formative presence within the discourse of the “New Negro” and within the literary history of the Harlem Renaissance, the most widely studied African American literary movement and also the one with which Du Bois himself was most consistently associated. A second section of sorts is formed by the essays on race, leadership, and civil rights. Ange-Marie Hancock examines the dialectical relationship between race and diversity in Du Bois’s thought while Axel Schäfer traces Du Bois’s thought on race as it develops through his work as historian and sociologist. Kimberly Springer examines Du Bois’s conceptualizations of race leadership and also offers an account of his actual involvement in the history of the civil rights struggle. The last three essays in the volume place Du Bois within broader national and international intellectual histories.

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Wilson Jeremiah Moses surveys Du Bois's life-long engagement with the place of Africa in world history, and Richard King suggests different ways in which Du Bois can be sited within American and European traditions of thought. Michael Stone-Richards's detailed comparison of Du Bois and Fanon continues this discussion, and, in its examination of psychology and of *Souls*, also allows the reader to circle back to earlier chapters.

Given the length of Du Bois's life and his incredible productivity as a writer, it is not possible to provide a fully comprehensive account of his achievement in a volume of this size. The editorial approach taken here is certainly not one which might have been taken by a historian, or a sociologist, or a political scientist. But even from the perspective of literary or intellectual history, there are certain aspects of Du Bois's work which have had to be excluded due to limitations of space. So, for example, Du Bois's autobiographical writing and his journalism are touched upon but not considered at length.

The *Companion* also grounds itself first and foremost in considerations of Du Bois's work up to the outbreak of World War II. There are two reasons for this. Though Du Bois continued to write and to produce works of importance throughout his life, his claim upon our attention rests above all on certain key texts which appeared between 1896 and 1940, from *Suppression of the African Slave-Trade* to *Dusk of Dawn*. Secondly, it is also the case that the foundations of Du Bois's philosophical, political, and cultural ideas and attitudes were securely laid through a late-nineteenth-century American and European education, and through the ways in which this education confronted the failure of the promise of Emancipation and Reconstruction which defined and shaped African American social and historical experience during the first fifty years of Du Bois's life.

A Note on Citations

At present the most comprehensive and readily accessible collection of Du Bois's works is *Writings*, ed. N. Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986). Wherever possible this volume has been used as the common source of citations in the *Companion*. A nineteen-volume edition of Du Bois's works is forthcoming from Oxford University Press under the editorship of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., but was not available at the time of going to press.

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I

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*The Souls of Black Folk: Thought
and Afterthought*

... a combination of social problems is far more than a matter of mere
addition; – the combination itself is a problem.

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899)

The subtitle of *The Souls of Black Folk* is “*Essays and Sketches*.” Together, the title and subtitle indicate a collection which offers the reader variations upon a theme. The fourteen chapters which comprise the main body of the book were written between 1897 and 1903. Nine had been published previously in various journals and magazines before being revised for inclusion in *Souls*. Taken together, the fourteen chapters range across social, political, and economic history, religion and education, psychology, the sociology of music, autobiography, and fiction. But *Souls* is more than simply a collection of essays and fiction held loosely together by a focus on the broad common ground of African American historical experience and contemporary life. It is a “combination” but one which is more than “mere addition.” In bringing together the disparate pieces, in revising the already published ones, and in ordering and framing them in particular ways, Du Bois transfigured them, so that *Souls* became a literary work which is greater than the sum of its parts.

In its opening lines *Souls* announces the problem which is its first subject: “the color-line” as a border which, in its very divisiveness, is constitutive of modernity. The present essay argues that the book’s literary achievement lies above all in creating a form in which understanding can only grasp the scope and nature of the problem of race and modernity, its confounding knottiness, by passing through its own undoing and leaving behind the established academic and journalistic conventions of social analysis. In arguing this I do not mean to suggest that Du Bois severs himself from his own pioneering work in historiography and sociology which precedes *Souls*; rather, I am proposing that in developing a model of integrative thought best described as a form of poetic imagination, *Souls* registers a recognition of the

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limitations of an instrumentalist or specialized shaping of knowledge, a delimiting which Du Bois's own academic work both inherits and innovates. It is because the structural "fact" of "color-prejudice" is always division, both social and psychological, that *Souls* insists upon "the breadth and broadening of human reason" and a "catholicity of taste and culture" as necessary responses.¹ This is why Du Bois's major work is treated here as a comedy. Reflecting on the comic "attitude toward history," Kenneth Burke has written that "the process of processes which this comedy meditates upon" is what he calls the "bureaucratization of the imaginative." By this Burke means to indicate a distrust in "the carrying out of one possibility because it necessarily restricts other possibilities."² *Souls* doggedly pursues the plural. Tragically haunted everywhere by social fracture and death, it seeks nevertheless to connect and restore through an imaginative plenitude, even as it acknowledges the limits faced by this endeavor. The mobile line between fragmentation and integration is a structuring principle in *Souls*, and the problem of reading Du Bois's book is the problem of reading this line in its movement. In this sense, "combination itself is a problem."

Although *Souls* has garnered substantial attention from literary scholars and intellectual historians over the last thirty or so years, and especially in the last decade, critical accounts have consistently overlooked the fact that Du Bois himself signaled his awareness of the particular nature of his own form at both the structural level of the whole, and also at the more intimate level of style, image, and metaphor. Du Bois openly acknowledged the demands his work was likely to make on the reader, and in so doing he explicitly invited a reading in which meaning was actively produced rather than passively received. In "The Forethought" and "The After-thought" which frame *Souls*, and in a brief note on the book published in 1904, Du Bois provided what may be taken as guides, provisional and partial to be sure but instructive of general strategies, for a reading of his book. The discussion that follows approaches the problem of form, of multiplicity and coherence in *Souls* through a reading of these reflexive texts. It seeks to address the experience of reading *Souls* as a whole through a reading of some of its smaller parts.

I

About a year and a half after the appearance of *Souls*, Du Bois published a brief note on his own book which seems at first to be an apologia for its failures. Du Bois begins by accepting that his exclusive focus on race, while it allows "clearness of vision" and "intensity of feeling and conviction," inevitably imposes "a certain narrowness of view," and a loss "of that

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breadth of view which the more cosmopolitan races have.” He then offers a backward, and somewhat melancholy, glance over the structure of *Souls* that proposes that the book’s heterogeneity is also its undoing:

The Souls of Black Folk is a series of fourteen essays written under various circumstances and for different purposes during a period of seven years. It has, therefore, considerable, perhaps too great, diversity. There are bits of history and biography, some description of scenes and persons, something of controversy and criticism, some statistics and a bit of storytelling. All this leads to rather abrupt transitions of style, tone and viewpoint and, too, without doubt, to a distinct sense of incompleteness and sketchiness.

However, this account of the book as a scrappy anthology in which all the “bits” have failed to transcend the conflicting pulls of their various original purposes quickly turns into the revelation of a unity counterbalancing and underlying the “diversity”:

... there is a unity in the book, not simply the general unity of the larger topic, but a unity of purpose in the distinctively subjective note that runs in each essay. Through all the book runs a personal and intimate tone of self-revelation. In each essay I sought to speak from within—to depict a world as we see it who dwell therein. In thus giving up the usual impersonal and judicial attitude of the traditional author I have lost in authority but gained in vividness.³

The unity promised by autobiography and subjective insight may not entirely harness the volatility of *Souls*’s diverse form, but the unfolding of the personal life *is* one major narrative strand which runs submerged through the whole of the book; it not only helps weave the fourteen chapters together, it is, as will be demonstrated later, an essential element in the distinctive epistemology of the book. *Souls* opens with Du Bois’s childhood in Great Barrington, Massachusetts (chapter 1), and concludes with him in his thirties, now a professor at Atlanta University (chapter 14). Along the way Du Bois bears direct witness as both observer and participant to the world of segregation or Jim Crow in which the mass of African Americans lived at the start of the twentieth century. There are many moments in which we see the world through Du Bois’s eyes and hear what he himself refers to as the “distinctively subjective note,” but most notable are his account of his experiences of teaching the black poor in the hills of rural Tennessee during the summers when he was a student at Fisk University (chapter 4), and his elegy for his dead son (chapter 11). These pieces of a life may not add up to a conventional autobiography, but they are a quiet though firm counterpoint to the larger composition and as such constitute a strong structuring device for the book.

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But if in the note from 1904 Du Bois points to autobiography and subjective insight as a source of unity at both the narrative and tonal levels in *Souls*, in the “Forethought” from 1903 he suggests a different structural logic for the design of the book, one which in effect runs parallel to the autobiographical. Here Du Bois divides the book in two parts and describes the progress of the reader from the first (chapters 1 to 9) to the second part (chapters 10 to 14) as a narrative of immersion, a movement towards the inner depths of black spirituality, culture, and psychology usually hidden from or invisible to most whites. In describing the contents of the first nine chapters Du Bois makes it clear that this part of the book deals with aspects of African American life as it is lived within the white world, within, in other words, the constraints and abuses of Jim Crow prohibitions and a system of servitude and poverty that amounts to nothing less than a form of neo-slavery. But in the second half the book shifts its ground: “Leaving, then, the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses, – the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls. All this I have ended with a tale twice told but seldom written” (359).

As a description of the final five chapters of *Souls* this is of course incomplete. Religion is the concern of chapter 10, the “human sorrow” is the personal grief at “the Passing of the First-Born” (chapter 11), “the struggle of its greater souls” refers us to the eulogy on the African American leader Alexander Crummell (chapter 12) and the “tale twice told” is the story of John and his lynching (chapter 13). What is missing from the outline is the final chapter on the Sorrow Songs. When Du Bois prepared the text for a fiftieth-anniversary edition in 1953, he revised the final sentence of his description to read “All this I have ended with a tale twice told but seldom written, and a chapter of song.” The original omission was an oversight which allows us to see something of the process of design which went into the making of *Souls*. The book was published on April 18, 1903. The “Forethought” is dated February 1, 1903. At this fairly late stage Du Bois had clearly settled on a plan for the book which included only thirteen chapters. But as Du Bois’s correspondence with the publisher, A. C. McClurg of Chicago, makes clear, Francis Fisher Browne, his editor, had urged him to include the chapter on the Sorrow Songs. Du Bois did reconsider his plan but failed to revise the “Forethought.” As late as February 21 Du Bois was still working on what would become the well-known final chapter of *Souls*. But the chapter was not Browne’s idea; it was part of Du Bois’s own original design for the book. This is clear from a letter dated January 21 in which Browne asks Du Bois: “Is it too late to carry out your original intention of having a chapter on ‘Sorrow Songs of the Negroes?’” Browne was absolutely