

# Musical/Textual Double Consciousness in W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*

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**Abstract** Besides introducing groundbreaking critical concepts such as double consciousness, colour line and the veil, W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) was among the first books to attribute universal dignity to black music. It did so by devoting a whole chapter to the 'sorrow songs', seen as "the articulate message of the slave to the world", as well as by opening each chapter with epigraphs composed of bars of 'black' spirituals juxtaposed with lines of poetry by notable 'white' authors – Symons, Lowell, Byron, among others – in a musical/textual version of double consciousness. Reconsidering the composite formal structure of *The Souls of Black Folk* and the role of the spirituals as ceaseless reminders of freedom, the paper explores the ways in which Du Bois's speculations on black music foreshadow contemporary sonic/textual strategies.

**Keywords** W.E.B. Du Bois. The Souls of Black Folk. Double consciousness. Spirituals. Sound studies.

**Summary** 1 Forethought. – 2 Black Spirituals, White Poetry. – 3 The Sound of Black Folk. – 4 After-Thought.



Edizioni  
Ca'Foscari

## Peer review

Submitted 2022-07-01  
Accepted 2022-10-06  
Published 2022-12-19

## Open access

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**Citation** Elia, A. (2022). "Musical/Textual Double Consciousness in W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*". *Il Tolomeo*, 24, 199-214.

## 1 Forethought

Well over a century since its publication, W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) continues to resonate and to produce an impact on the behavior of some parts of the African-American community. Throughout the decades, most scholarship has predictably focused on the three main critical concepts devised in this book - double consciousness, the color line, the veil - that have become essential to pinpoint the socio-economic, political, and existential condition of African Americans in the twentieth century. However, with few significant exceptions (Sundquist 1993; Weheliye 2005; Zamir 2008, among others), less attention has been paid to the crucial role of music, notably spirituals and 'sorrow songs', in Du Bois's collection and output at large, as an effective means to tackle racial discrimination. This essay will endeavour to contribute to bridging this critical gap by reassessing and updating in a twenty-first century scenario the relevance of Du Bois's approach to black music.

*The Souls of Black Folk* was indeed among the first books to attribute universal dignity to black music. It did so by devoting a whole chapter to the 'sorrow songs', considered as "the articulate message of the slave to the world" (Du Bois 1994, 157), as well as by opening each chapter with epigraphs composed of bars of 'black' spirituals juxtaposed with lines of poetry by notable 'white' authors - Symons, Byron, Tennyson, Mrs. Browning, among others - in a musical/textual version of double consciousness. Reconsidering the role of the spirituals as ceaseless reminders of freedom and the composite formal structure of *The Souls of Black Folk*, we aim here to explore the extent to which Du Bois's speculations on black music foreshadow contemporary sonic/textual strategies.

To this purpose, we will move in two different, yet interconnected, directions: in the first place, we examine the dialogic connection between the spirituals selected by Du Bois, their lyrics, and the poetical excerpts to which they are attached; secondly, we investigate the ways in which Du Bois's trans-medial contribution is still relevant and topical.

## 2 Black Spirituals, White Poetry

The term 'spiritual' derives from the King James Bible translation of *Ephesians* 5:19: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord". The evocation of Biblical events is certainly the main source of inspiration for spirituals, but it is not the only one. While praising Du Bois's "unforgettable chapter", "a serious and proper social interpretation" of the sorrow songs, in his 1925 essay "The Negro Spirituals" Alain Locke (2015, 200, 205) identified four classes of spirituals:

the almost ritualistic prayer songs of pure Spirituals, the freer and more unrestrained evangelical 'shouts' or camp-meeting songs, the folk ballads so overlaid with the tradition of the Spirituals proper [...] and the work and labor song of strictly secular character.

A decade later, Zora Neale Hurston (1995, 870-1) defined the spirituals as "Negro religious songs, sung by a group [...] bent on expression of feelings" and highlighted their extensive scope in her typical outspoken style: "The idea of the whole body of spirituals as 'sorrow songs' is ridiculous. They cover a wide range of subjects from a peeve at gossipers to Death and Judgment". It is true that spirituals are mainly religious songs, based as they are on an eschatological concern for the Judgment Day, but the broadness of their thematic sources of inspiration - earthly liberation, escape North, return to Africa and, most crucially, the instilling of race consciousness, should not be overlooked (Sundquist 1993, 458).

Hurston also made a clear distinction between the spirituals and what she termed 'neo-spirituals'. The former, the real ones, are improvised songs characterized by dissonances, disharmony, shifting keys, broken time, in which each singing of the piece is a new creation, so that the rendition is a mood rather than any defined, final outcome. 'Neo-spirituals' are the work of Negro composers based on the spirituals, but not like them. For Hurston, even the Fisk Jubilee Singers, acclaimed by Du Bois in his chapter on the sorrow songs, sing 'neo-spirituals': while recognizing their value, Hurston argued that these are not the songs of the people as sung by them. Concert singers put their tuxedos on, get the pitch, iron out dissonances, and sing magnificent songs that are not like the real Negro songs.

Following Hurston's arguments, we are led to think that notating the spirituals' melody on pentagram bars may be a senseless operation. Spirituals lose their essence - ink and paper cannot convey the sorrow and pain felt by slaves, and this operation turns out to be an imposed Westernization of the original African culture. As Sundquist (1993, 530-1) noted, at the end of the nineteenth century, critics such as Jeanette Robinson Murphy were already aware of the difficulties of transcribing the spirituals, as some crucial performative features cannot be transferred on the musical score:

[T]he white singer must make his voice exceedingly nasal and undulating; that around every prominent note he must place a variety of small notes, called "trimmings", and he must sing tones not found in our scale [...] he should carry over his breath from line to line and from verse to verse, even at the risk of bursting a blood-vessel [...] He must also intersperse his singing with peculiar humming sounds—"hum-m-m-m."

In this respect, Susan Mizruchi (1996, 288) identified a paradox regarding the contradictory role of the spiritual bars in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “these songs represent at once an elite language, legible to those who read music, and a secret ethnic code audible only to those who know how the songs ‘really’ sound” (Zamir 2008, 14). Moreover, as the melody of the spirituals is far more ancient than the words, it is significant that the spiritual bars opening each chapter do not show the lyrics, but only the notes – hence the reader is forced to conduct further research on the origin and the meaning of the actual spirituals considered.

However, what interests us here are the unmentioned texts of the spirituals involved rather than the domesticated melody. Spirituals often displayed codified meanings, the ‘signifyin(g)’, to use Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s famous coinage – for example, a cry for freedom could be heard beneath the apparent meaning of stories from the Old Testament such as *Go Down, Moses*, used by abolitionist Harriet Tubman as a code to escape to freedom; *Steal Away to Jesus* was another example seemingly referring to a religious episode reinterpreted as an incitement to escape slavery. For Du Bois, the painful experiences of the African-American slaves were historically analogous to the spiritual experience of the Jews. Written around 1800 by slaves inspired by the Biblical story of the Jews’ liberation from slavery in Egypt, *Go Down, Moses* epitomizes this connection: “Go down Moses | Way down in Egypt land | Tell old Pharaoh to | Let my people go!”. In the context of American slavery, Israel represents the African-American slaves, while Egypt stands for slave states and Pharaoh embodies the slave master.<sup>1</sup>

Eric J. Sundquist’s magisterial book *To Wake the Nations* (the title itself being a quotation of a line from the spiritual *My Lord, What a Mourning*) provides us with an accurate reconstruction of the origins and the lyrics of the spirituals selected by Du Bois, as well as with a thorough discussion of the role of spirituals in Du Bois’s book. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, these layered meanings are amplified by the connection between the titles of the fourteen chapters, the poetical excerpts, and the attached spiritual bars opening each chapter, that can be summarized as follows:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Gates, Jr. 2014; Elia, Volpi 2021, 85. Composed prior to 1862 by Wallace Willis, the author of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, *Steal Away* also displays a veiled allusion to escape: “Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus | Steal away, steal away home | I ain’t got long to stay here | My Lord, He calls me | He calls me by the thunder | The trumpet sounds within-a my soul | I ain’t got long to stay here.”

<sup>2</sup> Du Bois’s bars of music were most likely taken from the volumes *Hampton and Its Students* and *The Story of the Jubilee Singers*. The first group of the *Fisk Jubilee Singers* was organized in 1871 to raise funds for Fisk University. Their early repertoire consisted mostly of traditional spirituals. The *Hampton Singers* were established in 1873

Chapter title	Poem	Spiritual
I. Of Our Spiritual Strivings	Arthur Symons: <i>The Crying of Water</i> (1901)	Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen
II. Of the Dawn of Freedom	James Russell Lowell: <i>The Present Crisis</i> (1845)	My Lord, What a Mourning
III. Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others	Lord Byron: <i>Childe Harold's Pilgrimage</i> (1812-18)	A Great Camp-Meeting in the Promised Land
IV. Of the Meaning of Progress	Schiller: <i>Die Jungfrau von Orleans</i> IV, i (1801)	My Way's Cloudy
V. Of the Wings of Atalanta	Whittier: <i>Howard at Atlanta</i> (1868)	The Rocks and the Mountains
VI. Of the Training of Black Men	Fitzgerald: <i>Omar Khayyám</i> (1872)	March On
VII. Of the Black Belt	The Song of Solomon: <i>King James Bible</i> 1:5-6 (1611)	Bright Sparkles in the Courtyard
VIII. Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece	William Vaughn Moody: <i>The Brute</i> (1901)	Children, You'll be Called On
IX. Of the Sons of Master and Man	Mrs. Browning: <i>A Vision of Poets</i> (1844)	I'm a Rolling
X. Of the Faith of the Fathers	Fiona Macleod: <i>Dim Face of Beauty</i>	Steal Away
XI. Of the Passing of the First-Born	Swinburne: <i>Itylus</i> (1866)	I Hope My Mother Will Be There
XII. Of Alexander Crummell	Tennyson: <i>Idylls of the King: The Passing of Arthur</i> (1869)	Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
XIII. Of the Coming of John	Mrs. Browning: <i>A Romance of the Ganges</i> (1838)	I'll Hear the Trumpet Sound (or, You May Bury Me in the East)
XIV. The Sorrow Songs	Negro Song ( <i>Lay This Body Down</i> )	Wrestling Jacob

As there is no literary contribution from black writers to enhance the message of the spirituals, the connection between the spirituals and the attached poems initially subverts the reader's horizon of expectations. Du Bois seems deliberately to choose mostly white European poets, belonging to places both geographically and culturally far away from the African-American world, thus trespassing simultaneously the color, the class and even the gender line – Mrs. Browning, twice, and Fiona Macleod (in truth, a pseudonym of Scottish writer William Sharp). Being born and raised in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Du Bois himself acknowledged the initial distance he had from the Southern spirituals, yet this distance soon disappeared; the songs “came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine” (1994, 155) – spirit-

in Hampton, Virginia, in order to raise money for what is now Hampton University. See Sundquist 1993, 491-2.

uals appealed instinctively even to those who were not readily connected to them.

This allegedly dissonant dialogic connection is brought to the fore from the very beginning: in the first chapter “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”, Du Bois selects a bar of the melody of the celebrated spiritual *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*, and combines it with the complete text of the poem *The Crying of Water* (1901) by Welsh poet Arthur Symons, one of the leaders of the British Decadent movement, an unusual choice that can hardly be associated with the African-American fight for freedom. Here is the first part of the epigraph, describing the experience of a speaker listening to and identifying with the water of the sea:

O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,  
 All night long crying with a mournful cry,  
 As I lie and listen, and cannot understand  
 The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,  
 O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?  
 All night long the water is crying to me.

The second part of the poem reveals that this association is not as far-fetched as it would seem at a first glance. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, the Judgment Day is not generally seen as an apocalypse, yet there are moments, Zamir (2008, 19) argues, in which catastrophic visions are invoked, and the same sombre feelings are aroused by the second section of Symons's poem, foreseeing that “there never shall be rest | Till the last moon droop and the last tide fail, | And the fire of the end begin to burn in the West”. Here, the weeping sea symbolizes the speaker's heart, the speaker is “weary” and “wonder[s] and cries like the sea”, thus evoking Du Bois's statements that the African-American race was in a time of conflict, “the time of *Sturm und Drang*: storm and stress to-day rocks our little boat on the mad waters of the world-sea” (1994, 6). Symons's poem ends with the speaker claiming that he will spend “All life long crying without avail”, and likewise Du Bois's first chapter conveys a pessimistic view of the struggle of African Americans, a view slightly mitigated by the choice of a hymn of salvation (both at the Judgment Day and on earth through the acceptance of Jesus) such as *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*. Thus, despite Du Bois's apparently odd choice of Symons's poem, these paratextual additions (the poem, the lyrics and the music of the spirituals) offer meaningful clues on the chapter that follows, dealing with the spiritual strivings of the Negro.

In the second chapter, “Of the Dawn of Freedom”, a discussion of the role of the Freedman's Bureau, the celebrated spiritual *My Lord, What a Mourning* is juxtaposed to an epigraph from *The Present Cri-*

sis (1845), a long poem by James Russell Lowell.<sup>3</sup> Here the connection between the spiritual, the attached poem and Du Bois's chapter is more consistent, as this poem was written when the United States government was considering the annexation of Texas as a state allowing slavery, and rapidly became an anthem of the antislavery movement, frequently quoted even by later twentieth-century activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1910, the poem also gave its title to the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's* magazine *The Crisis*, first edited by Du Bois. Here is the poetical excerpt:

Careless seems the great Avenger;  
 History's lessons but record  
 One death-grapple in the darkness  
 'Twixt old systems and the Word;  
 Truth forever on the scaffold,  
 Wrong forever on the throne,  
 Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
 And, behind the dim unknown,  
 Standeth God within the shadow,  
 keeping watch above his own.

Sundquist (1993, 499) observed that *The Present Crisis* uncovers a struggle between neo-slavery and freedom, in Lowell's words "Twixt old systems and the Word", where truth is once more "on the scaffold / Wrong forever on the throne". As for the spiritual, the ambiguity elicited by the alternative spellings "mourning" and "morning", the latter also symbolizing the dawn of the millennium, triggers a parallelism between antebellum struggles as conveyed by the poem and the socio-cultural scenario at the time of the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*.

The third chapter, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others", concerns the debate around the education of blacks. As is known, while Washington had declared that blacks should concentrate on vocational and agricultural training, Du Bois claimed instead they should pursue full legal and social equality with whites and maintained that the strategy of accommodation to white supremacy advanced by Washington would only serve to perpetuate black oppression. Their opposing views can still be found in some of today's discussions over the end of class and racial injustice and the role of black leadership. The chapter appropriately begins with a fragment from Lord Byron's *Chil-*

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**3** The Freedmen's Bureau was established in 1865 to help former black slaves and poor whites in the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. It provided food, housing and medical aid, established schools and offered legal assistance.

*de Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-18), in particular two epigraphs on liberation, which are carefully chosen by Du Bois to reinforce his criticism of Washington's arguments. The first epigraph ridicules Washington's inadequate programs: "From birth till death enslaved; in word, in deed, unmanned!"; the second one ("Hereditary bondsmen! Know ye not | who would be free themselves must strike the blow?") played as a militant call to arms and thus became a rhetorical trope used in other works such as Frederick Douglass's revision of his autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Martin R. Delany's novel *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1859) (Sundquist 1993, 496). Although the context is different – the disillusioned hero's pilgrimage in foreign lands as against the African-American fight for social equality – there is an unexpected feeling of consistency connecting Du Bois's chapter and Byron's apparently culturally distant poem. This bond is strengthened by Du Bois's choice of the spiritual, which is quite appropriate: *A Great Camp-Meeting in the Promised Land* is a song of hope, reminding one of the promise of a better day to come and delivering a message of comradeship. 'Camp Meetings' were church meetings, and this spiritual is a joyful reminder of freedom and celebration, not only in Heaven, but also in earthly promised lands, including free states and territories.

After considering more contributions by white poets and writers, American (Whittier, Moody) or mostly European (Swinburne, Tennyson, Edward Fitzgerald, Mrs. Browning, even Friedrich Schiller), only in the final chapter on the sorrow songs is the supposed dissonance between the spirituals and the poems attached overcome by the use of an actual 'Negro Song', *Lay This Body Down*, as an accompaniment to the spiritual (in this case, *Wrestling Jacob*). The XIV chapter on the sorrow songs opens with this Negro song:

I walk through the churchyard  
 To lay this body down;  
 I know moon-rise, I know star-rise;  
 I walk in the moonlight, I walk in the starlight;  
 I'll lie in the grave and stretch out my arms,  
 I'll go to judgment in the evening of the day,  
 And my soul and thy soul shall meet that day,  
 When I lay this body down.

This evocative poem, a meditation on the mystery of life and death, is followed by some bars from the spiritual *Wrestling Jacob*, dealing with Jacob's wrestling with the angel (or the Lord) in *Genesis 32*, signifying both the triumph and reconciliation that made him a patriarch of Israel (Sundquist 1993, 525):



Wrestling Jacob, Jacob day is a breaking;  
 Wrestling Jacob, Jacob day, I will not let thee go...  
 I will not let thee go,  
 Until thou bless me.

Although the connection between *Lay This Body Down* and *Wrestling Jacob* seems to deliver a message of regained unity by breaking the established pattern 'black spiritual'/'white poem', the juxtaposition of these texts elicits a dialectical tension triggered by the pessimist resignation of the former as against the hopeful defiance of the latter. Du Bois's effective selection suggests that it is indeed impossible to separate these contradictory feelings, as they are inevitably merged and embodied in the same African-American characters.

Moreover, as we have seen, there is no contradiction, as it would seem at a first glance, between the 'white' poetical epigraphs and the 'black' spirituals. Arnold Rampersad (1976, 71) noted that they both expose the strivings of the souls towards noble ideals, reflecting their spiritual dignity and artistic capacity. This juxtaposition functions as a musical/textual version of double consciousness, where two "unreconciled strivings" and "warring ideals" seem to find a balance, albeit temporary, thus making it possible for a man to be "both a Negro and an American" (Du Bois 1994, 2-3).

In order to highlight the suggestive power of the spirituals, Du Bois (1994, vi, 155) used the adjective 'haunting' and the noun 'echo' twice: in the *Forethought*, he mentioned "some echo of the haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past"; and in the XIV chapter once again he alluded to "a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men". It is indeed the erratic and eerie nature of the spirituals which endowed them with the fascination that still make them popular today. An alternative (and negative) interpretation of 'echo' might allude to Hurston's above-mentioned distinction between 'spirituals' and 'neo-spirituals'. These bars are thus just 'echoes' "because the songs as they have come down to Du Bois's time are already far removed from their original versions" (Zamir 2008, 14). For this reason, Du Bois (1994, 117), like Hurston, was critical of "debased imitations of Negro melodies", because they catch "the jingle but not the music, the body but not the soul, of the Jubilee songs".

Besides the layered meanings, another characteristic of the spirituals selected by Du Bois is their universal nature. Ever since their early diffusion, the universality of spirituals at large was soon underlined by Du Bois himself as well as by other remarkable personalities of that time. As for Du Bois, the omission of 'African' before 'American' in the quotation above is significant, where he referred to them as "the only American music which welled up from black souls". These songs are a gift to America, the "singular spiritual heritage of

the nation". A decade earlier, Czech composer Antonín Dvořák's had already predicted that "[t]he future of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States"<sup>4</sup> - in the early 1890s Dvořák was hired by an American philanthropist to lead the New York National Conservatory of Music, whose mission was to help American composers rid themselves of European influences to discover their own truly American voice. Dvořák had heard and loved *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* and *Go Down, Moses*, hence his will to foster an American classical music style paradoxically based upon African-American and Indian roots.

Dvořák's interest for these appropriated Negro melodies was embraced by Du Bois, who, like him, was an admirer of Richard Wagner as well as of German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, whose concept of *Volksgeist* - the spiritual life of a nation - was adapted by Du Bois to connect folk wisdom and formal training. For Du Bois, the spirituals and the sorrow songs were examples of a popular cultural musical treasure that could produce a native classical musical language thanks to the work of accomplished black composers such as Samuel Coleridge-Taylor.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 The Sound of Black Folk

One critical commonplace regarding *The Souls of Black Folk* is its unevenness. As a matter of fact, a few months after the publication Du Bois himself acknowledged this as a possible weakness:

*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 story-telling. 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, as we shall see, the book's heterogeneity and composite structure may also be considered as a springboard for new combinations and creative opportunities, the references to music being an important asset in this respect. In the same article, Du Bois himself continued pointing out that "there is a unity in the book, not simply

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<sup>4</sup> See Huizenga 2019; Horowitz 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See Horowitz 2019; Appiah 2014, 45-6; Elia 2015, 11-12.

the general unity of the larger topic, but a unity of purpose in the distinctively subjective note that runs in each essay".<sup>6</sup>

*The Souls of Black Folk* is indeed one of the first examples of trans-medial texts in which the verbal message is occasionally amplified by musical references, notably the bars of the spirituals.<sup>7</sup> More precisely, Du Bois's groundbreaking multivocal approach emerges in two different ways: firstly, as we have seen, in his early use of narratorial strategies across media; secondly, in his ability to mix disparate cultural sources as a contemporary disc jockey does with music.

Du Bois's contribution on black music is still relevant at the beginning of the twenty-first century. His poem *The Song of the Smoke* (1907), for example, may be regarded as an example of proto-hip hop lyrics conveying a spirit of assertiveness – it was indeed his pioneering role as a man of letters that helped forge the mentality that was to climax in the civil rights movements that from the 1960s onwards have developed in the United States and all over the world.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Alexander G. Weheliye (2005) has identified an affinity between Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and contemporary practices of disc jockeying. Du Bois's modernity emerges in his ability to 'mix' diverse material in order to achieve a unified whole. The book is not only a collection of essays, but also an extremely rich repository of disparate materials selected and mixed by Du Bois in a guise similar to what contemporary DJs do with records, isolating particular segments, often quite dissimilar from each other, and mixing them up together to obtain a new entity. The issues at stake – political history, economics, sociology, education, religion, the role of black music, among others – are combined wisely in a wide-ranging formal palette including essay-writing, autobiography, poetry, and even fiction: the presence of the short story "Of the Coming of John" confirms the fact that for Du Bois fiction could play a crucial role in the discussion of socio-political matters.

Therefore, the spirituals selected by Du Bois, their lyrics, the poetical epigraphs to which they are connected and the text of the actual chapters they introduce are all part of a mix carefully devised by Du Bois to communicate complex, layered, at times contradictory meanings. In particular, Du Bois (1994, 157, 162) himself expressed effectively the cultural impact of such polarizations (happiness vs unhappiness, sorrow vs hope) in the following terms:

<sup>6</sup> Du Bois 1904; Zamir 2008, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Among the vast scholarship on the multifaceted interrelationships between literature and music, see the pioneering Brown 1948, and later essays such as Kramer 1984; Favaro 2002; Bernhart, Wolf 2004; Benson 2006; da Sousa Correa 2006; Smyth 2008.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of *The Song of the Smoke*, see Elia 2020, 35-51.

They tell us [...] that life was joyous to the black slave, careless and happy [...] [but] [t]hey are the music of an unhappy people [...] they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world [...] Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things [...] the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?

Contemporary disc jockeys are not only people who make people dance, but they are also sonic educators, and this is precisely the reason why Du Bois's early literary activity blending disparate sources may be regarded as similar to their art. If we consider the music, the lyrics and the texts included in *The Souls of Black Folk*, we perceive it as an interconnected work, a sort of well combined educative hypertext foreshadowing trans-medially an uplifting mixtape by an inspired DJ.

Moreover, Weheliye (2005, 3, 13) coined the term “sonic Afro-modernity” to refer to the emergence of modern black culture reconsidered not only in visual, but also in often overlooked aural terms, and highlighted the unsettling role of the musical bars at the beginning of each chapter, deemed “not as accurate mimetic representations but as distorted, layered, lingering traces that disrupt the flow of words”. His critical contribution triggered an interesting debate around Du Bois's connection with the contemporary praxis of Sound Studies. Among the issues addressed, the ways in which Du Bois remixed and decoded history, the ways in which he prefigured the critical terrain of contemporary Sound Studies, and the new futures we imagine when we ‘listen’ to Du Bois's work.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, this insistence on the sense of hearing rather than on the sense of sight introduces us to another important subject. As Du Bois (1994, 157) put it: “I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world.” Du Bois claimed to “know little of music”, yet his writings foreshadow the emergence of Sound Studies, by connecting language, music, sonic environments and aural communication (Carter-Ényì 2018). Jonathan Sterne (2012, 2) defined Sound Studies as “the interdisciplinary ferment in the human sciences that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival [...] across disciplines and traditions” and identified in Du Bois's textual tactics one of the key inspiring moments for this new discipline. More precisely, as we have

<sup>9</sup> See *Sounding Out!*, a sound studies blog edited by Jennifer Lynn Stoeber and Liana M. Silva (Stoeber, Silva 2018).

seen, in reconsidering the role of race in the American society, Du Bois (1994, 155-56) considered sound as a key modality for thinking through African-American culture:

[b]efore each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men [...] 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 born this side of the seas. It has been neglected, [...] mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.

It is also thanks to pioneering efforts like Du Bois's that Sound Studies has now become an established inter-discipline, an effective critical response to our changing sonic world, questioning the alleged superiority of sight over hearing through extensive scholarship from across the humanities and social sciences. An important critical contribution was made by Jennifer Lynn Stoeber (2016), who, echoing Du Bois's celebrated notion of "color line", coined the phrase "sonic color line" to argue that ideologies of white supremacy are as dependent on what we hear (voices, musical taste, volume) as they are on skin color. Racism is generally a visual phenomenon based on the sense of sight, yet there are also elements linked to the sense of hearing that may become crucial as racial markers - the sonic color line thus refers to racialized aural representations operating at the level of the unseen. Stoeber shared a concern for the often neglected connection between blackness and sound focusing on the development of racialized listening practices, the power dynamics and ethics of listening, the construction of 'black' and 'white' voices, and the role of 'noise' in the production of racially segregated space.

In this respect, there is a significant affinity in the racialization of sound as it is described by Jon Cruz in his book *Culture on the Margins* (1999). Cruz discusses the 'discovery' of black music by white elites in the nineteenth century in contrast with the routine view by slave owners, who had always considered black songs as senseless 'noise' - the same treatment was reserved throughout the decades for other black American musical genres like jazz (especially bebop) and, more recently, hip hop. Inspired by Frederick Douglass's invitation to hear slaves' songs as witnesses to their inner worlds, abolitionists began to attribute social and political meaning to the music - an interpretive shift defined by Cruz (1999, 3) as 'ethnosympathy', "an interpretive ethos of pathos" which marks the beginning of a mainstream American interest in black traditional music.

The sound of black folk can be heard in the history of racism. For Du Bois, music was a source of great inspiration - for example,

he would go regularly to concerts of black tenor Roland Hayes. In a 1925 letter written after a concert at Carnegie Hall, Du Bois expressed his “very deep and enduring pleasure” and hoped that Hayes would carry his “great message further and further for an indefinite time” (Aptheker 1997, 328-9). The sound of black folk thus displayed a strong political message – Du Bois believed black music could change the narrative of black life, history and culture, delivering a decisive contribution for a constant redefinition of the historical and affective meanings transmitted to the future generations.

#### 4 After-Thought

In the “After-Thought” closing *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1994, 165) addressed the reader in the following terms: “Hear my cry, O God the Reader [...] Let the ears of a guilty tingle with truth”. Here Du Bois refers to his book in aural terms, as a ‘cry’ that should appeal to and flatter the ‘ears’ of “God the Reader” with “vigor of thought [...] to reap the harvest wonderful”. Reconsidering the crucial role of the spirituals for Du Bois, this auditory reference is not accidental. As we have seen, it is indeed the layered meanings achieved by embedding music into words that is essential to understand the ways in which black traditional music has played and continues to play (albeit in a different way) a crucial role as a means of enfranchisement.

Thus, we have sought to reconsider some particular aspects of *The Souls of Black Folk*, notably the early use of narratorial strategies across media and the ability to mix disparate cultural sources as a contemporary disc jockey does. Du Bois’s speculations on black music foreshadow contemporary sonic/textual strategies, as we understood by examining the dialogic connection between the spirituals selected by Du Bois, their lyrics, and the poetical excerpts to which they are attached. We investigated the ways in which Du Bois’s trans-medial contribution is still relevant, with a particular focus on the aural rather than the usually predominant visual aspect. Du Bois’s book also paved the way to contemporary critical approaches such as Postcolonial and Cultural Studies – it is worth mentioning that Paul Gilroy considered Du Bois as one of his main influences and devoted a whole chapter of *The Black Atlantic* to his critical contribution.

Ultimately, the final message of this landmark work in the literature of black protest is that education, in its widest sense, is the essential proxy for individual and social transformation. For this reason, the words of Nnyla Lampkin, a former freshman at Howard University who in 2018 was invited along with several other students by her African-American literature teacher Dana A. Williams to discuss the book, manage to define in simple, yet effective terms, the reason why Du Bois is still relevant today: “It was amazing to me

to hear somebody from the past speaking the way that some of us think today” (Neary 2018). This is further evidence of the fact that, as we suggested at the beginning of this article, Du Bois still generates – and will most likely continue to in the years to come – an ongoing impact on the mentality of contemporary young black people.

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