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Peter Coviello

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## Intimacy and Affliction: DuBois, Race, and Psychoanalysis

Peter Coviello

Carrying out that line of thinking, we might be able to see in an apposite psychoanalytic protocol for the subjects of “race” . . . an entirely new repertoire of inquiry into human relations.—Hortense J. Spillers, “‘All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother’: Psychoanalysis and Race”

Nearly a century ago—back in the old millennium—W. E. B. DuBois offered a description of American social life whose power to startle remains, to a remarkable degree, undiminished. We jaded moderns will of course come by our sense of revelation differently from the late Victorians to whom *The Souls of Black Folk* was first introduced, but this, too, is part of the work’s fascination. For today it is less the bravado of DuBois’s book that is apt to take us aback, less its clear-sighted demolition of Victorian racial propriety, than the sheer idiosyncrasy of its discursive construction—or perhaps we should say, of the methodology that construction embodies. We might be particularly startled, for instance, by the dexterity with which DuBois managed, in 1903, to hold together analytic imperatives that, in the present moment, appear at best ill matched, often irreconcilable, and sometimes mutually hostile. In its most basic terms, *Souls* is a history lesson: it speaks up against those histories of Reconstruction that would forget that the breach between the American North and South was healed not least through the steady revocation from African Americans of virtually all the rights and opportunities that emancipation had promised. In this register the book has primarily to do with the slow unfolding, in a variety of institutions, of a great national betrayal, the issue of which was a new but equally dire economy of subservience and racial exploitation. But what makes *Souls* truly singular—what distinguishes it so sharply from DuBois’s

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landmark 1935 book of historiography, *Black Reconstruction in America*—is an attentiveness to routinized inequality and pervasive terror that focuses not solely on the institutions in which they flourished but also on their most finely wrought, subtle, inward manifestations. Contrasting his methods to those of the “cold statistician” and the “car-window sociologist,” DuBois presents an impassioned, often surpassingly lyrical account of the trauma of race in America, an account whose rhetorical figures clearly mean to adumbrate the experience of subordination in a way that numerical figures cannot. The opening sentence of chapter 12 frames the matter succinctly: “This is the history of a human heart.”<sup>1</sup> We might say, then, that what DuBois provides in *Souls* is a staggeringly intricate account of the intimate life of race—or, in the racier parlance of today’s criticism, of the intimate life of power.

To say as much is to imply a variety of critical affinities, not all of them commonsensical. That DuBois addresses himself to the nuances of power is uncontroversial; his seven decades as a leading civil rights activist would seem to corroborate it. But intimate life? Would this not suggest that DuBois’s work somehow situates on both sides of the still-widening rift between what we tend to call, for short, historicist and psychoanalytic perspectives? What sense can it make to talk about the possibly psychoanalytic affinities of a practiced historian and trained sociologist? It is no doubt true that such questions, with their air of incredulity, invite us to misremember or simply to ignore the significant fact that in 1903 DuBois’s intellectual contemporaries included William James, Henry James, and, only slightly more esoterically, Sigmund Freud—all writers distinguished by their efforts to find a literary or philosophical or even scientific language adequate both to the protean richness of the inner theater and to the mazy circuitry by which it com-

<sup>1</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 512. All subsequent references to *The Souls of Black Folk* are to this edition.

**Peter Coviello is assistant professor of English at Bowdoin College. His essays have appeared in *American Literature*, *Early American Literature*, *Studies in American Fiction*, and elsewhere. His book *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* is forthcoming.**

municates to the varied objects of the world.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, these contemporaries of DuBois took for granted what Marjorie Garber aptly describes as the “mutual embeddedness of historicism and psychoanalysis.”<sup>3</sup>

If these paired analytic imperatives seem odd to us—this conjoined interest in the inner life and social machinery, in intimacy and affliction—it is only because of the very sharpness of the theoretical antinomy that has grown up after DuBois and whose effect on our view of his writing is, I would say, estranging: through the lens of this antinomy, DuBois’s work appears oddly formed, extravagant, strange. But it is also true that a detailed look at *Souls* estranges us, in a potentially revelatory way, from some of the habituated movements of critical practice that we may have inherited. One of the things I think we see most vividly through the lens of *Souls* is, in fact, a certain routinized crudity in our own thinking about persons and their relations to power in its amplest and subtlest forms. It is, as we shall see, a crudity prosecuted largely on behalf of a particular kind of theoretical sophistication—a faithful Freudianism, a sufficiently Foucauldian historicism—but is at any rate a method of sophisticated simplification that DuBois’s work point by point rebukes. And it does so in the name of a methodology whose aim

<sup>2</sup> Many readers will recognize in DuBois’s famous account of “double-consciousness”—“of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (364)—a marked indebtedness to William James, the pragmatist philosopher and early scholar of psychology with whom DuBois had studied at Harvard University. In fact, William mailed his brother, Henry, a copy of *The Souls of Black Folk*, calling it “a decidedly moving book,” and Henry, in turn, cited it (somewhat backhandedly) in *The American Scene*. The points of overlap between both Jameses and Freud are numerous and tremendously suggestive. On the interrelations among DuBois, William James, and the psychic see Cynthia D. Schrager, “Both Sides of the Veil: Race, Science, and Mysticism in W. E. B. DuBois,” *American Quarterly* 48 (1996): 551–86. On William James and Freud see Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 12–26. On the need to read DuBois among an intellectual cohort that includes the Jameses specifically see Kenneth W. Warren, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 131–43.

<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Garber, “Second-Best Bed,” in *Historicism, Psychoanalysis, and Early Modern Culture*, ed. Carla Mazzio and Douglas Trevor (New York: Routledge, 2000), 384.

is to be adequate, after its own fashion, to the breadth and complexity—the lived intricacy—of the dynamic of power called race.

In what follows I wish to offer a reading of *The Souls of Black Folk* that claims for DuBois a singular moral preoccupation: not with the dates and names of times past but with the very fate of intimacy, of human relation, in a racially stratified America. For DuBois, this preoccupation ramifies in two distinct but complimentary directions. First, it expresses itself in a concern with the inner theater, the individual's inward scene of consciousness as well as of affect: the site of thought and also of the emotional intensities of loss, anticipation, bereavement, joy. Second, it is a concern with the web of relations that draws together the inner and the outer, with the varying terrain of the relational. "Between me and the other world," the book's first chapter begins, "there is ever an unasked question," and it is the question of that betweenness that *Souls* again and again poses and dissects (363). (In the Caribbean theorist Edouard Glissant's suggestive phrase, DuBois invites us "to imagine the unimaginable turbulence of Relation.")<sup>4</sup> In a way that our criticism has yet to describe precisely, DuBois's abiding fascination in the book—his prevailing point of moral absorption—is with the career of race not only as an actor in history or as a vector of self-relation but as an agent and element of other-relation. His is a preoccupation, that is, with race's often tragic entanglements with virtually every aspect of intimate life, entanglements that have resulted in the frightening specter of a nation in which the races live "side by side, united in economic effort, obeying a common government, sensitive to mutual thought and feeling, *yet subtly and silently separate in matters of deeper human intimacy*" (435; my italics).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 138.

<sup>5</sup> The critic most attuned to this relational, protopsychoanalytic strand in DuBois is Hortense J. Spillers, in two landmark essays, "'All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race," *boundary 2* 23, no. 3 (1996): 75–141; and that essay's predecessor, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. My concern with the relational dimension of race also follows from Glissant's difficult but immensely suggestive work in *Poetics of Relation* (as well as from Winfried Siemerling, "W. E. B. DuBois, Hegel, and the Staging of Alterity," *Callaloo* 24 [2001]: 325–33, which provides a strong if brief reading of Glissant with respect to DuBois's work in *Souls*). For a philosophical rendering of DuBois and the movements of relation, particularly in his engagement with Hegel, see Shamooin Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B.*

On the way to telling this story, DuBois performs a subtle but immensely consequential methodological shift: away from the paradoxes of subject formation and toward the differently resonant problems of attachment, of relation and its vicissitudes. DuBois's work, that is, locates itself at a wary remove from "the problem of the subject"—of subjectivity and the nature of its origins—and this move is for our own critical moment uniquely instructive. For with this move DuBois makes an essential but often overlooked methodological claim about the need to account, in frameworks that may be *either* historical or psychoanalytic, for the capacity of persons to sustain infinitely varied, infinitely particular kinds of relations to the forces of their world. It is this point, *Souls* suggests, that subjectivity talk habitually obscures.<sup>6</sup> Speaking to us from a moment before these tendencies in our critical methods hardened into impasses, DuBois's writing thus offers us, along with its other rewards, an amazingly sharp view of what analytic orthodoxies we have made over the past century, not altogether wisely, in the name of social criticism. Along these lines, I think that *Souls* can begin to be read less as a call from or description of the turn of the last century than as a gesture in the direction of the next: a movement toward a future in which our own critical practice might appear to us new, more agile, and perhaps freer of the strictures and inherited antinomies that we have, over many years and with every good intention, devised for ourselves.

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*DuBois and American Thought, 1888–1903* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). A more explicitly psychoanalytic account of *Souls* appears in Victor E. Wolfenstein, "On the Road Not Taken: 'Revolt and Revenge' in W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 5 (2000): 121–32. See also Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 178–89.

<sup>6</sup> In this way *Souls* helps us specify a polemical objection that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick raised more than a decade ago when she worried that "our indispensable antihumanist discourses"—and she was thinking of both historicism and psychoanalysis—have made little provision for the bare fact that "people are different from each other," and have essentially "ceded the potentially forceful ground of profound, complex variation to humanist liberal 'tolerance' or repressively trivializing celebration at best" (*Epistemology of the Closet* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990], 22, 24).

We seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully. It is so much easier to assume that we know it all. . . . And yet how little we really know of these millions,—of their daily lives and longings, of their homely joys and sorrows, of their real shortcomings and the meaning of their crimes! All this we can learn only by intimate contact with the masses, and not by wholesale arguments covering millions separate in time and space, and differing widely in training and culture.—W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

The story that DuBois tells in *Souls* is unusual in several respects, and first among them is its many-voicedness, the “self-consciously polyphonic form” that the book displays as it unfolds.<sup>7</sup> In its broadest terms, *Souls* means to be an account of what DuBois, in the opening paragraph, calls “the problem of the Twentieth Century,” which is, of course, “the problem of the color-line” (359). For this succinctly framed problem, however, we quickly learn that no conventional or unmodified analytic language will suffice. The question of double consciousness is taken up at the start, but what follows differs from, for instance, the philosophical explorations of consciousness that DuBois would have found in the work of William James, in that it is all but glutted with particularities—with statistics—culled from the historical archive. In his willingness to include vastly more quantitative data than would be customary in philosophy or in psychology (or, for that matter, in psychoanalysis, however tantalized by empiricism Freud may have been), DuBois announces his affiliations with the discipline of sociology. “Fifty-three per cent of these [Negro] graduates,” he writes, “were teachers. . . . Seventeen per cent were clergymen; another seventeen per cent were in the professions, chiefly as physicians” (433). Or again: “There were, in the years from 1875 to 1880, 22 Negro graduates from Northern colleges; from 1885 to 1890 there were 43, and from 1895 to 1900, nearly 100 graduates. From Southern Negro colleges there were, in the same periods, 143, 413, and over 500 graduates” (435). Such passages are common enough that one would have to read DuBois quite disingenuously to come through the whole of *Souls* without being struck by the deep impress, on the very language it uses, of empirical, social-scientific methods.

At the same time, DuBois is anxious to separate his analytic task from that of the “cold statistician,” and he does so largely through

<sup>7</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 115.

rhetoric—or, more exactly, through a studied modulation of discursive registers. For instance, his narrative voice firmly commands the perfectly conventional locutions of the historian and the sociologist, as when he writes: “It is the aim of this essay to study the period of history from 1861 to 1872 so far as it relates to the American Negro. In effect, this tale of the dawn of Freedom is an account of that government of men called the Freedmen’s Bureau.” When it comes time to present that history, though, the prose reads like this: “They [the fugitive slaves] came at night, when flickering camp-fires shone like vast unsteady stars along the black horizon: old men and thin, with gray and tufted hair; women, with frightened eyes, dragging whimpering hungry children; men and girls, stalwart and gaunt,—a horde of starving vagabonds, homeless, helpless, and pitiable, in their dark distress. Two methods of treating these newcomers seemed equally logical to opposite sorts of minds” (372–73). The language of empirical observation does not altogether disappear—it flickers up in the phrase “two methods”—but DuBois clearly subjoins it to a different language of observation and recording, whose forms of emphasis make available to his reader other kinds of data. If the heavily figurative scene setting and the deliberate patterning of grouped adjectives (“old men and thin,” “stalwart and gaunt,” “helpless, and pitiable”) seem inspired more by novel reading than by translations of Schmoller, it is in part because the account of historical motive that DuBois wishes to provide is not strictly quantitative or sociological. The very language of the passage suggests that whatever animates the “horde” of refugees will be inadequately grasped—will, in fact, be fundamentally misperceived—in the absence of a clear-sighted understanding of their fear, their deprivation, their helplessness, their distress. This is a history lesson, to be sure, but what it is determined to include as part of the historical archive is not the standard sociohistorical fare. For the only way to fashion an undistorted history of the color line and its effects, DuBois’s rhetoric suggests, is to bring into relief a history of human striving and disappointment, of promises made and believed in and withdrawn: a history, in short, of emotional life.

It is not sentimentality that motivates DuBois’s turn to the contours of the inner life. It is clear to him, in the first place, that the aftermath of the Civil War cannot be understood separately from the fraternal vio-



lences that the war engaged but did not exhaust. Repeatedly, he refers us to the intensity of passion invested by both sides in incommensurate ideals, to the multitude of resentments fostered by the war and its uneasy resolution, and, in particular, to the already delicate relations across the color line that the war exacerbated. Of the fate of the Freedmen's Bureau, DuBois writes: "When to the inherent difficulties of so delicate and nice a social operation were added the spite and hate of conflict, the hell of war; when suspicion and cruelty were rife, and gaunt Hunger wept beside Bereavement,—in such a case, the work of any instrument of social regeneration was in large part foredoomed to failure" (382). Emotional life must be part of the public record, DuBois insists, because to an extraordinary degree the straining of the intimate sphere made much of the history in question happen the way it did: "Thus it is doubly difficult to write of this period calmly, so intense was the feeling, so mighty the human passions that swayed and blinded men" (383). Among the things DuBois ponders, as he considers Reconstruction, are the limits of an empiricist historiography. As both its form and its very title suggest, *The Souls of Black Folk* is interested in expanding the category of history through its sustained attention to the effects, in the lived world, of those ephemeral but enormously meaningful states of being, those blinding passions, that defy what DuBois later calls "our crude social measurements" (475).<sup>8</sup>

The task of accounting for such elusive states of being—for the varied surfaces of intimate life—is for DuBois especially important to the analyst of black life. For at the very center, the defining core, of black life in America stands a singularly intimate experience of loss and fear—an experience shared in, but lived through in infinite variation, by the whole of African America. Paul Gilroy, for instance, argues convincingly that "the significance and functionality of racial terror" (118) provide for much of DuBois's abiding ambivalence toward modernity and its narratives of humanist progress: because "war, murder, slavery, extermination, and debauchery" (475) do not belong to some pre-modern past but have supplied material resources for modernity at every stage of its unfolding, DuBois's faith in "civilization" is, in Gilroy's

<sup>8</sup> On the turn, in *Souls*, to states of only marginal susceptibility to empirical, materialist methodologies, see Schragger.

reading (117–24), more tentative than it sometimes seems. To this reading I would add only that the experience of racial terror takes its place alongside the more general experience of foreclosure, also endured by American black folk in infinitely varying ways, that the book chronicles so meticulously: alongside all the other promises (of emancipation, liberty, freedom from degradation, social and economic mobility) whose persistent revocation is, for DuBois, the defining feature of the history of Africans in America, or, as Gilroy more broadly frames the matter, “the post-slave history of the new world” (117). As the very form of *Souls* persistently reminds us, however, this is a phenomenally difficult history to write. For the most meaningful form of commonality shared by the American blacks whose varied history DuBois would write is one that, because it is so profoundly affective, does not readily yield to the empiricist tools with which his training has equipped him. An understanding of the nature of that commonality, of what Robert B. Stepto calls the black *communitas*, in this way requires of DuBois some new mode of address, some new critical language.<sup>9</sup>

This analytic demand begins to explain what may seem to be the stylistic extravagance of *Souls*: the novelistic personification or scene setting, the personal narratives, the figurative density, the moments when, as in the great peroration that ends chapter 6, “Of the Training of Black Men,” the prose begins to unfold in the measures of iambic pentameter: “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not” (438). For DuBois’s literary extravagance is less a formal flourish than a carefully deliberated tactic intended, above all, to keep the work alive and responsive to the basic fact that persons, no matter where or how they may be “situated,” sustain themselves *in relation* to the social facts and imperatives of power that shape their world. *Souls* means to be a book about power, but DuBois labors to produce in it an account of an awful power, condensed and expressed in “race,” that gauges its terrible efficacy and scale while recalling at all points that it lies categorically beyond the reach of any power to determine, conclusively, the nature of any person’s relation to the forces of his or her world. Persons are definingly shaped by power; persons sustain relations to power. As cautionary methodological

<sup>9</sup> Robert B. Stepto, *From behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 66–82.

premises, these points seem simple enough. Yet they are hugely consequential, introducing as they do onto the critical stage the whole unruly range of human variousness, the refusal of persons, however similarly marked they are by powers both great and small, to be just alike.

DuBois himself frames the methodological dilemma he faces in the opening strains of chapter 9, "Of the Sons of Master and Man," in which his emphasis on the relational dimension of black life is clearly on display:

The world-old phenomenon of the contact of diverse races of men is to have new exemplification during the new century. Indeed, the characteristic of our age is the contact of European civilization with the world's undeveloped peoples. Whatever we may say of the results of such contact in the past, it certainly forms a chapter in human action not pleasant to look back upon. War, murder, slavery, extermination, and debauchery,—this has again and again been the result of carrying civilization and the blessed gospel to the isles of the sea and the heathen without law. Nor does it altogether satisfy the conscience of the modern world to be told complacently that all this has been right and proper, the fated triumph of strength over weakness, of righteousness over evil, of superiors over inferiors. It would certainly be soothing if one could readily believe all this; yet there are too many ugly facts for everything to be thus easily explained away. We feel and know there are many delicate differences in race psychology, numberless changes that our crude social measurements are not yet able to follow minutely, which explain much of history and social development. At the same time, too, we know that these considerations have never adequately explained or excused the triumph of brute force and cunning over weakness and innocence. (475)

One of the delicate questions the passage poses—or, more accurately, revolves—is that of racial identity. On the one hand, in his studied deflation of the pretenses of "European civilization," DuBois seems to hold in aggrieved contempt the very notion of strictly racial identities, inasmuch as they yield all too easily to exactly those presumptions of superiority and inferiority that authorize the exertion of "brute force . . . over weakness." Insofar as it is some ill-considered notion of indelible racial essence that operates civilization's brutalizing mechanisms, DuBois encourages us to have none of it. On the other hand, he also gestures, with notable tentativeness, to certain underexplored "differences in race psychology" that, if they do not account fully for the ter-

rorization of one group by the other, seem nevertheless to hold out the possibility of a conceptual ground in which some racial distinctiveness or specificity might be rooted. The tentativeness of the formulation proves to be its methodological key, if by that we mean not intellectual timidity but a profound analytic regard for variability. For DuBois offers in the following chapter not a systematic inquiry into the nature and shape of “race psychology,” at all, but “a conscientious study of the phenomena of race-contact” (476). The substitution, race contact for race psychology, is small but telling: it is as though what “race psychology” finally refers to were not any static or encompassing disposition toward the world but a flexible dynamic of relation. By the very manner in which it takes up the question, “Of the Sons of Master and Man” appears to propose that if there is a true “race psychology” out in the world—and if something like black identity stands behind it—it will appear only in the intricacy of the relations through which black life, in all its variety, unfolds.<sup>10</sup>

Reading “Of the Sons of Master and Man,” it is not hard to credit Kenneth Warren’s rueful speculation that “Henry James’s reading of *The Souls of Black Folk* could have been one of the signal moments in American literary history” (112). Warren notes a methodological dissonance between the social-scientific *Souls* and the more “impressionistic analysis” of James’s *American Scene*, but he seems far closer to the mark when he takes James to task for refusing to allow, even as he singles out DuBois for praise, “the possibility that *The Souls of Black Folk* is more a competitor with James’s book” than an unrelated regionalist curiosity (116).<sup>11</sup> For as writers mutually interested in capturing the intricacy and variousness of lived relation, they do stake out much of the same territory. For instance, chapter 9 in *Souls* investigates “the contact of men and their relation to each other,” which “fall in a few main

<sup>10</sup> As Louis Menand puts it, in pragmatist language that would have been resonant to William James, “It is the key insight of [*Souls*]—that self-conception is a function of how others see you. Identity is not biological and static; it is social and relational” (*The Metaphysical Club* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001], 396).

<sup>11</sup> James, whom Warren quotes, asks, “How can everything so have gone that the only ‘Southern’ book of any distinction published for many a year is *The Souls of Black Folk*, by that most accomplished of members of the negro race, Mr. W. E. B. DuBois?” (*The American Scene*, ed. Leon Edel [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968], 418).

lines of action and communication.” These “few” lines of contact assemble in DuBois’s introductory comments as follows: the analyst must look to

- the physical proximity of homes and dwelling-places
- the economic relations,—the methods by which individuals cooperate for earning a living
- the political relations, the cooperation in social control, in group government
- the less tangible but highly important forms of intellectual contact and commerce, the interchange of ideas through conversation and conference
- the various forms of social contact in everyday life, in travel, in theatres, in house gatherings, in marrying and giving in marriage
- the varying forms of religious enterprise. (476)

Though there is nothing particularly “impressionistic” here—indeed, DuBois can be said to remain firmly within the parameters of empiricism—there is a wonderful collusion with the writerly imperative that we know, in a word, as Jamesian: the imperative to define by ever finer discriminations the tremendous variety of ways that any one person can be “in relation” to any other. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, referring to this project of “nonce taxonomy,” argues that James’s opulent proliferation of *kinds* of relation frustrates the rigid taxonomies of intimate life that grew up around him and eventually subsumed virtually all attachments beneath the dichotomy of hetero- and homosexual (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 22–23). DuBois’s project seems similarly driven, though it falls along different lines of stress: he engineers an anatomy of black-white relations that means to expand beyond the reified positions of oppressor and oppressed, without for a moment losing sight of the ever-present fact of oppression.

This trick proves much more difficult than at first it might seem (a fact made evident by the degree to which the two positions—“there is only oppression,” “there is no oppression”—came to define almost the whole of the recent, stalled “national dialogue on race” in the United States). Clearly, DuBois is guided by the premise that “this much all men know: despite compromise, war, and struggle, the Negro is not free” (390). But he insists that oppression, to be a lived fact, must be understood to ramify along a multitude of axes, in a multitude of dis-

crete circumstances, each of which has its own parameters of conduct and laws of operation. Not only is racial inequality inexhaustibly plural in its modes of expression, but every black citizen, DuBois persistently suggests, sustains a relation to inequality that will be inflected by his or her involvement in a variety of forms of social contact, as well as by other factors that, despite their importance in social life, elude strict calculation:

It is, in fine, the atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life. In any community or nation it is these little things which are most elusive to the grasp and yet most essential to any clear conception of the group life taken as a whole. What is thus true of all communities is peculiarly true of the South, where, outside of written history and outside of printed law, there has been going on for generations as deep a storm and stress of human souls, as intense a ferment of feeling, as intricate a writhing of spirit, as ever a people experienced. (487)

Here it is plainly stated: if *Souls* is committed in its analytic project to limning the extra-empirical qualities of black life in America “which are most elusive to the grasp,” it is because they are also the “most essential to any clear conception of the group life taken as a whole”—by which we may well understand DuBois to gesture as decisively as he does anywhere else in the book to the question of racial identity. But again, the group identity or “race psychology” at issue has not been elaborated in the familiar way: for DuBois, such identity is not a matter of innate disposition but unfolds in the vastly more variegated terms of relations and their vicissitudes, of those “thousand and one little actions” and engagements. If for only this reason, we may wish to demur from Kwame Anthony Appiah’s contention that, powerful scholar though he was, DuBois was “unable to escape” his belief in a finally illusory notion of racial character, particularity, and coherence.<sup>12</sup> DuBois himself may have believed as much, but it is not at all clear that *Souls* does. For to the degree that DuBois admits a notion of racial identity in *Souls*, it consists in no more—and no less—than the shared fact of a necessitated relation to the bereavements and revocations of racial inequality. “They must perpetually discuss the ‘Negro Problem,’” DuBois

<sup>12</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 46.

writes of turn-of-the-century black Americans, “must live, move, and have their being in it, and interpret all else in its light or darkness” (501). This is the commonality, the shared burden, that characterizes DuBois’s black American world. This is African American identity, as DuBois would have us understand it.

But whatever clear coherence or particularity one may presume to follow from such a notion of manifestly racial identity is immediately splintered by at least two factors that DuBois builds into it. First, he everywhere insists that racial inequality expresses itself across such a multitude of localities that it will be as a matter of course experienced in consequentially differing forms and intensities by black citizens situated in their various social stations. (That DuBois considers these differences of experience analytically consequential is made clear by the broad-ranging perspectival mobility he brings to the book: it is why he routes every inquiry through the sometimes disparate, sometimes overlapping vantages of North and South, urban and rural, well-heeled and impoverished.) Second, and more crucially, through his downright Jamesian approach to intimate life and its variousness, DuBois insists that no black citizen’s relation to inequality can be in good conscience either predicted or prescribed, since it is the very essence of relation to be no less incalculably particular than the person sustaining it. The insistence on relation, that is, implies a certain inner mobility—a repertoire of response, to follow Adam Phillips—that, however dramatically it may be circumscribed, is for DuBois’s purposes not to be taken for granted in accounts of the life of the race.<sup>13</sup> As Leo Bersani has it, “Interiority is a breeding ground not only for essences but also for a mobility incompatible with all essentializing definitions.”<sup>14</sup> One must never forget that irreducible mobility, DuBois’s writing implies, in accounts of the group life taken as a whole, however convenient it may be to do so.

It is tempting, though tendentious, to describe this state of being-in-relation in the now rather modish terms of “agency,” tendentious because it is an enforced relation (one cannot *not* have it) and because, as DuBois and Fanon after him point out, the task of sustaining con-

<sup>13</sup> Adam Phillips, *Terrors and Experts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 1–17.

<sup>14</sup> Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 12.

stantly that relation to an imposed inequality, among one's other relations in the world, is burdensome enough to constitute its own kind of malady.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, by foregrounding the relational dimension of the black lifeworld, DuBois defends his work explicitly against the stifling determinism that threatens almost any identity-driven analytic (and many models of historicism and historical "construction" as well).<sup>16</sup> But he is not, for all that, precisely "against identity," either. For in his insistence on the irreducibility of relation, he holds open a space in which identity might encounter the more expansive variability of *being*. Spillers seems to have exactly this DuBoisian (and, for her, explicitly psychoanalytic) turn in mind when, in a brilliant critique of Fanon, she demands that we make a place in our theoretical frameworks for the bare fact that the colonized subject "executes an entire human being whose nuanced particularities escape calculation beforehand" ("All the Things," 96). Like Henry James before him, and very much like Freud, DuBois speaks up for the capacities of such being by multiplying the valences of relation, by refusing to reduce, for theoretical expediency or otherwise, the plurality of ways that any subject might be in relation to the world beyond himself or herself. (We might think here as well of Glissant's notion of "relation identity," produced through contact, flux, and "errantry" [144].) All that is certain is that the black citizen will be compelled to include, among his or her other attachments in the world, a relation to the shifting imperatives of race. That relation can be described—such descriptions take up a great part of *Souls*—but never presumed. DuBois's is a theory that trades social-scientific certainty for the unresolving intricacy of the lived: a theoretical agnosticism, then, whose return is nuance and acuity.

For DuBois, this variegated "race psychology" consists not only in

<sup>15</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 109–40.

<sup>16</sup> The threat of a particular kind of historicist determinism is probably best captured in Walter Benn Michaels's infamous polemical barb, that "the only relation literature as such has to culture as such is that it is part of it" (*The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987], 27). The *only* relation: this states as baldly as one could wish the pronouncedly un-Jamesian—we might even say *anti*-Jamesian—disposition of much of the work that has gone on under the heading of New Historicism. It is this *depletion* of the valences of relation that DuBois's work pointedly contravenes.



“the phenomena of race-contact”—in interracial exchange—but, just as crucially, in the complication of intraracial relations. In his account, these relations fall variously across the divisions between generations, genders, classes, and geographies. Consider again his remarks on the black church, which DuBois takes “as peculiarly the expression of the inner ethical life of a people” (499). The church has a uniquely difficult task, he says, inasmuch as “the inner ethical life” of black folk is tied so intimately to the unyielding pressures of inequality:

They must perpetually discuss the “Negro Problem,”—must live, move, and have their being in it, and interpret all else in its light or darkness. With this come, too, peculiar problems of their inner life,—of the status of women, the maintenance of Home, the training of children, the accumulations of wealth, and the prevention of crime. All this must mean a time of intense ethical ferment, of religious heart-searching, and intellectual unrest. For the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American, as swept on by the current of the nineteenth century while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century,—from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence. The worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretense or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism. (501–2)

The problems of the inner ethical life, as DuBois describes it here, are not solely those of self-constitution and self-relation (the way double consciousness is a problem of self-relation). The “peculiar wrenching of the soul” that he asks us to consider derives as well from troubled relations to others: to women, to men, to the home, to children, to the broader black world. It is the relation to these persons, as well as to the self, that “the double life every American Negro must live” threatens to infect with “hypocrisy.” The claim here is that the necessitated relation to the “Negro Problem,” which for DuBois defines black identity—the toil of having to “live, move, and have their being in it, and interpret all else in its light or darkness”—strains deeply the attachments *among* black citizens. These strains are precisely what DuBois is anxious both to chronicle and to remedy.

Accordingly, *Souls* works to envision the strains and exigencies of intimate life along the color line as they unfold across an astoundingly broad range of locales. At one moment DuBois, considering the problem of “separation and desertion after a family group has been formed,” concludes that “the plague-spot in sexual relations is easy marriage and easy separation” and is “the plain heritage from slavery” (460–61); at another he recalls the fragile intimacies he forged while teaching in a “tiny community” in the hills of Tennessee—intimacies that took part in “a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief, at burial, birth, or wedding” (410)—and with how dreadful a sense of the routine the family he loved came to suffer bereavement and disintegration. In one of the book’s most wrenching passages DuBois recounts his own diffidence toward his newly born son, the attachment and warmth he began to feel for him at first only through his love for his wife, and finally the knotted complications of his grief at the child’s death: a grief crossed both with “an awful gladness” that his son had escaped the world’s contempt for him and his aspirations and with a sharp stab of despair that racial restriction—the voice from within that commands, “*Thou shalt forego!*” (510)—should extend even to a parent’s wish to see his infant grow. The cumulative argument that *Souls* appears to mount as it surveys this tremendous, and tremendously varied, landscape of attachment and loss is simply this: the imperatives of race in America have disordered and made excruciate the black citizen’s relation not only to self but to family, lovers, spouses, children, persons of different class, the strangers who make up one’s nation, and, not least, members of the same and different races. In this sense race is, as Spillers remarks, “our perfect affliction”: the ever-present fact of racial restriction skews the whole of the relational field, such that the burden of being black in America is in no small part a specifically relational burden. It calls for, among other things, the constant reassertion of one’s very capacity for relation—for human attachment—which the conditions of American social life have conspired to place in grave doubt (“All the Things,” 78). This struggle, this burden, is exactly what DuBois hears in the Sorrow Songs. “Over the inner thoughts of the slaves and their relations one with another,” he writes, “the shadow of fear ever hung, so that we get but glimpses here and there, and also with them, eloquent omissions and silences” (542).

A concern for these telling omissions and silences inspires, in turn, one of DuBois's principal political ambitions for *Souls*: a desire, finally, to repair the ominous gaps in the relations of black to white, and also of black to black. Indeed, with remarkable stridency he advocates a mending of intimacies and of the fabric of relation: a restoration of that "finer sympathy and love" (490), that "deeper human intimacy" between the races as well as between the strata of the race itself. In the conclusion to chapter 9, which addresses the need for revitalized interracial intimacy, DuBois argues that "only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph" (492). In the Sorrow Songs, for DuBois the purest expression of the toil, weariness, and "soul-hunger" of the slave, he finds a key to the reparative work he wishes to advance. In the emotional intricacy of the music he claims that we find passage into "the inner thoughts of the slaves and their relations one with another" (542). If the Sorrow Songs are redemptive—to DuBois, they clearly are—it is because, like all true art, they promise to open the audience to some new, more demanding relation with those whose suffering they mean to transcribe.<sup>17</sup> This is an expressivist, aesthetic utopianism—a belief that art sponsors a transformative intimacy between artist and audience—but it is exactly the utopian strand that, two decades later, underwrote the Harlem Renaissance, and DuBois's supervisory efforts in particular.<sup>18</sup> From *Souls* that latter-day movement borrows not only DuBois's famous remarks on the talented tenth but, more crucially, its

<sup>17</sup> On DuBois and the Sorrow Songs see Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 457–539; and Kevin Thomas Miles, "Haunting Music in *The Souls of Black Folk*," *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000): 199–214.

<sup>18</sup> What is often taken as DuBois's aesthetic snobbery or authoritarianism may also be read as an effort to prevent the relation between artist and audience from settling into one between product and consumer—the probably hopeless effort, then, to keep an *aesthetic* relation to the art object free of the imperatives of a *commercial* relation. On the dynamics of white commodification as they operated in 1920s Harlem see David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997); and George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic, 1994), 244–67. On the phenomenon of hip consumerism see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

governing belief: since the phenomena of intimacy are indeed among the foremost agencies of world making, racial advancement will depend as much on the fostering of a “deeper human intimacy”—across races and within the race—as on other strictly material forces. This is the true DuBoisian character of the Harlem Renaissance.

More broadly, DuBois’s desire to account for the fraying of intimate life around race, along with his insistence that a “deeper human intimacy” between and among the races is an essential political goal, reflects his sense of the precarious place of race and racial meaning in the ongoing, often torturous elaboration of American nationality. For DuBois, much of the particularity of the African American situation lies in the treacherous intertwining of a notion of race with an ideal of American national belonging.<sup>19</sup> Here again, with respect to the question of American nationality and its formation, his persistent recognition of the salience of intimate life is crucial. For well over a century the American nation, self-mythologized, even before its break from England, as a land unburdened by any heritable past, had grounded most of its self-definitions in spatial, rather than temporal, terms: in terms, that is, not of tradition and its protocols but of present-tense unity, coherence, and transpersonal connectedness. In one prominent version of antebellum nationalism, Americans were enjoined to consider themselves “American” less by virtue of a shared past that distinguished them than by their contemporaneous involvement in an unfolding mutuality. (We might think of Whitman’s ecstatic embrace of the passing stranger, who is at once unknown to him and intimately bound to him, mirroring the way that citizens of the nation are mutually anonymous yet, Whitman insists, intimately tied.) Thus one of the ways that the idea of race came to be fatally wed to the idea of nation in America was as a concept that described not only an identity but an inborn connectedness to others, a quality of relation among scattered citizens who were, to each other, strangers. Particularly to antebellum nationalists, wary of any pretense to unity offered by an increasingly untrustworthy state, race—and what

<sup>19</sup> For a trenchant critique of “African-American exceptionalism,” which argues that “much of the precious intellectual legacy claimed by African-American intellectuals as the substance of their particularity is in fact only partially their absolute ethnic property,” see Gilroy, 15, 124–45.

the nationalists meant was whiteness—provided a way to imagine a coherence at once expansive (it could, with a populist flourish, include *all* white people) and engagingly affective (it implied a kind of relation, an emotional proximity, to others). It was the perfect nationalist vehicle: a language with which to describe a bond between strangers, a language of anonymous intimacy.<sup>20</sup>

Given how perfectly race answers to the demands of an affective antistate nationalism, it is not difficult to imagine how in the middle third of the nineteenth century whiteness largely overrode previous markers of status (such as property) and became endowed with a new, frighteningly expansive civic potency.<sup>21</sup> But if race in this way conferred an almost magical aptitude for relation on white citizens, a corollary effect was the ever more thorough seizure from black subjects not only of rights and material objects but of the very capacities for relation (to self, to spouse, to children, to the state) on which those rights were seen to rest. As whiteness came to be the secret strand through which any-

<sup>20</sup> On the antistate tendencies of nineteenth-century America see Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart Blumin, "Where Is the Real America? Politics and Popular Consciousness in the Antebellum Era," *American Quarterly* 49 (1997): 225–67. On race as a kind of intimate adhesive, a language of affiliation, see Peter Coviello, "Intimate Nationality: Anonymity and Attachment in Whitman," *American Literature* 73 (2001): 85–119; and Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 176–203. On DuBois and turn-of-the-century American nationalism see Roumiana Velikova, "W. E. B. DuBois versus 'The Sons of the Fathers': A Reading of *The Souls of Black Folk* in the Context of American Nationalism," *African American Review* 34 (2000): 431–42.

<sup>21</sup> The expansion of the social meaning of whiteness in the early nineteenth century grounds much of the new work in the loosely assembled field now called white studies. This work includes, most prominently, David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Theodore W. Allen, *Racial Oppression and Social Control*, vol. 1 of *The Invention of the White Race* (New York: Verso, 1994); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995). In their considerations of the excruciated relations between racial and class formations in nineteenth-century America, these works continue a tradition of scholarship whose point of origin is none other than DuBois's 1935 *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1969).

mous Americans were connected to each other, and constituted *as* Americans, blackness in turn came to signify a fundamental incapacity for attachment of whatever kind. (This change is especially visible in the gradual shift, over the first half of the nineteenth century, from largely property-based models of enfranchisement to ones based more exclusively on gender and race.)<sup>22</sup> As Spillers observed in her landmark 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” the polemical resistance to such seizures—the insistence on, and maintenance of, the intricacy of black attachments in the face of social conditions that so violently opposed their very existence—is a defining topos in the work of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs and in nineteenth-century black writing generally. *Souls* is not so much about this history as keenly responsive to it: the writing proceeds, we might say, from within its teeth. If DuBois backed away from the kinds of essentialism that might use the fact of blackness to define an innate quality of connectedness among all black subjects—if he backed away from this now familiar version of black identity—it is in part because such essentialism comprised the very grammar and syntax of nationalist American white supremacism. At the same time, his book labors to bear witness to that galvanizing racial history of seizures and foreclosures, and it does so not least by foregrounding the disruptions of intimate life that play out, in infinite variety, around the color line: by returning us, again and again, to the relational dimensions of race. Black life in America, DuBois contends, must be grasped in the grain of its intimate life, but this is so largely because the imperatives of American nationality have already confounded a notion of race with a notion of intimacy, of anonymous interconnectedness, to eventually catastrophic effect.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> On this shift and the changes it has brought to American race relations see Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); and Roediger.

<sup>23</sup> For a related account of intimacy and American nationality see Lauren Berlant, “Introduction: The Intimate Public Sphere,” in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–24.

Relationships constitute so-called identities, not the other way around, and this makes selves always provisional and circumstantial, not creatures of either/or (to suffer is often to feel a self fixed in something).—Adam Phillips, *Terrors and Experts*

What, then, of us, and the presumptions that sustain our thinking about the world, about race and intimacy, about power and persons? Thread- ing through the argument to this point has been the largely implicit contention that DuBois and Freud share in illuminating ways a number of premises and concerns. The important task now, before we address that claim, is not to derive “influences”—not to make either Freud or DuBois into an unwitting disciple of the other. My sense is, rather, that these two very differently motivated authors can be, from certain van- tages, mutually clarifying: knowledge of the preoccupations and emphases of one allows us to see those of the other in new, revelatory ways. I have implied thus far that DuBois is distinctively Freudian in his wish to mul- tiply the valences of relation, to render in prodigiously ample terms the human capacity for varied engagement with an often maddeningly recalcitrant world, and to credit, in every theoretical context, the irre- ducible richness of motive that invests every person who lives and acts in the world. The next question to ask must therefore be: What about DuBois’s procedure runs contrary to the familiar trajectory of psycho- analytic thought? What might happen to a psychoanalytic mode of crit- icism if, for instance, the seeing of relation in all its variousness became its defining imperative, or if a stance against reductive or determinis- tic understandings of human resilience and resourcefulness really were among its foremost intellectual offerings? Could we recognize the result *as* psychoanalytic inquiry? What would be the conceptual risks and dividends?

From a psychoanalytic point of view, perhaps the first thing to note about DuBois’s anatomies of race and intimacy in American social life, his multiplication of intimate spheres and “nonce taxonomies” of forms of relation, is that, although they often involve the family (fathers and sons, husbands and wives, masters and men), they are not tied to the determinations of oedipality. Masters, for instance, are often more like siblings than like fathers, different but contemporaneous selves, and even this troping describes rather poorly the shifting, many-valenced attachments DuBois wishes to trace. Relation, in brief, does not travel

along predictable or easily prescribed routes in *Souls*, just as the mere fact of embeddedness in a given social context does not, in DuBois's view, readily or immediately yield something like "identity." In an account of the resonances between DuBois and Glissant, Winfried Siemerling wisely remarks that "a certain indeterminacy and unpredictability are for Glissant signs of relation" (330)—and they are as well for DuBois. One of the implications is that, whatever else they are, DuBois's anatomies of intimate life are not origin myths: they do not pretend to explain how people, or certain "types" of people, came to be the way they are (or, in psychoanalytic terms, came to desire the way they desire). The variousness that DuBois accords to all persons—his insistence that people sustain, in an absolutely unpredictable way, every variety of relation to the forces and objects in their surroundings—sits uneasily alongside the generative or etiological accounts of personality in which a certain kind of psychoanalysis specializes and to which an oedipal narrative of sexual development is so often the key. The disinclination of *Souls* to produce any but the most provisional models of the black citizen or black identity suggests, more broadly, that, as far as DuBois is concerned, the interests of the analyst of social life lie somewhat afield of the problems of subject formation, or of subjectivity per se. The problem of the subject is for DuBois simply not the most pertinent or pressing or socially revelatory avenue of inquiry. And we may assume this is so, at least in part, because talk about the problem of the subject and "subjectivity" tends to proceed as if there were *a* subject (a racial subject, a patriarchal subject, a sexual subject) that could accommodate, beneath its theoretical rubric, the inestimable variousness that, for DuBois as for Freud, defines the human or, rather, marks its insusceptibility to conclusive definition.

*As for Freud:* we arrive here at the first of several contradictions. For the Freud who is the theorist of human incalculability—the Freud who describes dreamwork and the unconscious, those reservoirs in which the proliferation of selves we have yet to become, or have ceased to be, speak up within us—is not the Freud who draws up a rather rigid developmental map based on an ancient tragedy and immodestly suggests that all persons can be located on it. That is, we find often in the same text, and sometimes on the same page, the Freud whose concern is the nuanced vagaries of particular attachments and affiliations *and* the



Freud who, as a good scientist does, classifies, categorizes, subsumes, abstracts, and generalizes.<sup>24</sup> No one has written more eloquently of these divided tendencies in Freud than Phillips, who speaks of the simultaneous presence of “the Enlightenment Freud”—Freud the doctor, as it were—and “the post-Freudian Freud.” For Phillips, the latter acts as the irrepressible ironist of the former:

The post-Freudian Freud, that is to say, was not promoting the necessity or the (traditional) value of self-doubt; he was questioning the very idea of the self as an object of knowledge (or a commodity). If a person is not a potentially knowable set of constituents—humours, faculties, predispositions, instincts—then how can we know what’s missing? The inevitability of infancy, the unruliness of instinctual life, the puzzling acquisition of language and its link with sexuality, the unconscious dream-work; all of these suggested to Freud a radical and formative insufficiency, something that cannot be solved by knowledge. With the post-Freudian description of the unconscious, the idea of human completeness disappears. We are not in search of wholeness—the satisfaction, amelioration, progress, or self-knowledge of the Enlightenment Freud; we are in search of good ways of bearing our incompleteness. (*Terrors and Experts*, 6–7)

In one important strand of Freud, we are enjoined to regard ourselves with far-reaching agnosticism: the selves we have, however searchingly we approach them, “cannot be solved by knowledge,” because they are undergirded by an unconscious that always eludes us. What fascinates this Freud (Freud the theorist, we might say) is the galaxy of mobile relations we attempt to sustain around and with respect to this constitutive incompleteness. In a way that may seem strange, *Souls* actually speaks up, in its methodological idiosyncrasies, for something like this latter, post-Freudian Freudian vision—and speaks up for it, remarkably, on behalf of an explicitly social criticism. It is as though any less ample

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the most vivid example is the 1905 *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*: Freud takes pains in the first two treatises to describe sexuality as a relentlessly pleasure-seeking force, nonteleological in its hungers and operating always in excess of any reproductive function, only to spend the whole of the third writing the contours of sexual experience back into a teleology of reproduction and laboring to tie it to a strictly biological, and almost biomechanical, set of laws (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. [London: Hogarth, 1953–74], 7:135–243).

and finally agnostic vision of the human would yield a fundamentally false vision of social life, which in turn would sponsor the promotion of necessarily inadequate solutions to any number of real but misperceived social crises. This is why DuBois insists that some analytic framework, other than any provided by the conventional “crude social measurements,” must be written into being. Freud’s ironies are thus, in a sense, also DuBois’s: each writer is a kind of empiricist (Freud the doctor, DuBois the social scientist) whose thought turns irresistibly toward, and is in some respects structured by, the confoundingly dynamic and incalculable nature of his human objects. For Freud, the emphasis on the ineluctable variousness of the human proceeds in the name of a sometimes medical, sometimes metaphysical exhaustiveness; for DuBois, the same emphasis works in the name of a more ample, more incisive social critique.

In the present moment, of course, a great many works that aspire to the name of social criticism take place exclusively in, or very near to, the province of the subject. A pervasive concern with “subjectivity” has been upon us for some time and has brought with it its own idiosyncratic mandates. The questions to ask now are: Where does the being of subject X come from? What activates it? What forces design and delimit the subject, partake in its construction?<sup>25</sup> Clearly, much of this work follows from Michel Foucault and adapts his interest in the interplay between power—the protean array of forces engaged in a given environment—and the human. (“My objective,” he once wrote, “has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings have been made subjects.”)<sup>26</sup> Subjectivity, in these terms, holds together both subjection (as to an exterior force) and self-perception. Foucault’s basic polemical insight, in which many critics are eager to follow him, is that power, after the Enlightenment turn to the individual, became less repressive than *productive*: it fixes the available

<sup>25</sup> For a good critique of constructivism, in particular its “conflation of the question of . . . phylogeny with that of individual ontogeny,” see Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion,” in *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 226–27.

<sup>26</sup> “The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 208.

terms of self-perception and, as such, continually checks the horizons of human being. Judith Butler describes these movements nicely: “Subjection,” she writes, “is neither simply the domination of a subject nor its production, but designates a certain kind of restriction *in* production, a restriction without which the production of the subject cannot take place, a restriction through which that production takes place.”<sup>27</sup> Foucault is essentially Nietzschean, then, in his emphasis on an initial bounding or foreclosure that makes knowledge and intelligibility (of the subject) possible.

One great contemporary problem, though—and it is a problem from which Butler’s own work on Foucault and Freud is not exempt— involves a certain confusion between subjectivity imagined as the limiting of terms that bounds the human and subjectivity imagined as a conferred or impelled internal trajectory, a destiny. The latter is the ghost in the theoretical machine that haunts such commonplace critical terms as *socially constructed* and especially *subject position*. For in their hurry to follow Foucault in crediting the formative powers of various social forces, as well as in debunking liberal illusions of autonomy, critics have given short shrift to the kinds of mobility that even a text like *Discipline and Punish* presumes. (And *mobility* is the word we want: it is not necessary to dress up the range of available responses or relations to power in terms as melodramatic as “counterhegemonic resistance.”) Foucault makes clear throughout his work, and abundantly so in his later writings, that it is the ideal, the dream, of modern power to insinuate itself comprehensively at the level of “the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations.”<sup>28</sup> He leaves it to us to observe that not everyone goes to prison, joins the army, or stays forever in school. The message of power, that is, does not always or uninterruptedly reach its destination. To presume, on the contrary, that persons are not so much inflected by social contestation as situated, or given being, by their social position is to adopt the vantage of power as though it were comprehensive, or true.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 84.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 16.

<sup>29</sup> This is not Foucault’s vantage: that persons exist in unpredetermined relation to the forces that shape and delimit them is, in truth, an ever-present, uncon-

Given the potential for reductiveness in these commonplace misapplications of Foucault—these “overly-hasty historicizations of the subject”—psychoanalytic approaches promise to bring a welcome expansiveness to the scene of criticism.<sup>30</sup> For one feature that distinguishes the work of such writers as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Slavoj Žižek, and Joan Copjec is, in fact, an insistence on the irreducibility of the subject to the forces that shape and delimit it. Copjec, for instance, is “against the historicists” in nothing so much as her belief that the variety of social forms that condition the human subject do not account for it at all exhaustively.<sup>31</sup> And this, as we have seen, is one of the operative premises of *Souls*, that the human is activated by an incalculable array of imperatives, motives, and crossed relations. But a more dispiriting commonality among these contemporary authors, who speak up for this kind of irreducibility, is their tendency to forget the plenitude of the lived in the rush to reduce the human to the same irreducibility or, rather, to the same allegory of irreducibility. Working in the deconstructive tradition of Lacan, these critics disclose a subject forever dissolving into the inadequacy of language, the default of signification that results, inevitably, in the eruption of the real within the symbolic. The problem is not so much that the notions of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real are implausible—I do not think that they are—as that the constant rerouting of human irreducibility through this schema makes

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troversial presumption throughout his work—a point made fantastically clear, for example, in the chronically underread second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. See esp. Foucault’s remarks on “arts of existence” and “techniques of the self,” as well as on “ethics-oriented” moralities, as opposed to strictly juridical moralities. “Here,” he writes of the former, “the emphasis is on the forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which he [the individual] works them out, on the exercises by which he makes of himself an object to be known, and on the practices that enable him to transform his own mode of being” (*The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage, 1990], 8–13, 29–30).

<sup>30</sup> Mark Seltzer, “Serial Killers (I),” *differences* 5, no. 1 (1993): 120.

<sup>31</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994). Other exemplary works in this tradition include Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989); Joan Copjec, ed., *Supposing the Subject* (New York: Verso, 1994); and, from a less partisan angle, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, trans. Douglas Brick (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

it enormously difficult, in the first place, to tell one person from any other. It was one of Lacan's virtues to keep in play the question of the subject's relation to his or her *jouissance*; the permutations of this relation defined sex and gender, as far as Lacan was concerned. In these contemporary works, by contrast, the subject reduces always to that same irreducibility, that same real that marks signification's default and the dissolving aporia of the unconscious. So in the place of an exterior determinism, derisively called "historicism," we have a structural determinism, which, for all its emphasis on irreducibility and the priority of the psychic, "produces" rather monolithic subjects, devoid of the nuanced particularities (to use Spillers's terms) in whose evocation Freud, for instance, excelled. It is as though the most prominent Lacanian theory had been forced, as the cost of its very prominence, to undersell the funny, always elusive Lacan for the Lacan who, as Malcolm Bowie has it, "dreams of a perfectly calculable human subject."<sup>32</sup> This emphasis on the programmatic nature of subjectivity (one thinks of Žižek's flowcharts in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*) begins with the thoroughly psychoanalytic premise of an irreducible person, only to end in betrayal of a concern for prolific human variance in favor of the prestigious assurances of a system, a theory.

One especially pertinent lesson for those of us who continue to believe in the usefulness of psychoanalytic tools is that irreducibility ceases to be interesting when its only context is subject formation. All one can say is: the subject is irreducible, because the inadequacy of one's language, one's unconscious, and the unresolvingly conflictual nature of one's desire all make it so—as though this were the end of the story. As though the sustaining and fraying of attachment, the finely discriminated varieties of relation, the intensities of the affect world in

<sup>32</sup> Malcolm Bowie, *Psychoanalysis and the Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 198. My take on the Lacanian tradition as it works today owes a deep debt to Bowie's splendid primer, *Lacan*, in which he makes a number of telling points about the disappearance, in Lacan's own work, of many avenues of human variance and variability: "Lacan's constant stress upon the disjunctive Symbolic dimension has its moments of debilitation and of frenzied overstatement. . . . A long gaze at the Pacific may be taciturn at one moment and loquacious the next. Language offers us now a retreat from sensuality, now a way of enhancing and manipulating it. Yet to these differences Lacan's theory remains a principled indifference" (*Lacan* [London: Fontana, 1991], 198–99).

the whole of its range—as though all of this were of only passing consequence. What the unwearying turn to the subject does provide, of course, is the prestige of a strong account: to trace the formation of the subject is almost necessarily to offer a theory on the nature of subjectivity, that is, a theory of the nature of the interface between the social and the subject. To be sure, there is often something of high value in such theoretical endeavors. For instance, *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, a fine volume of essays edited by Christopher Lane, in many instances draws from the paradoxes of the subject suggestive readings of the nature of racial conflict, and it does so across an impressive range of historical and cultural contexts. One cannot help but notice, however, even in moments of true appreciation, that it is only to a very particular kind of racial conflict—the “astonishing intransigence” of racism—that this theorizing can address itself with any assurance.<sup>33</sup> The theory is certainly strong: it holds that “racial enmity” is one prominent expression of the ego’s fundamentally rivalrous, self-contradictory, and therefore violent disposition; that racism is, in effect, the lived allegory of the intrapsychic tendency to violence.<sup>34</sup> But the theory is just as certainly limited in the range of its application: limited first of all in the dimensions of race that it finds worthy of commentary (racism is a mighty enough topic, but, as DuBois made more than clear, it does not begin to exhaust the affective field engaged and traversed by race), and limited especially in its responsiveness to the movements of race across the many vectors of intimate life.<sup>35</sup> To say that racism is the expression of the ego’s rivalrous nature is indeed to tell us something potentially profound about how social forms and psychic structures may reinforce one another. But it gives us little purchase on the currents of admiration,

<sup>33</sup> Christopher Lane, “The Psychoanalysis of Race: An Introduction,” in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed. Christopher Lane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>34</sup> The premise is that “the *ego* is the seat of contradiction and the enemy of difference and desire” and that such contradictions play themselves out often beyond the threshold of our “knowledge,” in the unconscious (Lane, “Psychoanalysis of Race,” 19).

<sup>35</sup> Nor, in truth, does it hold up well as social theory. The intransigence of racism is, after all, not that mystifying: racism has persisted, first and foremost, because it has proved almost inexhaustibly *useful*, in a multiplicity of contexts, to a multiplicity of ends.

condescension, wariness, envy, generosity, and fearfulness that inflect the coming together of any two or more people, of the same or different races, when race becomes an explicit or even an implicit topic. These phenomena are made no less consequential by virtue of the exceptional difficulty of generalizing them. In short, the intricacy of the lived—once the specialty, the very province, of psychoanalytic work—gives way in such accounts to the imperatives of a strong theory.<sup>36</sup>

DuBois tells a different story. In his story of the racially stratified life world, there is the simultaneous presumption of a wide range of shaping restrictions and foreclosures *and* of the irreducibility of persons to those determinations. But for DuBois, that irreducibility consists in a variousness in persons that defies calculation or prediction; it derives, more plainly, from the fact that would-be subjects have the capacity to sustain, among the truncated set of terms available to themselves, any number of kinds of relation to the world. Oedipus is unhelpful, then, primarily because his story is a way of sleeking down, of making an allegory of, this hectic plurality of possible forms of relation. One result is that in his preference for rendering more local entanglements, DuBois leaves us with no strong theory of either power or the subject: to the question of the nature of authority, or of the nature of subjectivity, or of the nature of the interface between the social and the subject, we are enjoined to answer as agnostics. And this, I know, will seem to many to cede too much of the very conceptual density that makes psychoanalysis so abidingly compelling. But the return on such agnosticism is, at the very least, a far more agile critical responsiveness—a responsiveness, in the first place, to the unsystematizable contingency of which lives are made.

This return plays out in several directions. First, it sponsors an uncompromised view of how irreducibly plural a phenomenon “authority” actually is. (I am not the first to observe, with respect to Oedipus, that the father and even the rather abstracted concept of authority are painfully inadequate to describe the great variety of imperatives and exhortations, from the unignorable to the infinitesimal, through which

<sup>36</sup> Similar strengths, and similar weaknesses, can be found in Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen, eds., *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

the world's many forms of stricture act on us.)<sup>37</sup> Second, it allows us to recognize that persons are different from one another not simply, and not primarily, by virtue of their gender. (Oedipal psychoanalysis encourages us to accept gender, and gender alone, as the measure of human alterity; all other differences must then be understood either to inhabit allegorically, or to circulate subordinately to, that one indispensable polarity.) Finally, the turn to the fate of local attachments, to their maintenance or foreclosure, demands of us, as critics, a considerably richer, more deliberately nuanced (more Jamesian) language of relation. As far as DuBois is concerned, this more subtle analytic provides the very ground on which to build a richer, more accurate, more useful language of American social life. His writing suggests that, however useful they may at times be, strong theories of the subject or of power, whether historicist or psychoanalytic, oppose the rendering of more provisional, but also more nuanced and variegated, accounts of the lived social world.

One final way of framing these positions is to say that in DuBois's view the lived world presents simultaneously a form and a content. Its form is constraint and the truncation of possibility, a restriction so thorough as to be formative. (We can think here of Foucault's Nietzschean vision of a productive, administering power.) Its content, though, is all variance and surprise, and consists in an unschematic mobility of attachments to the objects of the world, each attracting different intensities and affects. (Here we might think of Glissant's notion of *chaos-monde*.) On this score, Freud reads as one of our greatest resources for the description of the content of life, if only for the affective range he enables us to see and to consider in their shadings and cross-relations: envy, terror, curiosity, rage, bereavement, appeasement, want, desire, dread, supplication, confusion, and all the ever-turning ambiguities of ambivalence. Thinking the registers of form and content together—having, say, your Foucault *and* your Freud—need not involve tortuously baroque

<sup>37</sup> This is Foucault's point about versions of political authority that mistakenly presume a "formal homogeneity of power." "In political thought and analysis," he writes, "we have yet to cut off the head of the king" (*An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage, 1978], 85, 88–89). Foucault himself is indebted to the pioneering work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*.



reconfiguring of theoretical paradigms; such contortions result only when the subject is taken as the sole context of their engagement. These registers (and these theorists) accommodate each other much less catastrophically when, in a more necessarily provisional pursuit, we follow both DuBois and Freud in understanding sociality as, at its base, a condition of relatedness between persons, each of whom is constrained but undetermined. The network of relations DuBois traces between “masters and men” is one model for this. Another is Freud’s remarkable description of “group psychology” as “the influencing of an individual by a large number of people simultaneously, people with whom he is connected by something, though otherwise they may in many respects be strangers to him.”<sup>38</sup> If these are not now the prevailing methodological models of social inquiry, it is in part because a century of critical practice has, for good and ill, attuned us to differently structured questions and dilemmas—problems of power, subjects, and their unsteady intersection. It is no stretch to say that DuBois’s text describes the intricacy of racial meaning in America as deftly as any before or since. Perhaps more strangely, though, the book goes a long way toward helping those of us laboring in the present moment to emerge from the shadow of some of the last century’s critical preoccupations. By its very textual peculiarity, *Souls* opens out our most prominent theories, and our most prominent theorists, to new, perhaps less antagonistic uses and extensions—in short, to new futures. One hundred years on, DuBois continues to propel us forward.

<sup>38</sup> Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in *Standard Edition*, 18:70.