
DuBois' *Souls*: Thoughts on "Veiled" Bodies and the Study of Black Religion

Anthony B. Pinn, Macalester College

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W. E. B. DuBois penned these words as context for his *Souls of Black Folk*: "I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses, --the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls."¹ For one hundred years, this haunting proclamation and its company commentary on the nature and meaning of "two-ness" have shaped discussions on Black American thought and life. Even a quick survey of twentieth-century writings related to African Americans surfaces countless arguments all framed by this racial dichotomy. For example, the study of Black religion, a major area of African American scholarship, embraces this dichotomy and defines liberating praxis based upon the dichotomy's assumed legitimacy.

The Souls of Black Folk, however, while outlining the mantra of the color line and the continuing significance of race (i.e., blackness and whiteness) is not restricted to discussion of blackness (the "racing" of African Americans) as a narrow and simplistic characterization of power relations and "being" in the United States. This text is concerned also with dimensions of life that are not captured by restrictive and myopic discussions of black consciousness framed in terms of what Victor Anderson critiques as "ontological blackness."² Albeit central, the question "how does it feel to be a problem?" captures only a portion of the book's premise because DuBois is also concerned with the creative unraveling of black humanity as it occurs in the more opaque areas of African American life.³ For example, I believe *Souls* offers a soft assertion that black bodies have "weight" or "soul" that is not fully accounted for through talk of the existential dimensions of race and race relations. It is through this soul, the inner and more

opaque dimensions of life, that the creative impulse for fullness of being is developed and nurtured, and imposed notions of meaning do not penetrate to this level of existence.

In the following pages, I explore the manner in which DuBois' framing of African American consciousness' depth suggests a hermeneutic that might prove helpful in the doing of black religious studies. This hermeneutic is not the hermeneutic of suspicion that dominates black religious studies; rather, it is an intriguing alternative, one meriting additional attention and application. In short, DuBois provides a hermeneutic by which the aesthetic dimensions of black life are used to interpret America. It is a hermeneutic of "aesthetics" as soul or depth, and it is concerned with the elemental impulses that mark African American existence. As a way of anchoring DuBois' preoccupation with the black body's more soulful dimensions, I begin this exploration by looking to music, the mode of "voice" that frames each chapter of *Souls*.⁴

Music and the "Style" of Life⁵

Music, the spirituals and the blues, is so important in the formation of consciousness or subjectivity in African American communities because it is such a large cultural marker. It was the first African American response to absurdity, and it entails the expression of dignity in spite of the dehumanizing tendencies of the modern world. When things were falling apart, music kept body and soul together, connecting them through a style of expression, an aesthetic mode of interpretation and movement. The movement was deep, so deep that white cultural

voyeurs missed much of its meaning and content, not realizing that they paid a dear price, a heavy price, for those moments of pleasure: Black listeners received subversive bits of information, and white folks were captured by the strange tones. When the blues were played, enjoyment by white folks often entailed a process of signification they failed to "get." Hell, lots of black folks could not appreciate the serious nature of play at work in the blues. In fact, just when we think we have dug to the core, we discover another layer of complex meaning and vision, another layer of speculation on the nature and flow of life. In many ways, spirituals and the blues speak to a black style of living, the rhythmic sway by which many African Americans have walked through a veiled world. Embedded in the words and the rhythm an impulse exist, a musically defined drive, that speaks to the manner in which African American have felt the pulse of life, measured it, and harnessed it with purpose. It is, of course, a meaning that runs counter to the dominant society's efforts to limit the human and cultural worth of black people. In this music, one finds a source of questioning, prodding the conditions of life, flipping and examining existential circumstances until something useful surfaces. It is recognition of the value of African Americans through their ability to shape and control language and, in this way, construct a world. Yet, this language has shaped a world marked by a mature depiction of life; it is one that recognizes the absurd nature of encounter, but in a way that avoids nihilism while calling into question the nature of social crisis. That is to say, this music teaches life can be harsh, but in some cases is quite laughable.

I got the world in a jug,
The stopper in my hand.⁶

As countless lyrics suggest, life is survivable and more. One need only face it, with vision, imagination, and tenacity.

The Aesthetics of "Soul" and the Religion of Veiled Bodies

Connected to this style of making meaning is a posturing of the body - a placement of bodies in various spaces of socioeconomic, political, and cultural purpose. What happens when the twisting and turning of these "raced" bodies is used as the central or organizing metaphor for the development of African American religious experience and its theological articulation?

What DuBois promotes is a concern with the significance of the physical body -- flesh -- for a proper understanding of the existential and ontological difficulties encountered by African Americans, as well as the creative ways in which a deeper sense of being is developed. Of great significance regarding this is the manner in which he suggests we might understand religiosity, the expression of ultimate concern and meaning, in part through examining the body as it occupies time and space. It is through a focus on the body that one sees the manifestations of a deep impulse - a soul-, a drive for full humanity that pushes through over-determined and fix identities. Perhaps this is the implication of DuBois' words regarding "book-learning":

In those somber forests of his striving his
own soul rose before
Him, and he saw himself, -- darkly as
through a veil; and yet he
Saw in himself some faint revelation of his
power, of his mission.
He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain
his place in the
World, he must be himself, and not another.⁷

In "Of the Faith of the Fathers" (*Souls*), as a young school teacher "fresh from the East," DuBois shares with readers a word on the nature of early black religion. He was familiar with a form of worship that was rather "very quiet and subdued."⁸ But in the south, on a dark Sunday evening, he approached a small village church and was met by an energy and

passion unfamiliar to him. Referencing this energetic worship experience, he presents the triadic structure of black religion that revolves around the preached word, music, and the encounter with the spirit of God (i.e., shouting or the frenzy). While distinctive elements, what I find intriguing, in spite of the flaws in DuBois' presentation and analysis, is the manner in which each element points to a central reality - the black body and its encounter with a cosmic other as a way of breaking the Veil.

While black religious thought has given implicit importance to the body, DuBois provides a theoretical framework and methodological sensibilities that might serve to push this further by recognizing more deeply the manner in which the body manifests deep impulses or "strivings" that say something about religion.

During what remains of this essay, I would like to suggest one possible application of this sensibility, a thinking through the manner in which sensitivity to physical bodies as signs and symbols of something having ontological and epistemological importance might be played out.

DuBois encounters the primal impulse of religious devotion, a deep connection that is expressed and celebrated always in reference to the physical body. The preached word glimpses an alternative arrangement and the presence of the preacher connotes the realness of an altered place in the world as, during slavery, this preacher arose on the plantation as "bard, physician, judge and priest."⁹

The music DuBois mistakenly refers to as sorrow songs speaks to the terror of bodies fixed in time and space, physical forms tormented by the confinement of raced identity; but this lament is accompanied by a perplexing sense of hope. Through the shout or frenzy black bodies were transported beyond the confinements of the Veil and placed in communion with that which affirmed their humanity. What was true during the period of slavery, remained fundamentally in place as black religion institutionalized. Mindful of DuBois's perspective,

one might think of the Black Church in the following way: the contemporary Church seeks to establish blacks as agents of will -- with all the accompanying benefits and responsibilities. Christian gatherings orchestrated by the church often serve as a ritual of exorcism so to speak in that they foster a break with status as will-less objects -- impoverished forms -- and encourage new forms of relationship and interaction premised upon black intentionality and worth. Poverty and its resulting conditions pushes on the poor a sense of worthlessness, of nihilism, by which life is rendered of little value and their bodies - - as the mechanism of this life -- are seen as of little importance. Based on this, for example, it becomes normal for young people confined to areas of poverty to think more quickly of their funerals than their futures. Yet, the black body constructed as ugly and impoverished was signified during church gatherings, and it was transformed into ritual devices through which the glory of God and the beauty of human movement was celebrated.

Through the more ecstatic modes of black worship the black body is rescued temporarily from the physical ramifications because the body becomes a vessel for cosmic energy. In this capacity, the potential for healing and reworking the body increases in that the person so possessed can provide important messages, be the source for healing, and can spark an ecstatic response from others. One gets a sense of this, for example, early in the development of the Black Church in the form of ring shouts, a rhythmic movement of the body that must have resembled the sway and jerk of bodies associated with trances and ecstatic behavior in traditional African religion. Although despised by many church leaders because shouting reminded them of the culture of slavery -- a slave past that should be replaced through worship refinements reflecting white religious expression such as proper hymns and thoughtful sermons -- these ring shouts demonstrated the beauty and value of black bodies, flesh that could channel the spirit of God. Such bodies had to be of profound value and worth, irrespective of economic holdings. Through the ring shout black bodies were redeemed in ways the fought against continuing

efforts to impoverish them.

Deformations with respect to health concerns are addressed through the 'healing' potential of the divine, and what were once considered bodies of limited value in the larger social setting are given great worth. Would the divine manifest in anything less than an important and useful vessel? Possession by the holy gives the poverty stricken body new value, a new level of spiritual beauty that overrides -- at least during the period of *communitas* -- the physical realities of life under the *status quo*.

Truth is no longer defined by the ability of a group to enforce its will, its desires, its recollection of things. Now, through increased spiritual vitality, the truth about blacks, about existence, is tied only to the power of God to manifest in the flesh of believers. The rules and tortures of this hostile land are momentarily mitigated by the Holy Spirit's presence and establishment of a space in which external dilemmas are held at bay and harmony is the rule.

Black bodies are complex signs that represent something both appealing and repulsive for the society in which we dwell. For DuBois, as Charles Long reminds us, religion has something to do with a wrestling against restrictions or the Veil that dwarfs the essential meaning and importance of these bodies.¹⁰

It is, according to Souls, within the "deeper recesses" of the Veil that the meaning of black religion is uncovered.¹¹ Religion, then, involves a struggle to live in complex ways, or to put to rest the "unreconciled strivings" described by DuBois. Finally, DuBois pushes religious studies to recognition the manner in which religion arises out of the struggle to obtain ultimate meaning through a process of "becoming". Religious experience, therefore, entails the shaping of the individual's sense of ultimate meaning (complex identity) in light of community.¹² Articulated in light of the significance of black bodies, *Souls*, speaks powerfully to new possibilities with respect to the sensibilities that might guide the study of black religion. In important ways it

might help clarify what is *black* and *religious* about black religion.

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Notes:

1. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books/The Library of America, 1990), "The Forethought," 3.
2. Victor Anderson: *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum Publishing Group, 1995).
3. DuBois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," *Souls*, 7. I am indebted to Charles Long for this notion of opacity as well as a more general sensitivity to black religion beyond institutions and theological doctrines. Long recognized the value of DuBois' work for a general study of black religion decades ago, but black religious studies has been slow to embrace this reformulation. Those familiar with Long's work will notice his influence on my theoretical sensibilities. See his *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).
4. In his introduction to The Library of America edition of *Souls of Black Folk*, John Edgar Wideman says the following concerning DuBois' use of spirituals: "... the phrases from slave songs that precede each section of *Souls* seem to be a relatively conventional means of providing structural coherence and unity. But consider these framing devices in terms of the continuing historic struggle for black voices to make themselves heard in the white literary tradition." (xiv)
5. My comments on music presented here are drawn from a larger discussion: Anthony B. Pinn, "Making a World with a Beat: Musical Expression's Relationship to Religious Identity and Experience," in Anthony B. Pinn, editor, *Can I Get a Witness?: Essays on Rap Music's Religious Sensibilities and Spiritual Commitments* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming).
6. James H. Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 114.
7. DuBois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," *Souls*, 12.
8. DuBois, "Of the Faith of the Fathers," *Souls*, 137.
9. DuBois, "Of the Faith of the Fathers," *Souls*, 142.
10. Charles Long, *Significations*, 164-167.
11. DuBois, "The Forethought," *Souls*, 3.
12. I develop this understanding of religion in *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).