
The Grooves of Temporality

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This essay takes W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as a model of modern black temporality and cultural practice rooted in and routed through the sonic. While *Souls* blends together history, eulogy, sociology, personal anecdote, economics, lyricism, ethnography, fiction, and cultural criticism of black music, Du Bois's central aesthetic achievement in this epochal text appears in bars of music placed before each chapter. The way the "Sorrow Songs" are threaded throughout the text is the key to *Souls*'s sonorous ignition. Besides the musical epigraphs, references to hearing and the "Sorrow Songs" close both the "Forethought" and "Afterthought," underpinning the manuscript both graphically—through musical notes—and in its content—through Du Bois's theorization of black music's place in U.S. and world culture. When Du Bois ([1903] 1989: 2; emphasis mine) first introduces the "Sorrow Songs" in the "Forethought," he links them directly to the souls of black folk: "Before each chapter, as now printed, stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs—some echo of haunting melody from the only American music, which welled up from *black souls* in the dark past." Moreover, in the "Afterthought" to *Souls*, Du Bois ([1903] 1989: 217) asks his readers to "Hear [his] cry," and the best way to *hear* the souls of black folk, as Du Bois remarks at the end of chapter 1 ("Of Our Spiritual Strivings"), is to listen to the "Sorrow Songs." Du Bois ([1903] 1989: 12) does not ask his readers to view or see the souls of black folk, but instead he writes so "that men may listen to the souls of black folk." Much in the same way that Du Bois appeals to the ear in his

theory of double consciousness, this injunction to imagine blackness sonically provides a phono-graphic guidepost for reading and hearing *Souls*.

Contemporary critics agree that the sonic signs taken from the Western tradition of musical notation cannot form a mimetic merger with spirituals. Eric Sundquist (1993: 470), for instance, states that “the musical epigraphs are . . . an example of a cultural ‘language’ that cannot be properly interpreted, or even ‘heard’ at all, since it fails to correspond to the customary mapping of sounds and signs that make up the languages of the dominant (in this case white) culture.” Of course, these notes were also unable to faithfully reproduce the Western classical music for which they were originally designed; for example, they cannot capture the full range of a performance of a Bach fugue, since the piece will be interpreted and performed differently depending on who plays it and when and where it is staged. As Alan Durant (1984: 98) has argued, “Notation marks an ordering of bodily movements of musical performance in addition to immediate verbal directives, and provided historically the possibility for pieces of music of a specialized, if restricted, kind of permanence. In this sense, notation was one necessary condition to take on, as composition, a temporal and aesthetic independence from particular versions and collaborations of its realization.” By incorporating musical notes into his text as doubles for spirituals, Du Bois attempts to make the musical works that comprise this body independent of their performances and locations in history while also ensconcing them in new forms of contextual codependency. Instead of being placed within a particular historical framework, the spirituals now signify and stand in for a general black American future-past. Du Bois (re)defines the spirituals he employs by fusing them with Western canonical literature, rendering these songs usable and audible African American future-pasts that bridge the gap between the nineteenth century—slavery and white transcribers—and the twentieth century—the color line. Thus, the “Sorrow Songs” are severed from their origins by transmogrifying them into grooves for Du Bois’s dub mix, which allows *Souls* to be audible and legible as the first literary sound recording (phono-graph) of sonic Afro-modernity.¹

1. I define *sonic Afro-modernity* in relation to the advent of technological sound recording at the end of the nineteenth century (embodied in the phonograph) that offered the ability to split sounds from the sources that (re)produced them, creating a technological orality and musicality in twentieth-century black culture. In other words, oralities and musicalities were no longer tied to the immediate presence of human subjects; they became technologically iterable in a Derridean sense that occasions not so much a complete disappearance of the human subject but its resounding through new styles of technological folding. On the one hand, this disjuncture between sound and source rendered the former more ephemeral since it failed to provide the listener with a clear visual point of reference. On the other hand, sound gained its materiality in the technological apparatuses

In order to contextualize my argument about the temporalities of “sonic Afro-modernity” in Du Bois’s use of the “Sorrow Songs,” I turn to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* ([1952] 1995) and to Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1969) as conceptual echo chambers. In Ellison’s novel, history appears as a groove that indexes both the serrations found on the surface of phonograph records and those somewhat more elusive grooves in the vernacular sense of the term, while Benjamin imagines history as an uneven chain of monadic shrapnel that disjoins the putative continuum of empty, homogeneous time. Moreover, all three writers hone in on variable temporalities from the vantage point of the tradition of the oppressed, to use Benjamin’s phrase, and consequently recalibrate the flows between the major and the minor, the future and the past. By reading these writings across time and space, my strategy quite intentionally goes against the grain of current historicist discourses in the U.S. academy, where “history” appears as commonsensical and determining in the last instance—if not necessarily progressive in a teleological sense. This often unarticulated and under-theorized account of historical time leaves intact a fairly staid configuration of temporal movement (if it includes motion at all) that cannot account for the discontinuities of the temporal in the work of Du Bois, Ellison, and Benjamin.

The Grooves of History

Chapter 20 of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* suggests a notion of temporality steeped in sound technology that, thankfully, steers clear of a linear model of history. This chapter, which overflows with references to records and grooves, opens with the protagonist’s search for the missing Tod Clifton, a fellow member of “The Brotherhood,” a political organization. In his quest to find Clifton, the protagonist is led to Harlem where “the uptown rhythms were slower and yet somehow faster” than the ones downtown, already indicating a shift in time that will acquire more force as the protagonist’s journey continues (Ellison [1952] 1995: 423). The protagonist finally locates Clifton selling “Sambo Dolls” on Forty-third Street. Clifton and his partner accompany their sales pitch with a song about the features of this doll. Comparing Clifton’s activities in The Brotherhood with his new role as a Sambo Doll salesman, the protagonist ponders Clifton’s fate: “It was as though he had

and the practices surrounding these devices and in the process rematerialized the human source. This interplay between the ephemerality of music (or the apparatus) and the materiality of the audio technologies/practices (or music) provides the central, nonsublatale tension at the core of sonic Afro-modernity. For a different consideration of Afro-modern time, see Hanchard 1999.

chosen . . . to fall outside of *history*” (Ellison [1952] 1995: 434; emphasis his). The assertion queries a commonsense approach to history; for how, if history is defined as an autonomous motor that keeps the world running, can Clifton fall out of it? What history does Clifton fall out of when he sells Sambo Dolls rather than participating in The Brotherhood? Here the protagonist seems to embody the historicist impulse by virtue of his failure to question the timeline fed to him by The Brotherhood, by accepting that there can be only a totalizing historical machine that controls the past, present, and future.

Undoubtedly, this query acquires different shades of signification for “the tradition of the oppressed.” Two incidents in particular shape the protagonist’s movement from—in Walter Benjamin’s terminology—a historicist worldview to a historical materialist one: when he witnesses Clifton’s death and when he encounters three young black men wearing zoot suits.² While selling the dolls, Clifton is threatened by and attacks a white policeman—a confrontation that culminates in Clifton’s fatal shooting, which the protagonist unwillingly observes. Forced to bear witness to his friend’s violent erasure from history—any history—the protagonist is swept up in a current of doubt, igniting a different historical motor: “Why should a man deliberately plunge outside history and peddle in obscenity? Why did he choose to plunge . . . into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside of history?” (Ellison [1952] 1995: 439). Clifton’s death forces the protagonist to acknowledge that Clifton had no choice in “falling out of history” since there exists no place for black subjects in The Brotherhood’s version of history. In this sense they are already belated, “men out of time,” in Ellison’s words ([1952] 1995: 441). Here, the teleological model of history ruptures; in its place, a more nuanced theory of temporality materializes that takes notice of the complex relations of domination and subordination linked to the inscription of history as it pertains to black people in the United States and the global oppressed. In this configuration, written records, and historical narratives in particular, are wrested from the sphere of totality and self-evident truth as they fail or violently resist inscribing the histories of marginalized subjects such as Clifton.

After leaving the scene of Clifton’s death, the protagonist descends into the nearest subway station, where he stumbles upon three young black men dressed in zoot suits. Briefly reasserting his totalizing conceptualization of history in the aftermath of Clifton’s murder, he describes them as: “Men out of time—unless they found Brotherhood. Men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten” (Ellison [1952] 1995: 441). Here, the zoot-suiters are beyond the measure of

2. For discussions of the culture of zoot suits, see Cossgrave 1984 and Kelley 1994.

temporality per se due to their distance from The Brotherhood; the protagonist, nevertheless, envisions this specific redaction of history qua History, eliding the differences between the particular and the universal. Paralleling the advent of Clifton's death, this encounter inspires a puncture in the seamless suture between the lowercase and uppercase types of history:

What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and his boys the ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge? For they were outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll; taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand. (Ellison [1952] 1995: 441)³

This set of questions and the final assertion serve to further elucidate the dislocation, if not negation, of the protagonist's model of history by interrogating the role of history in relation to American culture generally and black subjects in particular. If history were a madman and not a scientific motor, would Clifton still be alive? Once history ceases to bear the semblance of a "reasonable citizen," it visibly falls short as the sign and logos of temporal convergence—a site of failure from which the protagonist can yet gain perspective on his own alienation from this machine. While the totalizing idea of the historical does not quite vanish from the horizon, it does begin to fade slightly, making room for alternatives that allocate a place ("his agents") for the zoot-suiters in a way that the former cannot. Even though Clifton and the zoot-suiters are already "recorded out" of dominant historiography, they may be partially responsible for this positioning, according to the protagonist, for they do not attempt to alter its route. This recourse to self-determination underscores the protagonist's continuing belief in The Brotherhood's unilateral notion of history, like a transcendental locomotive that Clifton and the young men can either board or let pass by. To completely, or at least principally, abandon this train of thought regarding temporality and black subjects' status in it, the protagonist will have to tune his ears to the refrain of phonograph records for a dissimilar transaction of this vexed conundrum.

Walking the streets of Harlem, the protagonist asserts: "They were *outside the groove of history*, and it was my job to get them in, all of them. Forgotten names sang through my head like forgotten scenes in dreams" (Ellison [1952] 1995: 443;

3. *Nomen est omen*. *Tod* means death in German; inscribing *Tod*'s demise in his proper name, and its repetition in the passage cited above, would sonorically signify his overdetermined finitude.

emphasis mine). Unable to relinquish the dominant model of history propagated by The Brotherhood, which can only conceive of the zoot-suiters as embodying CPT, the protagonist imagines history as a single groove from which these men are barred even as they opt for remaining beyond its borders, thus suggesting a syncopated equilibrium between determining structure and human agency.⁴ As he continues his not so leisurely stroll, however, the sonic ecology intrudes even more forcefully into the protagonist's historical shield: "I moved with the crowd, the sweat pouring off me, listening to the grinding roar of traffic, the growing sound of a record shop loudspeaker blaring a languid blues. I stopped. *Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times*, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words?" (Ellison [1952] 1995: 443; emphasis mine). What distinguishes these sounds from the epochal totality promulgated by The Brotherhood is not only its imagining of an alternative historical sphere but also, and more important, the appearance of a sonic aperture that shifts the rules of the game altogether.

In what amounts to no less than an instance of a linguistic cum historical sublime, the clarity of traditional historiography is momentarily displaced by the "blaring of a loudspeaker" transmitting a variety of instruments and "turgid, inadequate words." The loudspeaker shocks the protagonist into a realm beyond the reach of linguistic signification (inadequate and turgid), wherein aggregations of phonemes cease to function as the sole determinants in the gamble of time, since they fall short of discharging the interlocking and clashing folds of temporal confluence. Put simply, the brand of history the protagonist has been hitherto accustomed to in his association with The Brotherhood can redact only one mode of historical change, leaving by the wayside those events too promiscuous to fit its teleological sequence of events. This has particular ramifications for subjects who have access to neither historiographical nor graphematic technologies (most markedly black people in the United States). Nonetheless, the written annals of history are not simply exchanged for a more authentic Afro-diasporic oral theory of history; rather, Ellison insists on the iterability of sound recording and reproduction and thus refuses to disentangle the *phono* from the *graph*, and vice versa, amounting to an additive code as opposed to an either/or proposition. But before we get ahead of ourselves, we should lend an ear to another sage voice sounding from a different virtual loudspeaker.

The protagonist's reconceptualization of the temporal suggests an instance

4. Ellison ([1952] 1995: 163) references CPT in an earlier part of the novel: "If you made an appointment, you couldn't bring them any slow c.p. (colored people's) time."

of peril (Clifton's violent demise) in which the past flares up as a monad. Such reconfigurations were underscored by Walter Benjamin, whose understanding of history opens a different series of doorways to the crinkle of the past, suggesting a nondogmatic and elastic constellation of temporal convergence rather than "the swift and imperceptible flowing of time" (Ellison [1952] 1995: 8). In his oft-cited essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin (1969: 257) distinguishes between historicism, which slavishly attempts to re-create the "true past," and a historical materialism that "brush[es] history against the grain."⁵ Benjamin's historical imaginary, rather than seeking to construe the past "the way it really was," aspires to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 1969: 255). As Benjamin (1969: 257) argues in a different thesis: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that 'the state of exception' in which we live is the rule." In this way, the historical materialist is always confronted by peril, which is precisely what puts into motion the necessity of "brushing history against the grain." But what does this brushing against yield that a cross section does not or cannot?

While the historicist accumulates facts in order to fill the dustbin of "homogeneous and empty time" that "culminates in universal history," the historical materialist works under the auspices of a "constructive principle" that incorporates its own theoretical production—he reflects on the process of assembling history as opposed to simply retelling the past—and "only approaches a historical entity where it confronts him in the form of a monad" (Benjamin 1969: 262–63). This monad appears as a breach, a wounding, as Hortense Spillers (1987) might say, in the ostensibly inevitable progressive workings of historical time and gives way to a model of "messianic time" that eschews a linear current in favor of a "cessation of happening" (Benjamin 1969: 263). The historical materialist faces—and therefore inevitably constructs—history as a secularized version of messianic temporality in which the past is released from its mimeticist straightjacket and reinvented as "a configuration of the present (*Jetztzeit*) which is shot through with shrapnel of the messianic" (Benjamin 1969: 263). The shards of messianism enable a revision not only of the historical, but of temporality as such, forming hiccups in the machine of "universal history," hiccups which do not suspend or dispense with this (chrono)logical mode so much as they provide pathways to the clefts and folds within its very configurations. In Edouard Glissant's terminology (1997: 145): the (weak) messianic imagines temporality as series of opacities, while historicism only apprehends the past, present, and future as silenced by the

5. I have altered the translation of Benjamin's text where necessary.

screech of clarity. These weak messianics conjure a different form of temporal materiality, in which the material is syncopated in a constant flux rather than held in the abyss of universal time. In an attempt to perforate “the swift and imperceptible flowing of time,” Ellison, much like Benjamin, tenders an arrangement of temporal change that bypasses quasi-positivist ideas concerning history, especially with regard to “the tradition of the oppressed.”

Ellison’s insistence on the sonic’s traversal of the phonograph proves decisive, as it recalibrates not only temporality but also the function of *graph* in historiography rather than claiming for black cultural purposes an authentic orality uncontaminated by the modern technological viruses. Hence, Ellison’s “hero” comes upon Benjamin’s flash in a moment of danger—Clifton’s death—via the electric amplification of a phonograph record and not, to put it bluntly, a “real” live singer or musician. Clearly, blackness and alterity in general are inscribed in and sound from the sonorous fissure of the “grooves of history.” These grooves, in turn, serve a double purpose: they displace—once again, it is necessary to insist that they do not replace—a historicist model of time; but they also sharply suggest how in the processes of sound recording and reproduction, the production of black history transmogrifies from absolute erasure in writing to sounding from loudspeakers on any given urban corner. And these amplifiers echo not only “turgid and inadequate words,” but also predominantly nonlinguistic sonic marks. In this way, black subjects are not intrinsically outside of history, as G. W. F. Hegel would have it a century before Ellison, but are actively and often ferociously “recorded out” of it, which, in turn, has led to the forging of other means to record black history. In the Ellisonian cosmos, these instruments appear in, through, and with the phonographic sounds because of, and not despite, the iterability the machine introduces into the realm of black aurality. In other words, the repetition thrown into the whirlpool of transversal movement by this particular technicity of black music in the age of mechanical reproduction—that here should not be equated with technicity per se but with a new form of technological folding—enables a fresh recording and sounding of black history. Neither an authentic black orality nor a thoroughly commodified and inauthentic version thereof suffices to stage black history qua history; instead, we are confronted with a sounding black history that hinges on mechanical and electrical iterability, suggesting a different form of writing than the fraught domain of alphabetic script and one that makes black sounds mechanically repeatable.

If we return to the most common senses of *groove*, we can better surmise how history might operate as one. First, the term refers to the serrations on the surface of phonograph records or any indentation; and second, we find it in colloquial

expressions, such as “the groove” of a particular piece of music or “getting into the groove” of someone or something. Both these senses of groove are derived from musical expressions, if not directly related to the sonic. While the grooves on records present a seemingly straightforward traffic between word and object, the other signification of groove proves slightly more intangible if not elusive (a more Du Boisian and Derridean signifier/signified relationship than a Saussurean one); for instance, there are no objective ways to describe or pin down the groove of a James Brown track. This does not connote incoherence, but it does highlight the difficulty in transfiguring the exact characteristics of the groove into the realm of linguistic meaning making: the groove contains a significant measure of opacity because it registers in the domain of affect and sensation rather than (linguistic) signification. For Steven Feld and Charles Keil, this can be attributed to the “collaborative expectancies in time” that lead to an agreement between musicians and their audiences that unites them in an open-ended and unevenly striated rapport, thus amplifying the nonrepresentational aspects of sound.⁶ These “expectancies in time” are also mediated, if not constituted, by the grooves of phonograph records; they provide the material groundings for intersubjective grooves.

The “groove of history” allows for both the materiality and the intersubjectivity of history; if black history is indeed contained on, or at least summoned by, phonograph records, it is only because the discs and their attendant discourses and practices harbor all these vital forces. Ellison’s protagonist comes upon this recognition in an instance of peril, which provokes his recognition of temporality as a series of monadic crosscurrents and discontinuities as opposed to a single and totalizing history. These relational grooves, however, cannot be consigned to the realm of the purely subjective, since they direct our awareness to dimensions of temporality that are not signified by the strictures of written history or even the indentations on phonograph records alone. Therefore, both forms of grooves—at least in the universe of recorded music—are not only mutually constitutive but bring each other into productive crisis. The groove of history works well in this regard because it fails to neglect one aspect in favor of the other; instead it preserves, or possibly invents, the eventness of temporality as sonically singular. Still, should we not ask what transpires when different grooves of history interface or collide? W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* will

6. Feld and Keil (1994: 109) describe the colloquial dimension of groove in the following fashion: “In the vernacular a ‘groove’ refers to an intuitive sense of style as process, a perception of a cycle in motion, a form or organizing pattern being revealed, a recurrent clustering of elements through time. Groove and style are distilled essences, crystallizations of collaborative expectancies in time.”

serve as our sonorous guide on this journey back and forth through the assorted time(s) of sonic Afro-modernity.

Phono-Epi-Graphs

In his analysis of the different functions of spirituals in nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century American culture, Ronald Radano (1996: 508) begins by charting the white fascination with spirituals after they had been transcribed during the Civil War, arguing that spirituals represented “the outer limits of the western imagination.” This was integrally tied to the conundrum of transcription; most whites “writing down” the spirituals noted the difficulties in “capturing” these on paper.⁷ In the minds of northern white abolitionists, spirituals became a part of a larger romantic ideology that believed music could counter Western reason as an anticivilizational prophylactic, especially since certain strands of romanticism in general were obsessed with replacing reason, the central concept of the enlightenment, with “untainted” and “natural” cultural productions that led man back to his original state. Romanticist thinkers, due in part to increased interest in folk culture, argued that these apparently natural and authentic cultural forms possessed qualities lacking in “spoiled” high-cultural production. As musical ruminations of folk culture, spirituals were doubly coded as authentic artifacts that provided a true representation of black humanity. Jon Cruz (1999: 5) extends Radano’s important argument by showing how spirituals formed a fundamental component not only of romanticist qua abolitionist conversations but also of burgeoning social scientific discourses (ethnomusicology and anthropology, in particular) and how, in Cruz’s formulation, “romantic antimodernism and rational social science converge and intersect in the discovery of the Negro spiritual.” The combined force of these two divergent figurations of discourse, and therefore of blackness, projected the spirituals as the “preferred black culture” for both white and black commentators from the mid-nineteenth century on (Cruz 1999: 7).⁸ In

7. Writing down acquires a particular resonance in relation to the German title of Friedrich Kittler’s *Discourse Networks 1800/1900 (Aufschreibsysteme 1800/1900)*. David Wellbery, in his introduction to the English translation of this work (Kittler: 1990: xii), shows that the title “can be most literally translated as ‘systems of writing down’ or ‘notation systems.’ It refers to a level of material deployment that is prior to questions of meaning. . . . In Kittler’s view, such technologies are not mere instruments with which ‘man’ produces his meanings, . . . rather they set the framework within which something like ‘meaning,’ indeed, something like ‘man,’ becomes possible at all.”

8. Cruz (1999: 164–88) interrogates the importance of spirituals to the formation of African American institutions of higher learning. Clearly the Fisk Jubilee Singers represent a crucial part of this assemblage.

this context, musical notation served to amplify both the primitive unrepresentability *and* the rationalization of spirituals, which is rendered even more overdetermined if we take into account, as Radano does, how the process of transcribing spirituals forced some scribes to thoroughly recast the Western system of musical notation. As a consequence, the notations that appear in Du Bois's text are already notations in difference, differential notes, originary remixes, or, as Fred Moten (2003: 14) has argued, "an ongoing event of antiorigin and an antiorigin, replay and reverb of an impossible natal occasion, the performance of a birth and rebirth of a new science, a phylogenetic fantasy that (dis)establishes genesis, the reproduction of blackness as (the) reproduction of black performance(s)." Not only does the presence of the fragments of musical bars alter the text of *Souls*, but the notation itself has been transformed into another "writing down system" by virtue of its encoding spirituals rather than Western classical music, transacting on a different scale black culture's constitutive part in Western modernity.

Du Bois's use of spirituals calls into question their representability in the Western system of musical notation while pointing to the limits of the method itself. As a result, the spirituals mirror Du Bois's own double textual strategy, which mixes "major" and "minor" cultural archives as opposed to merely using one to mimic the other. The musical notes, like the entire text, form a mix that transforms two distinct parts into a temporary fusion that highlights its own impurity.⁹ Moreover, Du Bois heightens the fragmentation of the spirituals by inserting musical bars and only the beginning of each song into the text, thus rendering it even more unlikely that readers actually recognize them. In fact, that the spirituals would have been readable only to those who both knew the songs *and* could crack their notation gives rise to a certain disjuncture between *Souls* and its audiences, one that transforms the bars of the spirituals before each chapter into "mute ciphers" that call attention to their own failure to represent sound (Gibson 1989: xvi). As we have established, the "Sorrow Songs" cannot sonically represent a true and authentic African American past, for the media (written collections) through which they were transmitted had been transformed into something altogether different prior to their Du Boisian figuration. This alteration shapes the spirituals into future-oriented artifacts that sound an opaque and fragmented African American past. Consequently, the temporality suggested by Du Bois's textual strategies resemble Ellison's "grooves" and Benjamin's "monadic shrapnel" rather than any movement that would fit into a historicist notion of history; they render

9. For the most convincing and influential account of syncretism in slave culture in general and spirituals in particular, see Levine 1977.

the spirituals as grooves in Du Bois's own textual collage. Surely, the sedimented meanings ascribed to and inscribed in these marks puncture the Du Boisian text, though they are significantly re-sounded as well.

Overall, what is at stake in Du Bois's transcription is not whether these spirituals can find an adequate written home that represents them faithfully but what their fragmentary status does to the text of *Souls*. The "Sorrow Songs" suggest a Freudian *unheimlich* (uncanny)—as opposed to homeliness in any traditional sense—as they intimate quasi-indecipherable musical signs that disrupt the flow of words and add to the textuality of the text (Freud 2003). Situated at the interstices of text (lyrical epigraphs) and words (chapters), these sonorous residues implode the linguistic utterances that frame them. While the musical epigraphs haunt the full text of *Souls* by way of suggestion, they stand on their own as booming, yet mute, phono-epi-graphs at the intersection of the poems and the body of the text. Rather than serving as mere afterthoughts, they radically alter the significations of the text via their constitutive supplementarity.

Du Bois continues the transformation of spirituals initiated by their improvisatory beginnings and subsequent transcription by fusing them with poems from the nineteenth-century European canon. The flow between the musical bars of the spirituals and mostly nineteenth-century British poems in *Souls* is the clearest example of Du Bois's mixology. Here I am not so much concerned with how the musical epigraphs interact with Du Bois's writing as I am with the sonic signifiers' refiguration of the poems that they trail. Far too often critics have assumed a certain stability to the poems' significations, though even as their placement in a literary context alters the spirituals, it also fundamentally transforms the poems, dislodging them from their enshrined canonicity. Thus Arthur Symons's poem, which opens the first chapter, becomes legible as a lament against chattel slavery and a testimony to the "Spiritual Strivings" of black subjects:

Unresting water, there shall never be rest
till the last moon droop and the last tide fail,
And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;
And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea,
All life long crying without avail,
As the water all night long is crying to me.
(Symons in Du Bois [1903] 1989: 3; emphasis mine)

Once attuned to Du Bois's mixing maneuvers, they appear as another manifestation of the spirituals—Du Bois's incorporation releases the poems' Afro-entelechy. Initially, what is most striking is the existential despair of these words that eerily

echoes many of the “Sorrow Songs,” particularly “Nobody Knows the Trouble I Have Seen,” which is paired with the Symons poem. The chorus of this spiritual reads as follows:

Oh, nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus,
Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,
Glory Hallelujah.

The poem and the lyrics of the spiritual suggest troubles and plagued souls, yet in both instances the reasons for these woes are not disclosed. Clearly, Du Bois takes advantage of this poetic haziness in order to make the words applicable to the souls of black folk, and in this way, the “weariness” and “crying” articulated by the speaker become testimonies of and to *Souls*’s collective black voice. And read in the mixological milieu of *Souls*, the line from Symons’s poem, “the fire of the end begin to burn in the west,” offers a pertinent observation concerning the role of race in Western modernity—so central to Du Bois’s argument. According to this eschatology, the apocalypse will not be precipitated by biblical sins, at least not in any strict sense, but by the secular crimes of the West (the specters of slavery, racism, and imperialism). Where earlier African American discourses (in spirituals, poetry, slave narratives, or spiritual narratives) coded secular problematics in religious language, Du Bois ([1903] 1989: 13) interfaces the spirituals and the poems to launch a decidedly this-worldly critique of Western modernity: “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of the men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” Du Bois does not merely quote, at least not in any simple fashion, Symons’s poem. By meshing its beat with the syncopated stylings of “Nobody Knows” and his own words in “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” he gives it a new signification that is legible and audible exclusively in *Souls*. This splintered synthesis of Western canonical literature and black musical expression inaugurates all of *Souls*’s chapters, save the last, which combines the music from one spiritual with the lyrics of another.

If Du Bois transposes spirituals into the realm of “legitimate” written culture, he vernacularizes European writing. A similar strategy will be later used by many black musicians, most famously in John Coltrane’s rendition of “My Favorite Things” or DJs’ remixes of previously recorded grooves. Poems by Schiller, Byron, Lowell, and Whittier thus form a symbiosis with the spirituals. Du Bois slyly forces these Western texts to testify to slavery and the absent presence of black subjects, both as empirical entities and as apparitions integral to

and unequivocally *of* Western modernity. Read or listened to in tandem with the musical bars, then, the poems *are* the lyrics to the “Sorrow Songs,” creating a new form of spiritual in their admixture. All of these layers in Du Bois’s textual mixology exemplify the aesthetic complexity and cultural flexibility of sonic (black) temporality. And this sonic-textual temporality does not simply reverse the order of things but generates a genuinely new modality, a different groove, inimitable in its insistence on and performance of the coevalness of the “Sorrow Songs” and the annals of literary canonicity. Johannes Fabian (1983: 143) has shown that the central discourse of anthropology resolutely denies the temporal equality of the Western other (generally the primitive or some reformulation thereof), choosing instead to “establish itself as an allochronic discourse; it is the science of other men in another Time.” Du Bois’s style of coevalness exhumes the internal crises in the still-warm corpses of reason and progress even while it constructs a different time in which reason and terror, progress and regress coexist in a momentary détente. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the phono-epi-graphic mix placed before the final chapter of *Souls*.

In the final chapter of *Souls*, Du Bois presents a theory of the “Sorrow Songs,” discussing their aesthetic, cultural, and political dimensions in addition to providing an autohistorical account of how African songs transmuted into spirituals in the aftermath of the Middle Passage. The chapter’s two epigraphs fail to comply with the scheme Du Bois has thus far established: both the lyrical and musical headings are drawn from the reservoir of the “Sorrow Songs,” in contrast to the previous chapters, which are introduced by one musical and one poetic epigraph. At first glance, this might imply that “The Sorrow Songs” establishes some sort of unity, in terms of both structure and content, in ways that the remaining chapters do not, a unity that in turn harks back to mechanisms of double consciousness: the black sonic marks (i.e., the words to a spiritual) erase and replace white words (the epigraphic poems), giving the structural feature of a page back its originary stature as black and white recede to their preordained places in the universe. Nonetheless, for all intents and purposes, there is no end of history in *Souls*—maybe an eternal return, but no closure in sight or sound. The two epigraphs preceding “The Sorrow Songs” implement rupture within this field of presumed unity given that they do not stem from the same spiritual: the lyrics are from “Lay This Body Down,” while the musical notes are those of “Wrestling Jacob.” By juxtaposing two different spirituals, Du Bois defies any easy dichotomy between black and white or major and minor. In the end, merging the music of one spiritual with the lyrics of another projects a new spiritual that encodes the multitude of significations the “Sorrow Songs” had acquired in 1903 but also, and perhaps more sig-

nificantly, makes them future-compatible. In this final twinning, the past, present, and future coexist to generate the temporal grooves of sonic Afro-modernity.

Overall, Du Bois suffuses *Souls* with the “non-wordness” of sounds—the aspects of sound that cannot be reproduced on the written page, or in Du Bois’s formulation ([1903] 1989: 207), which is echoed by Ellison’s, “turgid and inadequate words,” “knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music.” Du Bois’s attempt to provide written words with a sonorous surplus structures *Souls* as a phono-graph that attempts to make the souls of black folk *sound* and *be heard*. This not through a strict opposition between notated sounds and written words but through an augmentation of words with sounds, by adding back into the mix what gets left out in the equation of language and speech with linguistic structures. Du Bois indexes the “Sorrow Songs” he intends to use as epigraphs, stating that “some echo of haunting melody” will appear in his text, insinuating that their melodies—which are not the most important aspect of spirituals anyway—can be recorded by Du Bois and deciphered by the readers only as figural excess. The readers become privy to the titles of the spirituals used as epigraphs in the final chapter, yet even there Du Bois does not disclose the spirituals contained in the spectral assemblage of *Souls*, nor does he clarify where the individual song is placed in the text. This reticence, and the confusion it creates, exemplifies the distorted reverberations of black sounds, since the spirituals that Du Bois cites appear in the text not as accurate representations but as distorted, layered, and lingering traces. Through these melodic fragments, the voices of the slaves that composed, sang, and improvised upon these songs uncannily haunt the textual house of *Souls*. No one-to-one likeness of these songs will accomplish Du Bois’s goal, hence his invocation is an echoing rather than a mimetic technique.

Using Du Bois’s terminology, we can imagine *Souls* as an extended echo chamber in which traces of the spirituals reverberate with and against one other, forming a textuo-sonic machine that differs from the previously available compilations of spirituals. This becomes significant vis-à-vis *Souls* if we consider that most of its essays were previously published, recombined, and augmented for their appearance in *Souls*. Du Bois remixes his own words or rather, as we shall see, engineers a “dub version” of his own texts and the “Sorrow Songs.”¹⁰ In this way, *Souls*

10. Robert Stepto has already analyzed the significations of the changes with regard to form as well as content. Stepto (1979: 53–59) attributes the majority of the shifts and resignifications in *Souls* to Du Bois’s reaction to Booker T. Washington. For the purposes of my argument, it suffices to note that this adds yet another layer to the mix as it manifests itself in Du Bois’s text.

reverberates dialogically with one of the most significant Afro-diasporic aesthetic achievements of the past fifty years: dub reggae, without which most contemporary popular music would simply not exist. In the late sixties, Jamaican producers started messing with the musical text via technological means: loosening its confines, turning up the bass and drum in the mix, distorting and displacing the centrality of the voice, opening it up to the cosmos. These aesthetic formations have cast a midday shadow—much in the same way Du Bois has in the annals of American literary and political discourses—over much of popular music since then, including disco, hip-hop, and contemporary electronic dance music. As Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton (1999: 119) explain, “A dub mix is essentially the bare bones of a track with bass turned up. Dub separates a song into its stark component parts, and adds and subtracts each strand until a new composition is made. By adding space to the track, what is left has far more room to breathe.”¹¹ A couple of points remain salient in the resonance between *Souls* and dub’s Afro-tricknology: the style with which Du Bois recasts the spirituals via the technology of musical notation and his invocation of echo and haunting in the text. Echo, with reverb and delay, remains one of dub’s core features, inserting spatiality into the musical track while also messing with its temporal dimensions; in fact, the spatial effect of echo is achieved via the stuttering and dispersion of the music’s time. The term *dub* itself indicates not only a doubling or copying but carries homonymic overtones of *duppy* (the Jamaican word for “spirit” or “ghost”), so that the dub version of a song serves as a spectral other that was initially pressed on the flip side of its record, even as it often became far more popular than its source. In this echo box, Freud’s theory of the uncanny, especially as it passes through the doppelgänger, coexists with Du Bois’s notion of doubling and spectrality and returns to us from the margins of the contemporary African diaspora in an altered sonic form: dub, duppy, double consciousness, and the uncanny unveil the haunting at the center of the “real,” which according to Avery Gordon (1997: 8), “is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening . . . as transformative recognition.” This “particular way of knowing” that moves with spirits

11. In *Reggae: The Rough Guide*, Steve Barrow and Peter Dalton (1997: 199) offer the following concise redaction of dub reggae’s three main historical stages and movement from margin to center: “First there was the so-called ‘instrumentals,’ not originally conceived as such, but becoming so by removal of the vocal track. Initially these instrumentals were strictly for sound-system play, but before too long they were being issued commercially. Versions on which the contribution of the studio engineer was more obvious then emerged around the end of 1968, and by 1970 these remixes—called ‘versions’—were appearing on B-sides of most Jamaican singles. . . . During 1973–74 record buyers in Jamaica became accustomed to checking labels not just for the producer or artist, but also for the engineer.”

as integral to the totality of social life worlds finds its textual-sonic correlative in *Souls*'s figuration of the "Sorrow Songs," since rather than being auxiliary, their spectral absent presence enables the signification of the Du Boisian text, both in terms of thematics and structure. Thus, the *Geist*—what Du Bois ([1903] 1989: 204) terms "the gift of Spirit"—of *dub/duppy* allows us to think haunting as echo and vice versa, excavating the sonorous facets of this spectral ontology at the limit of empirical knowledge and livability. Hearing voices will never quite be the same again; for what comprises an echo, always a multiplicity of one (the one?), if not the clashing reverberations of a dead sound that lives in its aftereffects and therefore resists finitude, even as mortality forms the core of its spirit?

Benjamin, like Ellison and Du Bois, was also attuned to the lower sonic cum spectral frequencies of the past, writing: "Streift uns nicht selber ein Hauch der Luft, die um die Früheren gewesen ist? Ist nicht in Stimmen, denen wir unser Ohr schenken ein Echo von nun verstummten?" (Doesn't a breath of air around our predecessors graze us? Is not, in the voices we lend our ears to, an echo of the now muted?) (Benjamin 1980: 251).¹² I reproduce the German here because these two sentences were omitted from the English translation in *Illuminations* (1969), the compilation that precipitated Benjamin's popularization in the Anglo-American academy and beyond and that contained, until recently, the only English translation of Benjamin's essay. The voices of the dead spectrally infuse Benjamin's discourse, adding a sonic dimension to his monadic conception of the historical. In a number of ways they also remember, repeat, and work through Du Bois's plea that his readers hear the souls of black folk and his insistence that only "an echo of haunting melody" can materialize in the text. Moreover, these lines' exclusion from the translation and their concern with sound amplify both the volume of this echo and the spectrality of temporality; they only exist in the ghostly shadow of Benjamin's text. Thus, *The Souls of Black Folk* transacts the confluence of differing and differential grooves that add up to a dub mix, a sonic hauntology of the temporal in which both the past and the future echo in the present, only to transform its status as presence.¹³

12. Translation mine. These sentences have been included in the recent translation as part of the fourth volume of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* (2003).

13. The field of thought opened by Du Bois and Benjamin concerning echo, haunting, and temporality also makes several appearances in Deleuze's theater of *Difference and Repetition*. Therein, moving through the groundwork of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Deleuze stages repetition as a series of anti-/nonrepresentational singularities. At several key moments in the argument, Deleuze (1994: 1) makes echo a major player in this drama, for instance: "Reflections, echoes, doubles, and souls do not belong to the domain of resemblance and equivalence." While I have been influenced by Deleuze's idea of repetition throughout this essay, here I want to draw the reader's attention to "souls" and "echoes" as instantiations of the singular in Du Bois and Deleuze.

If Ellison and Benjamin detonate grooves and monadic shrapnel within the province of the historicist past, Du Bois performs this temporal explosion, where different flows, velocities, and grooves collide through the structural mixology of *Souls*'s epigraphs, particularly the final one. In other words, Ellison and Benjamin offer the tools for conjecturing nonhistoricist compilations of the temporal a propos the tradition of the oppressed and the sonic. That *The Souls of Black Folk* enacts these principles structurally ought not involve any sort of rift between the theoretical and the performative, in contrast to sundry manifestations of analogous principles vis-à-vis temporality in different modes of discursive materiality. And while these imaginings of time are drawn from those oppressed subjects behind the veil and outside the groove of history, we should not be so quick to relegate these imperative contributions to twentieth-century intellectual and cultural history to an already established minoritarian status. Instead, we might do well to think how these formations remix the temporality of modernity per se. Du Bois, Ellison, and Benjamin ratify, reimagine, and morselize the supposed linearity of hegemonic time from the (aural) vantage point of the oppressed.

Overall, it is sound that allows these diverse laborers in the kingdom of culture to mess with the strict cadence of Western modernity in order to present us with a disjointed and singular sonic Afro-modernity, giving credence to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's observation (1987: 313) that "meter is dogmatic, but rhythm critical." These writings or practices rhythmify temporality via syncopation, taking on variously the form of grooves, monadic shrapnel, and haunting echoes of the past, present, and future. Time ceases to behave solely as meter only when these three forces coexist, even if unequally and in a fragmented manner, and their contemporaneousness is aided by their proximity to the margins of Western modernity. In a recently unearthed essay about the vicissitudes of positivism in U.S. social scientific discourse at the turn of the last century, Du Bois (2000: 44) uses rhythm to delineate the grounds of empirical knowability: "a primary rhythm depending . . . on physical forces and physical law; but within it appears again and again a secondary rhythm, which while presenting nearly the same uniformity as the first, differs from it in its more or less sudden rise at a given tune." In conclusion, we can say that Ellison, Du Bois, and Benjamin insert this secondary rhythm (or *riddim*, to summon an Afro-diasporic rendition of this term) into Western modernity. Generally, this *riddim* is rendered inaudible even as it transacts the echoing strain and complementarity between these rhythms. Yet, as all of these figures show, once the latter beat, much like a ghost, is introduced to the mix, it no longer remains secondary or belated; rather it unbolts altogether

new and different versions of time, synonymous with the rhythms found in and sounding from the grooves of sonic Afro-modernity.

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