In the Mix: Hearing the Souls of Black Folk*

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ABSTRACT

This essay forges a link between the textual strategies of W. E. B. Du Bois's The Souls of Black Folk and contemporary mixing practices of disc jockeys. Although historically disparate, both Du Bois's text and DJing participate in the sounding strategies of twentieth-century black cultural production. These strategies suggest a model of subjectivity which relies on sound rather than vision, replacing a Western-style oculocentrism with a more fluid notion of selfhood. Moreover, both Du Bois and DJs mix different texts in order to produce their own cultural artifacts. This, I argue, gives us the moment of “the mix” which realigns the temporality of Western modernity.

But it may be that the energetic impingements and abrasions of the senses one upon the other may make the ear, with its acceptance of plural stimulus, and hearing, with its qualities of openness, complexity and interpenetration, a richer and more responsive metaphor for the self and its sensory composites and concretions than the self-detaching eye.1

“There’s Not a Problem That I Can’t Fix, I Can Do It in the Mix”2

Black American music, a major contribution of the United States to world culture in the twentieth century, is also one of the crucial sites where black people imagine and articulate their subjectivity. The concept of “Sonic Afro-modernity” grows out of an understanding of twentieth-century black culture as a sounding and hearing culture.3 Working with this concept necessitates hearing the sounds of blackness as they

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3 The advent of technological sound recording embodied in the phonograph offered the possibility of splitting sounds from the sources that produced them, creating a “post-technological” orality and musicality in twentieth-century black culture. In other words, orality and musicality were no longer tied to the presence of human subjects. On the one hand, this disjunction between sound and source rendered sound more “ephemeral,” since it failed to provide the listener with a visual point of reference. On the other hand, sound gained its materiality in the technological apparatus and the practices surrounding the apparatus. This dialogue between the “ephemeral”music and the “materiality” of the audio technologies and practices forms the center of what I call “sonic Afro-modernity.”
are expressed at different geographical and temporal points in the history of the African diaspora. Consequently, this essay hears W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and the contemporary practices of disc-jockeying (DJing) as two art forms within “sonic Afro-modernity,” presenting Du Bois’s text and disc jockeys’ sounds as different forms of “the mix.” This “mix,” as it appears in black cultural production throughout the twentieth century, highlights the combination of its components as much as it does the individual parts that constitute it, providing us with a model of modern black subjectivity and cultural practice that is rooted in and routed through hearing and sounding, rather than looking. This concept/practice, as it manifests itself in various black cultural discourses, represents a mode of articulation and a means for comprehension through sound for black diasporic subjects in the West.

*The Souls of Black Folk* inaugurates “the mix” in “sonic Afro-modernity.” According to Paul Gilroy, “music has been regularly employed since *The Souls* to provide a symbol for various conceptions of black commonality. Du Bois’s work initiates this strategy.” Just as DJs mix parts of different records, Du Bois’s text blends together history, eulogy, sociology, personal anecdote, economics, lyricism, ethnography, fiction, and cultural criticism of black music. Furthermore, Du Bois’s textual practice highlights the fissures in “the mix” in the same manner that a hip-hop DJ calls attention to his or her mix through the rhythmical scratching of records as opposed to utilizing a strategy of concealment. Du Bois’s “scratching,” one of the central aesthetic achievements of this epochal text, appears in bars of music placed before each chapter; or, in Houston Baker’s words, “Du Bois polyphonically . . . dances before our eyes the drama of RACE in the modern world.” Both Du Bois and DJs combine different elements—in Du Bois’s case genres and different forms of recording—records with regard to DJs—so as to articulate what cannot be visually represented.

I want to begin with a rereading of Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness and argue that the manner in which sound is used in *Souls* creates a new space for black subjectivity. When we analyze the role of vision as it relates to the mechanisms of racism, sound emerges as a space where black subjectivity is not fixed by the look of white subjects, but is instead articulated dynamically by black subjects themselves. This articulation of subjectivity, which I call sonic subjectivity, is also illustrated in the practice of DJing. While DJs rely on the sounds of others in the form of phonograph records to create their own productions, Du Bois utilizes spirituals and poems from the nineteenth-century British canon to achieve his mix. However, I argue, Du Bois’s mix is not complete: it is marked by a “failure” to represent sound in writing. My analysis of *Souls* enables us to view or hear this text (and texts produced

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7 With this assertion, I follow the lead of German media and literary theorist Friedrich Kittler, who locates nineteenth- and twentieth-century German (not exclusively, but for the most part) literature in a wider network of different informational media. See his *Discourse Networks 1800-1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (1985; Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990); and his *Gramophone, Typewriter, Film* (Berlin: Brinkmann und Bose, 1986). For a partial English
within this socio-historical framework in general) as an attempt to transmit sonic information in the same manner as phonograph records, despite its inability to do so. This “failure” is precisely what makes Souls audible and legible as the first literary sound recording (phono-graph) of “sonic Afro-modernity.” Finally, I utilize the concept of “the mix” to establish a dialogue between Souls and DJing, describing new contexts in which to read and hear both. In this way, the art of DJing is located within the African-American literary canon, in addition to emphasizing Du Bois’s relevance to understanding contemporary black popular musics and their technologies.

Therefore, the concept of “the mix” serves as a means for cultural analysis that acknowledges the centrality of music and sound in black cultural production. As a mode of cultural criticism and practice, “the mix” brings together disparate elements, but not in the manner suggested by the notions of “pastiche” and “bricolage” as they appear in postmodern literary theory. “The mix” offers a strategy for the construction of modern black identities, rather than a product that results from the randomness or irony evoked by the terms “bricolage” and “pastiche.” Furthermore, “the mix” differs from “hybridity” as it is outlined in a number of recent academic discourses. Recent invocations of “hybridity” purport to erase two factors (black/white; colonizer/colonized; self/other; and so on), replacing them with one that combines both. This practice merely reaffirms the logic of duality it seeks to undermine. “The mix,” apart from not having to bear the weight of acute overuse, does not have the illusion of replacing these dualities recognizing that they structure various social, political, cultural, and aesthetic formations. Rather this concept/practice creates an alternative space that co-exists with its other components. Thus, the term “the mix” itself, because it was first articulated in musical practices, locates black subjectivity and cultural production primarily in sound.

Sound recording and reproduction have aided black cultural producers and consumers to recast notions of temporality, spatiality, and community, enabling black subjects to comprehend and structure their positionalities within and against Western

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8 This is not to say that phonograph records are true representations of sonic information in ways that Souls is not, but that both Souls and phonograph records show/sound their representational character most in moments of rupture. Rick Altman offers the following description: “So-called recordings are thus always representations, interpretations, partial narratives that must nevertheless serve as our only access to the sounds of the past” (“Material Heterogeneity of Recorded Sound,” Sound Theory / Sound Practice, ed.Rick Altman [New York: Routledge, 1992] 15-31: 27). Furthermore, the etymology of the word phonograph would suggest that recorded sound can only exist if linked to writing. I use the term “phono-graph” throughout this essay to signify upon the vexed connection between writing and sound as it manifests itself, not only in the etymology of the term, but also in the literary texts I discuss.

9 Kodwo Eshun marks the main distinctions between “the mix,” or what he refers to as “remixology,” and more postmodernist-oriented forms of citation in this way: “[T]he idea of quotation and citation, the idea of ironic distance, that doesn’t work, that’s far too literary. That assumes a distance, which definition volume overcomes. There is no distance with volume, you’re swallowed up by sound. . . . It’s impossible to stay ironic, so all the implications of postmodernism go out the window” (More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction [London: Quartet Books, 1996] 188).
modernity. Homi Bhabha describes this split as indicative of a modernity which differs radically from the linear and rational Western model. Bhabha envisions the position of marginalized subjects vis-à-vis Western modernity as follows:

Modernity . . . is about the historical construction of a specific position of historical enunciation and address. It privileges those who ‘bear witness’, those who are ‘subjected’, or . . . historically displaced. It gives them a representative position through the spatial distance, or the time-lag between the Great Event and its circulation as a historical sign of the ‘people’ or an ‘epoch’ . . . .

This “modernity otherwise” disrupts and displaces the grand narratives of reason and technological progress by incorporating those who fall outside of these categories into the mix. Bhabha’s argument shifts the meaning of modernity sui generis, because it resists separating these two spheres (modernity and minority culture). Rather, Bhabha asks us to rethink modernity from the perspective of the marginal. What emerges from this interrogation is a concept of modernity which allows for a multiplicity of spatialities and temporalities instead of a universal and homogenous sphere of modernity. In this light, modernity is transformed into a series of competing and, at times, conflicting spatio-temporal terrains that enable a multiplicity of social practices.

The grooves of “sonic Afro-modernity” sound from the lag between the materiality (the apparatus) and ephemerality (the practices around the apparatus) of recorded black music. They highlight the complicated crosscurrents and discontinuities between sound, writing, orality, and technology in twentieth-century black culture. Instead of emphasizing either the technological or the cultural, the groove integrates both. I term this lag “sonic Afro-modernity” because it acknowledges the technological mediation of black popular music in the twentieth century but does not reduce these practices to the apparatus itself. Rather, “sonic Afro-modernity” can be found in the spaces and times between technological progress and a variety of cultural practices. These cultural practices occurring in and around sonic technologies constitute a specific relation of black subjects to recorded sound in the twentieth century. Du Bois’s textual practice and DJing suggest a groove within “sonic Afro-modernity” wherein a unified and straight-ahead model of temporal change makes way for multiple, overlapping, and competing temporalities. These temporalities are made possible and magnified by sonic technologies since they allow both cultural consumers and producers to apprehend them simultaneously.

Sound and Vision

While some nineteenth-century black American writers in the US had written about the function of music, particularly in regard to the cultures of slavery, Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk, situated at the cusp of the twentieth century, was the first Afri-
can-American text to incorporate music into its structure in such a prominent manner. This textual strategy ushered in the black modernism of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. Following Du Bois, many of the formal innovations of the literature of this period relied upon the structural incorporation of music and sound into written texts. Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Gwendolyn Bennett, for instance, used music in their works, creating a specifically black modernist formalism. Jazz and Blues musics entered the terrain of literary practice, and an African-American style was created as opposed to a form that merely imitated the innovations of white modernist counterparts. In addition, Du Bois's theory of racial double consciousness has served as one of the most significant conceptualizations of racial identity in the twentieth century. As Bernard Bell notes, the concept has been "remixed" numerous times in twentieth-century black literary production: "Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, Toomer's Cane, Wright's Native Son, Ellison's Invisible Man, Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain, and Morrison's Beloved readily come to mind as improvisational variations on Du Boisian themes and tropes of double consciousness." In my analysis, sound is crucial to understanding double consciousness, as it allows for the third, alternative space of "the mix" to emerge in Du Bois's conceptualization of modern black subjectivity.

Du Bois starts his comments on the mechanisms of double consciousness as it pertains to black subjects in the US at the turn of the century with the following announcement: "[T]he Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world . . ." (5; emphases mine). While Du Bois posits that black subjects are gifted, not cursed, with a second sight, he nevertheless fails to disclose the precise nature of this second sight. Du Bois goes on to describe "a world which yields [the Negro] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (5; emphasis mine). When Du Bois in-

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12 Examples from the œuvre of these writers can be found in the following anthologies: David Levering Lewis, ed., The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader (New York: Penguin, 1994); and Nathan Huggins, ed., Voices from the Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford UP, 1976).


14 Many black feminist intellectuals have critiqued the androcentrism inherent in the notion of double consciousness. Darlene Clarke Hine, for example, argues that if Du Bois "had considered the issue of gender, instead of writing, 'One ever feels his twoness,' he would have mused about how one ever feels her 'fiveness': Negro, American, woman, poor, black woman" ("'In the Kingdom of Culture': Black Women and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class," Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation, ed. Gerald Early (New York: Penguin, 1993) 337-51; 338. While this represents a valid criticism, it does not undermine
vokes the term “double consciousness,” he implicates sight: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense 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” (5; emphases mine). Black subjects view themselves as fractured, due to the way white subjects look at them. Conversely, hearing and sound do not contribute to the fractured subjectivity of black Americans in Du Bois’s description.15 What if the black subject can experience his or her subjectivity in sound, hear himself or herself in their music? Donald Gibson explains that “[t]he ‘veil’ is not indicative of pre-science, but of blinding.”16 This, however, should not mean that the “second sight” cannot be a blessing in terms of sound. In fact, blindness suggests that the sensibilities allotted to sight are displaced onto the other senses, particularly hearing. Reading the second sight as a gift, particularly considering Du Bois’s various uses of music, makes us understand this gift as “the gift of [hearing and] song.”17 This undergirds much of Du Bois’s text, beginning with the musical epigraphs and continuing with the mention of music and hearing at the beginning and end of Souls. Contrasted with the manner in which sight is implicated in the mechanism of racism, sound and hearing emerge as more apt domains for the staging of black subjectivity. This awareness enables us to take the second sight not as a handicap, but as Du Bois’s attempt to make black history, culture, and subjectivity audible in his text.

At this point, I want to discuss Du Bois’s notion of vision as it manifests itself in the concept of double consciousness in relation to the central role of vision in constructing Western modernity and white racism.18 Robyn Wiegman argues that the slippage between vision and knowledge, as it applies to race, is crucial to the construction of what she calls “visual modernity”: “The move from the visible epidermal terrain to the articulation of the interior structure of human bodies thus extrapolated in both broader and more distinct terms the parameters of white supremacy.”19

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Du Bois’s theorization of racial subjectivity which is not a racial and gendered subjectivity. Du Bois focuses on race and not gender, which, although problematic, is also indicative of the historical period in which he wrote.

15 In a recent essay on the vexed “cross-currents and discontinuities” that mark race and the discourse of psychoanalysis, Hortense Spillers notes the importance of the look in Du Bois’s theorization of racial subjectivity: “One is nevertheless struck by the importance of the specular and the spectacular here, which is precisely where Du Bois placed the significance of the look regarding the “seventh son” (Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race,” Critical Inquiry 22.4 (Summer 1996): 332-59; 346.


17 In the last chapter, Du Bois lists this gift as one, if not the most important, contribution of black subjects to US culture and society (see Souls 214).

The look of white subjects deduces supposed racial characteristics from the surface of black subjects' skin. These characteristics, in Du Bois's historical context, more often than not meant positioning black subjects as inferior to whites. Frantz Fanon shows how sight represents an integral part of racism. He begins his now famous description of "the fact of blackness," the moment of the primal scene of racial subject-formation, with the following exclamations by a white subject: "'Dirty nigger!' Or simply, 'Look, a Negro!'" (109). Fanon implies that racial identity and assumed inferiority are synonymous in the racist imagination. Therefore, Fanon highlights the devastating effects of this look on the black subject: "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning on that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly . . ." (113). In a similar rendering of the primal scene of his own racial identity, Du Bois writes: "I remember well when the shadow swept across me suddenness that I was different from the others" (4, see also 7). According to Fanon's and Du Bois's scenarios, the look of the white subject interpellates the black subject as inferior, barring the black subject from seeing himself or herself without being aware of the way that white folks view them. Black subjects cannot see themselves

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20 The image of the shadow was also employed by a number of other turn-of-century black writers such as Charles Chesnutt in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901; Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1969); and Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1899; New York: Oxford UP, 1988). Francis Watkins Harper goes so far as to equate shadows with black subjects by entitling her novel *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifted* (1892; New York: Oxford UP, 1988). The other image through which Du Bois envisions racial difference is that of the veil which separates black from white subjects. This provides another instance in which to link Du Bois and Fanon, since Fanon wrote about the meaning of the veil for women during the Algerian Revolution in his essay "Algeria Unveiled." Both images of racial subjectivity, the veil and the shadow, are not fixed but mutable, and they vary according to the contexts by which they are framed. For further elaborations of the Du Bois/Fanon connections, see Anita Haya Goldman, "Comparative Identities: Exile in the Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon," *Borders, Boundaries, Frame(work)js: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies*, ed. Mae Henderson (New York: Routledge, 1995) 107-32; and Ross Posnock, "How It Feels to Be a Problem: Du Bois, Fanon, and the 'Impossible Life' of the Black Intellectual," *Critical Inquiry* 23.2 (Winter 1997): 323-49.

21 The term interpellation and the entire concept comes from Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)." *L'Enseignement et la Pensée*, trans. Ben Brewster (1970; New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 87-126. This concept refers to the many ways in which different ideological discourses and state institutions transform and shape people into subjects. I am using this concept to show how black subjects are interpellated as inferior to whites through racist ideology, subjects, and institutions. This is not to claim that racist ideology is the sole factor in determining black subjectivity, but that with regard to Du Bois, this is what causes double consciousness in black subjects. Furthermore, if, as Judith Butler remarks, the Althusserian moment of interpellation provides "a visual rendering of an acoustic scene," then Fanon's scene might be said to acoustically render a visual scene. See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997) 112. In the Fanonian scenario, the voice maps racial identity onto the black subject, but rather than standing on its own, it enacts the visual component of racism. In other words, the white subject's vocal apparatus merely serves to repeat and solidify racial difference as it is inscribed in the field of vision.
because white people, controlling much of the media and political apparatuses, have
the power to define black subjectivity.

While this line of argumentation should not be taken to imply that black people
can only see themselves through the eyes of white subjects, it does mean that black
people are not able (at least within the historical context in which Du Bois wrote) to
view themselves without incorporating the look of those in power. The gaze of white
folks implies power over black subjects who cannot return the look, because returning
the look has often resulted in violence towards the black subjects. Du Bois writes this
against the backdrop of numerous lynchings—the brutal mutilation, torture, and mur-
der of black subjects. One of the main “reasons” given for these lynchings was the
look of black subjects (most often male) vis-à-vis white subjects (mainly women).
Robyn Wiegman stresses the connection between these lynchings and visibility:

When we turn to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we encounter the land-
scape overseen by the Ku Klux Klan: lynched, castrated, raped, and charred bodies cere-
moniously strung up for public view—images that would increasingly circulate as detailed
descriptions of torture found their way into local newspapers and as photographs of the
event that were mass produced for commercial entertainment value.22

Lynchings, then, surrounded black subjects both as physical threats and as media rep-
resentations. As a result, black subjects, in this scheme, are subject to the look of white
folks, yet are unable to exercise their subjectivity by looking back. Indeed, in Du
Bois’s definition of double consciousness, “looking” is historically linked to the appa-
ratuses of power which have played a major role in constructing race discursively and
materially in the Western world, particularly in the United States. Accordingly, vision
can only provide a space where black people are subject to racial interpellation, and
not subjects of this process.

In a delineation of Fanon’s concept of the “look” of colonial racism, Stuart Hall
proffers the following alternatives for the enactment of black subjectivity to the racist
mechanisms of “visual modernity”:

The principal counter-strategy here has been to bring to the surface—into representation
—that which has sustained the regimes of representation unacknowledged: to subvert the
structures of ‘othering’ in language and representation, image, sound, and discourse, and
thus to turn the mechanisms of fixed racial signification against themselves, in order to
begin to constitute new subjectivities, new positions of enunciation and identification.23

In the history of twentieth-century black cultural production, some of the “new posi-
tions of enunciation and identification” have been most clearly articulated in and
through sound. Music in Souls takes on a privileged position precisely because it man-
gages to suspend and augment the “inferior” black subjectivity created by racist ideolo-
gies and practices in the field of vision, establishing venues for the constitution of new
subjectivities. Both in Souls and in the practice of DJing, music achieves this feat be-
cause it is tied to the sounds of others, particularly the sounds of black music. Put dif-

22 Wiegman 39.
The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation, ed. Alan Read (Seattle: Bay
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ferently, black subjects have control over the sounds they utilize and the ways in which they use them—Du Bois by selecting specific spirituals to place in his text, and DJs in the records that they mix. Here, the black subject is interpellated as a sonic point through which music is transmitted, rather than as a fixed visual point of projected white racism; this subject is positioned in “sonic modernity” rather than “visual modernity.”

However, “sonic modernity” and “visual modernity” should not be taken as diametrical opposites; they rather articulate different modes of being in the world for modern black subjects in the West. Steven Connor persuasively argues that, due to the proliferation of auditory technologies such as the telephone and phonograph at the turn of the century, modern subjectivity might be best thought of as a “modern auditory I.” This “auditory I,” in Connor’s view, suggests a notion of subjectivity which differs from a theory of the subject situated in the realm of vision:

[T]he singular space of the visual is transformed by the experience of sound to a plural space; one can hear many sounds simultaneously, where it is impossible to see different visual objects at the same time without disposing them in a unified field of vision. Where auditory experience is dominant, we may say, singular perspectival gives way to plural, permeated space. The self defined in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self imagined not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as channel through which voices, noises and musics travel.

Following Connor, then, we might designate the subject of “sonic Afro-modernity” as a channel through which voices, noises, and music pass. I am extending Connor’s point here, since he only takes into account the hearing and not the sounding subject. Indeed, the role allotted to the production of sound by black subjects in Souls is more significant than that of hearing. In fact, the structure of Souls performs a model of a sounding and hearing black subjectivity crucial to understanding twentieth-century black culture. This subjectivity, however, does not displace the black subject in “visual modernity” (the subject of double consciousness). Instead, it opens another space, produced by and through the moment of “the mix,” in which black subjectivity and culture can be sonically articulated. In Souls, black sonic subjectivity emerges through the manner in which Du Bois combines spirituals with his own writing and canonical British poems. Similarly, in DJing the subjectivity appears in the moment that two records occupy the same sonic space time. This conjunctural spatio-temporal point places subjectivity at the border between self and other, as it encapsulates the precise point in which the other becomes the self and vice versa.

24 Lisa Gitelman provides a historically nuanced account of how the early technology of the phonograph radically called into question the visual stability of racial classification in late-nineteenth-century America. She writes: “By removing the performer from view, the technology of recorded sound also removed the most keenly felt representation of the performer’s race. American musical culture engaged difference in new ways, provoked at once by the enormous popularity of racist ‘coon’ songs during the late 1890’s [and] by early attempts to delimit and commodify authenticity in so-called Negro music . . .” (“Reading Music, Reading Records, Reading Race: Musical Copyright and the US Copyright Act of 1909,” Musical Quarterly 81 [1997]: 265-90; 265-66).

25 Connor 207.
Certainly, the role that Du Bois ascribes to music as it relates to black and white US culture represents a significant departure from the nineteenth-century strategies in African-American literature. Where earlier black writers drew on Christianity to claim their moral superiority over white subjects, Du Bois argues for a moral superiority that is mediated by spirituality and music in the form of the “Sorrow Songs.”

Du Bois first mentions the “Sorrow Songs” in the “Forethought” to Souls, where he explains his rationale for placing bars of music before the chapters: “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” (2). The passage is striking for several reasons. First, Du Bois asserts that the “Sorrow Songs” are the only true form of American, not African-American, music. Just like Du Bois’s own text, the spirituals are not only relevant to black culture but to American culture at large. The fact that they are the only true music produced in the history of the US makes them an achievement his readers must acknowledge. Instead of beginning his discussion of black subjects’ role in the US with physical slave labor, which would seem to provide the most obvious contribution, Du Bois establishes music as the first and foremost achievement. Not only does Du Bois claim music as the main accomplishment of African Americans, he also uses it as an extended metaphor for black subjects’ role in American culture at large. Without black music, the US is an “ill-harmonized” and “unmelodious” “wilderness” in which black music singularly conjures melody and harmony. Implicated in the scopic regime of racism, white subjects do not possess the same gift of song as black subjects. In fact, the adjectives “unmelodious” and “ill-harmonized” might also describe the physical and discursive violence inflicted upon black people in the history of the US. He suggests that black subjects, in their “musicality,” embody the “harmonious” and “melodic” ideal of US democracy. While the violence inscribed upon black bodies is visually constructed, the “sorrow songs” manage to encode the abstract ideals of US democracy precisely because they are not primarily located in vision. Black music and spirituality serve as constant reminders of equality and freedom, the basic tenets of US democracy. Music, then, becomes Du Bois’s metaphor, through which he not only claims to the moral superiority of black subjects in the US, but also points to the wide gap between the abstract ideals of US democracy (equality and freedom) and US political practice (Jim Crow and lynching).

In addition to utilizing music as a way to metaphorize the position of black people in the US, Du Bois seeks to valorize black musical production in the form of spirituals. By concentrating on black cultural production, Du Bois argues that black subjects not only helped build the US economically, through their slave labor, but also and more significantly through their songs and spirituality. Thus, cultural labor is placed above economic labor. Eric Sundquist pushes Du Bois’s argument further by claiming that “the labor of slavery that built much of white America, in this view, is one with the labor of cultural striving and nation building that created African America and pre-

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26 Claiming moral and ethical superiority under the auspices of “true Christianity” has a long tradition in African-American letters, particularly in slave narratives and in literature produced in the immediate aftermath of slavery.
served it.”27 While I basically agree with Sundquist, seeing these two forms of labor as one undercuts Du Bois’s rhetorical and political strategy, since he clearly seeks to emphasize the cultural and spiritual labor of slavery over the economic one. The reason for this hierarchy is that black subjects could exert more control over their cultural labor than their economic labor, especially during slavery. Therefore, Sundquist’s equation of these forms of labor also denies Du Bois the right to assert the cultural and spiritual superiority of black folk in the US. Du Bois’s privileging of music inaugurates the use of music as a channel through which to articulate black subjectivity and culture in the twentieth century.

Hey Mr. DJ28

The historical lineage of DJing as an art form begins with black radio personalities of the 1940s and 50s and extends into the mixing practices first used in black and Latino urban gay clubs in the 1970s. The disco boom of the mid and late seventies produced club DJing—the manipulation and mixing of different records together as opposed to just playing one record after the other.29 Mixing was then taken up by hip-hop DJs, providing new musical avenues for producing sound. Although DJing still remains a crucial part of hip-hop culture, in recent years this practice has been most prominent in and through various genres of dance music (House, Techno, Jungle, Trance, TripHop, Garage, and so on). Clubs in Britain, continental Europe, Latin America, urban Asia, and the urban centers of the United States play a number, if not all, of these genres presented by various DJs. While the overarching category of dance music is a multiracial global movement, it is of note that most of these genres and the practices of DJing related to them originated in and still have strong ties with black cultural practices.

Raymond Roker states that he perceives his role as a DJ not only as someone who makes people dance, but also as a sonic educator: “As a DJ, especially, I feel that with each rotation of the decks, I am presenting a musical lesson of sorts. At even the most basic level of expression—sound—the lesson should still evoke emotion.”30 In the

28 Sadly, DJing, just like record-collecting, is an almost exclusively male domain. In this part, I refer to DJs as “him or her,” in order not to marginalize even further those women who are practitioners within this field. Some of the well-known female DJs are: K. Hand (a black Techno/House DJ who also owns her own record label); Jazzy Joyce and Cocoa Chanel (two hip-hop DJs who can be heard on New York radio station Hot 97 every Friday night); Kemistry and Storm (two of the most respected Jungle DJs from London), DJ Rap (another Jungle DJ and record label owner from the UK).
29 For histories of DJing and its influence on contemporary popular music, see Ulf Porschardt, DJ Culture (Hamburg: Rogner und Bernhard bei Zweitausendundeins, 1995); and Matthew Collin, with contributions by John Godfrey, Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1997). For a historical map of the public consumption of recorded music in post-WWII Great Britain, see Sarah Thornton, Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1995).
same vein as Du Bois, Roker thinks of mixing as a project with the goal of education and clarification. He chooses records according to his principles, sharing his pleasure in and intellectual engagement with music. Du Bois’s project in Souls consists of educating his readers about life “behind the veil,” using sonic materials (Sorrow Songs). Du Bois uses different forms of written notation (musical notes and words) as the mixer through which he channels and mixes his own voice, that of his grandmother, his dead son, Alexander Crummell, unnamed slaves singing spirituals, Booker T. Washington, and many others.

Paul Miller writes of the DJ mix: “The direct incorporation of previously existing sound source material into an aural text . . . obeys a logic of bricolage that contains objects at different cultural velocities, and creates a multivalent temporal structure that is presented simultaneously. This is what we call the mix.”31 This becomes significant to Souls if we take into account that most of the pieces in that volume were previously published and were recombined and augmented for their appearance in Souls.32 Du Bois manages to make all the different aspects of his mix coexist within the confines of the text, incorporating various cultural, historical, and political “velocities.” Through his mix, Du Bois shows that different “velocities” are needed in order to depict the souls of black folk, for they cannot be rendered or contained by the narrow confines of one particular genre or medium. Du Bois’s text is a highly personal and public artifact, just like a DJ’s mix; it reconstructs his own information—experiences, family history, already published essays—and that of others—his family, Richard Wagner, Washington, Crummell, nineteenth-century British poets, and so on. He does this in the same vein as the DJ does before an audience, trying to make his mix interact with their needs and anticipations, while not losing sight or sound of his own mission. In sum, Du Bois takes what is around him and puts it through a textual mix, thereby creating a new space within black cultural production, a space in which sonic black subjects become discernible.

The setup which most DJs use consists of a mixer and two turntables or phonographs. The turntables utilized by DJs are usually equipped with a pitch control device that lets him or her adjust the speed of the record without altering the pitch, in order to match the beats of the two records to be mixed. This enables DJs to conceive of records as sonic raw materials that achieve their momentary meaning not as individual entities, but rather as different parts that make up “the mix.”33 Each turntable is connected to a channel on the mixer, which is where all the sonic information passes

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32 Robert Stepto has analyzed the significations of the changes with regard to form as well as content. Stepto attributes the majority of the shifts and resignifications in Souls to Du Bois’s reaction to Booker T. Washington. See his From behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1979) 53-59. For the purposes of my argument, it shall suffice to note that this adds yet another layer to “the mix” as it manifests itself in Du Bois’s text.
33 The most common records employed in DJing are extended-play twelve-inch singles, which usually contain different extended DJ mixes of tracks and were “invented” specifically for the practice of DJing. “Ten Percent” by the group Double Exposure, which appeared on the New York Disco label Salsoul in 1976 is considered to be the first record that was commercially available in this format. See Porschardt, DJ Culture (especially 122-25) and Collin, Altered State 13.
through and is redistributed. This mix then goes through the amplifier, which connects to the speakers that transmit the sound into the space of the audience. Every channel on the mixer has its own volume adjustment so that the DJ can decide in what relation he or she wants the two records to be heard. In addition, there is a master volume control that determines the volume of the overall sound. The final integral component of the mixer is the crossfader, which enables the DJ to arrange how much sonic space the sound emanating from each channel can occupy in the overall sonic geography of the mix. In other words, one of the records can take up only 20% of the sonic geography of “the mix” so that the other record in “the mix” is foregrounded. This scenario is increasingly supplemented by additional features: most mixers now have equalizers on each channel that allow for the adjustment of the bass and treble of the records being played. All these technologies and the various practices connected to them are designed to move DJing towards manipulating the sonic sources and transforming them into something else within “the mix.”

The DJ constantly monitors what is transmitted through both channels on the mixer. The first channel is the one which is playing over the sound system, amplified by the speakers. Then the DJ puts on another record for the second channel and listens to it on his or her headphones. At this point, the audience is not privy to the aural information transmitted on the second channel, as they can only hear the first one. The DJ hears both records concurrently, one on the speakers and the other through the headphones. In this personal sonic space, the DJ matches up what he or she hears on his or her headphones with what is emanating from the speakers. The DJ’s task is to find the moment in which to combine the two channels and make sure that when the two channels meet—the moment of “the mix”—they jive with each other. When this point is reached, the DJ releases both channels on the audience through the speakers and the personal sonic space transmutes into a social one. Although the DJ holds the privilege of hearing the second track he or she is about to mix, the moment of “the mix” itself is shared with the audience; everybody can now hear the two records playing on the different channels at the same time. At some point, the DJ takes one of the channels out of the mix and the audience only hears the other channel, while he or she chooses another record for the next mix, and the whole process starts over. The audience has to trust the DJ’s selections and his or her mixing skills, and the DJ has to anticipate what the audience wants to hear. However, this does not mean that the audience cannot disagree with the DJ and leave the dancefloor or that DJs cannot test their audiences by playing “difficult” selections; in an ideal club, all of these factors are in play. The practice of DJing, then, consists mainly of two forms of mixing: the mixing of records or sonic information and the mixing of the DJ’s and the audience’s expectations and practices. Thus the practice of DJing provides us with two modes of sonic double consciousness. These two modes of

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34 For example, describing Salvation, one of the first New York gay dance clubs, Matthew Collin sees the role of the resident DJ as follows: “[T]he DJ, Francis Grasso, would preach from an altar above the dancefloor. Grasso helped pioneer the technique of seamlessly mixing one record into another; he would layer the orgasmic moans from Led Zeppelin’s *Whole Lotta Love* over a heavy percussion break, cutting the bass and treble frequencies in and out to heighten the energy level, segueing from soul to rock then on into hypnotic African drums and chants” (11).
Alexander Weheliye
double consciousness add up to a larger mix that combines DJs, audiences, technologies, and clubs. While this mix does not erase the dualities on which it is based, it does create a temporarily bound interaction between them.

Although there are stark differences between the problem of racial identity as depicted by Du Bois and the mixing of DJs, both manifest a duality that is to be overcome in one way or another. The DJ suspends the problem of duality for a moment. In the mix, he or she manages to combine two musical modes of information; he or she matches tracks according to their beat, pitch, timbre, melody, genre, and so on. The reconciliation between the two channels is only momentary and not lasting, so the DJ has to reconcile his or her two warring musical “souls” repeatedly, anticipating the moment of the mix, as he or she listens on their headphones in order to discern the right moment to introduce the personal “sonic consciousness” into the social mix. He or she can bring the personal track (or second musical consciousness) into “the mix” in different ways: smoothly blending one track into another so that it becomes hard to hear where one track ends and another begins, scratching one record in time with the rhythm of the other (this highlights the mix by using the turntable as a percussive instrument as well as rhythmically matching the two records), or swiftly switching over from one channel to the other. All these ways of mixing bring together two different musical pieces, but each does it in a different way, proving that there is no way of achieving a reconciliation between the two modes of sonic information. Thus the DJ manages to create a new musical space which is then shared with an audience, creating yet another new space in which the audience and the DJ coexist as sonic architects. This architecture houses black subjects in “the mix”; subjectivity is experienced through the records played by the DJ and the ways in which he or she mixes these records. Thus, DJing produces a model of sonic subjectivity that cannot be stable or fixed as “the mix” can only be produced in a singular moment that may be repeated, although never in exactly the same way.

Phono-Epi-Graphs

The key to the status of hearing in relation to looking in Souls is the way in which Du Bois threads the “Sorrow Songs” through the text. When Du Bois first introduces the “Sorrow Songs,” 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” (2; emphasis mine). In “The Afterthought,” Du Bois asks his readers to “Hear [his] cry” (217); his “cry” stands for the cry of millions of other black subjects past and present. The best way to hear the souls of black folk, then, as Du Bois asks his reader-

35 In “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals,” Zora Neale Hurston vehemently objects to Du Bois’s classification of all spirituals as “Sorrow Songs.” She writes: “[T]he idea that the whole body of spirituals are ‘sorrow songs’ is ridiculous. They cover a wide range of subjects from a peeve at gossips to Death and Judgment” (Hurston, “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals,” Voices from the Harlem Renaissance, ed. Huggins 344). While “Sorrow Songs” might not be an accurate term, it achieves Du Bois’s goal of inscribing the memory of slavery in these songs.
ship to do at the end of chapter one, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” is to listen to the “Sorrow Songs”; they provide the channel through which an approximation of the souls of black folk is transmitted. If the “Sorrow Songs” are the most important cultural achievement of American black subjects, then the field of sound, rather than the visual, would provide a more apt space for the staging of black subjectivity. Therefore, Du Bois thinks that America will understand the souls of black folk only by hearing their voices. He manages to channel a number of different voices in the text by writing down their words, since he cannot reproduce these directly on the written page. Instead, notating these sounds becomes a productive “failure.” Du Bois does not appeal to his readers so that they may view or see the souls of black folk, but instead writes “that men may listen to the souls of black folk” (12). In the same manner that souls cannot be seen, they cannot be heard. Still, Du Bois emphasizes hearing more than vision, since it resists incorporation into the scopic regime of racism. While the aforementioned quote provides a phono-graphic guidepost for reading the rest of this text, this should not be read as implying that black subjectivity can reach wholeness in sound. The “Sorrow Songs” are obviously not “pure” black cultural artifacts but products of African as well as European cultural sensibilities.

The “failure” of representing sound becomes most apparent in Du Bois’s transcription of spirituals. This failure amplifies the importance of sound, for Du Bois suffuses Souls with the “non-wordness” of sounds—the aspects of sound that cannot be reproduced on the written page. This is not so much a strict opposition between notated sounds and written words as it is an augmentation of words with sounds or a mix of the two. Du Bois’s attempt to provide written words with a surplus of sound structures Souls as a phono-graph, one that makes the souls of black folk sound and be heard. Instead of discussing what each of the musical epigraphs—or “mute ciphers” (xvi), as Donald Gibson calls them—signifies in relation to the chapter it precedes, I want to focus on the larger implications brought about by the incorporation of music into what Robert Stepto designates as “the text that would have been.” Du Bois indexes the “Sorrow Songs” by stating that “some echo of haunting melody” will appear in his text. This testifies to the fact that melodies, which are not the most important aspect of spirituals anyway, can only be deciphered by the readers as fragments. Thus the melodies of the spirituals cited by Du Bois appear in the text, not as accurate mimetic representations, but distorted, layered, and lingering traces, or “discursive fictions.” Through these melodic fragments the voices of the slaves who “composed,” sang, and improvised upon these songs haunt the textual house of Souls. The readers only become privy to the titles of the spirituals used as epigraphs in the last chapter, yet even there Du Bois does not disclose all of the spirituals present in the text.

36 Stepto 56. Eric Sundquist, in his reading of Souls, has already undertaken this expansive task. See his “Swing Low: ‘The Souls of Black Folk,’” To Wake the Nations 457-539.


38 I put “composition” in quotation marks here, since the music and words to these songs were written down once and their “essence” contained in the notation. Spirituals, however, like most other black musical productions, live through performance and improvisation. This is not to say that there is no base which remains recognizable, but that the surrounding aspects shift due to contextual setting.
refusal, and the confusion it causes, exemplifies the control that Du Bois can exert over the sounds of black folk as opposed to the look of white folks.

Contemporary critics agree that the sonic signs, represented by musical notes taken from the Western tradition of musical notation, do not reproduce the spirituals faithfully. Eric Sundquist, for example, states: “The musical epigraphs are therefore . . . 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” (470). Of course, one could also argue that these notes were and are not able to reproduce the Western classical music for which they were designed originally. Alan Durant writes, with regard to musical notation within the history of Western classical music:

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.39

By incorporating into his text musical notes representing spirituals, Du Bois attempts to make this body of musical works independent of their particular performances and location in history. Rather than being placed within a particular historical framework, the spirituals now signify and stand in for a black American past.

In “Denoting Difference,” Ronald Radano offers a cogent analysis of the different functions of spirituals in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century American culture. He begins with charting the white fascination that ensued after the first spirituals had been transcribed during the Civil War, arguing that spirituals represented “the outer limits of the western imagination.”40 This was integrally tied to the problem of transcription, as most whites writing down the spirituals noted the problems in “capturing” slave songs on paper. In the minds of Northern white abolitionists, spirituals became a part of a larger Romantic ideology which held that music countered Western reason—it was a “medicine” against civilization, especially since Romanticism in general was obsessed with replacing reason, the central trope or concept of the Enlightenment, with “untainted” and “natural” cultural productions that led “man” back to “his” original state. This was coupled with an increased interest in folk culture by Romanticist thinkers, who argued that these “natural” and “authentic” cultural forms possessed qualities which were lacking in “spoiled” high cultural production. Thus, as musical ruminations of folk culture, spirituals were doubly coded as “authentic” artifacts that provided a “true” representation of black “humanity.” Additionally, “black spirituals were not simply trivial expressions of ‘primitive purity.’ In fact, they were vital to the Anglo-Saxon psyche precisely because they constituted the alter ego of the white self, representing the supplement or missing link of American national identity.”41 The issue of notation becomes even more complex if we take into account, as Radano does, that the act of transcribing spirituals forced some of the people doing

40 Radano 508.
41 Radano 522.
In the Mix: Hearing the Souls of Black Folk

this work to recast the Western system of musical notation in order to encompass the particularities of spirituals. Radano writes: “Yet as these sounds submitted to the effects of writing, so did they bring about changes in the notations themselves. Seeking to capture the peculiarities of African American vernacular singing, the transcribers altered staff notations to obey a new logic that exceeded the confines of common time and well tempered scales. . . . Seeking to master, notation succumbed, only to amplify black difference.” Thus the notations that appear in Du Bois’s text are already notations in difference. Not only does the presence of the fragments of musical bars alter the text of Souls, but the notations themselves have already been changed by virtue of encoding spirituals and not Western classical music. Yet, spirituals also served an important mnemonic function within late nineteenth-century black American culture. They were incomplete reminders of slavery’s past, mediated by the ideological baggage of the white transcribers and commentators.

Du Bois creates a disjuncture between Souls and its audiences, transforming the bars of the spirituals before each chapter into “mute ciphers” that call attention to their own “failure” in representing sound. Du Bois’s use of spirituals calls into question the representability of the spirituals in the Western system of musical notation while pointing to the limits of the whole system itself, and, as a result, they mirror his own double textual strategy that mixes Western and black vernacular and literary traditions. The musical notes, like the entire text, form a mix that transforms two distinct parts—Western musical notation and spirituals—into a temporary fusion that calls attention to its own impurity. Furthermore, the role assigned to spirituals in particular, and black music in general, derives from a historically specific process that is informed by black and white American discourses. Du Bois’s rendering of spirituals must be read in this context, since he draws on the meanings ascribed to spirituals by both black and white Americans. The “Sorrow Songs” cannot sonically represent a “true” and “authentic” African-American past, for the media (written collections put together mostly by white people) in which they were transmitted had already transformed them into something else.

What is left in Du Bois’s transcription are quasi-indecipherable musical signs that disrupt the flow of words. Situated at the interstice of text (lyrical epigraphs) and text (chapters), the musical fragments provide a mix of music and noise imploding the texts that frame them. The musical notes represent the structural moment of “the mix” in Souls. A similar moment is described by Dick Hebdige in his explanation of one of the all-time classic mixes in hip-hop, Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel:

The record is a startling mix of different sounds: the bass line from the rock group Queen’s 1980 hit Another One Bites the Dust is mixed with a riff from Good Times, Chic’s disco hit from 1979. These are mixed with snatches from four or five other rap records. Finally, towards the end of the record, a man and a young child read out extracts from an incomprehensible fairy story. All this is jumbled up and scratched together. The record is

42 Radano 525.

43 For the most convincing and influential argument concerning the syncretism of slave culture in general and spirituals in particular, see Lawrence Levine, Black Culture, Black Consciousness (New York: Oxford UP, 1977).
full of breaks and silences. But it is held together by a stuttering rhythm. Flash keeps holding the needle back, . . . but however long he waits, he always comes back to hit the mix with the right sound at the right time.44

The “breaks and silences” described by Hebdige coincide with Du Bois’s strategy for the spirituals. Just as with the musical epigraphs in Du Bois’s text, the scratching noises are at their most extreme when the songs meet, and the noise calls attention to itself by interrupting the flow. By not disclosing the names or the lyrics of the spiritual he is citing, Du Bois has the chance to make the spirituals applicable to his own mix. Likewise, Grandmaster Flash takes existing records and plays them against the rotation of the phonograph. By doing this, he can fuse the scratching with the sounds of the record on the second phonograph. These scratching noises can be ignored by the listener, only adding to the sonic density of “the mix,” or they can threaten the “pure” listening pleasure if perceived as noise. The bars of spirituals are music because as musical notes they strive to represent musical sound. However, they also conjure noise. While the musical epigraphs haunt the whole of Souls by way of suggestion, they hold their own as mute phono-epi-graphs between the poems and the body of the text. Thus these fragmented scratching noises change the meanings of the text by inserting sonically the unrepresentable pain (physical and psychical) of slavery, as well as the spiritual and cultural achievements of black subjects in US history.

Du Bois continues the transformation of spirituals, which began with their transcription, by fusing them with poems from the nineteenth-century canon. The interaction between the musical bars of the spirituals and the poems from the Western canon (mostly nineteenth-century British poetry) in Souls provides the most striking enactment of the moment of “the mix.” Sundquist fails to take into account how the musical epigraphs as sonic signifiers redirect the meanings of the poems which they follow. Just as being placed in a written text changes the spirituals, it also transforms these poems originating largely from the British literary canon. Therefore Arthur Symons’s poem, which opens the first chapter, becomes legible as a lament against the miseries of 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. (3)

This part of the poem can be related to slavery in terms of the desperation it exhibits, just as the “Sorrow Songs” do, particularly “Nobody Knows the Trouble I Have Seen,” with which the poem is coupled.45 Both the poem and the lyrics of the spiritual speak of troubles and plagued souls, yet in both instances the reasons for these woes are not disclosed. Du Bois does this purposefully so as to make the words applicable to the “Spiri-

45 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” (J. B. T. Marsh, The Story of the Jubilee Singers; With Their Songs [1899; New York: Negro UP, 1969] 5).
tual Strivings” of black folk. In this way, the “weariness” and “crying” exhibited by the speaker in the poem become testimonies of a collective black voice which Du Bois seeks to channel through the use of spirituals throughout Souls. This collective voice is comprised of the slaves that originally sang the spirituals, as well as of black subjects suffering from the consequences of reconstruction and legal segregation. “The mix” enables Du Bois to radically redefine the meanings of the poem. This mixing of Western canonical literature and black vernacular musical expression is carried forth in the interaction between each of the two epigraphs leading into all of Souls’ chapters, save the last, which combines the music from one spiritual with the lyrics of another.

While Du Bois transposes spirituals into the realm of “legitimate” written culture, he also “vernacularizes” the poems from the Western tradition. Schiller’s, Byron’s, Lowell’s, and Whittier’s poems create a mix with spirituals that testify to the plight of black subjects in the US. Put differently, Du Bois forces these Western texts to bear witness to slavery and the presence of black subjects as an integral part of Western modernity. Read or listened to in tandem with the musical bars, the poems become the lyrics to the “Sorrow Songs.” “The mix” in these phono-epi-graphs consists of a number of different layers, all of which exemplify the aesthetic complexity and cultural flexibility of a sonic black subjectivity as it emerges out of “the mix” that is Souls. This complexity provides a testimony to the various ways that black subjectivity can be located in sound.

In the last chapter of Souls, Du Bois presents a theory of the “Sorrow Songs,” discussing their aesthetic, cultural, and political dimensions. The two epigraphs leading into this chapter are striking as they fail to comply with the scheme Du Bois sets up in the rest of Souls: both the lyrical and musical headings come from the reservoir of the “Sorrow Songs.” This suggests that “The Sorrow Songs” establishes a structural unity at the end of the text by bringing together both words and music from spirituals. This unity, in turn, reflects the mechanisms of double consciousness outlined in the first chapter; the words of white subjects (in the form of the epigraphic poems) are erased and replaced by the songs of black subjects (the words to a spiritual). In other words, the black subject in Souls is finally at one with herself or himself. Yet, Du Bois does not provide a simplistic solution in which all the problems involved with the color-line vanish into thin air. The two epigraphs preceding “The Sorrow Songs” provide us with a rupture within this field of unity, since they do not stem from the same spiritual. The lyrics come from “Lay This Body Down,” while the musical notes correspond with “Wrestling Jacob.” By juxtaposing two spirituals, Du Bois avoids falling prey to an easy dichotomy between black and white culture. This rupture furthers “the mix” that is The Souls of Black Folk, as it provides an interaction between two spirituals in the same manner as the mixing of spirituals and poems in the earlier parts of the text. The multitude of effects highlights the modes of “the mix” since they force Souls to practice cross-pollination intra- as well as interculturally. While the mixing might be more self-evident in the case of the poems meeting the spirituals, its complexity increases in the final epigraphs. The final epigraphs mix the music of one spiritual with the lyrics of another to form a new spiritual, which draws on all the other meanings encoded in the spirituals within and beyond the confines of Souls.

While Du Bois stands at the beginning of the last century, DJs as musicians in black popular music have been pointing towards the new millennium. The two represent dif-
ferent points in the sonic geography of Afro-modernity, constituted through the integral role that black music has played in the twentieth century, not only on the US stage but in the global arena. The practices of Du Bois and the DJs as they appear in the mix create a space and time for a black subject positioned in sound. Their mixing strategies allow for a fluid experience of selfhood that is consistently channeled through the sounds of others. Rather than being coherent and enclosed, the subjects in the mix are unable to exist in solitude because they have to hear the sounds of other subjects in order to make them sound in their own mixes. In his suggestive reimagining of Western modernity from the vantage point of race, Homi Bhabha imagines a new temporality for this field:

   The time-lag of postcolonial modernity moves forward, erasing that compliant past tethered to the myth of progress, ordered in binarisms of its cultural logic: past/present, inside/outside. This forward is neither teleological nor is it an endless slippage. It is the function of the lag to slow down the linear, progressive time of modernity to reveal its ‘gesture’, its tempi, ‘the pauses and stresses of the whole performance’.46

Both the DJs and Du Bois metaphorically enact in their respective practices what Bhabha refers to as the “time lag” of Western modernity. DJs “slow down,” speed up, and scratch records, thereby sounding the disjunctures in their mixes. These mixing strategies present a different temporality than the linear notions of modern Western history, one that takes into account different velocities needed to imagine a modern black subject. Likewise Du Bois, by inserting the “Sorrow Songs” into his text, reformulates the temporal domain of modernity, pointing us to the gaps between the great Enlightenment narratives of reason, history, equality, and freedom. In these gaps, we find not only different temporalities, but sound, as both Du Bois and the DJs perform the “gesture” of modernity in the sonic arena. It is sound which allows them to “mess” with the strict temporality of Western modernity in order to present us with a fragmented, non-linear, and “mixed up” modernity: “sonic Afro-modernity.” In other words, Souls and the practice of DJing provide us with occasions to hear the souls of black folk as they are lived, performed, enacted, experienced, articulated and channeled through the mix.

46 Bhabha 253.