

Intimacy and affliction: DuBois, race, and psychoanalysis.

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Intimacy and Affliction:

DuBois, Race, and Psychoanalysis

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

Nearly a century ago—back in the old millennium—W. E. B. DuBois offered a description of American social life whose power to startle remains, to a remarkable degree, undiminished. We jaded moderns will of course come by our sense of revelation differently from the late Victorians to whom *The Souls of Black Folk* was first introduced, but this, too, is part of the work's fascination. For today it is less the bravado of DuBois's book that is apt to take us aback, less its clear-sighted demolition of Victorian racial propriety, than the sheer idiosyncrasy of its discursive construction—or perhaps we should say, of the methodology that construction embodies. We might be particularly startled, for instance, by the dexterity with which DuBois managed, in 1903, to hold together analytic imperatives that, in the present moment, appear at best ill matched, often irreconcilable, and sometimes mutually hostile. In its most basic terms, *Souls* is a history lesson: it speaks up against those histories of Reconstruction that would forget that the breach between the American North and South was healed not least through the steady revocation from African Americans of virtually all the rights and opportunities that emancipation had promised. In this register the book has primarily to do with the slow unfolding, in a variety of institutions, of a great national betrayal, the issue of which was a new but equally dire economy of subservience and racial exploitation. But what makes *Souls* truly singular—what distinguishes it so sharply from DuBois's **[End Page 1]** landmark 1935 book of historiography, *Black Reconstruction in America*—is an attentiveness to routinized inequality and pervasive terror that focuses not solely on the institutions in which they flourished but also on their most finely wrought, subtle, inward manifestations. Contrasting his methods to those of the "cold statistician" and the "car-window sociologist," DuBois presents an impassioned, often surpassingly lyrical account of the trauma of race in America, an account whose rhetorical figures clearly mean to adumbrate the experience of subordination in a way that numerical figures cannot. The opening sentence of chapter 12 frames the matter succinctly: "This is the history of a human heart."<sup>1</sup> We might say, then, that what DuBois provides in *Souls* is a staggeringly intricate account of the intimate life of race—or, in the racier parlance of today's criticism, of the intimate life of power.

To say as much is to imply a variety of critical affinities, not all of them commonsensical. That DuBois addresses himself to the nuances of power is uncontroversial; his seven decades as a leading civil rights activist would seem to corroborate it. But intimate life? Would this not suggest that DuBois's work somehow situates on both sides of the still-widening rift between what we tend to call, for short, historicist and psychoanalytic perspectives? What sense can it make to talk about the possibly psychoanalytic affinities of a practiced historian and trained sociologist? It is no doubt true that such questions, with their air of incredulity, invite us to misremember or simply to ignore the significant fact that in 1903 DuBois's intellectual contemporaries included William James, Henry James, and, only slightly more esoterically, Sigmund Freud—all writers distinguished by their efforts to find a literary or philosophical or even scientific language adequate both to the protean richness of the inner theater and to the mazy circuitry by which it communicates **[End Page 2]** to the varied objects of the world.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, these contemporaries of DuBois took for granted what Marjorie Garber aptly describes as the "mutual embeddedness of historicism and psychoanalysis."<sup>3</sup>

If these paired analytic...

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