

“AT THE DAWNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY”



W.E.B. Du Bois, A.C. McClurg & Co., and the Early
Circulation of *The Souls of Black Folk*

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On April 7, 1903, just as *The Souls of Black Folk* went to press, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote to the publishing manager at A.C. McClurg & Co., Francis G. Browne, asking to review the book's Forethought, which he had not received in proof copies. Browne responded apologetically, saying that the first edition of *The Souls of Black Folk* had already been printed. He sent Du Bois an advance copy of the first edition, asking the author to mark changes on it, so that A.C. McClurg might "have it corrected on the second edition."¹ Reviewing this copy, Du Bois edited the opening sentence of the Forethought, so that the book would show "the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century," rather than "in the dawning of the twentieth century." Likewise, Du Bois revised the fourth paragraph of the Forethought. To the sentence, "All this I have ended with a tale twice told but seldom written," he appended the phrase, "and a chapter of song." Du Bois also adjusted the title of this final chapter, which had been a late addition to the book. While it was called "The Sorrow Songs" in the first edition, it became "Of the Sorrow Songs" in subsequent printings, to align with the book's other chapter titles.² After the initial printing of 1,214 copies,³ these revisions persisted from May 1903 through the 1953 Blue Heron Press edition (alongside revisions made at that time), and through the 1973 Kraus-Thomson edition. And yet, these changes are noticeably absent in the current W.W. Norton and Oxford University Press editions of *The Souls of Black Folk*, which use the first edition as copy-text.⁴

On the most basic level, these changes impact the meaning of the collection. The book's revised opening sentence positions Du Bois and his interpretation of blackness not *within* "the dawning of the twentieth century" but *at* a dawning that is only beginning. It resituates the meaning of blackness during the turn-of-the-century era. The revised title, "Of the Sorrow

Songs,” shows that the final chapter was not meant to stand apart from, but alongside, the other chapters. By reprinting the first edition without commenting on these changes, the current Norton and Oxford editions restore a version of the book that did not circulate widely and that Du Bois had quickly corrected.

Beyond its effect on linguistic meaning, however, the reprinting of the first edition also indicates the extent to which *The Souls of Black Folk* is often viewed, retroactively, as an instant literary classic. Indeed, in his introduction to the Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois series, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes how the book was “hailed as a classic even by his contemporaries.”⁵ David Levering Lewis offers a similar appraisal in his biography of Du Bois, claiming that, “for a controversial work,” *The Souls of Black Folk* “enjoyed an impressive run” with exceptional sales.⁶ To a certain extent, such an argument holds true. Among African American readers and in the longer history of the twentieth century, the book’s importance can hardly be overstated, and Lewis emphasizes this reception. However, critical scholarship on the book’s initial publication and circulation has been limited, and such a positive reception cannot be ascribed to the book’s white audience at the turn of the century. Indeed, claims regarding the book’s favorable reception have a tendency to undercut both Du Bois’s complex rhetorical strategies as an author and the hostile reviews and responses that the book withstood.

This is not to say that the book’s publication history has gone unremarked. The initial publication of the book has been discussed in biographies written by Manning Marable and David Levering Lewis.⁷ Changes to the 1953 Jubilee edition of *Souls*—in which Du Bois revised several potentially anti-semitic portions of the text—have been examined in detail. George Bornstein focused his attention on these 1953 revisions in a 2006 article for *Textual Cultures*,⁸ and Henry Louis Gates Jr. revisits them in the Norton Critical Edition (xl–xli).⁹ In terms of the book’s early circulation, the most significant work of scholarship was performed by Du Bois’s literary executor, Herbert Aptheker, in his introduction to the 1973 Kraus-Thomson edition.¹⁰ Aptheker’s introduction closely examines the publication and reception of *Souls*. Yet despite this attention, Du Bois’s 1903 revisions to the second printing have gone unmentioned. In fact, as I will show, the editor of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Francis G. Browne, has been consistently misidentified by scholars. As such examples indicate, there is much more to be said about the publication of this foundational work of African American literature.

This essay considers *The Souls of Black Folk* as it moved through what Robert Darnton has called the “communications circuit” in its first year of

publication.¹¹ In the sections that follow, I consider the history by which A.C. McClurg & Co. developed an interest in Du Bois, the solicitation of *The Souls of Black Folk* by Francis G. Browne and A.C. McClurg & Co., the production of the text as it was collected and revised from previously published essays, the marketing and promotion of the book, and the reception of *Souls* among a contemporary audience. In doing so, the article participates in a wave of recent scholarship on African American print culture.¹² The essay looks closely at the initial circulation of the text to consider its influence upon readers “at the dawning of the twentieth century,” historicizing the book’s significance within the turn-of-the-century literary marketplace. In particular, the essay considers the fraught relationship between W.E.B. Du Bois, his Chicago publisher, and his predominantly white audience. It explores the book’s “early” circulation both in terms of its initial publication and in terms of its prophetic vision, untimely for so many readers.

Such a dynamic, between the African American author and the mainstream publishing industry, has been explored most notably in John K. Young’s *Black Writers, White Publishers*. As Young describes it, the relationship between black author and white publisher is distinctive because of “the underlying social structure,” which “transforms the usual unequal relationship [between author and publisher] into an extension of a much deeper cultural dynamic.”¹³ For Young, white publishers are influenced by US cultural dynamics to produce a one-dimensional and mythologized version of black experience. Leon Jackson elaborates on this dynamic in a 2010 essay published in this journal. There, Jackson argues that much of the scholarship on African American authors and white publishers falls into three categories: “publication-as-empowerment, publication-as-disempowerment, [and] publication-as-mediated-and-mediating process.”¹⁴ In the first two instances, scholars debate the extent of authorial empowerment and exploitation. In the third instance, they take a factual approach that replaces intentionality with mediation. Even more recently, in an introduction to *Race, Ethnicity, and Publishing in America*, Cécile Cottenet has offered another possibility for exploring relationships between ethnic authors and mainstream publishers. Referring to both Young and Jackson, Cottenet argues that the goal of examining author-publisher relationships is not simply to disclose empowerment or disempowerment, but to consider how authors “understood or did not understand” the book market, and how ethnic authors “work from *within*, although they continue to embody ‘otherness’.”¹⁵ This possibility, from Cottenet by way of Jackson and Young, strikes me as

especially productive because it attends to authorial development *through* publication. As authors move through the communications circuit, from one project to the next, they develop new skills and strategies to understand the literary marketplace.

The publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* was an experiment in popular writing, as opposed to scholarly writing, which allowed Du Bois's authorial strategies to evolve in response to the mainstream literary marketplace. Indeed, the book itself was solicited by A.C. McClurg & Co. and imagined as a collection of popular essays, many of which had been previously published in magazines. In collecting and revising these essays in book form, Du Bois focused especially on the text's framing materials, what Gérard Genette would call its "paratexts,"¹⁶ such as titles and epigraphs. These materials, I argue, reappropriated white fascinations with the racial other in an effort to lure the reader deeper within the veil of black experience. Put differently, Du Bois drew on his reader's *ethnological* assumptions to offer them a truer *ethnography* that would encompass the history, literature, music, and spirituality of black culture. Yet while Du Bois and A.C. McClurg & Co. sought to target a mainstream audience by simultaneously appealing to *and* subverting white supremacist fantasies, these efforts encountered dual forms of denial among the vast majority of readers. On the one hand, Du Bois's argument for racial equality and social justice was explicitly rejected by white readers. On the other hand, the book was interpreted as confirming racial stereotypes and essential characteristics of the negro, and was even recommended for this feature. In his attempt to address a mainstream, predominantly white literary public, Du Bois came to better understand the extent of this audience's racist mis-readings.

A.C. McClurg's Literary Interests

The history of A.C. McClurg & Co., which has rarely been discussed in critical scholarship,¹⁷ provides important context for understanding the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*. A.C. McClurg & Co. had its origins in Chicago's oldest book and stationery store, W.W. Barlow & Co., which had been founded in 1844. In its early phases, the company changed hands several times: from W.W. Barlow, to Samuel Chapman Griggs, to Egbert L. Jansen, and then Alexander Caldwell McClurg.¹⁸ These changes in ownership frequently hinged on business losses, especially due to fire. Following the Chicago Fire of 1871, for example, S.C. Griggs sold his shares of the

company to Egbert Jansen, Frederick B. Smith, and Alexander McClurg, so that the company became known as Jansen, McClurg & Co.. The firm would assume the name A.C. McClurg & Co in 1886. Following another fire in 1899, Alexander McClurg considered dissolving the company, but instead decided to continue through incorporation.¹⁹ The company would survive as A.C. McClurg & Co. until 1962, with a history spanning nearly 120 years.

In his time as president of the company until his death in 1901, McClurg took special interest in the more literary aspects of the business. In conjunction with George Millard, for example, McClurg organized the “English Book Department” in the mid 1870s, making frequent trips to England and Europe to secure rare and fine books for the company and bookstore.²⁰ This rare book section attracted a small group of writers and bibliophiles during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, throughout the 1890s, the A.C. McClurg & Co. bookstore was a literary landmark in Chicago: “Clergymen, physicians, actors, newspapermen—men of all professions who loved books and the company of book lovers made that particular corner a kind of club for their leisure hours, and [Eugene] Field with characteristic wit, in a happy moment dubbed the coterie ‘The Saints and Sinners’.”²¹ George Millard’s rare book section thus became known as the Saints and Sinners Corner.

Similarly, from 1880 to 1892, A.C. McClurg & Co. published the literary magazine *The Dial*, edited by Francis F. Browne: “an intelligent guide and agreeable companion to the book-lover and book-buyer.”²² Francis F. Browne worked closely with McClurg throughout the 1880s, serving not only as editor of *The Dial* but as literary advisor for the company’s publishing department.²³ Despite this close relationship, Francis F. Browne purchased *The Dial* outright in 1892, to manage it independently and to separate its critical voice from A.C. McClurg & Co. The magazine would continue under Browne’s guidance until 1913, and would later become an important “literary, artistic, and critical organ of modernism,” publishing work by T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and others.²⁴

Yet even as Alexander McClurg was devoted to literary aspects of the business, A.C. McClurg & Co. made the bulk of its money through the distribution and wholesale of books and other retail goods. According to one article, for example, by 1899 the company “reached a total gross of \$2,500,000 of which the publishing department accounted for \$100,000.”²⁵ Here, publishing represents just 4 percent of the company’s overall revenue, functioning as one aspect of a larger business upon which it was dependent.

This much larger side of the business, the retail department, had been managed by Frederick B. Smith since 1862.²⁶ Indeed, A.C. McClurg & Co. sold a wide variety of retail goods in addition to books and stationery, including pipes, glassware, pocket knives, prams, lanterns, and so on. Just as McClurg had worked with George Millard to acquire rare and fine books internationally, Smith traveled to Europe for new retail goods for distribution in the western U.S.²⁷

As head of the retail department, Frederick B. Smith compiled his own history of the publisher, a booklet detailing changes in company ownership and management from the mid-nineteenth-century through the first years of the twentieth century. The history is remarkable for its attention to place names, employee names, figures, and dates. Smith describes, for instance, how S.C. Griggs & Co. ordered massive quantities of textbooks to be shipped west prior to the Civil War: "Sanders's Spellers, 50,000; Sanders's Green Primer, 108,000; Sanders's Readers, 30,000 to 50,000."²⁸ By the time of the Civil War the company became "easily the most important book concern west of New York."²⁹ Smith's history also describes the various buildings and locations the company occupied. In February 1869, the company moved to Booksellers' Row, where it occupied a store 50 by 150 feet on 117-119 State Street. In 1899, as the company was incorporated, it moved to 215-221 Wabash Avenue, taking more than seven floors of an 80-foot-by-160-foot building. In the early twentieth century, the company continued to grow. As one report notes, "In 1907 the business had grown to such an extent that it was deemed best to conduct the retail and wholesale operations in separate buildings."³⁰ The company then moved to East Ohio Street, occupying buildings with 342,000 square feet of space and employing approximately seven hundred people. Frederick B. Smith's history thus depicts the rapid growth of an industrial business with acquisitions, incorporation, and strategic use of its geographic location.

From the early to mid-twentieth century, A.C. McClurg & Co. would focus less and less on Alexander McClurg's interest in fine books. In one meeting on January 11, 1910, the Board of Directors authorized a significant reduction in pay for George Millard, the manager of the Rare Books department, even as they increased the pay of numerous salesmen.³¹ In early 1912, the company would form a committee to examine Millard's productivity, forcing his resignation.³² In the second decade of the twentieth century, A.C. McClurg & Co. moved further away from any interest in "high" literature, publishing popular genre fiction from authors such as Zane Grey, Clarence Mulford, and Edgar Rice Burroughs. Burroughs, in particular, became A.C.

McClurg's touchstone author. From 1914 to 1929 he published 29 books with the company, including eleven in the *Tarzan* series. His 1914 *Tarzan of the Apes* was the company's most popular book of all time, selling 641,000 copies, and several of its sequels sold nearly as well. Burroughs's overall book sales for A.C. McClurg total more than 5,600,000 copies.³³

Thus while A.C. McClurg had a modest history of publishing and promoting quality literature, this was only a small aspect of the business during a specific era. By the mid-1940s, A.C. McClurg & Co. would cease publishing books altogether, remaining in business as retail distributors. In this way, the company's history is framed by its mass distribution of books and retail goods, capitalizing on Chicago's location within the expanding U.S. It was primarily from the late 1880s through the early 1900s that, under the leadership of Alexander McClurg himself, the company expanded its role as a literary publisher. This involved the implementation of the rare books section under George Millard, the publication of *The Dial* under Francis F. Browne, and, later on, the management of the publishing department by Browne's son, Francis G. Browne. It was within this corporate structure, toward the "Saints and Sinners Corner" of rare books, that *The Souls of Black Folk* was published.

Solicitation of *The Souls of Black Folk*

In his 1940 collection of autobiographical essays, *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois reflects on the publication of *Souls*. In a matter-of-fact description, Du Bois reveals a striking aspect of the text's origins. Namely, the idea to collect several popular essays as a book had not originated with Du Bois, but had been suggested by his publisher. As he describes:

I had been asked sometime before by A.C. McClurg and Company of Chicago if I did not have some material for a book; I planned a social study which should be perhaps a summing up of the work of the Atlanta Conferences, or at any rate, a scientific investigation. They asked, however, if I did not have some essays that they might put together and issue immediately, mentioning my articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* and other places. I demurred because books of essays almost always fall so flat. Nevertheless, I got together a number of my fugitive pieces The "Souls of Black Folk" was published in 1903 and is still selling today.³⁴

Here, Du Bois emphasizes that the book and its essayistic form were actively solicited by A.C. McClurg & Co.. Indeed, in his interaction with the company, Du Bois initially hoped to publish another book of sociological scholarship, and “demurred” from the solicitation. A.C. McClurg & Co was able to persuade Du Bois, however, suggesting they could publish a collection of his essays “immediately.” The passage thus describes A.C. McClurg’s efforts to compete against established publishers of the eastern seaboard, asking Du Bois specifically about essays he had written for the *Atlantic Monthly*. Du Bois ultimately agreed with this suggestion and, rather than producing another book of scholarship, collected and composed *The Souls of Black Folk*.

As Herbert Aptheker explains, it is not entirely surprising that A.C. McClurg & Co. solicited *The Souls of Black Folk*.³⁵ By the turn of the century, Du Bois had already attracted national attention. He had spoken at the Harvard graduation ceremonies in 1890, earned his doctorate at the university five years later, published his dissertation as a book, and conducted the first of the Atlanta Conferences. Indeed, Du Bois had already published essays with the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Southern Workman*, *The Independent*, *The Nation*, *Harper’s Weekly*, *World’s Work*, and with Francis F. Browne’s *The Dial*. It seems natural, then, that Du Bois would transition from *The Dial* to publish with its parent company, A.C. McClurg & Co.

Yet the company’s history, as outlined above, shows that *The Dial* was no longer directly affiliated with A.C. McClurg & Co. at the turn of the century. Rather, Francis F. Browne, had bought out stock for the magazine in 1892, separating himself from A.C. McClurg & Co. to publish *The Dial* independently. Indeed, A.C. McClurg & Co. took up a column in the July 1892 issue of *The Dial* to announce the magazine’s independence.³⁶ By the time Du Bois published his articles with the magazine, it had been dissociated from the publisher for nearly a decade.

This separation of *The Dial* from A.C. McClurg & Co. has alerted me to a significant error in scholarship regarding the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Namely, the editor of *Souls* has been mistakenly identified as Francis Fisher Browne, in place of Browne’s son, Francis Granger Browne. Aptheker’s Introduction to *Souls* makes this claim in 1973, saying, “*The Dial* was owned by A.C. McClurg & Co. and its editors, the Brownes—W.R. and, especially important, Francis Fisher—were also the editors of the McClurg books, with the last named the editor of *Souls*.”³⁷ By the time *The Souls of Black Folk* was published in 1903, however, Francis F. Browne had moved on from his official position within the company. Rather, Browne’s

son, Francis G. Browne, became manager of the A.C. McClurg & Co. publishing department from 1901 to 1912. Thus while the names, and even signatures, of father and son can be difficult to distinguish, it was the *younger* Francis Browne who served as editor for *Souls* and managed correspondence with Du Bois. To my knowledge, this error has not been corrected since Aptheker's introduction, but has instead been repeated by a number of scholars.³⁸ The quotation from *Dusk of Dawn* would thus refer to Francis G. Browne, rather than his father, soliciting *The Souls of Black Folk*.

While biographical information on Francis G. Browne is scarce,³⁹ it is clear that he was invested in publishing multi-ethnic literature. Indeed, A.C. McClurg & Co., as a publisher, is notable in this regard. In 1892, the company published Emma Wolf's *Other Things Being Equal*, arguably the first Jewish American novel from a mainstream press.⁴⁰ The company would publish two additional novels by Wolf within a decade.⁴¹ In 1912, the company also published one of the earliest books of fiction by a Chinese North American author, Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*.⁴² These texts, much like *The Souls of Black Folk*, are positioned to mediate between an ethnic author and a mainstream, predominantly white literary readership. They partake in what Yu Fang Cho has called "benevolent ethnography."⁴³ On the one hand, such books express interracial sympathy and sentiment in an effort to bridge cultural divisions. On the other hand, they simultaneously reinscribe existing social hierarchies, allowing the white reader to examine and consume dubious representations of the ethnic other.

After leaving A.C. McClurg & Co. in early 1912, Browne formed his own business, F.G. Browne & Co., publishing a number of books that focused on international relationships between the US and Asia. The company itself was short-lived. It was established in early 1913, changed names to Browne & Howell Co. in the same year,⁴⁴ and went bankrupt in January 1915.⁴⁵ Among the short list of titles the company produced, however, several participate in fantasies of orientalism. In 1913, for instance, F.G. Browne & Co. published Byron E. Veatch's *The Two Samurai* as well as Sarah Pike Conger's *Old China and Young America*. As Browne & Howell Co., they published a romance novel from Robert Ames Bennett entitled *The Quarterbreed*. They also produced a series of illustrated books including titles such as *Our Neighbors: The Japanese*, *Our Neighbors: The Fillipinos*, and *Our Neighbors: The Chinese*. Based on this history, it can be inferred that Francis G. Browne managed the acceptance and publication of Sui Sin Far's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* just before he left A.C. McClurg & Co. in 1912. His interest in ethnic literature thus led to the publication of foundational works

in both the African American and Asian American literary traditions.

Yet F.G. Browne's interest in ethnographic literature simultaneously encompassed stereotypical depictions—such as those written by Robert Ames Bennett—that would prefigure A.C. McClurg's publication of the *Tarzan* series. *The Souls of Black Folk* takes part in this longer history whereby Francis G. Browne and A.C. McClurg & Co. directed ethnic literature toward a mainstream, predominantly white audience. As Du Bois recognized when he initially demurred from writing a book for a popular audience, this cross-racial communication circuit was beset with potential and peril. How could Du Bois adapt his writing for a mainstream white reader? What would such a reader take from his ethnography of blackness?

Revisions and Additions

Assembling *The Souls of Black Folk*—in large part, from previously published materials—Du Bois conducted varying levels of revision. Whereas some of the chapters were written exclusively for the book, several were republished almost directly from magazine essays. The first chapter, which had been originally published in the August 1897 *Atlantic Monthly*, for example, is virtually unchanged. The opening paragraph, asking, “How does it feel to be a problem?,” had been included in full in the *Atlantic* several years prior to the book's publication.⁴⁶ The second chapter on Reconstruction and the Freedman's Bureau, which had been published in the March 1901 *Atlantic*, underwent very slight revisions, most commonly adjusting the breaks between paragraphs.⁴⁷ As in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the original magazine article concluded with its central argument: “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.” Chapters Four and Six were also republished from the *Atlantic* with almost no revision.⁴⁸ In these instances, Du Bois was satisfied with his writing, and A.C. McClurg & Co. was happy to position itself alongside the *Atlantic* through republication.

The most significant, and uniform, revision to these chapters would be the framing materials that surrounded the text itself: the new titles, epigraphs, and musical notation given to each.⁴⁹ The opening chapter, for example, had been titled “Strivings of the Negro People” in its initial version, but was retitled “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” for the book. The chapter was thus given a “spiritual” emphasis that had not been included in the initial magazine essay title, reiterated by its musical notation. The revised title also identifies Du Bois as African American (“*Our* Spiritual Strivings”), speak-

ing for collective pain and collective action. It positions Du Bois himself as a spokesperson for African Americans, offering a spiritual perspective in contrast to Booker T. Washington's industrial education. Similarly, the title for the second chapter was changed from "The Freedman's Bureau," to "Of the Dawn of Freedom." As with many of the titles, the revision adds a mythic element to the more descriptive title of the *Atlantic* essay; it uses the history of the Freedman's Bureau to address the emergence of African American freedom itself. This "Dawn of Freedom" is then reiterated in the Forethought, where the book imagines itself "at the dawning" of the twentieth century.

Chapters drawn from sources other than the *Atlantic Monthly* underwent more significant revision. While Du Bois had previously responded to Booker T. Washington in an article for *The Dial*, his chapter in *Souls* is significantly reorganized and expanded.⁵⁰ The chapter's sharper criticism of Washington foreclosed any possibility that Du Bois might work at Tuskegee. Chapters Seven and Eight were drawn from one essay in *World's Work*, and the shift in tone from essay to book publication is particularly evident in these examples. The initial piece had been titled "The Negro As He Really Is" with the subtitle: "A definite study of one locality in Georgia showing the exact conditions of every negro family—their economic status—their ownership of land—their morals—their family life—the houses they live in and the results of the mortgage system."⁵¹ The essay itself was published with numerous photographs of dwelling places, stores, women at work, and children in schools. Adapted for book publication, the content itself is similar; however, the chapter titles—"Of the Black Belt" and "Of the Quest for the Golden Fleece"—are repackaged in terms of color, metaphor, and myth. In such instances, Du Bois takes a more poetic approach, softening his academic terminology for popular book publication. References to black and gold lend the book a sense of coherence and would be reinforced in the design of the book itself, with its black cover and gilt details.

Composing new material for the book, Du Bois added Chapter Five ("Of the Wings of Atalanta") as well as Chapters Eleven through Fourteen, the last four chapters of the book. These concluding chapters are especially important because they progress deeper into black experience. Indeed, Du Bois describes Chapters Ten through Fourteen as: "Leaving, then, the white world, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls."⁵² Du Bois thus structured *The Souls of Black Folk* so that it would move white readers from issues

of history and education and toward black experience—toward chapters that deal with religion, family life, political activism, tragedy, and music. As these chapters move “within the Veil,” they are again described in terms of “religion,” “passion,” and the “soul,” drawing together the themes of the collection.

While numerous critics have considered Du Bois’s use of religious language as well as his personal religious beliefs,⁵³ my own point is that, by looking at the publication history of *Souls*, one can trace how Du Bois produced many of the text’s religious elements *for* publication, as a way to unify the book and appeal to a popular audience. He chose to privilege the idea of the “veil” in his opening chapter (referencing the tabernacle’s Holy of Holies),⁵⁴ to re-frame black striving as “spiritual striving,” to title his book itself *The Souls of Black Folk*. He chose to progress structurally toward “The Faith of the Fathers,” and compose additional concluding chapters on “The Passing of the First Born,” “The Coming of John,” and “The Sorrow Songs.” The history by which Du Bois collected, edited, and composed *The Souls of Black Folk* shows that, as it was being prepared for a popular audience, Du Bois increasingly called upon Christian sympathy.

This approach is especially evident in the parallelism of the Forethought and the Afterthought. In the opening, Du Bois uses direct address to target a predominantly white audience, offering his book respectfully to this “Gentle Reader,” and arguing that it is, indeed “of interest” to them. Du Bois asks his white audience to “read with patience” and to forgive “mistake and foible for sake of the faith and passion that is in me.”⁵⁵ That is, Du Bois appeals to the reader in terms of his religious “faith and passion.” By the book’s conclusion, however, Du Bois shifts his attention from this “Gentle Reader” to the audience of “God the Reader.” In doing so, Du Bois asserts his own access to providential justice and righteousness. He replaces the judgment of a popular audience with a higher judgment, asking not for forgiveness but that “the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth.”⁵⁶ Du Bois thus trades on fascination with the racial other in order to criticize popular ethnological assumptions and stereotypes. In the Forethought, Du Bois writes as a supplicant to his reader, offering his modest book apologetically. By the Afterthought, Du Bois boldly challenges this reader, asking that the book’s long-term survival foster social justice. Du Bois clearly edited and revised the book so that it would appeal to a “Gentle Reader” in this way.

Editorial Correspondence, Publication, and Marketing

Publication with A.C. McClurg & Co. thus influenced the book's appeals to a popular audience. Yet at the same time, the company allowed Du Bois a great deal of authorial control. From the time the book entered production in January 1903 through the end of the year, Francis G. Browne wrote more than 30 letters to Du Bois, discussing contracts, revisions, book design, and advertisements. On January 21, for example, Browne writes to Du Bois saying that he has read a revised manuscript of *Souls*, which they expect to publish in April.⁵⁷ The next week, Browne updates Du Bois on the printing and asks for approval of advertising material: "I enclose herein the first announcement we have made of the book. Please tell me frankly if these notes please you. I want the announcements to be satisfactory to you in every respect, but of course the work will require rather different handling from the ordinary book."⁵⁸ Here, Browne caters to Du Bois's preferences, asking for the author's frank opinion regarding marketing materials. Browne also recognizes the complex racial dynamics of the book's publication, which will require "rather different handling from the ordinary book." The tone of the passage assumes a shared understanding of this dynamic with Du Bois, as the publisher and author collaborate to target a predominantly white audience. Indeed, this was an experimental project for both the author and publisher as they sought to develop strategies for popularizing a work of African American literature.

The advertisement approved in this correspondence emphasize both the book's push for equal rights and its passionate, poetic approach. One such ad, placed in the *New York Times*, promoted the book before its release, noting that it would be "Ready in April."⁵⁹ The advertisement describes *The Souls of Black Folk* in a short paragraph:

The new champion of the rights of the colored race is without doubt the most eloquent advocate that has yet come forward. It is expected that this remarkable collection of essays, which are quite unlike anything that has appeared for years, will have a perceptible effect on public opinion regarding the Negro question. Certainly it will be difficult for prejudice to contend against the impassioned plea that Professor Du Bois offers for the spiritual rights of his people.

Like the book, the advertisement draws on religious language, describing Du Bois's "impassioned plea" and his advocacy "for the spiritual rights of

his people.” This last term, “spiritual rights,” serves a variety of purposes in its ambiguity. On the one hand, the phrase sets *The Souls of Black Folk* apart from the industrial education of Booker T. Washington. It positions Du Bois in contrast to Washington as a “new champion” for African Americans, more “eloquent” and poetic in his writing. On the other hand, “spiritual rights” also repeats the book’s religious appeals, without explicitly calling for social justice or legal rights; the book is original and provocative, but the exact effect it will have on public opinion is yet to be decided.

Subsequent advertisements would actually strengthen the book’s claim for social justice. A July announcement placed in the *Literary Digest* is more direct than the *New York Times*’ advertisement for “spiritual rights,” saying that the “author pleads for right and justice to his people.”⁶⁰ The advertisement goes on to say: “Aside from its remarkable presentation of facts [*The Souls of Black Folk*] holds the reader—prejudiced or not—by its fascination of style and overpowering pathos.” As in previous advertisements, Du Bois’s poetic style and “overpowering pathos” are emphasized. Readers will be drawn to the book through a “fascination” with Du Bois’s expression of black feeling. At the same time, the book is described as true to “facts” in its description of Reconstruction, segregation, and racial violence. It is not simply original and provocative, but true.

Correspondence with Francis G. Browne also indicates the timeline by which the book went to press. In a letter from March 5, 1903, Browne acknowledges Du Bois’s preferences regarding the cover design.⁶¹ The book would be manufactured in a black cover, embossed with a rectangular pattern, with top edge gilt, and gilt lettering on the cover and spine. The book’s golden soul would shimmer from inside its black cover. Du Bois approved this design. Similarly, correspondence with Browne reveals that the final chapter, “Of the Sorrow Songs,” was a late addition to the book. Du Bois had wanted to conclude with the sorrow songs, and was in the process of composing the chapter until just before the book was printed. In their letters, Browne and Du Bois discuss the timetable for submitting this piece, as well as its estimated page-count. When Browne receives “The Sorrow Songs,” he writes: “I have read the chapter through and like it very much, and it is now in the printer’s hands. It seems to me it closes the book most appropriately, and I am very glad we carried out your original idea to have it in the volume.”⁶²

In general, Du Bois was given nearly full authority over the text itself. In one letter, Browne tells Du Bois he is “toning down a too strong word or phrase which . . . might unduly prejudice those we want to read, and learn

from, your book.”⁶³ He continues, “For instance, I took out your reference to Hawaii, Cuba, and the Philippines, with which I personally thoroughly agree, but which I know would arouse needless antagonism.” Here, in an effort to appeal to a mainstream audience, Browne attempts to excise a discussion of US imperialism. Yet it seems Du Bois contested the change, and won the argument; the line itself remains in Chapter Three, criticizing the US for its actions toward “the darker peoples in the West Indies, Hawaii, and the Philippines.”⁶⁴ Considering that many of the book’s chapters were reprinted from previous publications without revision, and that Browne accepted “The Sorrow Songs” without criticism, it seems that Du Bois was allowed almost full authority over the text itself.

Reception

Upon publication, *The Souls of Black Folk* garnered widespread review and discussion. Herbert Aptheker’s Introduction discusses this reception extensively.⁶⁵ He categorizes the reviews according to various groups, and moves through these categories deliberately. According to Aptheker, publishers within the Tuskegee machine generally ignored the book, while other organs of the black press—especially Wendell Phillips Dabney in the *Ohio Enterprise* and William Monroe Trotter in the *Boston Guardian*—reviewed it enthusiastically. The southern white press either ignored the book or reacted to it with hostile and explicit racism. Aptheker also describes the book’s favorable reception among influential readers such as Charles W. Chesnutt, Jessie Fauset, James Weldon Johnson, William James, and Langston Hughes.

Mainstream reviews from northern publications are more complex, however. As Aptheker describes it, the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York World* were all very harsh on Du Bois. *The Outlook* took sides with Booker T. Washington, whose work they frequently published. On the other hand, *The Independent* and *The Nation* were sympathetic to Du Bois. Not surprisingly, *The Dial* reviewed *Souls* favorably, offering mild criticism of Booker T. Washington and sharp disapproval of Thomas Dixon, who had begun his Ku Klux Klan trilogy in 1902. Indeed, Francis F. Browne’s magazine gave one of the most enthusiastic reviews from the mainstream press.

While Aptheker describes this reception in detail, his summary often functions on a binary axis of positive and negative reception, considering how a review either favors or criticizes Du Bois. Examining the reviews

more closely, however, it becomes clear that Du Bois's revisions—toward mythic elements and religious passion—were influential for the mixed reviews of northern readers. These tactics did not protect Du Bois from harsh criticism, but they allowed the book to be read in ways that would spark debate and promote sales.

Among the more positive reviews, Du Bois's emotional appeal was often seen as a central feature of the text. *The Nation*, for instance, describes how the book might “surprise” readers familiar with Du Bois's “coldly intellectual” style.⁶⁶ Such readers will not be prepared “for the emotion and the passion throbbing here in every chapter, almost every page.” The review thus marks Du Bois's emotional appeal as a striking feature of the text, and an improvement upon his scholarly work. Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* declared *Souls* one of the best books of the year, calling it “the cry of a race struggling against fearful odds.”⁶⁷ Beyond a mere positive and negative evaluation, it is Du Bois's “cry” that registers with the reader, as an outburst of passion.

It is thus important to consider patterns among such affirmations, and the type of racialized reading that allowed for them. For instance, the review in *The Nation* that commends Du Bois's “passion” goes on to argue, “The features of Mr. Du Bois's mind are negro features.” In other words, despite its generally positive assessment of the book, the review nevertheless relies upon ethnological assumptions, imagining Du Bois's passion as a product of his racial background. Likewise, the review in the *Los Angeles Times*—which had called *Souls* one of the best books of the year—offers a peculiar comparison of Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, claiming that the negro race “need not fear for itself” under such leadership. Here, the review not only fails to recognize differences between Du Bois and Washington, but relies upon the mere existence of these leaders to assuage anxieties over racial inequality. In an era that has been described as the “nadir” of US race relations,⁶⁸ the review argues that African Americans have nothing to fear. In this way, many of the supposedly positive reviews both criticize and misunderstand Du Bois's politics.

The more negative responses to Du Bois function similarly, albeit more explicitly. They criticize Du Bois's politics while admiring his passion and spirit. A review from Elia W. Peattie in the *Chicago Tribune*, for example, shifts between extreme bias and a recommendation of the book. At one point, Peattie argues that it is “the white man” in Du Bois that produces such writing; “the white man” has transcribed the unwritten sorrow songs and “caught their minor and melancholy cadences in the written note.”⁶⁹

Here, credit for Du Bois's literary achievement is transferred from the black folk to the white man; it is only "the white man" within Du Bois who can transcribe the notes of the sorrow songs. The review thus aligns whiteness with written word and blackness with musicality, refusing to acknowledge African American literary success. Yet the review continues: "This passionate book, incomplete and sometimes self-conscious though it is, cannot but compel profound respect." In other words, Peattie recommends *The Souls of Black Folk* as passionate and compelling, despite its shortcomings. Much as the Forethought had asked, Peattie forgives "mistake and foible for sake of the faith and passion" in Du Bois.⁷⁰ And overall, the review shifts rapidly between unfair, racist criticism and interracial sentiment and sympathy.

One more example, from the *New York Times*,⁷¹ will exemplify my argument regarding the book's reception. The review is deeply prejudiced against Du Bois, emphasizing that he cannot understand the attitudes and customs of the South, and is not qualified to criticize Booker T. Washington's policies. The article mocks Du Bois's advocacy for the "abolition of the social color-line." Nor is the reviewer impressed with Du Bois's writing style, claiming that his "attempt to be critically fair-minded is strangely tangled" with the "sentimental, poetical, picturesque" characteristics of the negro. Here, the writing is interpreted according to racial stereotype, as both picturesque and imitative of white logic, or "fair-minded" thinking. Du Bois's hybrid voice does not produce anything of value, but is "strangely tangled" between reason and poetry. And yet, after all of these criticisms and others, the *New York Times* goes on to recommend the book, calling it "interesting to the student of the negro character who regards the race ethnologically and not politically." Despite disagreeing with the book's argument and criticizing its poetic style, the reviewer nevertheless recommends *The Souls of Black Folk* for its insight on "negro character." According to this reviewer, Du Bois's politics can be disregarded so that the book remains "interesting . . . ethnologically."

Pointing to such a reading of *Souls*, I do not mean that the text itself presents black experience in terms of scientific racism. Rather, I am arguing that Du Bois's efforts to appeal to a benevolent white audience *through* ethnographic writing and religious sympathy were interpreted according to racist assumptions and stereotypes. Assembling the book and composing new material for it, Du Bois constructed the text as a journey into the black soul. He appealed to his audience's curiosities regarding the "strange meaning of being black," and asked them to read with patience and charity. In doing so, Du Bois attempted to subvert ethnological assumptions in favor

of a more complex ethnography, one that would pluralize the souls of black folk and express black consciousness as a gift of second sight. On the contrary, however, a white audience doubly rejected this message. Readers both North and South criticized the book's argument, misinterpreting the text to further reinforce racial stereotypes of imitation and pathos.

Yet in a strange irony, these misreadings actually supported moderate sales for *The Souls of Black Folk*. Such interpretations were expressed in mixed reviews, criticizing Du Bois's politics while nevertheless recommending the book for its representation of essential qualities of the negro. Comparatively speaking, this is why Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) was much more harshly reviewed than *The Souls of Black Folk*.⁷² As its title indicates, *The Marrow of Tradition* sought to confront the history of white supremacist ideology. It directly addresses Jim Crow violence, exposing white power as a form of theft and disinheritance. *The Souls of Black Folk*, on the other hand, was reviewed as a sort of tour of blackness.

The Souls of Black Folk sold steadily. In 1903, the book went through three editions totaling 4,764 copies. Four more editions were produced by the end of 1905, selling an additional 4,000 copies.⁷³ This was not a best-seller, by any means; Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) reportedly sold 30,000 copies in its first two years.⁷⁴ Yet *The Souls of Black Folk* did sell, and the number of small reprintings indicates that it sold better than anticipated by A.C. McClurg & Co.. In fact, it was reprinted 24 times by McClurg from 1903 to 1940, selling nearly 20,000 copies.⁷⁵ Throughout these years, Du Bois received numerous requests to quote from the book, which he readily granted. Du Bois also wrote to A.C. McClurg & Co. in later decades about purchasing the rights for the book, so that he might produce a less expensive, popular edition.⁷⁶ McClurg responded frankly, telling Du Bois they preferred not to sell the rights because *Souls* was "what we call a good list book."⁷⁷ The company was happy to have the book in its catalogue, and would not release the copyright. It was not until 1946, after A.C. McClurg & Co. had closed its publishing department, that they would offer Du Bois the plates and rights of the book for \$100.00.⁷⁸ After some delay, Du Bois bought the plates in January of 1949, and prepared the Jubilee edition in 1953.

Afterlife

Although Du Bois wrote three different autobiographical books and numerous autobiographical essays, he rarely discussed the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*. His 1920 *Darkwater* revises the title of the book, in a chapter on “The Souls of White Folk.”⁷⁹ His *Autobiography* does not discuss *Souls*, but focuses rather on his work as a professor in Atlanta.⁸⁰ The few passages in which Du Bois does mention *Souls* indicate that he was satisfied with the book, yet wanted to push beyond its message. In the Jubilee edition, Du Bois would publish a preface entitled “Fifty Years After.” Drawing on the passage from *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois describes the publication of *Souls* with reference to A.C. McClurg: “Late in the Nineteenth Century, there developed in Chicago a movement to build a literary and publishing center in the Mid-West.”⁸¹ He credits “the Brownes, father and son,” for supporting this movement, and reiterates that *The Souls of Black Folk* was “aimed at a popular audience.” Du Bois’s own descriptions of the book thus emphasize its relationship to A.C. McClurg & Co., to the Brownes, and to a popular audience.

“Fifty Years After” goes on to consider the writing itself, mentioning two issues that, at the time of composition, Du Bois had not fully realized in his own intellectual development. The first “realization,” as Du Bois describes it, draws on Freud: “*The Souls of Black Folk* does not adequately allow for unconscious thought and the cake of custom in the growth and influence of race prejudice.”⁸² Here, Du Bois admits that he had underestimated the tenacity of his audience’s racism. The book did not fully recognize its white audience’s resistance to criticism, and encountered a psychological resistance for which it was unprepared. Du Bois’s second “realization” references Marx, noting that racial injustice is underwritten by civilized life and a willingness to live in comfort at the expense of “poverty, ignorance, and disease” for others.⁸³ In both of these areas, Du Bois claims, *Souls* could be better representative of racial dynamics. While the book had aimed to depict black humanity, it had not fully anticipated the psychology of race prejudice nor the economic and institutional structures that undergird racism.

These “realizations” might, in turn, be applied to the dual misreadings of the text among its popular white audience. On the one hand, the vast majority of readers viewed Du Bois through the lens of white supremacist ideologies, interpreting *The Souls of Black Folk* as confirming ethnological stereotypes of black musicality, spirituality, and emotion. On the other hand, white readers openly refused to accept the book’s critique of

racial capitalism; they rejected the text explicitly in a hostile backlash of re-entrenched racial attitudes. Reacting against the book's explication of race, a white audience forcefully reinvested in their own contradictory logic. They harshly criticized the book's message while nevertheless recommending, and re-envisioning, *Souls* as an ethnological study that confirmed racial stereotypes. In fact, many reviews interpreted the book positively *in terms* of scientific racism, as a description of the essential characteristics of the negro race. It was only among black readers and reviewers that the book was recognized as an instant classic. In the wake of this reception, Du Bois would adjust his authorial strategies, responding instead to "The Souls of White Folk." The publication of *Souls* had revealed the extent to which white supremacist misreadings dominated the turn-of-the-century literary marketplace, both North and South.

Notes

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2. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2nd Ed. (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903).

3. A.C. McClurg & Co.. Semi-annual statement of sales, May 1, 1903. Du Bois Papers.

4. The Norton edition includes a "Note on the Text," indicating that it is reprinted from the first edition. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), xl–xli. The Oxford edition reprints the first edition without any bibliographic description: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

5. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "The Black Letters on the Sign: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Canon," *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007), xiii.

6. David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 291.

7. Manning Marable, *W.E.B. DuBois: Black Radical Democrat* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 47–49. David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a Race* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 265–96.

8. George Bornstein, "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Jews: Ethics, Editing, and *The Souls of Black Folk*," *Textual Cultures* 1, no. 1 (2006): 64–74.

9. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, "Note on the Text," *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: W.W. Norton), xl–xli.

10. Herbert Aptheker, Introduction, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson, 1973), 5–46. Aptheker discusses revisions to the Jubilee edition on pages 38–43.

11. Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?," *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 65–83.

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13. John K Young, *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth Century African American Print Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 4.
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15. Cécile Cottenet, Introduction, *Race, Ethnicity, and Publishing in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 9.
16. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
17. A.C. McClurg & Co. Records, The Newberry Library, Chicago (hereafter A.C. McClurg & Co. Records). A brief history of the publisher is available in the Newberry's online finding aid. For the publisher's early history, see: Jack Cassius Morris, "The Publishing Activities of S.C. Griggs and Company, 1848–1896; Jansen, McClurg and Company, 1872–1886; and A.C. McClurg and Company, 1886–1900" (M.A. thesis, Graduate School of the University of Illinois, Urbana, 1939).
18. "A.C. McClurg & Co. Chicago's Largest Bookseller," *Publishers' Weekly* 93 (29 June 1918): 1970.
19. Frederick B. Smith, *A Sketch of the Origin and History of the House of A.C. McClurg & Co.* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, n.d., ca. 1902), 13.
20. Smith, *A Sketch of the Origin*, 11–12.
21. Francis, J. "Saints and Sinners," *New York Times, Saturday Review of Books and Art*, 29 December 1900: BR7. Harry Hansen similarly notes: "The proudest boast of McClurg's has been its 'amen corner'—where gathered writers and thinkers of twenty years ago like Eugene Field and Frank W. Gunsaulus—and many influential men of the middle west found its rare book section as important a place to visit on a trip to Chicago as the stockyards." Hansen, *Midwest Portraits: A Book of Memories and Friendships* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), 196.
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23. Smith, *A Sketch of the Origin*, 12.
24. Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume III: 1865–1885* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 543.
25. "A Half Century of Chicago Publishing," *Publishers' Weekly* 140 (16 Aug. 1941): 456–59.
26. Smith, *A Sketch of the Origin*, 19.
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28. Smith, *A Sketch of the Origin*, 6.
29. Smith, *A Sketch of the Origin*, 6.

30. "A.C. McClurg & Co. Chicago's Largest Bookseller," *Publishers' Weekly*. 93 (29 June 1918): 1970.
31. Record Book 1, January 11, 1910, A.C. McClurg & Co. Records.
32. Record Book 2, March 5, 1912, A.C. McClurg & Co. Records.
33. "McClurg Publications," Folder 516, A.C. McClurg & Co. Records.
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37. Aptheker, Introduction, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8.
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55. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1973), vii.
56. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1973), 265.
57. Letter from A.C. McClurg & Co. to Du Bois, January 21, 1903, Du Bois Papers.
58. Letter from A.C. McClurg & Co. to Du Bois, January 30, 1903, Du Bois Papers.
59. "The Souls of Black Folk," Advertisement, *New York Times*, 21 Mar. 1903, BR12.
60. "The Souls of Black Folk," Advertisement, *Literary Digest*, 11 July 1904, 56.
61. Letter from A.C. McClurg & Co. to Du Bois, March 5, 1903, Du Bois Papers.
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83. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1973), xi.