

The Unorthodox Collection of Essays that Became a Masterpiece (The Souls of Black Folk, Part 1)

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Transcript:

[Music]

[Mark:] You are listening to the Norton Library podcast, where we explore classic works of literature and philosophy with the leading scholars of the Norton Library, a new series from W. W. Norton that introduces influential texts to a new generation of readers. I'm your host Mark Cirino, with Michael Von Cannon producing, and today we present part one of our interview devoted to W.E.B. Du Bois' 1903 masterpiece, *The Souls of Black Folk*, with its editor Jesse McCarthy. In this first episode, we'll discover who Du Bois was and how his great work came to be while also discussing its form and some of its most enduring ideas. Jesse McCarthy teaches English and African American studies at Harvard University and has published widely in fiction and non-fiction, including the essay collection "Who Will Pay Reparations on My Soul?" Jesse McCarthy, welcome to the show! Would you tell us a little bit about W.E.B. Du Bois, his biography, and how he came to write *The Souls of Black Folk*?

[Jesse:] Du Bois is, in many ways, one of the towering – perhaps the towering – figure of black intellectuals, particularly in the first half of the 20th century, although in many ways he begins his career already in the late 19th century. W.E.B. Du Bois was born um just five years after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1868, in a small town called Great Barrington, Western Massachusetts, which is, if you know your geography in that part of the country, practically in the Hudson River Valley. Um, and that's significant because Du Bois was descended on his father's side from a Creole family, was mixed of French huguenot origin, that's why you get that kind of funny French-looking name. Um, people often get tripped up on the pronunciation and Du Bois was often annoyed in his own lifetime about this. The correct pronunciation is "dew boys" – a lot of people say "dew bwah", uh, but he would always correct them on this. But that's where it comes from – it's it's a French huguenot name originally. Um, but as with the complicated history of race in a Colonial space and in the United States of America, his father Alfred was mixed was Creole and on his, uh, mother's side, however, he was descended from an African family: the Burghardts. And that's what the "B" in W.E.B. stands for. Uh, the Burghardts were, uh, descended from a Tom Burghardt, who we believe was born probably, approximately, in 1730 somewhere in West Africa, uh, was brought over in Middle Passage to the United States, and was enslaved by, uh, a Conrad Burghardt – this was a kind of Dutch Patroon family and, uh, the Dutch, of course, had a strong presence in New York City and indeed in the Hudson River Valley. And that's really how they ended up in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. So Du Bois is born into this racially composite family, um, into a black family – what we would what in those days we would have called a "negro family" – in this small town in Western Massachusetts in 1868, and he was, I mean, he was a prodigy. From the youngest age, this was just sort of, uh, a boy that everyone knew was special and he loved ideas and books. We find him even as a high-schooler, uh, writing articles, sending out pieces to the great African-American newspapers of the time: *Thomas T. Fortune's*, *The Globe*, and others. And he knew that to be what he wanted to be in life, he would need education. And, uh, so he went down to Fisk University – historical black college in Nashville, Tennessee – and, um, where he got his first degree. He knew, however, that he was going to, uh, especially in that time and place need sort of even more credentialing, and he decided to take yet another degree from Harvard University. He would go on at Harvard to study philosophy, he switched to history, eventually decided to pursue graduate studies in

history, uh, go to Germany, and, um, return to Harvard and became the first African-American to get a PhD at Harvard, thus beginning a long journey as a prominent academic, intellectual, and activist.

[Mark:] Well, Jesse, It just strikes me – you're talking to us from Harvard. Uh, you're a professor there yourself. How unusual was that to have an African American to matriculate at Harvard?

[Jesse:] Well Du Bois would have been part of a very, very sort of select small group, um, of African Americans. There were a few others, um, but it was a severe minority – you might say there were very, very few. But certainly he was – he stood out even amongst that group, um, for his sort of relentless pursuit of higher education, of ever more learning. That is to say, um, you know, the fact that he went on to pursue graduate studies, to get a PhD, becoming the first, um, to get one – that was really rare. He was mentored by important figures, um, in the intellectual world at that time. George Santayana taught him philosophy, uh, William James was someone he was very close to. And that becomes important as an intellectual influence in his thinking about something like double consciousness. But even his relationship with William James was fraught. He always made a point of noting that James actually, um, invited him over to his house, something which, uh, you know for the sort of racial etiquette of the time, was considered sort of taboo. And, uh, so you know I think maybe that gives you a sense of the climate of the time. There were some African Americans, especially from the black free families that had their children attend Harvard but it was very, very few, and even among them he certainly stood out.

[Mark:] And for a PhD, it would have been almost unique, right?

[Jesse:] Absolutely. And he's the first to get a PhD at Harvard. And it has to be said it's not just that he got the degree. Um, he had gone to Germany, which itself was an extremely formative experience for him, but also we have to understand that at this time, Germany was really considered at the forefront of modern methodologies in terms of higher education. And in, you know, in Germany he was exposed to kind of the leading edge in terms of things like the emerging discipline of sociology, which he, in many ways, will be a kind of pioneering figure of and kind of import its most advanced, um, concepts and methodologies in his own work when he returns to the United States, when he goes down to Atlanta University and begins his sociological work there. Uh, so in many ways he's not only, I would say, um, you know, a kind of figure who's accomplishing certain African American firsts. He's also someone who's at the cutting edge of ideas in that moment, at that time.

[Mark:] Jesse, you mentioned that he began writing as a young man and this writing, as your introduction explains, continued for his life. He was a prolific writer. And I'm wondering where *The Souls of Black Folk* fits into that bibliography. What led to *The Souls of Black Folk*, and did he write other things like that as his career progressed?

[Jesse:] It's a very interesting history. In many ways, *The Souls of Black Folk* is not exactly an anomaly, but it's a book that was not initially the kind of book that Du Bois, uh, conceived of producing. When Du Bois is really beginning his career as an intellectual, he's a man who's very much convinced by, um, the new science of the time. And he's very much an admirer of Enlightenment ideals, a great believer in social progress. He's committed to sociology – he believes that with the problem of race in the United States, we can solve it by getting better data, by doing the right studies, by convincing people with argument, with reason, with logos. And he sets out to, uh, to undertake this work. Uh, he publishes *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899 – it's really pioneering work of sociology. And at Atlanta University, which is where he is working when he, um, actually publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*, um, the work that he's

undertaking there is sort of fieldwork, going out and gathering this empirical data so that we can improve our understanding of the situation of African Americans and hopefully remedy the situation in the country through good social science. He had, though, as I mentioned all even throughout this period been somebody who, um, wrote essays for the public. Um, they would be published in places like, say, The Atlantic or The Atlantic Monthly. And so he had already accumulated a number of essays. And it's really at the invitation and suggestion of A.C. McClurg, this publisher based in Chicago, that they sort of – they approach him and say, you know, “We think maybe it would be interesting to collect these essays together, um, into a book.” And he agrees with this idea, but he's actually somewhat dismissive of this work. That is to say, he calls his essays his “Fugitive Pieces,” um, that he's going to gather up. And in many ways, he thought of his serious work – his most important work – as the social science, as the sociological studies that he was undertaking. And, so, it's somewhat ironic that this collection that he assembles and puts together and publishes in 1903 is, in many ways, um, as history would have it, the book that he's really most remembered for.

[Mark:] So, let's talk a little bit about this book and the way Du Bois writes it. For the student or somebody who has never approached this particular text before, what are they going to find? What is the genre? What is conspicuous about the form of this book?

[Jesse:] Everything about this book is, I would say, radical and original. In many ways, there had never been another book like it – and in some ways there's never been a book like it since. One of the things that I think it's important to understand about it is that it really is a collection of essays, so some of the pieces here were occasional, um, some of them have a kind of very, kind of pointed political, um, purpose. Uh, we might – we'll get into it, I'm sure, but his interest in intervening in the debate with Booker T. Washington over, um, education policy. There's also a way in which he's going to try, in this kind of very experimental fashion, to pull together a wide variety of, uh, literary genres. So this is a text that, in some ways, has what we might call, um, ethnographic reportage. But it also has elegy, great elegy, for the death of his son, Burghardt. It also has, um, short story and fiction, The Coming of John. So, he's really assembling a diverse array, and then there's yet one more very important formal feature of the book, uh, which, and one of its most famous features, which is his interweaving of the spirituals which are so important and come in the last chapter, if you will, or the last essay of the collection as this kind of unifying metaphor for him for the African American people, but which he inserts or, if you will, um, interleaves throughout the collection as a motif – as this string of of quotations, they're epigraphs which are, um, always paired with various quotations. Poetry from the Western canon. And in some ways he's doing a kind of of of integration of, um, the life and art and experience of African Americans into, um, a broader Western canon and and he's kind of integrating it formally through this experiment, uh, this experimental book.

[Mark:] So, Jesse, if these essays come from a variety of sources and they had different intents, does The Souls of Black Folk have a specific audience or do different chapters have different – are they addressing different readers?

[Jesse:] The audience question is a difficult question to answer – I think it's a difficult question to answer for any book. But I will say this: part of what I think gives the the book a kind of slightly, a slightly strange quality to a certain extent is that I think, in some ways, it's trying to, um, it's trying to almost invent its own audience. It's imagining, I think, an audience, um, that is certainly one of what we might call a sympathetic white reader, who's going to pick it up and that he's trying to, um, kind of persuade and

illustrate certain points to and convince on certain kinds of questions. But it also, and I think in some sense if I had to if I had to name a specific audience that I think it's truly most emotionally, um, spiritually, we might say, in sympathy with, um, in many ways it's the black intelligentsia, the African-American elite that he really is a part of. You know, when Du Bois is often associated with this concept, this notion of "the talented tenth." And the talented tenth is, in some ways, an idea that was really forged for Du Bois by his experience at Fisk, where for the first time he was surrounded, uh, he was in the south for the first time, for the first time he's surrounded primarily by black folk, and, you know, he was incredibly impressed by the brilliance, the intelligence of these young men and especially these young women, um, who were being privileged because Fisk, um, had adopted a kind of liberal arts model of education – the kind of education that somebody like Anna Julia Cooper was also advocating at this time. This kind of notion of being at the forefront of carrying the country forward through a kind of higher aspiration, a higher aim, um, through imagining, um, this, the black elite as a kind of, um, as a kind of vanguard that that is going to raise not only black people but actually white people as well to a set of higher ideals and higher aspirations for what an integrated and more virtuous culture might look like in this country.

[Mark:] You alluded to this – to me, one of the conspicuous elements of *The Souls of Black Folk* is that Du Bois does, on occasion, speak autobiographically. And there's that episode, or chapter, where he's letting you into the most emotional, vulnerable aspect of his life. I'm wondering if you could talk about that chapter.

[Jesse:] The elegy of the passing of the first born is, um, one of the most remarkable and troubling essays or chapters in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Throughout *Souls*, Du Bois employs a kind of, um, heightened and highly sophisticated and erudite rhetoric. But in that chapter in particular, we get this kind of language that is, um, intensely poetic and full of pathos. And, you know, he was tremendously wounded by the death of his son, Burghardt, who died from diphtheria. But it has to be said that, you know, certainly he felt, and more importantly, I would say, um, his wife Nina Gomer – who became Nina Du Bois – felt and believed that, you know, he had – their son had died unnecessarily. Their son had died because the hospitals were segregated and he was not able to get the kind of timely medical attention that otherwise might have saved him. And, indeed, Nina Du Bois, I think, in some ways never forgave. Um, never forgave W.E.B. Du Bois for, uh, bringing her, bringing their family to Atlanta. She hated it and the death of their son really cast a shadow, you know, over their relationship in many ways. Um, and when you, when you really dig into the logic of that chapter, part of what you're seeing is, um, I think a man who's attempting to grapple with this loss, make sense of it, and in some sense sort of philosophically justify it. And that takes this very troubling position of essentially saying maybe it was better, maybe it was better that he died, um, rather than having to, um, survive and live in a world marred by racism and racist violence. And so there's a way in which, um, you know, this is obviously, you know, he's using the elegy to create a kind of moral indictment of his society, um, but there's something I do think quite troubling, in a way, about the way that intense personal grief is instrumentalized. And at the same time it's, uh, one of those moments that's extraordinarily personal in this book, um, that I think is really unforgettable and stands out for a lot of readers.

[Mark:] Yes, and somehow it coalesces into this work of sociology that is – ostensibly, a work of sociology – it's a peaked emotional experience, and, as you say, he makes it an instrument to argue his point. Uh, I'm comparing it to the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, where he talks about the death of his son and he spends, like, one sentence on it and says, "This is just a lesson, you should – everybody

should get vaccinated.” But here we have a chapter that's really devoted to it. I feel like it's such a bold chapter.

[Jesse:] It is. Uh, it, I should say I think it also participates in some ways in an African-American, um, literary tradition. I mean there's a trope that we find for instance, um, in Harriet Jacobs, in her slave narrative, um, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, where there's a passage where she, uh, you know talks about, um, at one point her child getting sick and almost wishing or almost thinking maybe it would be better, um, if the child perished rather than, um, having to endure slavery.

[Mark:] Yeah, yeah.

[Jesse:] Uh, there's the famous case of, um, of Margaret Garner, who was an enslaved woman, right, who was pursued by slave catchers and rather than have her daughter return into slavery, kills her own child. Um, and this is the historical seed for Toni Morrison's great, great novel, *Beloved*, of course, which in many ways is a novel that's trying to meditate on the question of how and who could possibly judge such a desperate act. So, in some ways I think it's also – it's in deep continuity with a set of philosophical and ethical and moral questions that have hovered over, um, what I think Du Bois would be happy to call sort of the peculiar and strange circumstances of being black in America, especially at that time.

[Mark:] Jesse, one of the aspects of your introduction that you acknowledge as one of the points that Du Bois is making is, as you mentioned, this issue of double consciousness. So, can you tell us a little bit about double consciousness and how it functions in *The Souls of Black Folk*?

[Jesse:] Well, double consciousness, um, is evoked in the first essay,, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” and it's a concept that, um, is a little bit slippery, I think. It's a little bit difficult to pin down exactly. But Du Bois talks about it as, right, um, this experience of always in part seeing the world and seeing oneself through the eyes of the other, right. And in a sense, there are different aspects to this that I think are worth pulling out. One that I often emphasize is that, um, in the passage where he describes double consciousness, and he only does so once, um, he also mentions in the same passage, uh, the concept of “second sight.” And I think, I think we're really meant to think of these things as distinct but related. That is to say that double consciousness is attempting to give language to something like the experiential quality, to use the philosophical term we might say the phenomenological quality, of a minoritized and racialized experience of the world. In his famous phrase, what it “feels like to be a problem.” And in many ways, Du Bois was the first to put the question in that way. To ask that question theoretically, right? To attempt not just to sort of talk about race as a political problem, as a social problem, but to say that there's actually a kind of theoretical and psychological and conceptual, um, quality of minoritized experience that has to be taken into account – that he's trying to give language to and trying to describe. At the same time, we don't want to lose sight, so to speak, of second sight, which I think is, um, his way of also saying that while in some sense double consciousness can sound like a burden, to a certain extent, a kind of a weight in some sense that one is carrying, second sight he describes as a gift. And I think it's important to see these things in their relationship to each other. That is to say, I think part of what Du Bois is getting at is that the person who has this minoritized experience of the world, he's also given a perspective that someone who is a member of the majority cannot have but also crucially needs. That is to say, what Du Bois is saying – and this is partly why I think in so many ways he's really speaking to this group to which he belongs, um, to the Black Elite, if you want to call it – that he's saying, you know, “Yes, we have this very complex position and we have this experience of the world that perhaps the white folks around us, um, don't have and don't understand that we are

experiencing, that we're having. But we also – by virtue of this, of our double consciousness, by virtue of this experience – we also have a perspective on American life, on American society that they don't have and that they need. In other words, we can see flaws in the system. We can see where things are not working that they will be unable to point to – that are in their blind spots.” And so, for Du Bois, I think this is what calls those people who he's speaking to, who are inhabiting this subject position. What calls them to a sense of special responsibility, right. A kind of duty, even, I think, to, um, to be part of this talented tenth, right. To use the gift of Second Sight. To attempt to correct for and to educate to a certain extent, um, those who cannot understand this experience.

[Mark:] Yeah, that's really interesting. So, Du Bois defines double consciousness as “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.” A couple of questions about that. Is he referring to a historical moment, or is this something that modern readers will be able to identify with, this double consciousness?

[Jesse:] I think the correct answer there is both. There is an important way in which we ought to read and situate and understand this text within the context of its own time. One of the things that Du Bois is doing is he's looking back over the history of African Americans with the history of America since the Emancipation Proclamation. In fact, he's looking all the way back to the founding, but in particular, he's trying to grapple with what has happened. You know, after the Civil War there was this opportunity to get things right. There was an effort to get things right that we call reconstruction, right. Why did Reconstruction fail? Um, why after all of that struggle, all of that bloodshed, all of the progress – there was some progress made during Reconstruction – was it rolled back? Um, did, um, racial violence increase? Right, the era of lynchings 1880s the 1890s peeking into the period in which, right around when he's writing *The Souls of Black Folk*. Um, he's trying to grapple with the very specific circumstances of his time, which the historian Rayford Logan called the Nadir of race relations in America. The worst point, in some ways, in our history. And say, um, how did we get here, why, and how do we – how do we look forward? What hope do we have, if any, looking forward? But one of the reasons that *Souls* has been I think such a powerful book in spite of the fact, as I said before, that Du Bois thought that it was secondary in some sense to his social scientific studies and his sociological work, is precisely because – the fact that he was able to give language to the experiential quality of minoritized subjectivity is a feature of a permanent relevance. That part of it, uh, is not actually historically specific. Right? It picks out something about social psychology. It picks out something about the nature of, um, of living in a society in which, um, you are racialized. That is to say, your, um, your physical and outward appearance determines the way you are treated, the way the world, as he says, looks upon you, right. And so that fact, I think, has made – has given the book this kind of permanent resonance. Um, and I would hasten to add, and I just want to make this point really quickly, but I think it's very important: it's – it has that resonance and was intended to have that resonance most especially for African Americans and for Black folk, of course. But Du Bois, I think, would not at all object to my saying that in fact it is a theory that is portable to the notion of minoritized subjectivity, as such. That is to say, if you find yourself, um, a woman in an environment or an institution or a room that's primarily composed or entirely composed of men, you may similarly find yourself thinking about the way in which you are kind of being judged and watched through their eyes, right? You can imagine other kinds of minority experience. If you're – what it means to be queer in a society, um, that is profoundly heteronormative. What it's like to be trans in a society in which, um, transness is considered, um, or regarded as, you know, some kind of something

strange or anomalous, looked down upon with pity and contempt, right? And so I think double consciousness has an important valence for all kinds of minoritized experience, as well, and that's part of the richness of the text.

[Mark:] That's an excellent point, Jesse, that it extends to a variety of underrepresented, uh, groups. The final question that I wanted to ask is the metaphor of the veil. Is the veil also a related aspect of this double consciousness?

[Jesse:] I think for Du Bois, the veil is part of the poetic and metaphorical vocabulary that he's forging for this book. I think one of the things, um, maybe that I haven't said yet thus far is part of what *The Souls of Black Folk* is trying to do is to understand what it means to be black.

[Mark:] Right.

[Jesse:] It's trying to understand what makes the African American people a people. And part of the answer to that question has to do with art and expression and culture. And the great symbol of that are the Negro spirituals, which are a folk music, right? And Du Bois would say – and he is implicitly saying in the way that he is marshalling them and using them in his text – if you were to hear this music, um, and you asked, “Where did this come from?” uh, “What is this?” Sort of, “Why does it sound the way that it sounds?” The answer to that question is going to be partly the answer to the question that he's seeking in this book, right? It comes from African America, fundamentally. There's no other way to explain its existence. And so in some sense it's part of the answer to the question of, um, who these people are. And it speaks to the notion that who we are is deeply related to, fundamentally, this shared historical experience – a shared group experience forged under Middle Passage, under slavery, under Jim Crow. And it has created a binding energy, if you will, um, that common experience. And the veil, I think, is part of the kind of metaphorical architecture for him, for explaining how being a member of that group is something that, to those who identify with it – who are identified by and through it – there is perpetually a sense of, a kind of tangible sense, of belonging there. Um, and it's something that can be seen, in some sense, or felt or known and understood by those who are tied to it and not always seen by those who are not, but sometimes. And this is the sense in which the veil has this kind of semi-transparency and this kind of strange way of being something that people know and recognize, but also sometimes fail to know and recognize even though it's always present.

[Mark:] Jesse McCarthy, thank you for joining us on the Norton Library podcast.

[Jesse:] Thank you.

[Mark:] The Norton Library edition of *The Souls of Black Folk*, edited by Jesse McCarthy is available now in paperback and ebook. Check out the links in the description for this episode for ordering options and more information about the Norton Library, including the full catalog of titles.

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