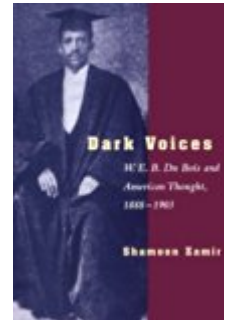


Shamoon Zamir. *Dark Voices: W.E.B DuBois and American Thought, 1888 1903.*

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Reviewed by Robert Elliot Fox

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Werner Sollors (quoted on the rear cover of the book) is absolutely right in declaring Shamoon Zamir's *Dark Voices* to be "intellectual history at its best." A lecturer in English at King's College, University of London, specializing in twentieth century American literature and cultural studies, Dr. Zamir has written a detailed study of the development of W.E.B. DuBois's thinking between his days as an undergraduate in the penultimate decade of the nineteenth century and the publication in 1903 of his masterpiece *The Souls of Black Folk*, considered by many scholars to be the single most important text in the African American literary tradition.

In Zamir's own words, he has "sought to describe how DuBois is led by his reflections on the relationship of the black and white worlds to develop a complex model of the location of the self alongside an equally complex literary practice (p. 207)." In so doing, Zamir has provided us in the first part of his study with a revelatory mapping of the mindscape--at once international and multi-racial--which shaped the personality and intellect of one of the most compelling individuals this

country has produced, and in the second part he has given us what is--along with that of Eric Sundquist in *To Wake the Nations* (Harvard, 1993)--one of the most significant readings available of *The Souls of Black Folk*.

During the decade and a half of his life that this book explores, DuBois made a crucial move from philosophy to "poetry," from idealism to engagement. The significance for our understanding of the African American experience of *Souls*, a literary work that articulates and attempts to reconcile the contradictions of the "strange reality" of history, underscores the importance of African American literature as a means of grappling, not with the unknown, but with the otherwise unknowable. If any one thing has been required of people of African descent in this country, it is imagination, and the brilliance of African American cultural improvisations testifies to the fact that they possess this quality in abundance. *The Souls of Black Folk*, in short, may be said to both explore and embody that particular resonance in the expression and beingness of black people called *soul*, which, to be sure, is associated with

spirit but which is also something quite apart from that theologically defined "organ" known as "the soul."

One instance of the recourse to imagination in the face of a recalcitrant reality is the previously unpublished and undiscussed sketch of a story, entitled "A Vacation Unique," which DuBois wrote in the summer of 1889, and which is in the DuBois archives at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Zamir describes it as having a "fantastic, almost science fictional plot," thereby anticipating by many years George S. Schuyler's "science fiction satire *Black No More* (1931), in which a drug transforms blacks into whites" (p. 219), although in this case (in DuBois's own words), "a painless operation" transforms a white man into "a full fledged darky" (p. 221), very much like what happens in Griffin Howard's famous nonfiction account, *Black Like Me* (1961). To quote again from DuBois's story, "by becoming a Nigger you step into a new and, to most people, entirely unknown region of the universe--you break the bounds of humanity and become a--er--colored man" (p. 221); in short, "you" undertake a jarring journey across the color-line and behind the veil DuBois speaks so poignantly of in *Souls*, into a realm which he here refers to as "[the] Fourth Dimension."

Zamir explains that the possibility of a fourth dimension, argued for in an 1884 text by C. H. Hinton, was adapted by William James in his lectures on ethics which DuBois attended at Harvard. James posited the fourth dimension as a moral one which separates human beings from animals; "for DuBois it separates white from black." Moreover, while "for Hinton the human appears abstract when seen from the perspective of the fourth dimension, for DuBois the self-legitimations of white American culture appear as hollow forms masking a more concrete and disgraceful history" (p. 51). This was a period, after all, in which racist defenses of the color line and "rising

legal and physical violence against African-Americans" were at a height (pp. 52-53).

The fragmentary nature of "A Vacation Unique" (included in an appendix) and the fact that it is a fledgling attempt at fiction might cause the average reader to dismiss it as a curiosity. Zamir, however, not only argues for its importance in shedding light on Du Bois's questioning of his own early "theorizations of a philosophy of history," he also constructs a valid case for the work as "a significant document for African-American literary history" because of the way in which it prefigures "both the first chapter of *Souls...* and many of the major preoccupations and literary strategies of twentieth-century African-American fiction (p. 47).

DuBois not only "received a privileged education available to only a handful of African-Americans at that time" (p. 1), he was, in fact, among the most educated individuals of his time on the planet. His notion of a Talented Tenth--an intellectual and cultural elite charged with responsibility for uplifting the "masses"--applied to all "races." As Zamir notes, "the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of DuBois's early thought" which are his concern in *Dark Voices* are drawn mainly from Euro-American sources (p. 18). And the greatness of DuBois's thinking is not in dispute. This ought to be a lesson to hardcore Afrocentrists who have "re-educated" themselves to believe that Euro-American influence "spells death" for the "African personality," whereas the very depth and resiliency of an African inheritance is proven, rather than undone, by its ability to negotiate and re-express the circumstances and influences of the diaspora. So when DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* asserts his right to cross the color line and "sit with Shakespeare," he isn't disproving his blackness, he instead is disproving the validity of limits on the mind and the imagination, whether placed there by white ideologues or by black ones.

Zamir reminds us that "the social and political thought of the young DuBois is, in many ways,

fairly conservative" (p. 45), quite different from the Marxism of DuBois's later years. But Zamir also informs us that "what is most radical in Du Bois's early work is his ability to confront, through complex descriptions of the outer contours and inner torments of black life in America, what Horkheimer in a different context called the 'debacle of our days' (p. 46)." DuBois embraces the philosophical, but direct contact with the often brutal facts of ongoing oppression in America--especially in the final decades of the nineteenth century--requires him to moderate his adherence to the "ideal."

Given the extraordinary length of DuBois's life and career, it is no surprise that his thinking underwent a series of evolutions, but what is very striking and instructive in Zamir's account of Du Bois's early work and responses to various aspects of his tutelage is the multiple directions in which he was moving even then. We learn that "DuBois's simultaneous adoption of the roles of idealist philosopher, empirical scientist, and the poet who refuses generalization is made most evident" in the fact that his book *The Philadelphia Negro* and his essays "The Conservation of Races" and "The Strivings of the Negro People" (which became the first chapter of *Souls*) were published "within one year of each other" (p. 109). Appearing shortly thereafter, DuBois's most enduring book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, which manages to mediate the contrasting (even conflicting) tendencies of his thought, "is a generic hybrid, a moving and introspective poetic meditation blending autobiography, impressionistic historical survey, social critique, and an existential philosophical psychology in its description of historical experience" (p. 98).

In his discussion of DuBois's concept of double-consciousness, that famous schism or bilateralism of the black psyche articulated in the first chapter of *Souls*, Zamir puts Du Bois's notion into context by first reminding us that ideas "of fragmented consciousness and the divided self were ubiquitous in the 1880s and 1890s not only in psy-

chology but also in literature." He then points to what he calls "a fundamental misunderstanding" with regard to the "specificity" of DuBois's idea, emphasizing that double-consciousness "represents the black middle class elite facing the failure of its own progressive ideals in the late nineteenth century... 'Of Our Spiritual Strivings' is intended as a psychology of the Talented Tenth in crisis, not of the 'black folk' as a homogenized collectivity (p. 116)." Du Bois does not spare himself here, critically portraying the "class bases" of his own progressive idealism as well as the historical "evasions" of "liberal American exceptionalism (p. 133)."

Both the title of the book as a whole and the title of the fifth chapter are taken from Jay Wright's poem, "W.E.B. DuBois at Harvard," that provides one of the book's epigraphs. In Wright's vision, DuBois's "connection," what roots him to a necessary history even as he soars among the abstractions of the intellect, is "the prosody of those dark voices" that sang the spirituals--musical phrases from which, side by side with quotations from the likes of Byron, Tennyson, and Schiller, lead off each chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*. The final chapter, however, which actually deals with "the sorrow songs," significantly couples its quotation from the spirituals with a passage from a "Negro Song," so that double-consciousness is, in a sense, unified or at least sutured at the end. Through the spirituals, Du Bois himself comes to a deeper appreciation of "the 'soul-beauty' of black culture" which Zamir says whites "despise" (p. 172), though indeed it may have been invisible to them because they were insensitive to it. And the inevitable and foundational "historical knowledge" embodied in the spirituals "reverses the flow of knowledge and power between the Talented Tenth and the black masses (p. 172)." DuBois may never embrace "romantic notions of collective identity" (p. 171), but his insistence on the particular gift of the spirituals reconnects the black vanguard to its folk roots, and his belief that "the spirituals and their political content must be

made central to any national self definition in America" (p. 172) makes American identity itself dependent upon African-American experience and understanding.

The complexity of *Souls* is in part exemplified by the text's ability to sustain varied readings. For instance, the narrative can be read as one of "ascent," a movement from "racist alienation to personal enlightenment," thereby aligning it with works such as Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), but it can also be read as "an inverted slave narrative that reverses the plot of enlightenment and attained freedom (p. 188)." This is a powerful reminder that the experience of African-Americans has been one, not just of advances followed by reversals, but of advances which reveal new obstacles.

In conclusion, Shamoan Zamir's *Dark Voices* is an excellent scholarly study, all the more impressive for being a first book. It is indispensable reading for anyone wishing to have a fuller appreciation of the work and thought of W.E.B. DuBois, and it constitutes an important contribution to the field of American Studies more generally.

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