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We will Make Our own Future Text: A Proposal for an Alternate Interpretive Orientation

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“WE WILL MAKE OUR
OWN FUTURE TEXT”:
AN ALTERNATE ORIENTATION
to INTERPRETATION



Vincent L. Wimbush

Jes Grew . . . is a psychic epidemic. . . . [It] is seeking its words. For what good is a liturgy without a text? . . . Jes Grew has no end and no beginning. . . . Jes Grew is life. . . . They will try to depress Jes Grew but it will only spring back and prosper. . . . Jes Grew needed its words to tell its carriers what it was up to. Jes Grew was an influence which sought its text, and whenever it thought it knew the location of its words . . . it headed in that direction. . . . If it could not find its Text then it would be mistaken for entertainment . . . merely a flair-up. The Blues is a Jes Grew, as James Weldon Johnson surmised. Jazz was a Jes Grew which followed the Jes Grew of Ragtime. Slang is Jes Grew too. . . . We will make our own future text.

— Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*

It is a tribute to the fairness and large-mindedness of the editors of this commentary that they would solicit and accept as part of this project this trenchant anti-commentary essay. I share the interest held by all contributors to this project (and many beyond it) to contrib-

ute to the ongoing political-ideological uplift work of African Americans. But I propose here to contribute to such work through a questioning of and challenge to the traditional and still dominant discursive formation—the commentary—that this larger project reflects and

within which the Bible and other scriptures are generally thought about and engaged, and to offer at least the outlines of a different orientation and approach to interpretation. Every discursive formation is political. My basic argument is that the commentary as intellectual project is (politically) very problematic, not because of any specific substantive arguments on the part of commentators—such arguments may run widely within a certain spectrum—but because the commentary necessarily forces a certain delimitation and qualification of questioning and probing. It forces the interpreter to begin not in his or her own time, not in or with his or her own world situation, but in another one—that (one that is imagined or assumed to be) of the text. This orientation to the beginning or first step in interpretation is critical. To be sure, since Origen, biblical exegetes or commentators have tended to range widely with their questions and issues. But the point here is that a dangerous game is set up whereby the commentator feigns to be faithful “to the text” while dancing with another set of issues. This game can—in fact, has—become so twisted and dizzying that it is for the most part and for too many interpreters no longer even recognized for what it is; the game and its effects are acutely and profoundly and with devastating social-political effects obfuscating. There are high stakes in such practice for peoples on the periphery. At the very least, it keeps them distracted, unable to focus on their world situation.

I am not recommending that texts not be engaged. What I am suggesting is that we question taking up the master discursive intellectual project developed by masters in relation to the master text. I want to challenge us to think differently about and orient ourselves differently around interpretation, about what to interpret, where and how to begin, how to proceed, with what approaches, and with what agenda.

My own way of addressing this phenomenon has been through focused attention on the history of the conjuncture of African Americans and the Bible. I continue in this essay with the questions that have haunted and inspired and challenged me—not so much about the meaning of this or that text but about this phenomenon that involves the invention and uses of texts as scriptures. What psycho-social-cultural work is done in relationship to this phenomenon? With the focus on scriptures and peoples I show my interest to be in the archaeology and politics of interpretation. The phenomenon we call “scriptures” and the people we call African Americans are for me emblematic of the problematics of interpretation and consciousness. So in this essay I want to address some of the larger implications and ramifications of such an interpretive history. What does it teach us—about African Americans and other peoples, and about “scriptures”? About interpretation? About interpretation and power—psychosocial, sociocultural power? About interpretation and/as consciousness? About who and what we are, how we are, what we do—including the range of the complex good and ill as consequences and effects—as interpreters in relationship to “scriptures”? What does it mean to have and to engage scriptures? I begin—perhaps somewhat defiantly—not with a text but with social (viz., African American) textures.

DUBOIS AND THE VEIL

Because of his prescience and sharp sensitivity to issues having to do with interpretation and/as consciousness, I find still challenging and useful as an expansive, critical, and sensitive perspective on the existence and challenges of persons of African descent in the United

States the language and argumentation found in W. E. B. DuBois's classic collection of essays, *Souls of Black Folk*, originally published in 1903.¹ As part of his attempt to name the major challenges faced by the "folk"—or perhaps, more accurately, the challenges faced by the type of black person he knew himself to be, thereby speaking in complicated ways for so many others—DuBois refers again and again in these essays to the "veil."² Notwithstanding their internal differentiations and infra-politics, about which he as historian and social scientist was very much aware, all black folks, he argued, had been placed, no, forced, behind the "veil." Referred to (by my count) more than thirty times, the metaphor of the veil in *Souls of Black Folk* is DuBois's attempt to define the existence of black folks in the United States as those forced into divided consciousness. Thus we have the poignant significance of the plural term *souls*—not *many* souls, as in *many* persons, but two "souls" in the one representative black body, or in each black body, warring against each other. This division was for DuBois the deep internal psychologically felt reflection of the external social-political existence of black folks as the chronic persistent other, as the subaltern, as the enslaved/colonized living next to, and reduced to looking at themselves through the gaze of, the enslaver/colonizer. Recall one of the most famous of references: "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others . . . shut out from their world by a vast veil. . . . After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil" (2–3).

Modified variously in terms of the "veil of Race" (55, 56), "Veil of Color" (127, 142), as that which imprisons (64), as that within which black folks are born and in which they grow up (147, 148, 150, 156, 159, 165),

as that which casts a shadow (149), as that against—above and beyond—which the black self strives to live (76, 153), as that world beyond and above which white folks live (56), as that which the black self overcomes only in death (151), and that which, based on hope, is to be rent (187), references to the "veil" were varied and complex in function.

Literary critics Shamoon Zamir³ and Arnold Rampersad⁴ have argued that, in the metaphor of the veil, DuBois drew most directly from Plato via G. W. F. Hegel, then from Ralph Waldo Emerson and some other construals of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century letters, psychology, and interpretation of the Bible. These two scholars suggest that DuBois took from Hegel the idea of the veil and its effects on consciousness and wedded them to the Bible's stories regarding transformation. DuBois needed language and concepts through which he could articulate the reality of the crisis of divided consciousness as well as the aesthetics and performativity of transformed consciousness. The turn to Hegel had to do with the interest in finding language through which DuBois could express the poignancy of divided consciousness. Hegel's concern had been about the "unhappy consciousness" as part of the dialectics of the master-slave relationship and that moment in which such consciousness is transformed, when self-consciousness discovers itself beyond the realm of appearances, that moment in which the "curtain" is drawn aside.⁵

The pertinent references from the Bible in relationship to the "veil" also, according to DuBois, have to do with "transformation," but in a different discursive domain. In Exod 26:33 the "veil" (*to katapetasma*) separates the Holy of Holies, the sanctuary for the Ark of the Covenant, from everything else. In 1 Cor 13:12 Paul makes reference to humans, even repentant ones, being able to see only

partial truths—"darkly as through a veil" (*en ainigmati*). In Heb 6:19 the writer refers to entering into the domain of the "veil" (*eis to esoteron tou katapetasmatos*) to mark the change in those who, although having been enlightened, have in the face of persecution nevertheless "fallen away." And, perhaps most poignantly, Matt 27:50-54, having depicted Jesus crying out loud and dying on the cross, indicates that "the veil" (*to katapetasma tou vaou eschisthe eis duo apo anothen hoes kato*) of the temple was "rent in two" from top to bottom.

A great part of the purpose of *Souls of Black Folk* was to celebrate the social power and social gifts and contributions of the people forced behind the veil. The way of doing this was through emphasis placed upon the forms of black expressivity—music, literature, religion. To be sure, DuBois understood the veil itself and black folks' forced positioning behind it as problematic, to be gotten rid of, ripped. He and others during his times challenged black folks to strive to rend the veil. Although after many decades of intense engagement and strivings DuBois removed himself from the United States, there is no doubt that the legal changes that were wrought here in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s represented a degree of the rending of the DuBoisian veil.

Yet, even as the matter of the degree of amelioration of social-economic position among black folks continues to be debated, it is clear that "the veil" as a metaphor for black existence has proved to be elastic and expansive. At the end of *Souls of Black Folk*, after having consistently and dramatically used the term to describe and provoke strong emotions about the separation and hegemony of black folks from "the kingdom of culture," DuBois used it in a more positive sense, as the language of the slave songs that encodes

or conceals the most profound and sensitive sentiments:

In these songs . . . the slave spoke to the world. Such a message is naturally veiled and half articulate. Words and music have lost each other and new cant phrases of a dimly understood theology have displaced the older sentiment. . . . The music is distinctly sorrowful. [They] tell in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding; they grope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the End.

The words . . . cleared of evident dross . . . conceal much of real poetry and meaning beneath conventional theology and unmeaning rhapsody. . . . Over the inner thoughts of the slaves and their relations one with another the shadow of fear ever hung, so that we get but glimpses here and there, and also with them, eloquent omissions and silences. . . .

The things evidently borrowed from the surrounding world undergo characteristic change when they enter the mouth of the slave. Especially is this true of Bible phrases. (182–85)

These songs seemed to have been for DuBois evidence of a serious grappling with the "veil" of the other negative valence, the veil that was to be overcome. The point seems to have been that a certain kind of veiling—or critical interpretive strategy—was needed by those forced behind the veil. Such folk thought that for the sake of safety—physical and psychological—they had to express their deepest sentiments in veiled terms, indirectly, "in other words."

Some of the implications of this thinking were not lost on critics and scholars of African American culture and its forms of expression. Zora Neale Hurston comes immediately to mind as a well-known and provocative

representative of folklorists, historians, literary critics, and others who have picked up on the veiling characteristic of African American expressivities. Most interesting for me, these critics, without consistent elaboration and problematization, without attempts to explain what was at issue, have nonetheless noticed the uses of the Bible and other sacred texts—in the “sorrow songs” and in so many other forms of black expressiveness—as part of the agenda of veiling about which DuBois argued. That veiling, indirection, encoding, and signifying are prominent in the interpretation of the folk is powerfully indicated in the saying that Hurston picked up in her field work and offered as handle for “reading” the world and the self—“hitting a lick with a crooked stick.” In the manner in which she picked up on the full array of the lore and rhythms, the textures and gestures of black folk, and in the connection she made between the use even of the Bible and their liquid interpretations—“even the Bible was made over to suit our vivid imagination”⁶—Hurston named for critics of black culture to follow some of the poignancy involved in critical interpretation about and among black folks. Her rendering of black readings of the world points to the mysterious, the elusive, the uncanny:

“Now all y’all heard what Ah said. . . . Dat’s just an old time by-word. . . .” “I done heard my gran’paw say dem very words many and many a time. . . . There’s a whole heap of them kinda by-words. . . . They all got a hidden meanin’, jus’ like de Bible. Everybody can’t understand what they mean. Most people is thin-brained. They’s born wid they feet under the moon. Some folks is born wid they feet on de sun and they kin seek out de inside meanin’ of words.”⁷

MORRISON AND THE (UN-)VEILING OF THE VEIL

We cannot fail to notice Hurston’s representation of the Bible as a depository of the uncanny, the mysterious, the “hidden meanin’.” Toni Morrison picks up on the connection between the DuBoisian metaphorical use of the veil and the uses of the Bible in terms of the folkways illuminated by Hurston in order to problematize black existence and interpretation. Regarding the veil, she deepens and widens DuBois’s metaphorical rendering. For her the veil has to do not merely with racial segregation and other-ing. She expands the DuBoisian notion of the attendant/resultant divided consciousness into an argument about a type of shutting off, occlusion, and silencing of the interior life/self. In an essay titled “The Site of Memory,” published in 1987, Morrison addresses the matter of the veiling of the interior life for the black self—the muting or encoding of deeply felt sentiments, pain, stresses, and trauma. With special attention to the autobiographical works that were the slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries she identifies what is for black folk the perduring poignant problem of uniting the divided consciousness and accessing and probing and articulating the movements of the interior life:

No slave society in the history of the world wrote more . . . about its own enslavement. The milieu, however, dictated the purpose and the style. . . . Popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience. Whenever there was an unusually violent incident, or a scatological one, or something “excessive,” one finds the writer taking refuge in the literary conventions of

the day. "I was left in a state of distraction not to be described" (Equiano). "But let us now leave the rough usage of the field . . . and turn our attention to the less repulsive slave life as it existed in the house of my childhood" (Douglass). "I am not about to harrow the feelings of my readers by a terrific representation of the untold horrors of that fearful system of oppression. . . . It is not my purpose to descend deeply into the dark and noisome caverns of the hell of slavery" (Henry Box Brown).

Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, "But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate." In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it they were silent about many things, and they "forgot" many other things.⁸

Although it is clear enough that in the slave narratives the phenomenon of the silencing, hiding, and forgetting about which Morrison argues was much in evidence, it is less clear that in every instance of the narration of the experiences of slavery the term *veil* was referenced as euphemistic registration of or allusion to the phenomenon. Not all of Morrison's examples quoted above include the term itself. Yet there is no doubting their support of her general argument. She used the pointed metaphor of the veil as a way to think and make the point about the occlusion. The one narration from which she quotes that includes actual reference to the term comes from Lydia Maria Child's introduction to Linda Brent's "tale" of sexual abuse. It seems to be the reference that for Morrison makes clear the problem faced and suggests the language with which a solution can be found:

I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages

to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I am willing to take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil drawn [aside].⁹

Morrison goes on to make her most important point: it was striking to her that in the narratives there was "no mention of [the slaves'] interior life." As a writer thriving "not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman," she saw her job to be "to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate.'" She argued that this work was "critical" for all who belong to the "marginalized category" in society, because "we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic."¹⁰

Morrison's research into the slave narratives surely did allow her both to problematize and to provoke more thinking about divided black consciousness. But it seems to me that notwithstanding her lack of acknowledgment of it—at least in "Site of Memory"—Morrison was surely aware of DuBois's uses of the "veil." She was, if not dependent on him, at least in conversation with DuBois. Here I have in mind in particular her conversation with him about his intimation of what the "sorrow songs" signify, what they beckon, what they hold out as possibilities in helping to "rend the veil," to unite a divided consciousness, to articulate powerful sentiments and yearnings. As I have pointed out, it is ironic that the term DuBois used to point to this work/office is *veil*. That is, he thought that one powerful response on the part of black folks to the dividedness of the black soul was

the music—especially, but not exclusively, the “sorrow songs.” The music was understood to be evocative and powerful. DuBois found himself undone by it; he first experienced and then understood it as powerful carrier of veiled sentiment. The music, then, should be compared to the slave narratives as expressive form—with the obvious different and shared possibilities and limitations respected.

From her different social historical positioning Morrison saw more sharply the limitations of both music and the literature that was the slave narrative. Regarding music, she argued in an interview that it “kept us alive, but it’s not enough anymore.”¹¹ No surprise that she favors literature: she has made it clear that she thinks that fiction—in particular, the novel—can now speak most directly and powerfully to and for the people having migrated to the cities:

I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction . . . for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for my people. . . . The middle class at the beginning of the industrial revolution needed a portrait of itself because the old portrait didn’t work for this new class. Their roles were different; their lives in the city were new. The novel served this function then, and it still does. It tells about city values, the urban values. Now my people, we “peasants,” have come to the city. . . . We live with its values. There is a confrontation between old values of the tribes and new urban values. It’s confusing. There has to be a mode to do what the music did for blacks, what we used to be able to do with each other in private and in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization.¹²

Morrison here seems to see music, including the music DuBois discussed, as a continu-

ing part of the veiling, needing to be ripped. The veiling here is that which keeps black folks from probing their interiority—on their own terms. Such a problematic and the way outward (or inward, really) seem to be precisely what Morrison addresses in most of her novels, most profoundly in *Beloved*.¹³

Beloved has been and continues to be interpreted in myriad ways, with many different types of interpreters representing many different angles, agendas, and perspectives, responding to what appears to be the author’s invitation to read and probe and discuss the book. There is raging debate still about the character Beloved—whence she comes, who or what she represents, the meaning or import of this or that statement or action attributed to her/it, whither it/she goes. But all interpreters generally agree that *Beloved* is a story about a haunting, the haunting of those who are survivor-heirs of the “sixty million and more” made to undergo the Middle Passage (and to whom the book is dedicated). It is a story about the failure on the part of all of us to remember those who died in such an experience. It is about the refusal of those who died to go away and remain forgotten; it is about the haunting of the memory of those who died. It is about why and how the memory of those who died is prevented, held back, made difficult or impossible to embrace. Why the memory persists. Why it hurts, traumatizes. It is about consciousness, the impact the haunting has on the black soul, on the black consciousness. It is about the impact of the loss of memory, the prevention and refusal of memory upon the black soul. It is also ultimately about how the black soul may be reconstituted, healed, and united. So it is also consciousness, interpretation, and articulation about the terms on which, and the framework within which, the black self, the one who is survivor-heir of the Middle Passage may now look back, remember, interpret, negotiate, and speak to

the world about what it thinks, how it feels, and how it travels and experiences. It is about “ripping the veil” that prevents the black self from remembering and healing itself. It is a pointing in the direction in which the psycho-social-cultural stitching, weaving work can be carried out.

Although it is clear what character in the book does the haunting, not entirely clear in every part of the book is the matter how the haunting is to be understood, that is, how the haunting works, why it persists, what the haunting is really all about. It should occasion little surprise that I would notice and want to exploit, as very few other interpreters have, Morrison’s epigraph, which is taken from Paul’s letter to the Romans (9:25), and which also supplies the name of the character for whom the book is named:

I will call them my people,
Which were not my people;
and her beloved,
which was not beloved.

No argument need be made about the importance of epigraphs in summing up a writer’s agenda. What I want to stress here is the importance of the epigraph in naming the issue behind the (narrative plotline) issue. In order for this to be made clear, it is important that the larger context of Paul’s statement (actually a quotation of Hos 2:25, with word agreement with the LXX of 1:9) be established. The larger discursive-argumentative context is Paul’s effort to address the believers at Rome of mixed background, viz., Jews and Gentiles, regarding what appears to be, in light of the success of the Pauline mission, an ironic, even paradoxical twist of fate and circumstance—the phenomenon of the turning to God in great numbers on the part of Gentiles. Since the promise of God’s favor was given first to the Jews, how has it come about that the

non-Jews, the Gentiles, are turning in what seems to be great numbers and so many Jews in comparison seem not to be accepting God’s “call”? Paul’s tries his best to clarify matters; it does not work. His arguments are halting, elliptical, and confusing.¹⁴

I think it important to note that the end of the larger section, Romans 9–11, in which the prophetic statement that Morrison used for her epigraph is found, Paul sums up how he thinks the matter having to do with the turning and selection should be understood: “I do not want you to be ignorant of this *mystery* . . .” (11:25). At the beginning of the larger section Paul engages in a wonderful play on the word “call” (*kaleo*) before he draws a conclusion regarding the “mystery.” It is this word and Paul’s play with it—that is, signifying on it as marker of “hidden meanin’,” of paradox—that seem to draw Morrison’s attention and inspire her usage.

Morrison seems to have applied the Pauline “mystery” that equated “the call” (as election) and being called “beloved” to her book and black existence. She renders the historical and perduring exclusion and marginalization; the historical enslavement, other-ness, and subjugation; and the hoped-for elevation and self-possession in society and culture of black peoples mysterious. Paul’s rendering of Hosea’s being called “beloved” is translated by Morrison as black folks’ coming to be loved. So it seems that what is most mysterious is the matter of *how* they were first enslaved and *how* they can or may come to be healed, elevated. In Morrison’s thinking—through Paul—black peoples are the Gentiles, the ones thought at first to be outside, at first considered marginals, slaves, in terms of some grand design. And just as a mysterious thing happened with the Gentiles of Paul’s day, as *even* they were brought into the fold, so black folks, according to Morrison, are destined to be “called,” *to be loved*.

Morrison presents the challenge of addressing the mystery of black existence—how it evolved, survival strategies, the power dynamics involved, the self-acceptance. But what is first required (her essays and novels, especially the book *Beloved*, seem to suggest) is the work of identifying and “ripping the veil.” With *Beloved* Morrison makes narratological, thus more complex and emotional, the identification of both the problem and the direction of the healing for the characters. Whatever is *Beloved* the book, it is not a “straight stick” that hits a “clean lick.” Whatever *Beloved* means, it means not in a straightforward manner. The story that is *Beloved* cannot possibly be represented or understood as a line. And the story that the characters of the story tell is the scrambling of a line. Instead of a line circles come to mind—the characters tell versions or aspects of the same story; or they tell multiple stories, stories that are varied and overlapping. For all of the characters, but most especially for the main character, Sethe, language, certainly, the language and narratives, the “symbolic order” of the master, cannot transmit or translate her experience. In order to prevent her from having to undergo the humiliation of slavery, Sethe killed her baby girl. This experience was deemed by Sethe and by all observers to be horrible. But it was also representative. And it was precisely as horrible representative act that it was traumatic, “unspeakable.”

It is the master language, the “symbolic order,” that Morrison stresses must be ripped in order for black folks to come to be called beloved. Not just the slave narrative, but dominant Western discourse itself, with its need and tendency, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, to “occult the aphasia,”¹⁵ to veil the veiling, as Morrison might put it—this must be ripped. This ripping is signaled in the book not only by the multiple repetitive and varied tellings of the horrible experiences and hauntings by

different characters but also by Sethe’s effort finally to come to speech about what happened. It is Morrison’s description of Sethe’s movements as she comes into speech that is important to notice here: “She was spinning. Round and round the room . . . turning like a slow steady wheel. . . . Circling [Paul D] the way she was circling the subject” (151, 153). This spinning seems to reveal Morrison’s understanding of knowledge, self-awareness, self-consciousness, critical interpretation in terms of indirection, and fragmentation, perhaps, functioning in terms of therapy or psychoanalysis. It is both critique of master narrative as the reflector and confirmation of fixed position in society and a pointing toward reconstitution and healing. The circling and spinning suggest a critique of and resistance to linear discursivity and politics. It also reflects an effort to reconstitute the self. This difference in movement and orientation suggests that the ripping of the veil is accomplished not so much by a refusal to engage language and texts and textuality but a refusal to accord them the power to carry meaning in the same way, on the same terms, that is, in uncritical naturalized terms, as though they were part of what Bourdieu termed the realm of *doxa*, the domain of the taken for granted, the undiscussable,¹⁶ and what Houston Baker referred to as critical “silence.”¹⁷

Here are the radicalism and power of the interpretive stance taken and shared by Morrison and DuBois and so many other critics of African American life—that for black and subaltern critical consciousness there is no meaning in any Western-translated narrative, script, text, and tradition unless such is first ripped, broken, and then “entranced,” blackened, made usable for weaving meaning.¹⁸

The metaphors here and throughout my article are mixed; they rather deliciously and poignantly run amok. Speaking so—“in other words”—is necessary in order to address

complexity and pain and trauma. "Ripping the veil" means refusing to think according to and live dreamily within the realm of *doxa*, the realm of the canonical. It means accessing the sites of memory. Social therapy can begin only when these memories on their own terms—not behind the "veil" of canonical texts—are woven together or "(re)textualized" (in the original meaning of that term) as "scriptures" in critical/signifying relationship to other "scriptures." And in agreement with writer-critic Ishmael Reed, it may mean, with ramifications most radical, that ultimately "we will make our own future text."¹⁹

Notes

1. W. E. B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1989 [1903]); all quotations are from this edition.
2. The term *veil* has interesting etymology: Middle English *veile*, taken from old North French, taken from the Latin *vela*, plural of *velum* (sail, awning). It has been used allusively in various prepositional phrases, such as behind, beyond, or within the veil: William Tyndale 1528; William Wollaston 1722; Alfred Tennyson 1850; E. Fitzgerald 1859; A. J. Ross 1877; to conceal from apprehension, knowledge or perception; to disguise: Benjamin D'Israel 1841. At the time of DuBois's writing, these uses were very much in the air of popular discourse and in letters. See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, sub verbo, 3c, vol. XIX, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).
3. Shamoan Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. DuBois and American Thought, 1888–1903* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), esp. part 2.
4. Arnold Rampersad, *Art and Imagination of W. E. B. DuBois* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), esp. chap. 4.
5. "This curtain [of appearance] . . . hanging before the inner world is withdrawn, and we have here the inner being gazing into the inner realm. . . . What we have here is Self-

consciousness. It is manifest that behind the so-called curtain, which is to hide the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless we ourselves go there, as much in order that we may thereby see, as that there may be something behind there which can be seen." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967 [1807, trans. 1910]), 211, 212–13, quoted in Zamir, *Dark Voices*, 135.

6. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Perennial Library, 1990 [1935]), 3.
7. *Ibid.*, 125.
8. Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 109–10.
9. *Ibid.*, 110.
10. *Ibid.*, 110–11.
11. From Thomas Leclair, "'The Language Must Not Sweat': A Conversation with Toni," in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah, Amistad Literary Series (New York: Amistad, 1993), 371.
12. *Ibid.*, 370–71.
13. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Penguin, 1987).
14. See Romans 9:22–26 for the larger context:

What if God, wishing to display . . .
wrath and to make known [God's]
power, has endured with much patience
the objects of wrath that are made for
destruction; and what if [God] has done
so in order to make known the riches of
[God's] glory for the objects of mercy,
which [God] has prepared beforehand
for glory—including us [believers] whom
[God] has called, not from the Jews only
but also from the Gentiles? As indeed
[God] says in Hosea,
"Those who were not my people I will
call 'my people,'
and her who was not beloved I
will call 'beloved.'
"And in the very place where it was said
to them, 'You are not my people,'

there they shall be called
children of the living God.”

15. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 170.
16. *Ibid.*, 168.
17. It is really functionally much like the “silence” that Houston A. Baker Jr. discusses in his *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), in particular, the essay “Lowground and Inaudible Valleys: Reflections on Afro-American Spirit Work” (chap. 3). Baker argues that the interpretive orientation he associates with black folk culture is to be understood as “silence”—that is, as holding back from normal/traditional uses of language, turning away from the regular forms in order to express critique and healing. Drawing upon Susan Sontag’s essay on silence, “The Aesthetics of Silence,” in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Vantage, 1983), 181–204, he calls for a “criticism of silence” (106) to “match the depths of a magnificently enhancing black sounding of experience” (109).
18. “Merely arranged in a traditional Christian problematic . . . words are ineffectual. Only when they enter into entranced performance . . . do they give birth to sounds of a new order” (Baker, “Lowground and Inaudible Valleys,” 106). The entranced performance about which Baker speaks is realized only when there is an addressing of the “lowground and inaudible valleys” of experiences of black folks. Then the canonical arrangements and structures are exploded, the veil is ripped.
19. Reed is widely published. See *The Reed Reader* (New York: Basic, 2001) for a selection of his writings.

For Further Reading

- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Reed, Ishmael. *The Reed Reader*. New York: Basic, 2000.
- Sugirtharajah, R. S. *Postcolonialism and Biblical Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.