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A Gift of the Spirit: Reading the Souls of Black Folk (Psychoanalysis and Social Theory)

Eugene Victor Wolfenstein

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The Souls of Black Folk by W. E. B. Du Bois was acknowledged as a masterwork when first published in 1903. It has inspired a rich and varied range of responses in the intervening years. Eugene Victor Wolfenstein builds on this discursive foundation in a reading of Souls that demonstrates its organic unity and coherence.

Wolfenstein takes as his interpretive key the experience of the color line with which Du Bois's narrative begins--the incident from his youth in which a white girl refused his offer of a visiting card. In Wolfenstein's view, this instance of misrecognition makes visible an aesthetic and affective configuration involving insult and injury, both racial and personal; anger as the immediate response to the humiliating wound; and, when that anger is suppressed, a melancholy retreat from the site of injury. At the level of lived experience, this is a pointed example of the problem of the color line. Wolfenstein finds that Du Bois solved this problem in twofold fashion: through proud and disciplined resistance to the impositions and injustices of white supremacy, and through the developed capacity to rise above the field of battle and survey it from on high. Souls, Wolfenstein contends, tells the story, at once personal and racial, of this struggle for recognition.

With its serious and respectful approach to this canonical work in African American social theory, A Gift of the Spirit is a fitting tribute to the enduring relevance of Du Bois's singular achievement.

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